

“The Professor Actually Really Cares, and They Want You to Know Why You’re Doing
It”: Exploring Traditionally Underserved Students’ Experiences With Transparent
Assignment Design

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design (TAD). Degree attainment has been associated with many individual and societal benefits (Davis et al., 2025; Phillips et al., 2020; Wilson, 2023). However, traditionally underserved students are less likely to attain a degree (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024a), a phenomenon that has been described as the equity gap. This gap is due in part to noncognitive factors such as sense of belonging and self-efficacy (Tinto, 2017a). To address this gap, a variety of high-impact practices have been implemented in higher education to support students at risk of attrition (Kuh, 2008). Transparent assignment design is one such practice that has been shown to improve self-reported academic success indicators such as sense of belonging and self-efficacy, especially among traditionally underserved students (Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). I used narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of six first-year students from traditionally underserved backgrounds in freshman seminar courses that implemented TAD at California State University, Northridge in Fall 2024. Major findings suggest that despite some negative student experiences with TAD, the framework addresses the equity gap by supporting students in overcoming the hidden curriculum. TAD clarifies assignment expectations to students from traditionally underserved communities, especially for complicated or novel tasks. Results may inform faculty and administrative decisions in higher education, with broader societal implications.

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DEDICATION

For Dad, who taught me the most important lessons about fairness and hard work. I hope I'll keep making you proud.

Also, for my dear students: It's always been for you.

Chapter I

Introduction to the Study

Ideally, students from all demographics and backgrounds would have an equal opportunity for academic success in higher education. Unfortunately, this ideal is far from the current reality in the United States. Nationwide, higher rates of attrition have been associated with students who have less outside support and preparation for the skills needed for success, such as low-income students (Aucejo et al., 2020; California State University, Northridge [CSUN], 2020; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019), first-generation students (CSUN, 2020; Gillen-O’Neel, 2021; Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021; O’Keeffe, 2013; Phillips et al., 2020; Somers et al., 2004; Zumbrunn et al., 2014), and students from minoritized racial and ethnic groups (Bingham et al., 2022; Brower et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 1999; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Ou, 2018; Strayhorn, 2008, 2023; Wofford, 2022; Yeager et al., 2013).

These categories of students—low-income, first-generation, minoritized races and ethnicities—are broadly understood by an assortment of terms in the literature, including *traditionally underserved* (Howard et al., 2020; Michaud et al., 2017; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019), *historically marginalized* (Yeager et al., 2013), or *disadvantaged* (Pitman, 2015). For the purposes of this study, I referred to this population as traditionally underserved because that term has been used by California State University, Northridge (CSUN), the research site (CSUN, n.d.-1).

Regardless of the term used, these categories represent complex identities, and identities are intersectional. The human experience is influenced by multiple social positions such as race and gender, and these positions interact with one another (Carbado et al., 2014; Crenshaw, 1993). As such, students who belong to one of the previous categories may belong to others. For example, first-generation students may also be low-income and belong to a racial or ethnic minoritized group; such students may face even more hardship than peers belonging to only one traditionally underserved category (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021; Phillips et al., 2020).

The United States has among the lowest rates of intergenerational income mobility, defined as children exceeding their parents’ socioeconomic status, when compared to other nations with similarly advanced economies (Davis et al., 2025; Song et al., 2020). Intergenerational income mobility, also referred to as intergenerational social mobility (Causa & Johansson, 2010), has shown an overall downward trend in the United States since the 1980s (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018; Wilson, 2023).

Educational achievement has been connected to social mobility in the foundational literature (Bourdieu, 1986), and recent data has also connected higher education degree completion to upward social mobility (Liu, 2011; Phillips et al., 2020; Wilson, 2023). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024b) reported that those with higher educational attainment tended to have higher median earnings; in 2022, the median full-time employment income for 25- to 34-year-olds in the U.S. with a bachelor’s degree was \$66,600, which is 59% higher than \$41,800, the median income of those who only completed high school. Individuals with a college degree have also been

found to have higher levels of employment. In 2022, the employment rate for those with a bachelor's degree was 80%, as compared to 73% for those who only completed high school, and the discrepancy was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (73% vs. 60%) (NCES, 2024b). This discrepancy suggested greater vulnerability to unemployment among less-educated individuals in times of crisis.

Beyond income, college-educated individuals have reported being healthier, liking their careers more, and engaging in more civically responsible activities such as voting (Gallup, 2024). College-educated individuals have been found to be more likely to participate in community service, more likely to contribute to greater economic growth, and less likely to commit crimes (Tinto, 2004) or use government programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and cash assistance (Trostel, 2015, p. 45).

Moreover, the Public Policy Institute of California (2019) reported that the majority of the college-aged population in California would soon come from traditionally underserved groups. This growth in the number of students from traditionally underserved communities in higher education makes identifying the factors that facilitate and support their academic success at the undergraduate level even more critical. These students' successes or failures will not only affect their lives and their immediate families, but also society at large—they will be future teachers, doctors, engineers, and other professions that shape communities. These connections between higher education, social mobility, and benefits to society bring greater urgency to the discrepancy between degree attainment rates of traditionally underserved and traditionally better-served student populations.

Institutions and individual faculty have attempted to address the inequities affecting traditionally underserved communities, but the specific implementations that best support the academic success of students from traditionally underserved communities has not yet been clearly defined (Johnson & Stage, 2018; Kuh, 2008). Yet the literature has confirmed that these traditionally underserved populations often do not match the educational attainment of their traditionally better-served peers (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; Margolis et al., 2001; Public Policy Institute of California [PPIC], 2019; Tinto, 1975, 2004; Ziegler et al., 2021).

The most recent data from the NCES (2022) reported that among the cohort of students who began their undergraduate careers in 2014 at 4-year degree-granting institutions, the 6-year graduation rate was higher among students with traditionally better-served racial identities (74.7% for Asian students and 64.5% for White students) than students who identified as belonging to racial and ethnic identities traditionally underserved by higher education (53% for Hispanic or Latino students, 40.5% for Black or African American students, and 36.2% for American Indian/Alaska Native students). Low-income students (PPIC, 2019) and first-generation students (Fry, 2021) were also less likely to earn a 4-year degree within 6 years when compared to their traditionally better-served peers. The difference in success rates among these student groups has been commonly referred to as an *equity gap* (California State University [CSU], 2019b; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; Slavin, 1997; Winkelmes et al., 2019) or *opportunity gap* (Carter & Welner, 2013), terms meant to emphasize that the differences in success rates are due to factors other than individual student cognitive abilities. These terms may refer to the same phenomenon as the term *achievement gap* when used by

scholars such as Cohen et al. (2006) and Yeager et al. (2013), but that last term may communicate a deficit mindset that many educators and educational scholars wish to move away from (Shukla et al., 2022). For the purposes of this study, I have adopted the phrase *equity gap* to match the research site terminology.

Overview

This study was inspired by the equity gap, or the discrepancy in academic success outcomes such as persistence, retention, and degree attainment among students from traditionally underserved communities attending California State University, Northridge (CSUN, n.d.-l). CSUN has used the California State University (CSU) system's Historically Underserved Student Factor Model, which specifically describes students who belong to one or more of these groups: first-generation, low-income, underprepared (indicating self-reported lack of preparation for college in high school), or historically underserved racial or ethnic communities (California State University [CSU], 2019b). I focused on first-year undergraduate students belonging to at least one of these groups because these students have been especially vulnerable to attrition (NCES, 2022). The site is California State University, Northridge (CSUN), a diverse campus with a large percentage of students from these traditionally underserved backgrounds (CSUN, n.d.-b). According to CSUN's retention rates dashboard, in Fall 2023, the overall percentage of first-time freshmen retained at CSUN one year after matriculation was 73.8%; White and Asian students who did not receive a Pell Grant were retained at 86.3%, but American Indian, Black/African American, and Latinx/Hispanic students were only retained at 68.1% (CSUN, n.d.-g).

The Equity Gap

Higher education is often a tool for social mobility; completing any degree in higher education has been positively correlated with increased lifetime income and overall quality of life in the United States (Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021). Therefore, the divide in academic success between students from traditionally better-served communities and those from traditionally underserved communities, known as the equity gap, perpetuates social stratification and exposes traditionally underserved students to an increased likelihood of negative outcomes, such as lower income and poorer health, associated with lower class status (Phillips et al., 2020).

Several problems are commonly associated with student success in higher education among students from traditionally underserved communities. One problem is that first-year, and especially first-semester, undergraduate students are disproportionately vulnerable to attrition (NCES, 2022). Institutions of higher education hoping to support and retain vulnerable students from traditionally underserved communities have had a very short window of time in which to do so. Among students who do not persist in higher education, the greatest percentage have done so in their first year; 28.9% of first-time, first-semester students in the U.S. dropped out of college during the 2021 to 2022 academic year (Hanson, 2023). In comparison, the overall percentage of U.S. undergraduates at all levels who do not complete their degree was estimated to be 32.9% that year, a 4% difference (Hanson, 2023). Another problem is that students from traditionally underserved communities often have fewer financial and social resources than their traditionally better-served peers and are therefore less insulated from hardships and setbacks outside of academia (Bathmaker et al., 2013;

Brower et al., 2021; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2022; Liu, 2011; Pitman, 2015; Strayhorn, 2019).

Somers et al. (2004) found that first-generation students, many of whom are from traditionally underserved communities, are especially sensitive to economic impacts; this finding has been continually supported by more recent studies (Aucejo et al., 2020; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Liu, 2011; Phillips et al., 2020). As an additional complication, research has emphasized the disproportionately negative fiscal and health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on student success among students from traditionally underserved populations (Aucejo et al., 2020; Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Moeller et al., 2022). Aucejo et al. (2020) found that lower-income students were 55% more likely than their peers to delay their intended graduation date due to economic concerns related to the pandemic. Ecton et al. (2023) reported continuing economic stressors among low-income students years after the pandemic began. Thus, individual students' backgrounds can intersect to compound barriers related to success in higher education.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) is a term that has been used by many institutions, including CSUN (n.d.-b), to refer to programs and resources designed to reduce systemic injustice. The American Psychological Association (2021) reordered the terms to be Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), but the principle is the same: Diversity means representing various groups, equity involves ensuring that resources are provided according to need, and inclusion refers to a commitment to welcoming different approaches and experiences. Other terms and initialisms such as Justice, Equity,

Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) (Hammond et al., 2021) and Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA) (Indiana Arts Commission, n.d.) have communicated similar ideas.

No matter what term is used, an institution simply pledging its commitment to DEI is not sufficient to improve educational equity. Zheng (2022) noted that DEI policies can vary widely in terms of content and effectiveness at the institutional level.

Additionally, many changes to increase equity happen at the classroom level. Although many classroom-level DEI initiatives have been proposed in higher education (Chepp, 2017; Michaud et al., 2017; Otten et al., 2022; PPIC, 2019; Wang et al., 2023), some studies have found faculty resistance to changing their teaching styles or curricula to accommodate student needs (Becker & Palladino, 2016; Bradshaw, 2020; Xie & Rice, 2021). Studies have suggested that individual faculty may have a large effect on students' help-seeking behaviors (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Bingham et al., 2022; Daddow, 2016; Han et al., 2022; Harsh et al., 2011; López et al., 2022). Particularly, Yeager et al. (2013) argued that students from traditionally underserved communities benefit academically when they recognize that their instructors believe in their ability to succeed. Therefore, individual faculty members' actions are an important factor for student success.

Further, Kirby and Thomas (2021) supported Tinto's (1975, 2004) earlier argument that positive interactions with faculty were a predictor for students' sense of belonging, a key factor in student success. Sense of belonging has also been found to correlate with transparency (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Students from traditionally underserved communities may struggle with the so-called *hidden curriculum*, or unwritten rules and expectations that are usually not explicitly communicated in classrooms (Daddow, 2016; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018).

Many DEI initiatives are designed to make such emic knowledge about skills and behaviors necessary for higher education more transparent for students from traditionally underserved communities.

Transparent Assignment Design (TAD)

In this study, I investigated the impact of transparent assignment design (TAD) as a tool for addressing the hidden curriculum. TAD is a framework popularized by Winkelmes (2013), used as a high-impact practice equity implementation in higher education (Michaud et al., 2017; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). The goal of TAD is to make “learning processes explicit and equally accessible for all students” (Winkelmes et al., 2019, p. 1). Assignment prompts designed with TAD include three sections: purpose, task, and criteria (Transparency in Learning & Teaching Higher Ed [TILT Higher Ed], n.d.). The purpose section communicates to students what skills they will practice and what knowledge they will gain by completing the assignment; the task section details what students should do and how, specifically, to complete the assignment; and the criteria section details “what excellence looks like” and communicates how the assignment will be graded “in advance to help students to self-evaluate” (Winkelmes et al., 2016, p. 33). Research has shown that TAD has a positive impact on sense of belonging and academic confidence, as well as short-term retention and completion rates (Howard et al., 2020; Peplow et al., 2021; Winkelmes, 2013; Winkelmes et al., 2016).

CSUN administration has provided an asynchronous course, one-time presentations, and interactive workshop series about TAD to educate faculty about the implementation and encourage its adoption (CSUN, n.d.-j). Instructors using the templates have been directed to explain their assignment purpose by defining specific

learning objectives and the skills and knowledge the assignment is designed to support. Then, instructors have detailed the task students must complete using actionable steps that are broken down into an appropriate level of specificity. Finally, instructors have clarified the criteria by which the assignment will be graded, often using a rubric or checklist (TILT Higher Ed, n.d.). CSUN (n.d.-g) has asserted that faculty who adopt TAD “can reduce gaps in retention rates” among traditionally underserved students (para. 1). Internal workshop materials explain the connection between sense of belonging, transparency, and student success, citing Winkelmes et al. (2016).

Sense of Belonging and Transparency in Teaching

Sense of belonging is an important outcome of transparency because higher sense of belonging has been found to be connected to student achievement and retention (Hausmann et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2005; Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 2017a). Students from traditionally underserved backgrounds often report feeling that they do not belong in higher education at all, making them more sensitive to setbacks and more likely to drop out (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019; Tinto, 1975; Winkelmes et al., 2016). Tinto (1975) wrote that student “dropout” behavior could be better understood as analogous to suicide, in that both of these phenomena are more likely when the individual is not integrated into society, and that colleges are equipped with their own societal values and norms to which students must adhere (p. 92).

Strayhorn (2019) concurred with Tinto’s comparison of attrition to suicide, further adding that students with a low sense of belonging may feel that they are a burden “to the instructor, peers, or larger community,” which can be caused by “social

alienation, strained relationships,” and unfamiliar surroundings (p. 25). Students who have prior experiences with the norms of higher education are more likely to adhere to these expectations and feel connected to the institution, reflecting the impact of the hidden curriculum (Margolis et al., 2001).

Tinto (1975) asserted that an individual student’s likelihood to persist was increased, among other factors, by their parents’ education level, income, and interest in the student’s studies, as well as the quality of high school education the student had access to. Strayhorn (2019) focused on the impact of students’ minoritized social identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, and religion (p. 37). Students belonging to categories that are not well represented in higher education have been found to be more likely to struggle with sense of belonging, which can increase the likelihood of attrition (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975). However, transparency in teaching can mitigate the negative educational impact of some of these disadvantages by better communicating instructors’ expectations, exposing previously hidden elements of the hidden curriculum, and guiding students toward successful assignment completion (Palmer et al., 2018; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). True experiences with success, or mastery experiences, in one context build self-efficacy, improving confidence and willingness to approach similar challenges (Bandura, 1977). Transparent assignments also guide students through the development of skills necessary for success on other assignments that they may not have previously had an opportunity to master (Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019).

Therefore, in this study, I sought to explore student perceptions of the impact of TAD as a tool for improving sense of belonging and self-efficacy in higher education.

This investigation was particularly relevant in minority serving institutions such as CSUN, my research site, which was designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and was named a Fulbright HSI leader by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs in 2021, 2022, and 2023 (CSUN, 2023b). As a minority serving institution, CSUN had a large population of students from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic groups; such students have been found to be less likely to complete their college degree (PPIC, 2019). Gaining a better understanding of how some individuals from such student groups experience TAD may improve how faculty implement this equity practice and how higher education administration supports faculty in its adoption. Improving TAD's implementation on campus may benefit students, faculty, the campus, and society overall by contributing to decreased rates of attrition and increased graduation rates.

The Freshman Seminar at CSUN

Freshman seminar courses have been developed as one of many structured first-year activities meant to support first-year undergraduate students. Such courses may be referred to by different names in various contexts, including first-year seminar (Kudrna et al., 2024; Young, 2020). However, this latter term sometimes includes courses designed for graduate students (Garcia & Yao, 2019). I used the term freshman seminar to align with the official course name at CSUN, the research site. The literature has supported that such courses can improve student retention and graduation rates, especially for students from traditionally underserved communities (Aulck et al., 2021; Choudhury & Runco, 2020; Tinto, 2004). In institutions that implement such courses, the design and content may vary widely (Cohen, 2019), and so can the course's effectiveness (Harrington,

2025). At CSUN, the freshman seminar (University 100) is a semester-long course with in-person meetings 75 minutes twice each week (CSUN, n.d.-i). Content has included both CSUN-specific resources and general college success skills such as time management, goal setting, and learning skills (CSUN, n.d.-k). A webpage containing information about the course stated, “Students will . . . have the opportunity to develop a strong sense of belonging at CSUN” (CSUN, n.d.-k, para. 2).

As an instructor in the pool to teach the freshman seminar, I had access to a shared Canvas learning management site that included sample syllabi, best practices, and a collection of required and optional assignments. Among these assignments were six designed using the TAD framework: Academic Planner Assignment, Asking for Help Assignment, Self-Report Card, Attend a Campus Event, Time Log, and Essay. In addition, all CSUN professors have had access to faculty development about TAD in the past, including a 5-week TAD workshop held during select semesters, an asynchronous self-paced TAD design course they could engage with at any time, and TAD templates available on the faculty development website (CSUN, n.d.-j), so it was possible that faculty teaching the freshman seminar could include their own TAD prompts in addition to the ones provided by the Department of Academic First Year Experiences.

Although freshman seminar instructors were free to change assignments if they wish, I ensured that my participants were students who had been exposed to TAD by first asking freshman seminar instructors to complete a survey verifying that their section of freshman seminar included at least two TAD assignments. Winkelmes et al.’s (2016) major study of TAD’s effectiveness also set a threshold of two TAD assignments in each course.

Statement of the Problem

The success of institutional efforts to address the equity gap with high-impact diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices has often hinged on faculty implementation. Although instructors are experts in their respective fields, many college and university professors are not trained in educational theory and practice (Robinson & Hope, 2013). This lack of pedagogical training has led instructors and their students to suffer from the *curse of knowledge*, a term describing content experts' inability to empathize with and accurately assess the needs of fledgling learners (Birch et al., 2017). Faculty, experts in their respective fields, may lose connection with how the novice mindset functions when instructing students in their respective disciplines (Brookfield, 2013).

Several factors contribute to the disconnect between faculty and students. First, although the field is becoming more diverse, most higher education instructors are not from traditionally underserved backgrounds (Karkouti, 2016; NCES, 2024b), meaning they must work harder to be culturally understanding and responsive (Hammond, 2015). Students belonging to traditionally underserved groups have been found to be more likely to struggle with forming positive connections with their instructors who both hold positions of power and belong to majority communities in the United States (Karkouti, 2016). Additionally, students from traditionally underserved communities have often struggled with sense of belonging in higher education (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). These students have been found to be more likely to internalize failure and

less likely to overcome academic obstacles to persist and complete their degrees as a function of the added self-doubt and sense of otherness (Somers et al., 2004).

Students from other traditionally underserved communities are often also first-generation students (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Bourdieu (1986) theorized that access to education came with increased social capital, relationships that provide access to power and resources, as well as cultural capital, skills and knowledge related to power and social mobility. Therefore, the cultural and social capital that first-generation students' families and communities can offer them is less likely to provide them with the same networking opportunities and access to power and social mobility as their traditionally better-served peers. More immediately, first-generation students may lack connections to people with college experience who can help them navigate higher education, putting them at a disadvantage compared to peers whose parents can offer guidance for college success (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019; Wofford, 2022).

In addition to being more likely to misunderstand or not immediately grasp their instructors' expectations, students from traditionally underserved communities have also been found to be generally less likely to engage in help-seeking behaviors that would clarify their misconceptions, possibly due in part to stereotype threat (Cohen et al., 1999; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Yeager et al., 2013) and feelings of isolation (Strayhorn, 2008). Some intervention is needed to improve educational outcomes for these students. TAD is a relatively easy implementation that has been found to clarify expectations, reduce student questions, and improve sense of belonging and academic confidence for all students, but especially traditionally underserved students (Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). However, changes to instruction such as assignment redesign require an

investment of faculty time and administrative support (Tinto, 2017a). Additionally, faculty adoption of TAD can be imperfect, which decreases its effectiveness (Palmer et al., 2018). Existing literature does not include much information about how TAD is qualitatively perceived by the students it is meant to serve.

This study explored the impact of transparent assignment design (TAD) implementation as it was used to reduce the negative impact of the hidden curriculum and to increase sense of belonging and self-efficacy among students from traditionally underserved groups enrolled in a freshman seminar course at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). There is a lack of cross-cultural and cross-experiential transparency in higher education (Winkelmes et al., 2016), which is particularly detrimental in minority serving institutions such as CSUN that have a large percentage of students from traditionally underserved populations.

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design (TAD). The scope of the study was the experiences of first-year students enrolled in a freshman seminar course during their first semester at CSUN, which is a large (approximately 40,000 students) HSI in Southern California (CSUN, n.d.-c). For the Fall 2023 semester, there were 5,545 incoming freshmen who enrolled at CSUN (CSUN, 2023a). Of these incoming freshmen, 4,038 were labelled as *traditionally underserved*, with 4,062 students being designated as first-generation students, and 3,575 were noted

as being eligible for a Pell Grant, which is used to indicate low socioeconomic status (CSUN, 2023a).

The course schedule revealed there were 62 sections of the freshman seminar course offered during the Fall 2024 semester when data collection took place. Each section of the freshman seminar contained up to 25 students. The freshman seminar at CSUN was designed to meet the needs of first-semester freshmen and particularly those from traditionally underserved communities (CSUN, n.d.-a). Among other high-impact practices, most sections of the course included TAD.

Research Questions

I created three research questions to frame the study's research design:

RQ1: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their experience in a freshman seminar course that uses transparent assignment design?

RQ2: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging after exposure to transparent assignment design in a freshman seminar course?

RQ3: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their academic self-efficacy after exposure to transparent assignment design in a freshman seminar course?

Significance of the Study

First-year undergraduate students have been found to be especially vulnerable to attrition (NCES, 2022). Current data have suggested that first-year undergraduate students from traditionally underserved backgrounds are less likely to remain enrolled

and finish their degrees at CSUN than their more historically privileged peers (CSUN, n.d.-1). As equity is a major concern in higher education (Clayton, 2021; Livezey, 2022; Wells et al., 2023) and at CSUN specifically (CSUN, n.d.-b), this study might inform instructors and administrators at CSUN and similar institutions as they attempt to better support the academic success of students from traditionally underserved backgrounds and work to close the equity gap in higher education.

By understanding how first-year undergraduate students from traditionally underserved backgrounds experience and respond to specific assignment prompt designs, instructors wishing to adapt TAD may be able to refine their approaches to better address these students' needs and therefore improve these students' understanding of the prompts, ability to complete assignments, and possibly their overall chance of achieving their educational goals. Findings from this study could inform faculty development programming and institutional and faculty-level decisions when attempting to academically support students from traditionally underserved communities. These findings would also have implications for society at large, as recent data has also connected higher education degree completion to upward social mobility (Liu, 2011; Phillips et al., 2020; Wilson, 2023). The hidden curriculum is one contributing factor for the equity gap (Margolis et al., 2001; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). Therefore, increasing transparency in higher education could decrease the detrimental impact of the hidden curriculum and address the equity gap, increasing higher degree completion rates and improving society at large.

Conceptual Framework

Saldaña (2022) explained that, in qualitative research, conceptual frameworks are the “intellectual gameplan” and are made up of three components that must work together. These three components are theoretical premises, epistemological premises, and methodological premises. I used Saldaña’s (2022) conceptualization of three premises to constitute a conceptual framework to guide this study.

Theoretical Premises

I used sense of belonging in higher education as a framework for understanding how exposure to transparent assignment design (TAD) in a freshman seminar might affect the narratives of first-semester undergraduate students from traditionally underserved communities at a 4-year HSI. The literature has repeatedly asserted that TAD improves sense of belonging and academic confidence (a construct related to self-efficacy) among all students, but especially among students from traditionally underserved communities (Howard et al., 2020; Michaud et al., 2017; Ou, 2018; Peplow et al., 2021; Winkelmes, 2013; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). However, I was unable to find qualitative studies focused on how students describe their experience with TAD as it relates to sense of belonging and self-efficacy. In an educational context, sense of belonging is a term used to describe the degree to which students see themselves as fitting into the educational institution; students with a strong sense of belonging feel “accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Holistically, Maslow (1968) identified sense of belonging as an important component of individual well-being.

A review of foundational literature suggested that the traditional system of higher education in the United States was originally designed by and for White, upper-class men (Flinders & Thornton, 2017). The legacy of this design means that students outside of this narrow demographic face systemic equity issues as they attempt to navigate a system that was not originally designed to accommodate their individual circumstances and cultural backgrounds (Hammond, 2015). Students from traditionally underserved communities might struggle with sense of belonging because they fear being perceived as unintelligent (Yeager et al., 2013) or have a different cultural context than the people around them, leading to isolation (Strayhorn, 2019).

Underrepresented students may additionally face stereotype threat, or the fear of confirming their better-represented peers' negative stereotypes about their own race, ethnicity, gender, or cultural group (Cohen et al., 1999). Yeager et al. (2013) explained that, for students with low sense of belonging, negative experiences can “seem like proof that they don't belong” (p. 62). Conversely, a higher sense of belonging is associated with positive behaviors such as help-seeking behavior, reduced procrastination (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021), and improved motivation to learn (Shepherd & Penueel, 2018). Most importantly when considering the equity gap, greater sense of belonging is associated with retention and persistence (Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012), especially among first-year undergraduate students (Smith, 2021).

Tinto (2017a) identified sense of belonging, along with self-efficacy and perceived worth of the curriculum, as precipitators of motivation, and he conceptualized persistence as a “manifestation” of motivation (p. 2). High self-efficacy is associated with students who engage with material more readily, expend more effort, and persist longer

in achieving their goals (Tinto, 2017a), and sense of belonging binds students to a specific community and helps them commit to completing their goals despite challenges (Tinto, 1987). Tinto's (1975) original theoretical model defined categories of drop out behavior and explained how interactions between individual students and the educational institution have led students to drop out. Tinto (1975) explained that each college represents a social system with its own values and social structures, asserting that a poor fit between the student and the institution was strongly correlated with dropping out. Tinto (1975) acknowledged that students' income, family backgrounds, and prior educational experiences were related to persistence and acknowledged the importance of both social and academic integration, recognizing the additional hardships faced by traditionally underserved students. Later, scholars such as Strayhorn (2019) have built upon Tinto's models in additional contexts.

Using Tinto's (1975, 2017a) models as a guide, I analyzed the narratives of individual students from traditionally underserved communities to learn more about their personal experiences with TAD as it relates to their sense of belonging at CSUN. I created the following concept map to show transparent assignment design as a tool that could be used to support sense of belonging and self-efficacy and therefore increase persistence. I attempted to represent some of the mechanisms by which this implementation could affect students' personal academic narratives.

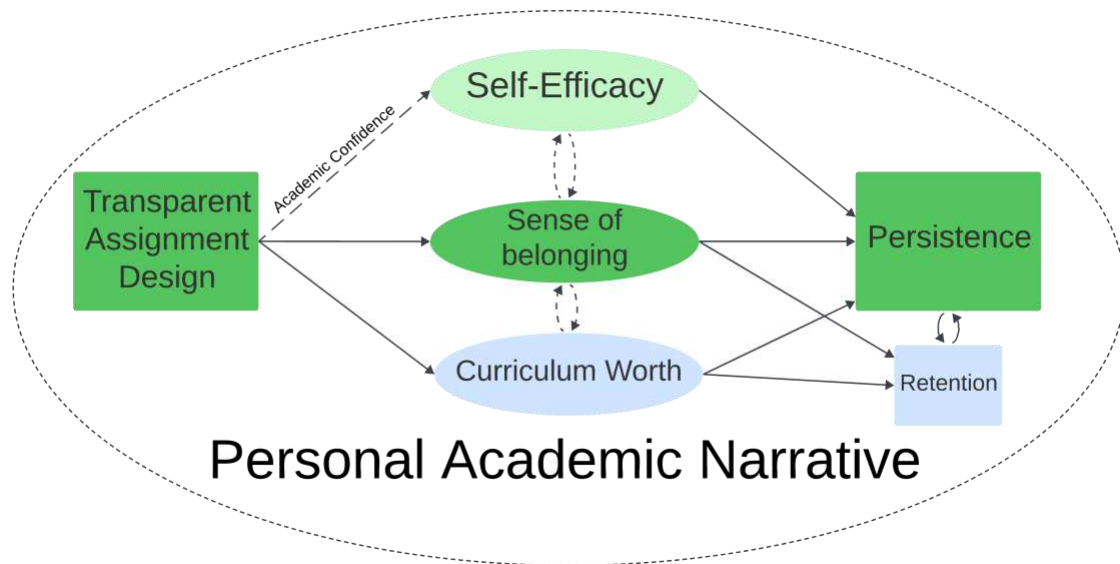
The solid arrows coming from transparent assignment design indicate relationships supported by the existing literature. Transparent assignment design has been shown to make the curriculum worth explicit to students (specifically, transparent assignments include a purpose section explaining, in part, why the assignment is relevant

to students' educational and career goals) (Winkelmes, 2013). Tinto (2017a) identified students' perception of curriculum worthiness as important to retention and persistence. Additionally, the literature supported that TAD improves sense of belonging (Howard et al., 2020; Michaud et al., 2017; Ou, 2018; Peplow et al., 2021; Winkelmes, 2013; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019), which Tinto (1975, 2017a), which Strayhorn (2008, 2019) also connected to retention and persistence. The connection between self-efficacy and persistence was established by Tinto (1975, 2017a). The connection between retention and persistence was also established; although students can persist (earn their target degree) without being retained (staying at a given institution, as opposed to transferring), transferring between institutions often delays degree attainment (Shirley et al., 2023).

The dotted lines indicate suspected connections suggested by but not fully established in the existing literature. Winkelmes et al. (2016) claimed that TAD exposure improves students' self-reported *academic confidence*, a term closely related with self-efficacy in the literature (Artino, 2012), but did not explain the mechanism of this relationship. I posit that transparent assignment design's support of academic confidence improves educational self-efficacy according to Bandura's theory (1977) because such assignments guide students through the necessary steps for completion and make grading criteria explicit (Winkelmes, 2013), improving success outcomes such as grades (Winkelmes et al., 2019). Therefore, transparent assignments may give students a mastery experience. Mastery experiences strongly support self-efficacy for related tasks (Bandura, 1977; Preez, 2012).

Figure 1

Concept Map



Therefore, the above concept map visually represents how TAD impacted sense of belonging and self-efficacy in traditionally underserved students' narratives about their experience with TAD in a freshman seminar course.

Epistemological Premises

Saldaña (2022) explained that researchers' epistemological premises are their beliefs about how knowledge is constructed. A researcher must explicate their epistemological stance because they are the main instrument in qualitative research. My epistemological stance aligns with constructivism. A major premise of constructivism is that there is no one objective reality or "truth," but rather individuals construct "multiple realities" that are influenced by their individual positionality (Patton, 2002, p. 96).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) noted that constructivism as a worldview allows for meaning making using an understanding of participants' subjective views; researchers learn about individual participants' understandings of the world, which are shaped by

their own personal histories and social interactions with others. Researchers then create broader patterns using their understanding of these individual perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Constructivism fits with the theory of sense of belonging because each participant will have a different, individualized perspective affected by their own life experiences and positionality.

As stated by Saldaña (2022), data generation methods must align with the researcher's epistemological premises because knowledge is contextually situated. My epistemological premises fit with my data generation method of interviewing and collecting audio/visual observation data during these interviews because I believe a particular group, my participants, hold the knowledge that I seek.

Methodological Premises

Although I am interested in phenomena such as college persistence and attrition, I am and always have been more interested in individual people. One important method by which individuals construct their sense of self is through storytelling (Bamburg, 2020). Students' self-perceptions as they relate to their classmates, faculty, and academic institutions have been closely linked to their ability to persist and succeed in higher education (Barnett et al., 2001; Brower et al., 2021; Tinto, 1975; Wilson et al., 2015).

I selected narrative inquiry as the most appropriate way to learn more about individual participants' stories. This framework involves gathering individuals' personal narratives to ask, "What does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came? How can this narrative be interpreted to understand and illuminate the life and culture that created it?" (Patton, 2002, p. 135). Kim (2016) explained that narrative inquiry is a rigorous, interdisciplinary research methodology (p. 10) in which

researchers use narrative to understand “multidimensional meanings of society, culture, human actions and life” to “access participants’ life experiences and engage in a process of storytelling” (p. 6). Kim stated that individual interviews are the most common data collection method in narrative inquiry (p. 157) and that such interviews may be structured but are more often and perhaps more usefully semi-structured or unstructured (p. 163). Several approaches for analyzing data exist; two main approaches are analysis of narrative, in which researchers identify major themes across multiple narratives (my chosen approach), and narrative analysis, in which researchers focus on structural elements of narrative (p. 197).

One premise of narrative inquiry is that humans understand their own lives and experiences in terms of narrative and need narratives to understand others’ experiences and actions (p. 8). There are many approaches to narrative inquiry in a variety of different fields. In an educational context, narrative inquiry is often used to explore lived experiences (p. 18) and challenge traditional assumptions and dominant viewpoints (p. 19). This emphasis on challenging dominant assumptions and views made narrative inquiry a fitting methodology for my study about the experiences of traditionally underserved students. I interviewed participants to understand their personal narratives and how they perceived their own educational experiences, especially regarding how TAD assignments in their coursework interplayed with their vignettes related to sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

Definitions, Assumptions, and Delimitations

This section includes definitions of relevant terms, a discussion of my assumptions for the research, and an explanation of delimitations for the study.

Definitions

The following terms will be used throughout this dissertation:

Academic Success. For the purposes of this project, I define academic success in line with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which gathers “success” data using 6-year graduation rates and measures of persistence and retention (NCES, 2022).

Persistence. Persistence is “the percentage of students who return to college at any institution for their second year” (National Student Clearinghouse, 2022). Students may be said to have persisted from one year to the next if they are still enrolled in a degree program at the beginning of the second academic year.

Retention. Retention is a measurement for students who return to the same institution from semester to semester.

Attrition. In this context, “attrition” or non-continuation describes students who do not persist in their educational goals at any institution from one semester to the next (NCES, 2022). Attrition rates include students who plan to return later and students who have no plans to (Bradshaw, 2020).

Traditionally Underserved. I use the term “traditionally underserved” as it is defined by the California State University (CSU) system’s Historically Underserved Student Factor Model to include students who are first-generation, low-income, underprepared, or from traditionally underserved racial or ethnic communities (CSU, 2019b). These attributes are interrelated conditions that influence students’ experiences in higher education; they are not discrete categories, and they do not cover all possible conditions that may be included within the term *traditionally underserved*.

First-Generation. For this study's purposes, a first-generation college student is defined as any student without at least one parent who completed a 4-year (bachelor's) degree, in line with the definition used by CSUN's office of Institutional Research (CSUN, n.d.-1).

Low-income. This study defines "low-income" in line with CSUN's (n.d.-1) data, which determines low-income status using Pell Grant eligibility and expected family contribution (EFC).

Underprepared. This term refers to students' lack of adequate preparation for higher education. This measure is determined by the CSU (2019a) using "multiple measures" such as high school courses and grades, standardized testing scores, and Advanced Placement or International baccalaureate performance (p. 3).

Underrepresented Minorities (URM). As discussed previously, race and ethnicity can be complicated and inexact categories; however, they are important to acknowledge in the pursuit of educational justice. This study aligns with the CSU (2019b) Factor Model, which classified "African American," Hispanic, and American Indian students as Underrepresented Minorities (URM).

Self-Efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to a person's own judgement of their ability to perform a given action (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Bosscher & Smit, 1998; Preez, 2012).

Sense of Belonging. Sense of belonging is connected to community; "a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

Assumptions

A major assumption of this study is that undergraduate students from traditionally underserved communities, as a group, have a different experience in higher education from their peers from traditionally better-served backgrounds. I assume that what some may see as “norms” in higher education are usually, in fact, specific to upper class, White culture. I assume that acknowledging this fact and compensating for it by addressing the factors that harm success among students from traditionally underserved populations is an important step toward elevating social justice in higher education.

I also assume that because of the racist, classist history of higher education in this country, students from traditionally underserved communities are likely to be less prepared for higher education, more susceptible to feelings of academic ostracization, and more in need of detailed, transparent instructions. I also assume that narrative inquiry will allow me to better understand the academic experiences of this target group. Finally, I assume that, although my findings will not be generalizable, an understanding of the experiences of a selection of participants from the target group will still be useful information for those who hold power in academia and who seek to improve academic equity.

Delimitations

I delimited this study in three ways: First, participants had to self-identify as belonging to at least one traditionally underserved community. Second, students had to be enrolled in a section of the freshman seminar at CSUN in the Fall 2024 semester that used at least two assignments that adhered to the TAD framework. Third, I only included students who were legal adults at the time of the study. Although my recruitment survey

(Appendix A) included quantitative scales for sense of belonging and self-efficacy, these scales were not used for participant selection. I only discussed participant responses on the survey during the interviews to solicit narrative data regarding those topics. As disclosed in the survey consent information and IRB approval (Appendix B), I reserved the survey response data for possible use in future research.

Conclusion and Outline of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design (TAD). Through investigating this phenomenon, my goal was to use individual participant data to create broader patterns that could inform how interested parties such as faculty implement the TAD framework.

In this chapter, I presented an introduction to the study, including the statement of the problem, purpose, significance, and the research questions, as well as the conceptual framework, definitions, delimitations, and assumptions. In Chapter II, I review pertinent literature related to the equity gap in higher education, traditionally underserved students, the hidden curriculum and its effects, and practices that have been implemented to address the equity gap, including TAD. In Chapter III, I introduce the methodological premises of the study, including the research design, data generation and analysis, and methods by which I assured trustworthiness and rigor. Chapter IV contains my research findings, organized into two main sections. First, I present an overview of my participants' individual educational narratives using a loosely chronological design. Then, I investigate commonalities in these narratives that relate to the present study.

Finally, in Chapter V, I discuss my findings, review implications for practice, acknowledge the study's limitations, and propose future directions for research. I conclude with my final thoughts regarding TAD and supporting traditionally underserved students.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

In this literature review, I synthesize major concepts related to the study. First, I present findings related to the equity gap in higher education. I explain how belonging to various groups labelled as “traditionally underserved” has complicated students’ educational attainment and how the equity gap is detrimental for students, institutions, and society. Then, I review relevant practices used to combat the equity gap with a focus on sense of belonging, self-efficacy, freshman seminar courses, and transparent assignment design. I also discuss complications related to these practices. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary and an overview of Chapter III.

Equity Gap in Higher Education

The term *equity gap* has been used to refer to the disparity in the rates of academic achievement, described using metrics like grade point average and retention (CSUN, n.d.-h), among students from traditionally underserved and traditionally better-served populations. Researchers have agreed that specific populations have been consistently underserved in higher education (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Daddow, 2016; Johnson et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2019). The equity gap has been “usually understood as disparities between groups in educational outcomes that violate notions of equity” (Ziegler et al., 2021, p. 2). The term *equity gap* (California State University [CSU], 2019b; Ziegler et al., 2021) and the related term *opportunity gap* (Carter & Welner, 2013) have emphasized that the differences in academic success rates are due to factors other

than individual student cognitive and noncognitive abilities; the gaps stem from the social milieu in which students exist. These terms may refer to the same phenomenon as the term *achievement gap* when used by scholars such as Cohen et al. (2006) and Yeager et al. (2013). However, the term *achievement gap* may communicate a deficit mindset that many educators and educational scholars have argued against (Shukla et al., 2022).

Many researchers have indicated the connection between decreased initial enrollment in higher education and belonging to a traditionally underserved community (Bingham et al., 2022; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Evans, 2017; Somers et al., 2004; Yeager et al., 2013). When they do enroll, students belonging to certain demographic categories are more likely to achieve lower grades than their peers from traditionally better-served communities (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Tinto, 1975; Yeager et al., 2013). They are also less likely to persist to degree completion in higher education (Brower et al., 2021; Somers et al., 2004; Tinto, 1975, 2004; Xie & Rice, 2021).

The literature has proposed many possible causes for the equity gap, and some causes might affect specific demographic groups more than others. Research has suggested that disparities in educational attainment may be additionally compounded when students belong to multiple traditionally underserved communities, as is common (Somers et al., 2004). Transparent assignment design (TAD) has been proposed as one possible teaching and learning implementation for addressing the equity gap because it provides additional guidance that can support underserved students in overcoming limiting factors, such as the hidden curriculum (Winkelmes et al., 2019).

In the next few sections, I review the categories of students whom the CSU (2019b) system identified as *traditionally underserved* and most likely to suffer from the

equity gap. These categories are not exhaustive and can be nebulous and overlapping. After defining each category, I explain the equity gap's detrimental effects.

Traditionally Underserved

The specific categories of students who are traditionally underserved and therefore at risk of falling into the equity gap varies from study to study. Common categories include Black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) students (Evans, 2017; Hammond, 2015; Wofford, 2022), first-generation students (Evans, 2017; Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; O'Keeffe, 2013; Wofford, 2022; Yeager et al., 2013; Zumbrunn et al., 2014), low-income students (Wofford, 2022), veteran students (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018), queer students (Wofford, 2022), and international students (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Students with disabilities are also sometimes included as a traditionally underserved community (Becker & Palladino, 2016; Bonati, 2019; Bradshaw, 2020; Wilkens et al., 2021; Xie & Rice, 2021). Many studies have indicated that undergraduate students from traditionally underserved communities of all types reportedly have lower academic success rates as measured by degree completion within 6 years (Aucejo et al., 2020; Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Bird et al., 2022; Daddow, 2016; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2022; López et al., 2022; Pitman, 2015; Somers et al., 2004).

Various collective terms for such students have been used in the literature, such as *historically marginalized* (Yeager et al., 2013), *disadvantaged* (Pitman, 2015), and *underserved* (Howard et al., 2020; Michaud et al., 2017; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). In each study, the chosen term has often collectively referred to different groups. For the purposes of this study, I used the term *traditionally underserved* because it has been used

by California State University, Northridge (CSUN), the research site (CSUN, n.d.-h). At CSUN, this term applies to students who are first-generation, low-income, underprepared, and/or from historically underserved racial or ethnic communities (California State University [CSU], 2019b). I therefore focused on these categories with the understanding that they are not the only possible categories under the *traditionally underserved* umbrella in the literature. In the following section, I define and discuss each of these categories in more depth.

First-Generation

Researchers and individual institutions have disagreed about the specific definition of a first-generation student in higher education. For example, the University of California (UC) system defined a *first-generation* student as a student without at least one parent who completed a bachelor's degree or the equivalent (Echelman, 2023). However, the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) limited the term *first-generation* to only apply to students whose parents did not attend any college at all, regardless of degree completion. Many institutions have not considered parental academic achievement outside of the United States, meaning that students whose parents earned international degrees may still qualify as first generation. Other institutions, such as UCLA, broaden the definition to include students whose parents completed a 4-year degree in another country. The CSU system has used multiple definitions in various publications (Echelman, 2023). CSUN's Office of Institutional Research (CSUN, n.d.-l) defined a first-generation college student as any student without at least one parent who completed a 4-year (bachelor's) degree.

No matter how the term is defined, the literature generally has agreed that first-generation status has made students more vulnerable to negative academic outcomes (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021; Phillips et al., 2020; Somers et al., 2004; Wofford, 2022). For example, Dumais and Ward (2010) analyzed data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988–2000 and the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS). They concluded that parental assistance was a significant factor both when students applied to 4-year colleges and in their overall graduation rates. First-generation students, defined in their study as students whose parents had not attended any college, were found to have “lower enrollment rates, lower levels of academic and social integration and lower grade point averages when in school, and lower rates of retention and graduation” (p. 250).

Tinto (2004) explained that first-generation students, defined in his study as students whose parents had not earned more than a high school diploma (p. 4), faced several disadvantages when compared to their peers whose parents had college experience. He found that first-generation students were more likely to enroll in 2-year colleges than 4-year institutions (Tinto, 1975). These colleges generally have higher dropout rates, and enrolling in such an institution may increase the time to graduation (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (2004) also found that first-generation students were more likely to enroll in public than private institutions; the latter usually have higher completion rates. The strongest effect Tinto (2004) found was socioeconomic: Parents with degrees were likely to earn more money with which to support their children through college, perhaps explaining why first-generation students were more likely to work while enrolled. More recent studies have confirmed that traditionally underserved students are likely to have

less time available for their studies than their traditionally better-served peers, due in part to the necessity of employment (Wladis et al., 2024). As with the other traditionally underserved categories, an overlap between first-generation status and low-income status is likely (PPIC, 2019).

Low-Income

The specific income level at which a student or their family has been considered low-income has varied by location (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). In the United States, many students fill out a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to determine income status and eligibility for financial aid, including grants and loans (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). Pell grants are commonly awarded to students with “exceptional financial need” (Federal Student Aid, n.d., para. 1). More than half of all Pell Grants went to students with family incomes below \$20,000 in the selected reporting years between 2003 and 2016 (NCES, 2019). In comparison, the federal poverty threshold for a family of four was \$18,400 in 2003; it increased gradually each year and reached \$24,300 in 2016 (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, n.d.). CSUN’s (n.d.-1) data has determined low-income status using Pell Grant eligibility and expected family contribution (EFC), which was also determined using students’ FAFSA applications.

Tinto (1977) stated that income status alone was not a major determinant for persistence, but later studies indicated that income has become a more significant factor (Aucejo et al., 2020; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Tinto, 2004). The High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 found that, from a nationally representative cohort of students who were in ninth grade in 2009, 44% of students from the lowest fifth of socioeconomic status (SES) had never enrolled in postsecondary education by 2016 as compared to only 7% of

students from the highest fifth of SES (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). This discrepancy may exist in part because low-income status may necessitate that students pursue employment in addition to coursework, either to support themselves or contribute to their families (Aucejo et al., 2020).

Findings have been mixed about the impact of employment while enrolled in higher education. Some scholars have argued that the time and energy dedicated to employment can reduce students' ability to focus on their studies (Somers et al., 2004), a phenomenon which has been referred to "time poverty" (Wladis et al., 2024). Darolia's (2014) findings suggested that "marginal" work hours did not have a detrimental effect on students' grades and credit completion, but employment could influence students to reduce course loads, thus increasing the time taken to earn a degree and raising the likelihood of dropping out (p. 39). Employment while enrolled full-time in higher education has also been associated with increased anxiety and stress (Mounsey et al., 2013).

As explained by Tinto (2004), first-generation students have been found to be more likely to come from low-income families. Detriments to educational success may therefore be compounded by such first-generation students' difficulty navigating financial aid because their parents have no experience with the process and therefore struggle to guide them (Somers et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2019). First-generation students might also be less likely to accept financial aid loans due to lack of knowledge, distrust, or fear about their ability to repay them, leading them away from more prestigious institutions at which tuition is often more expensive (Somers et al., 2004).

Tinto (2004) explained that high-income and low-income students usually went to different institutions, but even at similar institutions, low-income students were less likely to earn a degree (p. 6). Somers et al. (2004) found that cost was more likely to impact first-generation persistence than their other variables: high income, high test scores, and high GPA. More recently, Strayhorn (2019) also examined the many detrimental effects, such as lower retention, of low-income status, which has often intersected with first-generation status and belonging to a historically marginalized racial and/or ethnic community. Aucejo et al.'s (2020) work with undergraduate students at Arizona State University who were enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shift to emergency remote instruction found that lower-income students were 55% more likely to report that COVID-19 caused delayed graduation than higher-income students, demonstrating increased vulnerability to economic concerns among low-income students. Additionally, low-income students have been found to be less prepared for higher education than their higher-income peers (Nguyen, 2023; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2004).

Academic Preparation

Academic preparation, a term used by the California State University system (CSU, 2019b), is another term for *college readiness*. Duncheon (2015) defined college readiness as “the preparation needed to enroll in credit-bearing courses and persist to graduation” (p. 5). Academic preparation encompasses skills spanning social, cultural, and institutional factors that have been difficult to define (Duncheon, 2015, p. ix). Cognitive preparation is a more common measure at educational institutions; academic preparation has been determined by the CSU (2019a) using “multiple measures” such as

high school courses and grades, standardized testing scores, and Advanced Placement or International baccalaureate performance (p. 3). Other researchers have defined this term using specific high school GPAs; in one study, a B+ average GPA was taken as indicative of college readiness (Cabrera et al., 2001). The exact criterion of this term varies by context, but it has been presented by the literature as strongly related to the resources and support students receive while in high school (Liu, 2011; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019; Tinto, 1975).

Duncheon (2018) acknowledged that academic preparation could be affected by noncognitive characteristics, which were more difficult to measure and research. Noncognitive characteristics have been understood in various ways. For example, Lipnevich and Roberts (2012) sorted these characteristics into a taxonomy with four categories: attitudes and beliefs, social and emotional qualities, learning processes, and personality traits. Some characteristics related to academic success have included lower motivation, a lack of self-regulatory learning behaviors, and sometimes lower self-efficacy (Duncheon, 2018).

Ender and Wilkie (2000) described under-prepared students as having less realistic expectations, unfocused goals, extrinsic motivation, “inadequate” study skills, and a “history of passive learning” (pp. 134–135). Smith and Commander (1997) noted that under-prepared first-generation students were more likely to lack knowledge about navigating college culture, specifically the importance of attendance, preparing for class, taking effective notes, speaking with professors, using course materials, and collaborating with classmates, among other non-cognitive skills. Although Smith and Commander (1997) did not use the term *hidden curriculum* in their study, these unspoken expectations

for academic success meet the criteria for that term established by other scholars (Margolis et al., 2001; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). Students who are not first-generation have had opportunities to gain better preparation for these implicitly required skills from their college-educated parents (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975).

The literature agrees that low-income status has also been closely related to college readiness (Anyon, 2005; Duncheon, 2015, 2018). The condition of being low-income has been found to harm students' ability to learn and succeed academically (Jensen, 2009). Low-income students have often attended public high schools in low-income urban areas; such schools can be less resourced to prepare students for college success due to lack of funding and high student-teacher ratios (Anyon, 2005; Strayhorn, 2019). Additionally, families with a higher socioeconomic status have been found more likely to afford high-quality private tutoring for their children (Masako, 2007) and facilitate social connections that provide their children with access to power and resources (Bourdieu, 1986). Tinto (2004) stated that even with preparation, low-income students were still less likely to earn a degree, possibly due to "social or cultural factors that pose additional barriers for low-income students" (p. 6). Later scholars have indicated that this discrepancy is still extant (Strayhorn, 2019; Swanson et al., 2021).

Race and Ethnicity

Historically, identifying clearly delineated categories for race and ethnicity has been challenging (Lewis et al., 2023). The CSU Factor Model (2019b) classified African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students as Underrepresented Minorities (URM). Research has suggested that students from these racial and ethnic groups are more likely to face marginalization and exclusion in higher education, leading to greater

academic challenges (Bonati, 2019; Gilmore, 1985; PPIC, 2019; Yeager et al., 2013). Many scholars have detailed the psychological and practical harms of racism in higher education (Ancis et al., 2000; Hammond, 2015; Strayhorn, 2019). Denaro et al. (2022) explained that, even in the absence of overt racism, URM students have been harmed by institutional racism in the form of systemic bias, unequal power structures, conflicting cultural models, and lack of access to equal educational opportunities (Discussion, para. 2).

Students from minority racial and ethnic categories have also been negatively affected by a lack of diversity among their faculty (Poloma, 2014; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2017a). The NCES (2024) stated that in Fall 2022, 73% of college and university faculty were White, as compared to 13% Asian, 7% Black, 6% Hispanic, 1% two or more races, and less than half a percent American Indian/Alaska Native and Pacific Islander, respectively. This lack of diverse representation among faculty has decreased URM students' sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). It has communicated the message that "people of color do not have what it takes to succeed in academic professions" (Poloma, 2014, p. 338). Mismatches in cultural norms may harm students' ability to connect with faculty on an individual level and form helpful relationships (Bingham et al., 2022; Strayhorn, 2019). Lacking these relationships has harmed URM students' academic success; positive student-instructor interaction has been linked with retention, persistence, motivation, and general well-being (Bingham et al., 2022; Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2022; Strayhorn et al., 2019).

Ancis et al.'s (2000) study of student perceptions regarding race found that African American students reported more negative experiences in higher education, such

as racial-ethnic hostility, less equitable treatment by both faculty and staff, and overt faculty racism. In the same study, Asian American and Latino/a students were found more likely to reveal stereotyping and prejudice, a lack of respect, and unfair treatment. All groups of minoritized students expressed pressure to conform to racial and ethnic stereotypes (Ancis et al., 2000). These findings aligned with Cohen et al.'s (1999) assertion that URM students have struggled with "stereotype threat," which occurs when people from a marginalized group fear confirming negative stereotypes about their group (p. 1303).

Steele (1997) explained that minoritized students can internalize stereotypes, leading to self-defeating behaviors. Cohen et al. (1999) further argued that students from minority racial and ethnic groups may be more likely to see instructor feedback as "threatening, judgmental, and based on negative stereotypes," leading them to "withdraw from academic tasks" (p. 1303). Tinto (2017a) noted that even a brief reminder about negative stereotypes can harm minority students' self-efficacy. Of note, White students who responded to Ancis et al.'s (2000) study reported much higher satisfaction and "seemed to lack a recognition that interracial tensions and conflict exist for a significant portion of the student body [non-White students]" (p. 183).

Issues faced by URM students may be compounded by simultaneous membership in other traditionally underserved categories. For example, in the United States, Black and Hispanic individuals have historically had a much lower median annual income than White and Asian individuals (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). Certain groups of URM students are therefore more likely to also face the negative implications of being low-income.

Hidden Curriculum

The literature has suggested the hidden curriculum is one reason why students from traditionally underserved backgrounds struggle in higher education more than their traditionally better-served peers (Flinders & Thornton, 2017; Margolis et al., 2001; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). This term was first used by Jackson (1968/1990) when describing unspoken institutional expectations that students must master to achieve academic success.

Specific elements of the hidden curriculum have not been definitively described in the literature and may vary from institution to institution (Tinto, 1979). However, Smith and Commander (1997) described example behavioral elements of the hidden curriculum in higher education, including attendance, preparation for individual courses and/or college overall, note-taking, addressing professors, accessing and using course materials, and effectively engaging in group work. Giroux and Penna (1979) asserted that the hidden curriculum included not only behaviors but values and beliefs “transmitted . . . through the underlying structure of meaning in both the formal context [and] social relations of school classroom life” (p. 22). Oliva (2000) acknowledged that curricula often have hidden elements, including school values and social climate (p. 7). Tinto (1975) stated that a mismatch in values between the student and their educational institution was one major cause of dropping out.

Orón Semper and Blasco (2018) discussed methods by which the hidden curriculum could be made explicit in higher education, specifically by teachers acknowledging its existence and making their expectations for student behavior clear. Giroux and Penna (1979) warned that the hidden curriculum had the potential to

undermine social education (p. 23), and Giroux (1983) acknowledged the hidden curriculum's role in contributing to dominating teacher/student relationships. Margolis et al. (2001) reframed the hidden curriculum as something purposely hidden as a means of both excluding students from unwanted populations but to hide "evidence of wrongdoing" (existing classist structures) in educational institutions (p. 3). The hidden has been described as an intentional, historical means of controlling and upholding social and educational stratification, a way for institutions to reproduce hierarchy and resist change (Margolis et al., 2001, p. 20).

Detrimental Effects of the Equity Gap

The equity gap is not only a problem for individual students, but a social issue. Because higher education degree attainment is associated with increased lifetime income and overall quality of life in the United States (Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021), the gap perpetuates social stratification and exposes traditionally underserved students to an increased likelihood of negative outcomes, such as lower income and poorer health (Mulvey, 2009; Phillips et al., 2020). Additionally, college-educated individuals are more likely to participate in community service, more likely to contribute more to economic growth, and less likely to commit crimes (Tinto, 2004) or use government programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and cash assistance (Trostel, 2015, p. 45).

Mulvey (2009) argued that "the political life of the nation may well depend on the education of its under-prepared students," in part because attending college is so closely correlated with voting and other political participation, informed citizenship, and other aspects of "social cohesion" (p. 30). Addressing the equity gap is also in the best interest

of educational institutions that wish to retain students; high attrition can present a financial concern for institutions and harm college ranking and reputation (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). Improving retention and persistence for traditionally underserved students is especially important given the increasing number of students from traditionally underserved backgrounds enrolling in higher education (CSU, 2019a).

Practices to Combat the Equity Gap

Recognizing the urgency of addressing the equity gap, governmental agencies, educational institutions, and individual educational practitioners have attempted many interventions and practices to close the gap, to varying degrees of success. The literature agreed on the necessity of broader structural solutions such as financial aid for improving enrollment and persistence among traditionally underserved students (Liu, 2011; Pena, 2010; Tinto, 2004). At the level of individual institutions, possible avenues for improvement include high-impact practices. Formal definitions of high-impact practices vary widely (Finley & McNair, 2013; Kuh, 2008), although their implementation is widely encouraged by stakeholders (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Trogden et al., 2023).

High-impact practices may be implemented at the administrative level, such as living-learning communities, first-year cohort programs, and service-learning (Trogden et al., 2023); internships, study abroad programs, capstones, and student-faculty research (Trogden et al., 2023; Wofford, 2022). Other popular high-impact practices may be implemented by individual instructors, such as universal design for learning (Edyburn, 2021; Xie & Rice, 2021); learning-centered syllabi (Grunert, 1997); and transparency in teaching, including the specific transparent assignment design framework (Winkelmes et

al., 2019). Other influences that are not traditionally labeled as high-impact practices may also have a great effect on student success, such as a trauma-informed care pedagogical approach (Barros-Lane et al., 2021) and improved student-faculty communication outside of class (Bingham et al., 2022; Brower et al., 2021; Daddow, 2016; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Harsh et al., 2011; Moeller et al., 2022).

The following sections focus on sense of belonging, self-efficacy, freshman seminar courses, and transparency, constructions and implementations that have been used to combat the equity gap and that are relevant to the current study.

Supporting Sense of Belonging

As relative newcomers who may not have familial connections to academia or access to the same resources and supports as more privileged students, students from traditionally underserved populations are less likely to have internalized the so-called hidden curriculum that would grant them familiarity with the language used by and unspoken expectations held by the traditional academic community (Hammond, 2015; Oliva, 2000; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). This lack of familiarity with academic conventions may contribute to a sense of otherness or exclusion thought to stem from differences between traditionally underserved students and their traditionally better-served peers (Bonati, 2019; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), especially in relation to differences in socioeconomic status (Pitman, 2015). Sense of belonging has been shown to be positively correlated with greater persistence and retention in multiple studies (Blackwell-Starnes, 2018; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; O’Keeffe, 2013; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2023).

Sense of belonging might have such an impact for many reasons. Although students from all backgrounds encounter academic challenges, students who feel like *outsiders* or that they do not belong in higher education are less likely to practice help-seeking behaviors, leading to ultimately worse outcomes (Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Bingham et al., 2022; Daddow, 2016; Han et al., 2022; Harsh et al., 2011; López et al., 2022). Particularly, Gillen-O’Neel (2021) argued that sense of belonging was negatively correlated with academic procrastination, which studies suggest is a major contributor to student attrition (Grunschel et al., 2013; Pelikan et al., 2021). Students who already face a lower sense of belonging may be more sensitive to additional indications about lack of belonging; Yeager et al. (2013) explained: “When students worry about belonging and something goes wrong—for instance, when a student feels left out, criticized, or disrespected—it can seem like proof that they don’t belong” (p. 62). Tinto (2017a) argued that, to persist, students must feel that they are part of an academic community and that their participation is valued, that they “matter and belong” (p. 258). Tinto (2017a) acknowledged that students’ sense of belonging could be impacted by experiences prior to enrollment in higher education but stated that sense of belonging was most dependent upon daily interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators. He advised universities to improve representation, campus climate, and engagement with students to improve sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2019) further explored how students’ identities, such as belonging to historically minoritized racial and/or ethnic groups, coincide with decreased sense of belonging.

Fostering Academic Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p. 391). In their analysis of the General Self-Efficacy Scale, Bosscher and Smit (1998) similarly defined self-efficacy as one’s beliefs in their own ability to “organize and execute” a given target behavior (p. 339), and Preez (2012) further added that self-efficacy covers initializing a given action, applying effort, and persisting against obstacles.

Academic self-efficacy is an important component of student success (Anderson & Brockett, 2008; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Shepherd & Penuel, 2018; Wilson et al., 2015). Academic self-efficacy may be improved by increased sense of belonging (Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Yi et al., 2024) and experiences of mastery (Bandura, 1977). Specifically, Bandura (1977) stated that self-efficacy could be enhanced (and defensive behaviors could be reduced) when individuals persist through activities that feel threatening. Although self-efficacy can be generalized to other related situations (Bandura, 1977), an individual may have high self-efficacy in one domain and low self-efficacy in another (Bandura, 1986). An experience of mastery (successfully accomplishing a task that felt threatening) could establish self-efficacy in similar performance contexts, even overcoming “self-debilitat[ing] . . . preoccupation with personal inadequacies” (Bandura, 1977, p. 195). However, “it is important that subjects understand what kind of behavior will be required and the circumstances in which they will be asked to perform them” (pp. 203–204). Tinto (2017a) acknowledged the importance of self-efficacy in academic contexts as well as its malleability. He stated that

self-efficacy is learned, rather than inherited. Additionally, his research supported that students with higher self-efficacy engage more in educational pursuits, devote more effort, and persist longer when attempting tasks.

Freshman Seminar Courses

Freshman seminar courses, also called first-year seminar courses, are a common implementation designed to help first-semester undergraduate acclimate and succeed in college settings (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Keup, 2005). Freshman seminar courses were first introduced in the 1930s (Clark & Cundiff, 2011) and focused on “adjusting” new students to the campus (Gordon, 1991, p. 109). Gordon (1991) explained that freshman seminar course became less popular in the 1960s due to concerns that they were not “academic” enough, but the influx of “first-generation, non-traditional, and minority” students in the 1970s prompted the return of these seminars (Gordon, 1991, p. 109). This influx of students from populations traditionally underserved by higher education was likely due to increased financial aid opportunities (Saenz et al., 2007). The rates of traditionally underserved students enrolled in higher education have continued to rise, and many institutions have implemented freshman seminar courses to serve these students; by 2003, they were offered by 90% of American colleges and universities (Clark & Cundiff, 2011).

Freshman seminars are generally “small discussion courses that focus on teaching basic study skills, academic planning, and time management” (Clark & Cundiff, 2011, p. 618). The freshman seminar course at CSUN, also called University 100 or simply U100, was designed to teach students about “skills necessary for success in college, life, and their career” and improve sense of belonging (CSUN, n.d.-k, para. 1). The literature

agreed that sense of belonging is important for retention and persistence (Clark & Cundiff, 2011; Cohen, 2019; Keup, 2005; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1997, 2004, 2017a).

However, results about these seminars' effectiveness have been mixed; some researchers found that students enrolled in such courses during their first semester were more likely to stay enrolled through the next semester (Burgette & Magun-Jackson, 2009; Miller et al., 2007), but others found no difference in retention between students enrolled in a freshman seminar course and those who were not enrolled (Strayhorn, 2009; Wolf-Wendel et al., 1999). Cohen (2019) argued that freshman seminar courses could help students adjust to college life and improve their success by facilitating a shift in attitude from passive to assertive, providing information about institutional resources such as tutoring, and developing academic skills such as note-taking that are vital to academic success (p. 9).

Clark and Cundiff's (2011) study of 435 first-year undergraduate college students in a semester-long seminar did not find a difference in GPA, but students enrolled in the freshman seminar did have increased retention rates (p. 631). Keenan and Gabovitch (1995) found positive effects from enrollment in their institution's 8-week seminar course, including "awareness of college policies and procedures, knowledge and use of campus resources, confidence in learning skills, development of career planning strategies, and retention to the second semester of the freshman year" (p. 11). However, that study found no major differences in "student development and integration into the campus culture" between students in the seminar and those not in the seminar (p. 11). Other qualitative studies have found increased engagement (Ehrlich et al., 2020).

Clark and Cundiff (2011) noted that most freshman seminar courses are voluntary, so studies about their efficacy in improving factors related to academic success may be confounded by self-selection bias; students who choose to enroll in such courses may have other differences from their peers who do not choose to enroll (p. 620). Additionally, the design of freshman seminar courses can vary widely between institutions and even instructors at the same institution, complicating any conclusive determination about their overall effectiveness (Hunter & Linder, 2005).

Transparent Assignment Design (TAD)

Transparent assignment design (TAD), a framework by which assignment instructions are organized to increase student comprehension, is one of many equity initiatives in higher education (Howard et al., 2020; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Michaud et al., 2017; Winkelmes, 2013; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). The literature supports that one cause of the equity gap is hidden curriculum (Margolis et al., 2001; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018), providing a theoretical bridge between structural inequity and TAD, which functions to communicate expectations that often remain unspoken in higher education (Winkelmes et al., 2019).

Assignment prompts designed with TAD include three sections: purpose, task, and criteria (Transparency in Learning & Teaching Higher Ed [TILT Higher Ed], n.d.). The purpose section communicates to students what skills they will practice and what knowledge they will gain by completing the assignment; the task section details what students should do and how, specifically, to complete the assignment; and the criteria section details “what excellence looks like” and communicates how the assignment will be graded “in advance to help students to self-evaluate” (Winkelmes et al., 2016, p. 33).

Findings from Winkelmes et al. (2016) showed that the implementation of transparent assignments using the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) framework showed a statistically significant benefit for all students' rates of success in the course, with a "more pronounced" effect on first-generation, low-income, and "underrepresented" students. Winkelmes et al. (2019) argued that use of the TILT transparency intervention predicted improvements in "academic confidence, sense of belonging, [and] mastery of employable skills" (p. 1).

That transparent assignment design may improve success outcomes for students, especially students from traditionally underserved communities, aligns with the existing research. The literature agreed that successful objectives are distinctly measurable and observable (Evans, 2017); their meaning and the method by which they may be measured should be commonly understood (Anderson et al., 2001). The literature also agreed that clearly stated and measurable objectives are essential to instruction and allow graders to accurately assess learners' performance (Evans, 2017; Flinders & Thornton, 2017; Masters, 1976; Oliva, 2000; Zaidi et al., 2018). Clear explanations about expected behavior and how success will be measured are vital to the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Also, learning from others' examples helps novice learners overcome fear of failure and persist, developing self-efficacy (Preez, 2012); Kang et al. (2016) found that giving examples ahead of time significantly improved student performance in their study.

Recommendations under the umbrella of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and Research on Teaching and Learning (RTL) have included transparent assignment design; many scholars have argued that equal engagement opportunities, or

participatory parity, which is said to be improved by the use of transparent assignment design, compose an essential part of educational social justice (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016). Existing research suggests that transparent assignment design may reduce the negative impact of racist, classist, ableist, and other discriminatory and exclusionary instruction practices that often go unnoticed (Palmer et al., 2018; Xie & Rice, 2021). Thompson and Carello (2022) argued that students from traditionally underserved communities are likely to have experienced trauma due to their marginalized status, such as discrimination and violence motivated by their identities.

Transparency in teaching and clear communication, as well as Winkelmes's (2013) transparent assignment framework itself, are recommended as useful trauma-informed care pedagogical practices (Thompson & Carello, 2022). Daddow (2016) and Winkelmes et al. (2019) also argued that students' ability to trust instructors is an instrumental factor in student success, and Hammond (2015) explained that students struggle to learn when they feel unsafe, as can happen when they do not trust the instructor, which is connected to understanding the instructor's teaching and grading practices.

A substantial component of building trust is, therefore, dependent on clear communication of the instructor's expectations and grading criteria. Hammond (2015) explained that students from traditionally underserved backgrounds are more likely to struggle with the so-called invisible curriculum, or unspoken academic expectations that those familiar with higher education take for granted. Hammond's (2015) findings agreed with those by Yeager et al. (2013) and others such as Orón Semper and Blasco (2018) who concurred that instructors could work toward equity by making the invisible

curriculum visible via overt explanation. TAD is believed to be one method by which instructors can counteract the negative effects that the invisible curriculum has on students from traditionally underserved backgrounds because the framework guides instructors to clearly explain every assignment's purpose, task, and criteria using accessible language and an appropriate level of specificity (Winkelmes et al., 2019).

Complications

Administrators and faculty development professionals in higher education are often eager to encourage faculty to implement classroom-level DEI initiatives (Bradshaw, 2020; Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021). However, faculty can be resistant to change (Bradshaw, 2020; Price & Regehr, 2022). Price and Regehr (2022) focused on curricular and instructional change specifically in the health sciences, noting that “being asked to change one’s teaching practice will incur a cost to identity” for faculty who strongly identify as content and teaching experts; that is, being directed to change one’s teaching approach may feel threatening (p. 114). Matthews (2019) acknowledged that faculty resistance to changing their teaching practices, specifically in the context of engaging students as partners in their own learning, was a more complicated issue than simple stereotypes about faculty simply being “out-of-date,” “older,” “not good at teaching,” or “scared of change” (p. 2). Matthews (2019) noted that change requires an “emotional and intellectual commitment” (p. 4).

Faculty have also expressed concerns that instructional changes designed to improve equity may harm academic rigor (Bird et al., 2022; Pitman, 2015). Academic rigor is defined by Culver et al. (2019) as classroom activities or assignments that require deep, higher-order (rather than surface-level) student engagement to demonstrate

complex understanding of course content (p. 613). Winkelmes et al. (2019) acknowledged faculty concerns about increased workload and objections about reduced rigor specifically related to transparent assignment design, noting a particular faculty objection that “students learn less when they are pampered” (p. 180). However, a benefit of transparent assignment design as an equity implementation is Winkelmes et al.’s (2019) claim that redesigning assignments to be more transparent is a relatively quick process that may actually reduce faculty workload because making assignments transparent has reportedly resulted in “fewer last-minute requests for guidance [and] fewer questions or disputes about grades” (p. 40). Winkelmes et al. (2019) asserted that transparent assignments improve academic rigor by allowing students to focus more time on producing high-quality work, rather than wasting time trying to decipher more basic questions about assignment construction (p. 18).

Among faculty who do implement transparent assignment design, it is possible that not all do so effectively. Palmer et al. (2018) used Winkelmes (2013) and Winkelmes et al.’s (2016, 2019) TILT framework to create a transparent assignment design rubric with four major sections: purpose, task(s), criteria/assessment, and additional learning-focused qualities; they argued that this rubric could be used to determine the degree of transparency in a given assignment, and that not all so-called transparent assignments fulfilled the criteria. This claim could be seen as at odds with Winkelmes et al.’s (2019) assertion that using transparent assignment design is “relatively easy” (p. 2) and requires only “small, strategic tweaks” (p. 93). Adapting the transparency framework may be easier and more successful for some faculty than others (Bradley, 2023).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature regarding the equity gap in higher education and practices that may help address this gap, especially in relation to transparency in teaching and its effect on sense of belonging and self-efficacy among students from traditionally underserved populations. Although not all researchers agree regarding the roots of the equity gap and the best approaches by which professionals in higher education should address it, that the gap exists and that it perpetuates systems of oppression in the United States is generally agreed upon by researchers in the field of education (Aucejo et al., 2020; Barros-Lane et al., 2021; Daddow, 2016; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019; Yeager et al., 2013).

Many policies have been created to support traditionally underserved students, and DEI initiatives such as transparency in teaching are a popular topic of faculty development in higher education (Daddow, 2016; Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Winkelmes et al., 2019). However, the equity gap persists (NCES, 2022). While comprehensive research about faculty resistance to implementing transparent assignment design specifically is not available, some faculty are reluctant to engage in DEI implementations and high-impact practices, often due to concerns about academic rigor (Bird et al., 2022; Pitman, 2015) and faculty workload, especially for faculty who are themselves members of traditionally underserved groups (Stoll et al., 2022). Additionally, faculty who do implement transparent assignment design may not always do so effectively (Palmer et al., 2018).

In the next chapter, I present my method for the study. I explain my theoretical considerations and methodological orientation and discuss the research design in relation to my research questions. I also present the practices I used to ensure trustworthiness.

Chapter III

Method

In this chapter, I describe and justify this study's methods. The chapter begins with a discussion of my theoretical considerations, epistemological stance, and methodological orientation. Then, I engage with and explicate my biases and assumptions in a subjectivities statement. The subsequent research design section provides an overview of the site, participants, and data generation and analysis methods. Finally, I detail my strategies for building rigor and trustworthiness to protect data quality.

Theoretical Considerations

I have aligned myself with the constructivist premise that “multiple realities” are constructed by individuals as influenced by their own positionality (Patton, 2002, p. 96). Indeed, “each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). Each learner enters the course environment with their own perspective as influenced by their experiences, social group, and culture, and understanding their meaning-making process adds important knowledge to the existing literature. My positionality and alignment with the constructivist lens fit this study because I explored individuals’ perceptions of and experiences in higher education. Although there may exist similarities across individual experiences, which I was interested in investigating, I recognize that each individual experiences higher education differently.

Sense of belonging is one component of individual meaning-making in higher education. The term *sense of belonging* describes a student's ability to see themselves as a member of the academic community (Tinto, 2017a). Sense of belonging can bind an individual to a specific group or community and help that individual persist through challenges (Tinto, 1987). According to Tinto (2017a), academic sense of belonging can be shaped by one's prior experiences but is "most directly" influenced by "the broader campus climate" and the impressions about belonging that students form about "daily interactions with other students, faculty, staff, and administrators on campus" (p. 5). Tinto (2017a) posited that along with self-efficacy and student perceptions of curriculum, sense of belonging was a major contributor to student withdrawal and dropout decisions. Any student may struggle with sense of belonging for a variety of reasons (Tinto, 1987), but the literature has argued that sense of belonging in higher education is especially a problem for students from traditionally underserved communities (Cohen et al., 1999; Smith, 2021; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019; Yeager et al., 2013).

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) explained that constructivism allows researchers to use subjective information from research participants to better understand how the participants make meaning of their experiences as shaped by their social interactions with others and their own personal histories. Sense of belonging is subjective; it is an internal phenomenon that will be experienced differently by each individual. These factors influenced my selection of narrative inquiry as a methodology, explained in depth in the next section.

Methodological Premises

Kim (2016) argued that humans understand our own and others' lives in terms of narratives. Individual experiences of reality are shaped by the content and manner of the stories people tell themselves *about themselves*, and one can understand others more by examining their stories. As noted by Kim (2016), storytelling is "is the primary way we express what we know and who we are" (p. 9). The researcher and participant undergo a "re-storying" process of collecting details and constructing a meaningful narrative together with the key question, "What is the story and its meaning as told through this person's experience?" (p. 468). Merriam (2009) detailed a variety of possible narrative approaches, including biographical (e.g., the influence of personal attributions, family, and life events), psychological (e.g., thoughts and motivations) and linguistic (e.g., the language used to tell the story) (p. 33). Kim (2016) grouped narrative inquiry into different genres: autobiographical, biographical, arts-based, literary-based, and visual-based. No matter the approach, narrative inquiry is a method for understanding an individual's lived experience (Ary et al., 2010). I adopted a biographical narrative approach, examining how participants described their past, present, and future related to the phenomena of study, to better understand how their positions as students from traditionally underserved backgrounds informed their narratives.

Kim (2016) cautioned that "fledgling" researchers, like I am, may have difficulty using narrative inquiry as a method because it does not fully align with dominant, positivistic viewpoints in scientific study (p. 20). A positivist viewpoint would be that one version of reality exists "out there" and is "observable, stable, and measurable" (Merriam, 2009, p. 8), unlike my previously stated constructivist viewpoint. However, I

felt that narrative inquiry was appropriate because my interests in this study include challenging a dominant viewpoint—in this case, the dominant view in higher education that all students must conform to the institutions’ expectations to succeed.

Additionally, Kim (2016) also noted narrative inquiry is complex because it transcends any one discipline. As Kim stated, human phenomena overlap various fields. I was not daunted by this complexity; I was used to putting a great deal of effort into educational endeavors, and I was most interested in pursuing a clearer understanding of each participant’s story in the most accurate and personal method available.

Research Design

In this section, I describe my proposed research site, present a general overview of my participants, discuss participant recruitment and selection, review my data generation methods, and detail my data analysis methods.

Research Site

With VSU IRB approval and a Letter of Cooperation from CSUN (see Appendix C), I conducted this study at California State University, Northridge (CSUN). CSUN is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) with a large percentage of students from traditionally underserved backgrounds, defined by the CSU Factor Model as students who are first-generation, low-income, underprepared, or from historically underserved racial or ethnic communities (CSU, 2019b). In 2020, the latest year from which such aggregated data were reported, approximately 59% of all CSUN students were classified as “traditionally underserved” (CSUN, 2020, para. 5). In Fall 2023, the latest demographic census data available when this study was conceived, 55.8% of CSUN students self-identified as Latino/a (CSUN, 2024).

According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI, 2019), an HSI is an accredited, degree-granting institution of higher education whose undergraduate student body is at least 25% Hispanic, of whom at least 50% must be low-income. After applying for and obtaining HSI status, an institution becomes eligible for additional federal funding. HSIs were first recognized as part of the “Strengthening Institution Program” and codified into the Higher Education Act in 1992, and funds for such institutions were first appropriated in 1995 (p. 3). These funds are intended to “expand educational opportunities” and “improve the academic attainment” of Hispanic students, “expand and enhance the academic offerings, program quality, and institutional stability of colleges and universities that are educating the majority of Hispanic college students” and “help large numbers of Hispanic and other low-income students complete postsecondary degrees” (Santiago & Andrade, 2010, p. 5). Of note, according to a graph prepared by the U.S. Department of Labor (2023), people who identified as Hispanic earned the lowest median annual earnings of any race or ethnicity in the United States, at \$41,140 for Hispanic women and \$47,420 for Hispanic men as compared to \$52,360 for all women and \$62,350 for all men. This discrepancy in pay highlights the need for supporting traditionally underserved students at HSIs like CSUN.

At CSUN, the terms *credit* and *unit* are used interchangeably, and undergraduate students are encouraged to enroll in 15 units each semester, although they may be considered full-time for financial aid purposes if they are enrolled in at least 12 units (CSUN, n.d.-f). CSUN’s freshman seminar courses are 3-unit, opt-in, semester-long courses that generally meet in-person for 75 minutes twice per week (CSUN, n.d.-e). Content includes both CSUN-specific resources and general college success skills such as

time management, goal setting, and learning skills (CSUN, n.d.-e). The freshman seminar was designed to provide students with the “opportunity to develop a strong sense of belonging at CSUN by forming connections and relationships with classmates, the campus, and members of the campus community” (CSUN, n.d.-k, para. 2). More sections are offered in fall than in spring to match the demands of incoming freshmen; seven sections were offered Spring 2024, but 62 sections were offered in Fall 2024 during the time of data collection (CSUN, n.d.-i).

I am very familiar with the research site. I completed my bachelor’s (2011-2013), and master’s (2013-2015) degrees at CSUN and have worked on site since 2015. I am currently employed as a part-time faculty member with a full-time load of 15 units at CSUN and have taught courses in the English, Linguistics, and Queer Studies departments in addition to the Academic First Year Experiences department, which houses the freshman seminar. My experience teaching the freshman seminar granted me insight into how the course is structured and how the required assignments are designed. That teaching position, in conjunction with designing and co-leading a transparent assignments workshop for faculty on campus, inspired the present study.

In addition to learning more about participants’ experiences in the freshman seminar in our interviews, I also gathered information about their other courses as a point of comparison and to better understand the complexities of their first-semester experiences. At other university and college campuses, researchers might use enrollment in remedial courses, such as preparatory writing and math courses, to measure student preparedness for higher education. However, at CSUN, compulsory standalone remedial courses ended in 2018 in compliance with CSU Executive Order 1110 (CSU, 2019a).

Nevertheless, most students are placed into a first-year composition course, either 113, 114, or 115, based on “multiple measures,” such as high school GPA. The 113 first-year writing course has the most support for less prepared students; the course is split into two semesters, 113A and 113B, and includes a mandatory 1-unit supplemental instruction section led by an upperclassman. The next level, 114, is also split into two semesters, 114A and 114B, but does not include the supplemental lab. The highest level of first-year composition, 115, spans only one semester; students who enroll in a 115 writing composition section will not receive as much time and support as their peers in 113 or 114, so this placement may indicate a higher level of preparedness or confidence. Therefore, in addition to asking students whether they felt prepared for higher education, I asked participants which composition course they were enrolled in, if any, as one more objective indicator of preparedness.

Additionally, CSUN students may choose to enroll in the first-year writing requirement in the Asian American Studies, Africana Studies, Central American and Transborder Studies, Chicana and Chicano Studies, English, or Queer Studies departments because all these departments also offer their own version of first-year composition 113, 114, and 115. Completing any of these courses fulfills the lower-division writing requirement at CSUN. Although sometimes students simply choose any course at a convenient day and time, the department students choose to take their first-year composition course in may indicate the cultural groups they identify with or care about. When noteworthy, I explain such possible connections further in Chapter IV.

I also collected information about students’ math placement as an indicator of math proficiency. There are many possible math courses and paths vary widely

depending on students' majors, but most of the first-year math courses include an option to take only the math course, indicating higher proficiency; the math course with a supplemental instruction lab led by an upperclassman, indicating mid-level proficiency; or the math course, the supplemental lab, and an additional support course, indicating lower proficiency. Placement in such courses is not the only indicator of academic preparedness, but I include these objective data points as touchstones for comparison between different participants' experiences.

With respect to my being a faculty member at CSUN, I did not recruit participants who were my current or former students as the implicit professor-student power imbalance would undermine the study's credibility. Prospective participants with whom I had a prior relationship were excluded from the study to avoid any ethical conflicts. Also, I explained my position as a researcher, not as a faculty member, when I discussed confidentiality and anonymity in both the invitation to participate and the informed consent notifications.

Population and Sample

The population for this study is first-year undergraduate students who self-identify as members of at least one community that is traditionally underserved by higher education as defined by CSUN and who are currently enrolled in a freshman seminar course using transparent assignment design (TAD) at CSUN. I decided upon these limitations because first-year undergraduate students are especially vulnerable to attrition, especially during their first semester of college (NCES, 2022). Additionally, the CSU expects traditionally underserved students (first-generation, low-income, underprepared, or from historically underserved ethnic/racial communities) to lack the same "educational

opportunities” as their better-served peers, putting them at a “significant disadvantage” in terms of academic success (California State University [CSU], 2019b, p. 1).

I selected students enrolled in the freshman seminar course because these courses have been largely composed of first-semester students and have been designed to increase student success (CSUN, n.d.-k), which I hoped would attract a higher percentage of students from traditionally underserved backgrounds who met my recruitment criteria. Additionally, many sections of the freshman seminar were likely to implement the transparency framework because the Department of Academic First Year Experiences in which the freshman seminar is housed provides predesigned TAD assignment prompts to freshman seminar faculty, which most faculty adopt with no or minimal changes (K. Henige, personal communication, May 16, 2024).

There were 62 sections of the freshman seminar in Fall 2024. Most sections had a course capacity of 25 students, although a few special cohort sections were capped at 30. Prior to data collection, I assumed that not all sections would fully enroll and that some would over-enroll. I estimated a total population size of approximately 1550. I assumed that my student survey would have a low response rate near 5%, yielding approximately 77 responses. I detail recruitment procedures in the next section.

Recruitment

To facilitate participant recruitment, I used two Qualtrics surveys. I detail each survey and initial responses below.

Faculty Recruitment Survey. The faculty survey explained my study and research aims, then used branching logic to determine whether their section of the freshman seminar included at least two TAD assignments. If their course did use at least

two TAD assignments, the survey asked whether the faculty member would be willing to distribute a survey link to their students. The threshold of two TAD assignments was established by Winkelmes et al. (2016). For clarity, I listed the predesigned TAD assignments provided to freshman seminar faculty by the department on the shared learning management course and asked if they were using at least two of these assignments or if they had implemented TAD in at least two assignments on their own. This survey for faculty included a brief explanation of TAD to avoid false positive responses (Appendix D).

I assumed that many of the faculty teaching the freshman seminar were familiar with TAD because the department encourages TAD professional development training and because the major assignments faculty are given to use are already formatted using the TAD framework. However, faculty ultimately have control over the materials used in their courses; as such, it is possible that not all of them were using transparent assignments. Thus, this first survey allowed me to exclude sections of the freshman seminar course that did not meet my delimitations as discussed in Chapter I.

I used the faculty Qualtrics survey to identify faculty whose courses met the TAD delimitation and who are willing to disseminate the student survey invitation to their students. I also asked whether faculty would consider allowing a brief classroom visit to discuss my research and invite students to participate. There were 62 sections of the freshman seminar course in Fall 2024 taught by 43 individual faculty members, as some faculty taught multiple sections (CSUN, n.d.-i). The faculty survey (Appendix D) was distributed via email (Appendix E) to those 43 faculty members on October 16, 2024, the day I received full IRB approval. A total of 21 faculty respondents began the survey,

although many did not complete all three questions. Only 11 indicated that their freshman seminar course included at least two TAD assignments, making their students eligible for my study. An additional one respondent indicated that their course included only one TAD assignment, and another single respondent indicated that their course did not include any TAD assignments. The other 8 skipped the question.

Of the 11 faculty respondents who indicated eligibility, 6 agreed to forward the student recruitment email (Appendix F) to their students. Publicly available course schedule data (CSUN, n.d.-i) showed that several of those faculty taught multiple sections of the freshman seminar. Assuming the faculty who agreed to disseminate the survey to their students did so, 14 total sections of the seminar were included in the study (22.6% of all 62 sections). According to the schedule of classes (CSUN, n.d.-i), most of these sections were fully enrolled and collectively contained 371 students.

Student Recruitment Survey. The student recruitment survey (Appendix A) included five main sections. In the first section, I explained the study's purpose, participant expectations, time commitment, confidentiality, and all other aspects of informed consent. Respondents could elect to exit the survey or continue if they agreed to the terms.

In the second section, respondents completed the Imperial College London (n.d.) Sense of Belonging Scale, a short, free-to-use adaptation of Gehlbach's (2015) Harvard-Panorama Student Perception Survey scale on Sense of Belonging. The scale had only seven items, each using a five-point Lickert scale. The only modification I made to the scale was replacing "Imperial College London" with "California State University,

Northridge.” There was an additional text box in which students could optionally share any pertinent information about their sense of belonging.

Third, participants completed the New Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSE) developed by Chen et al. (2001). This free-to-use scale contained eight items and measured responses using a five-point Lickert scale. There was an additional text box in which students could optionally share any pertinent information about their self-efficacy. The responses to both scales were not used to determine study eligibility. They were merely as a starting point for conversation about sense of belonging and self-efficacy during the interviews. As indicated in the IRB approval and survey consent information, this survey data may be used in future research.

Fourth, participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire that I used to determine whether they would be labelled by CSUN as *traditionally underserved*. The categories identified by the CSU system’s Factor Model were first-generation, low-income, underprepared, and underrepresented racial/ethnic minority (CSU, 2019b). I explained each of these factors and invited participants to share whether they identified as belonging to any of them.

If the participants self-identified as belonging to one or more of the traditionally underserved categories from the CSU Factor Model (2019), an additional question appeared asking whether they were willing to be contacted as interview participants for the study. Participants could choose to remain anonymous or give their contact information if they were willing to be part of the study. Due to Valdosta State University’s restrictions on raffles and my inability to provide compensation for all

survey respondents, in addition to the legal complexities of including compensation in a dual IRB study, no financial incentives were offered at any point in the study.

Interview Participant Selection. The narrative inquiry approach privileges depth rather than breadth. Although Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) have recommended one or two participants for narrative analysis, Kim (2016) previously argued that six participants would be more acceptable to ensure data saturation is achieved. Therefore, I recruited six participants. The participants were at least 18 years old at the time they completed the recruitment survey. They all self-identified as belonging to at least one category of traditionally underserved population (as defined by CSUN) and were enrolled in a freshman seminar course in Fall 2024 at CSUN.

I identified prospective participants using the Qualtrics survey results, which recorded a total of 74 student responses (approximately 20% of the 371 students possible). I excluded students who did not self-identify as belonging to at least one category considered traditionally underserved by CSUN or who did not agree to be contacted about participating in interviews. This left a total of 33 possible interview participants. Because of my time limitations, I emailed the interview invitation (Appendix G) to each eligible participant as I received their survey results, beginning on October 21, 2024. Most prospective participants did not respond. Two responded to decline. A total of nine prospective participants agreed to participate in the first round of interviews, which began just after the middle of the semester on November 6, 2024, and extended for several weeks depending upon participant availability. Only six of those participants agreed to return for the second round of interviews, which began at the end of the semester on December 17, 2024, and extended through December 21, 2024.

Data Generation

I conducted two rounds of participant interviews. The following sections discuss the applicability of individual semi-structured interviews to a narrative inquiry study, a description of the interview process, and the content of discussion in each round of interviews.

Interview Method

Kim (2016) stated that individual interviews are the most common method of data generation in qualitative research, and the “foremost method” of data generation in narrative inquiry (p. 158). I used a semi-structured interview model for several reasons. First, Roulston (2021) warned that unstructured interviews can be difficult for novice interviewers because it can be harder to stay on-topic and because ethical complications may arise (such as more sensitive information or an inappropriately close interviewer/interviewee relationship) due to unstructured interviews’ conversational format (p. 8). Structured interviews would not be as appropriate for narrative inquiry (Kim, 2016). In contrast, the semi-structured interview format affords me a framework to guide the interview process while also providing flexibility to explore emergent topics relevant to participants’ stories. Semi-structured interviews may take 30 to 60 minutes (Jamshed, 2014), so I scheduled 60 minutes for each interview to provide adequate time to engage with and explore participants’ stories.

Interview Process

I generated rich data by interviewing each participant two times, each instance 4–6 weeks apart. I scheduled at least one hour for each interview to allow time for rapport-building and investigative lines of inquiry. I conducted interviews via Zoom because this

software allowed video recording and automatically produced a transcript, which then reviewed and cleaned, checking for accuracy. Additionally, I assumed that virtual meetings would be more convenient for the participants and easier to schedule. I provided participants with my Zoom room meeting link and urged them to join from as private and quiet of an area as possible. I joined each meeting from a private and quiet location inside my home.

Interview dates were loosely scheduled during the middle and end of the Fall 2024 semester. This time between the interviews was intended to give me adequate time for transcript processing and member checking and so that both the participants as generators of stories and I as listener and interlocutor could reflect on our experiences and discuss how their narratives developed over time.

I chose to begin near the middle of the semester in part due to time constraints, but also because by that time I expected that the participants would have gained some experience as first-semester students and would likely have completed at least one TAD assignment. I chose to conduct our final interviews shortly after the semester ended for several reasons. I wanted to ensure that the participants had time to think through their first responses and amass additional experiences with which to develop their narrative over time in the second interview. I also wanted participants to have the opportunity to check the transcript from the first interview and discuss any concerns with me during the second interview. Finally, I also wanted to respect the participants' priorities as students by avoiding any additional demands on their time during the last few stressful weeks of the semester, when many courses schedule final exams.

Before each interview, I asked participants to read and digitally acknowledge receipt (via Adobe Acrobat Sign) of an informed consent document that includes core information about the study such as the purpose, duration, and methods, possible risks and benefits, and assurance that they have the right to withdraw consent and end the interview at any time. These practices for obtaining informed consent are in line with Kim's (2016) recommendations. I also used a member checking phase, which I discuss in more detail in the trustworthiness section later on.

Interview Content

Conducting multiple interviews allowed me to form an appropriate personal connection with each participant. The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled me to provide a starting point from which participants could guide the conversation according to their own experience of what information they felt was important for me to know. I used open questions, or questions with broad parameters, in contrast to closed questions with more limited, narrow expected responses (Roulston, 2021, p. 3). I asked additional probing questions based on participants' initial answers to increase the amount of data I received and improve my understanding of each participant's perspective. For example, Roulston (2021) suggested starting with an open question such as "Tell me about . . ." to gain a description from the participant, then following up with an open probe such as "You mentioned X. Tell me about that," and then another open probe such as "You mentioned X. Describe a specific example of that," to gain a more detailed description each time (p. 7). I adopted these suggestions when appropriate.

Roulston (2021) stated that, if the interviewer and interviewee are comfortable enough with each other, as few as four or five open-ended interview questions could be

sufficient to generate enough content for additional follow-up questions to fill an hour-long interview (p. 6). Kim (2016) suggested six to ten questions, but cautioned that researchers should be ready to “think on [their] feet” and be prepared to break away from the interview protocol and engage in an exchange of stories with participants instead (p. 164). Reissman (2012) concurred, cautioning interviewers not to make quick judgments and to follow the narrative thread of even seemingly unrelated participant responses (p. 376). Accordingly, I prepared a list of questions to ask in order of importance, but noted in my interview protocol (Appendix H) that I might not be able to ask all questions in all interviews depending on where each conversation took us.

In addition to consent and basic demographic questions, I prepared 12 questions for each interview to serve as a guide. However, followed my participants’ lead and prioritized being “attentive, sensitive, and responsive” to participant feedback to preserve the interviewer/interviewee relationship and ensure that I yielded authentic and meaningful data (Kim, 2016, p. 164). I was prepared to skip questions and follow important narrative threads as they arose. I modeled interviews on Kim’s (2016) two-phase interview framework in which participants first provide extensive narration while I practice active listening. Then, I clarified or elicited additional information during the conversation phase. These phases are not always linear but should occur throughout such interviews (p. 169). There was time to discuss most questions in most of the interviews.

First Round of Interviews. The first round of interviews began on November 6, 2024, and extended loosely through the following weeks depending upon participants’ availability. I used the first interview to develop trust and rapport with each participant; Kim (2016) stated that trust and rapport are “the most important aspect” of interviewing,

although one must be careful to reach an “optimal” rather than “maximal” level of rapport because too close of a relationship may lead to bias (p. 162). Kim noted that the first interview may yield participant responses that are in line with what the participant thinks the interviewer wants to hear, or the “public version” of their narrative (p. 163). I engaged in conversation and self-disclosure as appropriate to establish rapport and address these concerns.

Semi-structured interview questions for this first interview were focused on participants’ life stories and narratives about their experiences as first-semester freshmen so far. I started with “grand tour” questions (Kim, 2016) about participants’ identities and lives and was ready to probe further or use the additional questions as needed to gain information related to sense of belonging in higher education and general feelings of self-efficacy regarding coursework.

Second Round of Interviews. The second round of interviews took place after the semester concluded, between December 17, 2024 (one week after the last day of formal instruction) and December 21, 2024.

Semi-structured interview questions solicited information about the participants’ experiences since our last interview. Questions also included invitations to expand on their responses to the sense of belonging and self-efficacy scales on the initial Qualtrics survey, whether they feel differently now, and why not. I asked them to reflect on their first-semester experiences and their outlook about the future. I also asked about their experiences with specific assignments and solicited their feedback about the TILT sample TAD assignments (see Appendix I).

Recording. With participant consent, audio and video of interviews was recorded via Zoom and stored in a password-protected cloud account. I used Zoom's automatic captions to produce an initial transcript that I then cleaned and revised, using the audio/video recording to verify accuracy. The transcripts were stored securely using cloud storage that is password protected. I endeavored to represent the interviews in transcript form as accurately as I could using Roulston (2021) as a guide. Riessman (2008) argued that transcription cannot be completely objective; researchers make subjective decisions while transcribing and are influenced by their theoretical and methodological orientations (p. 49). Therefore, I memoed extensively during the transcription process to record my initial impressions as part of the audit trail.

Data Analysis

As is emblematic of the qualitative paradigm, this study used emergent design. I used an analysis of narratives approach, also called a paradigmatic mode of analysis, which Kim (2016) described as an "effort to classify general features into different categories" and "fit individual details into a larger pattern" (p. 196). My goal, in line with Kim's explanation of analysis of narratives, was to examine the data, discover common themes in my participants' stories, and organize those themes into categories to make sense of a broader pattern.

As Kim described (2016), I drew on inductive and deductive reasoning and my own experiential knowledge during this meaning-making process. Inductively, I pulled concepts from the data; deductively, I used concepts from existing theory that could be appropriately applied to the data. My prior experiences and the study's pre-identified foci also influenced data analysis.

Recording and Data Transformation

I video recorded and generated an automatic transcript of each interview using Zoom's built-in recording and transcription features. Then, I will conducted data analysis after each interview. First, I cleaned the written data by reviewing the transcript and comparing it to the respective audio/video recording. I added any important visual cues or verbal inflections to the transcript as needed to ensure that the written transcript conveyed the participants' story as accurately as possible. I memoed extensively while preparing the transcripts for member checking.

I then performed the remainder of the data analysis using MaxQDA, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). Although users of the MaxQDA program can purchase an "artificial intelligence assistant" upgrade, I purchased only the basic program and did not make use of any AI tools for data analysis. I am the research instrument in this study; working directly with the transcripts in the analysis process allowed me more opportunities to "flirt" with the data (Kim, 2016, p. 223). I performed two rounds of coding, *in vivo* and affective coding. Then, I formed categories and collapsed those categories into themes using Braun and Clarke's (2021) method of Reflexive Thematic Analysis. More detailed information about each step follows.

First Round

According to Saldaña (2021), first cycle coding analyzes or takes apart the data (p. 5). I used *in vivo* coding in the first round as I identified patterns in the interview responses. *In vivo* codes use the participants' actual language (Saldaña, 2021, p. 94). Saldaña (2021) noted that *in vivo* coding is his first "go-to" approach for interview

transcript data and that it is particularly appropriate for beginning qualitative researchers and for all studies that aim to honor participant voices (p. 108).

In vivo coding allowed me to stay close to the participants' own words and avoid leaps in induction because I was using the participants' own language in the generation of initial codes (Saldaña, 2021). As suggested by Saldaña (2021), I reviewed the transcripts and made words or phrases into codes if they stood out as worthy of annotation (p. 108). *In vivo* coding preserved the participants' authentic voices while allowing me to condense the data so that I could work with it.

Second Round

Saldaña (2021) warned that overdependence on *in vivo* coding alone could limit the level of the researcher's analysis (p. 110). Therefore, I also performed a second round of affective coding after the *in vivo* coding round. Saldaña (2021) explained that affective coding investigate[s] subjective qualities of human experiences" such as "emotions, values, conflicts, [and] judgments" (p. 159). Specifically, I used emotion, values, and versus codes during this affective coding round. I decided upon specific coding approaches after reviewing the *in vivo* codes to determine what type of affective coding will be most appropriate.

Emotion codes label participants' emotions, both as they label them and as I infer them from nonverbal cues, such as facial expression and body language. The interview recordings assisted me in identifying these nonverbal cues. Saldaña (2021) acknowledged that emotions are a "universal human experience" and that analyzing them can give researchers clues about participants' "inner cognitive systems" (p. 108). I used emotion coding when the participants' stories included meaningful emotional expressions to the

extent that not coding for emotions would detract from an accurate representation of the data. I know from my personal experience as a student that pursuing a higher education, especially as a student from a traditionally underserved community, can be a very emotional process. As an instructor, I recognize how strongly emotions can affect students' academic performance. Emotional coding helped me understand the significance of different aspects of each participants' narratives as they reflected on learning through TAD in their freshman seminar course.

Values coding names participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs; "a value is what you think/feel is important. An attitude is how you think/feel about something or someone. And a belief is what you personally think/feel to be true" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 108). I was interested in the first-semester experiences of traditionally underserved college students and specifically in how exposure to transparent assignment design might affect sense of belonging, which overlaps with self-efficacy. Learning what the participants value, their attitudes toward coursework, and their self-beliefs in higher education helped me understand their motivations when analyzing their narratives. Saldaña (2021) acknowledged that these three categories are "slippery" and that it may not always be necessary to distinguish between values, attitudes, and beliefs when performing values coding (p. 108). Values coding was an important step toward understanding my participants' stories. At times, it was not necessary to distinguish between values, attitudes, and beliefs. Some of the participants' stories could be better understood through emotion coding or emotion and versus coding.

Versus coding addresses dichotomies and conflicts (Saldaña, 2021, p. 108). Because my participants belong to traditionally underserved communities, their stories

sometimes express dichotomous themes such as those related to ostracization (Brower et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 1999; Flores et al., 2023; Yeager et al., 2013), although the specific moieties are dependent on their narratives. Dichotomies included rigor vs. busy work, transparent/less transparent assignments (and instructors); and student/faculty relationships. Specifically, because I was interested in sense of belonging and self-efficacy, versus coding helped me better investigate these perceptions when they were dichotomous. For example, some participants who felt they were not performing well academically expressed that belief in the context of comparison to higher-performing classmates, real or imagined (Flores et al., 2023). I took care not to influence participants to tell adversarial narratives, but when such narratives emerged, coding them was an important component of faithfully representing my participants' perceptions of reality.

Themes

According to Saldaña (2021), second cycle coding is meant to synthesize, or assemble parts to make new meanings (p. 5). Once I have completed my *in vivo* and affective coding, I will collapse the codes into categories. Categories are generally a word/phrase that explicitly describes a group of data (Saldaña, 2021, p. 19). The categorizing process will help me identify how codes can be grouped together or sorted for comparison and to condense the data to facilitate further analysis (Saldaña, 2021, p. 13). Saldaña (2021) explained that classification is intuitive; researchers group data that “look alike” and “feel alike” (p. 13). Categories may use the initial names of codes or a new label that encompasses multiple codes.

Saldaña (2021) acknowledged the existence of “fuzzy sets,” or categories that do not have discrete boundaries and codes that can belong to more than one category of

subcategory; however, I am aligned with Saldaña's (2021) preference for singular codes grouped into the categories that seem most appropriate (p. 13). I will be open to recoding as necessary during the categorization process. The categories I finalize will depend on the data gathered during the study.

After coding and categorization, I further collapsed categories into themes using Braun and Clarke's (2021) method of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as a guide. I chose RFA for several reasons. First, Braun and Clarke (2021) encouraged it as a flexible, "practice-first" approach (p. xxix) that is both accessible for new qualitative researchers and a robust method "for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns" (p. 3). Second, the core assumptions of RTA emphasize the researcher's subjectivity and reflexivity, the importance of theoretical assumptions, and the conception of data analysis as a creative and rigorous process (pp. 7–9). Finally, Braun and Clarke (2021) specifically explain their conception of thematic analysis in terms of the story this method allows the researcher to tell about their dataset (p. 84), a useful tool for me as someone who is interested in participants' stories and stories as a meaning-making tool in the framework of narrative inquiry. These attributes made RTA ideal for me; as I am the main qualitative instrument, they also made RTA ideal for my study.

First, I generated "initial themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 79). This process involved reviewing the data codes to find suspected similarities in meaning that could be clustered together into "candidate themes," which were then explored cluster-by-cluster on their own, as they relate to the research questions, and in the broader analysis (p. 79). Braun and Clarke explained that an important code may be promoted to a candidate theme during this process if it is sufficiently encompassing (p. 80) I did audition several

codes as candidate themes, although my final themes were more complex. At this stage, Braun and Clarke have urged researchers to generate the working themes and consider what “story they allow [researchers] to tell” that addresses the research question (p. 84). “Good” themes suitable for next phase were meaningful and coherent and had clear boundaries (p. 84). I used the visual organization tools in MaxQDA to explore how the themes could relate to one another but prioritized a depth of analysis in overarching themes and tried to avoid creating too many subthemes as cautioned by Braun and Clarke. I did not attempt to capture every idea from the dataset; rather, I analyzed the data to form an answer for my research questions.

I then developed and reviewed the themes. In this phase, I reengaged with the coded data extracts and entire dataset to reassess my initial data clusters and evaluate whether a better pattern might be possible (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 96). During this stage, I developed each theme as a singular, rich idea. I reviewed each theme against all the related codes with my research questions in mind to ensure that each proposed theme was viable, had clear boundaries, was supported by enough meaningful and narrow data, and communicated something important about the topic (pp. 98–99). RTA is a recursive process; I discarded many preliminary themes and generated multiple new ones (p. 100). When I was finally satisfied with my themes, I compared them with the dataset, getting closer to the data rather than being “removed” from the original data by using codes (p. 101).

Once I developed themes that “capture[d] the most important and relevant elements of the data, *in relation to* [the] *research question*” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 101), I refined, defined, and named the themes. Composing theme definitions (a few

sentences clarifying and illustrating each theme) helped me verify my themes' quality (p. 110). Definitions included each theme's central organizing concept, boundaries, unique qualities, and information about how it contributed to the overall analysis (p. 111). During this stage, I referred to the original transcripts as a validity check to ensure that I was accurately representing all original information (p. 111). Then, I composed more succinct and descriptive names for each theme by selecting quotations from my participants' actual words that represented my longer explanations. Finally, I connected my themes to the existing literature by composing my findings.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a major concern in qualitative research (Ary et al., 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2013). I engaged in the following practices to increase the trustworthiness of my study.

Reflexivity

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the main instrument of data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). A fundamental component of qualitative research is that researchers must recognize how their own prior experiences with their research content and existing personal biases may influence the study (Kim, 2016). Braun and Clarke (2013) defined reflexivity as the qualitative researcher's "critical reflection" of the research process and their own role as a researcher (p. 10). This reflection may include insider (sharing group identity with participants) and outsider (not sharing group identity with participants) positions. Kim (2016) detailed reflexivity's importance in developing one's *phronesis*, or one's wisdom and ability in relation to specific tasks (p. 105). For Kim (2016), reflexivity occurred two steps back from the

research process; first, to reflect on one's objective observation of the research subject, and second, to reflect on that reflection (p. 105). Reflexivity, then, is the researcher's reflection on the research process, including how the researcher themselves may be influenced or affect the study. The goal is to get the research closer to a "quasi-objective" state (Kim, 2016, p. 106). Therefore, I underwent a reflexive process to identify my existing assumptions and acknowledge my own limitations to strengthen rigor of the study and maintain integrity.

My interest in exploring the experiences of students from communities that are traditionally underserved by higher education stems from my personal experience as a first-generation, disabled, very low-income student. I am positioned as an insider in that I have experience as a student from a few traditionally underserved communities, but I assume that my participants saw me primarily as an outsider because of my current positions of (relative) authority in higher education as an instructor. My post-graduation experience as an educator and faculty development consultant in minority serving institutions further expanded my interest in this student population and the different Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) practices that educators and institutions have attempted to close the equity gap. I know that finishing my existing degrees gave me access to a career that provides adequate compensation to afford secure housing and that, crucially, provides employer-sponsored health insurance. Despite achieving this career, for which I am grateful, I still struggle to fit in with the usually comfortably wealthy, able-bodied, and otherwise more privileged individuals who populate much of the academic world and represent many of my colleagues.

When beginning my doctoral program, I had thought my years of experience as a college instructor would give me more of an insider perspective; I was very wrong. I was a novice once again. I struggled to navigate the opaque expectations and inflexible power structures of a doctoral education, and all of this despite my White privilege, my existing experience with higher education, and my adjunct faculty income that, although not impressive by most standards, is more than I could have dreamed of as a young person. *If attaining my educational goals felt so impossible for me, I wondered, how much worse and more alienated must other students facing steeper obstacles feel?* I have colleagues who belittle their students for “not trying hard enough” or roll their eyes when they think their students are exaggerating or even fabricating the hardships they say they face. I suspect that many educational professionals just do not understand because their experiences in education were just so markedly different from their students’. How much suffering in higher education could be avoided if those in power and those without only understood each other?

Albeit unintentionally, I certainly influenced the interview environment, interviewees, and interpretation of data because of my position as researcher in this study (Riessman, 2008). Although I made efforts not to influence my participants, they might have been able to perceive my biases and opinions through my tone of voice and other cues not entirely under my control. Therefore, I stayed aware of the environment I created and how I influenced the participants to minimize the risks that I might bring to the integrity of their personal stories. Focusing on only the content my interviewees shared and interjecting the minimum amount possible from my own subjectivity helped me reduce the impact of my bias and improve the trustworthiness of my findings.

Bracketing

I used bracketing, using Tufford and Newman's (2010) conceptual framework of this practice, to identify my personal relevant experiences and assumptions about the subject matter. As explained by Tufford and Newman (2010), bracketing may take many forms, such as memos, interviews, and journaling, but the main purpose is to "bracket" or encapsulate, recognize, and set aside my "assumptions, values, interests, emotions and theories," collectively called preconceptions (p. 81). Merriam (2009) referred to bracketing as "epoché," a Greek word describing refraining from judgment (p. 26). Bracketing has the potential to mitigate my emotional reactions and biases that may influence data collection and distort the data analysis process (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 85). Braun and Clarke (2013) noted that setting one's own assumptions aside can be difficult, but bracketing them off is a useful practice to this end (p. 9).

I began checking my assumptions while reading the literature related to obstacles faced by students from communities that are traditionally underserved in higher education and continued bracketing before each major stage of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes. I kept a research journal in which I collected my thoughts and responses to the literature I read as I composed my proposal and continued this practice throughout the study. I wrote researcher memos during and after each interview and reflected on my reactions to the content of each interview. Additionally, I underwent bracketing interviews with a supportive mentor. My participants' stories represent how they make sense of their reality and how they characterize themselves as learners and participants in the system of higher education. I worked to ensure that I honored the soul of their personal stories as I made sense of our collective experiences.

Audit Trail

As stated previously, Braun and Clarke (2013) presented memoing as a method for keeping an audit trail, or a collection of information that might be important when reporting research findings (p. 71). The purpose of an audit trail is to improve transparency for the qualitative research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 219).

Merriam (2009) agreed that keeping an audit trail improves trustworthiness by allowing readers of the study to “follow the trail” of the researcher; even though replicating findings in further studies is unlikely in qualitative research, researchers should explain how they found their results and decided upon their conclusions (p. 222). Indeed, Merriam (2009) noted that such audit trails, or “logs,” build confidence in readers. She recommended that audit trails should include, in detail, information about data collection, derivation of categories, and all decisions made during the study (p. 223). Additionally, an audit trail can provide information about the researcher’s values and ethical conflicts and resolutions (Merriam, 2009, p. 230).

Thus, I kept an audit trail as part of my research journal. I specifically noted and justified in detail all information related to data collection, deciding upon categories, and other decisions made throughout the study. This audit trail builds trustworthiness by acting as a record of every action I took and an explanation of why I took each action. I have reported pertinent information from the audit trail in this document to improve the rigor of the study.

Memoing

Braun and Clarke (2013) discussed memoing as a method of keeping a “paper trail” that details information about every action the researcher took, their reasons for

doing what they did, how they did what they did, the conclusions they came to, and why they came to those conclusions; the purpose of memoing in this way is to keep an audit trail of the research process (p. 71). Braun and Clarke further explained that researchers should begin memoing early about any analytic ideas, then move into advanced memoing during the coding process (p. 215). Merriam (2009) noted that extensive memoing is required during every step of the data collection process, and Ary et al. (2010) further stated that memo writing helps the researcher capture their thoughts and make connections between the data (p. 465).

I began keeping a research journal to collect my memos at the beginning of my dissertation-writing process and continued to memo extensively through to the study's conclusion. All memos were kept in a password-protected cloud storage account. These memos were an opportunity for me to interrogate my choices as I make them and an invitation for me to justify each choice during my research journey. By memoing, I held myself accountable for all decisions. The memos also helped refresh my memory when I reviewed the data and my analysis procedures, especially when reporting my research.

Member Checks

Member checking, also called member validation, is a term used to describe the process by which a researcher checks their analysis with their study participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). During this process, a draft of the research or analysis is presented to participants for their comments about its authenticity; it is an opportunity for participants to correct any researcher errors, and it helps researchers avoid misrepresenting the participants' contributions (p. 282). Because I sought to understand the stories of a "marginalized" group (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 282), I needed to ensure that my

interpretation was a good fit for their own understanding of their experiences. Therefore, I used member checking as a verification step built into the study's design, meaning participants were informed about this step and invited to participate (p. 282).

Importantly, Braun and Clarke (2013) noted that participants may refuse to engage in member checking due to time constraints, not seeing the value of it, or other reasons; of course, I could not compel my participants to engage in this step. I invited their feedback, but I was clear that it is not mandatory. I was also mindful that participants who do engage in member checking may be reluctant to correct errors because they could perceive me as having power or authority; I tried to mitigate this concern by emphasizing that they were the experts about their own experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 284). After cleaning each transcript in a Word document, I protected the document with a password that my participants and I had agreed upon in advance, during the first interview. Then, I emailed each transcript document to the corresponding participant with a short note reminding them that member checking was optional but appreciated to ensure accuracy. All but one participant accepted my invitation to engage in member checking, and none reported concerns.

Accurately representing my participants' perceptions of reality and the stories they used to make sense of their experiences was my main concern, so member checking was an essential step to ensure trustworthiness of the data.

Thick, Rich Description

Braun and Clarke (2013) explained that rich data provides a "detailed, complex and contradictory" account (p. 336) and that thick description refers to "detailed, complex, contradictory data" (p. 338); they note that the terms are often used

interchangeably (p. 24). Thick, rich description necessitates a narrow lens with few participants so that the researcher can mine detailed and complex data from each one (p. 4). Kim (2016) noted that, in narrative inquiry, researchers retell narratives with their own interpretation along with thick description of the participants' original data as shared with the aim of giving readers "some glimpse of narrative experience different from [their] own" (p. 133).

By providing thick, rich description interwoven with direct quotations from the participants' interview transcripts, readers are not limited to only my interpretation; they can interpret the text on their own as informed by my participants' voices. Whenever possible, I utilized thick, rich description to fully develop my participants' narratives.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design (TAD). In this chapter, I discussed how I used the theory of sense of belonging, my epistemological premises of constructivism, and the methodology of narrative inquiry to address these purposes. I also provided an overview of the research site, California State University Northridge, and a discussion of the population, first-semester undergraduate freshmen enrolled in a freshman seminar course that included at least two transparently designed assignments.

I used Qualtrics to survey faculty (see Appendix D), ensuring that their courses used at least two transparently designed assignments and gaining permission to contact them further about inviting their students to participate in my study. Then, I provided

interested and eligible faculty with an invitation email (see Appendix F) to provide to their students. This email included a link to a second student recruitment survey (see Appendix A) that gathered basic information to determine the students' eligibility to participate in the study and their interest in interviewing.

I invited eligible and willing participants to engage in the interview process as soon as they completed this survey. I interviewed each participant twice, once near the middle of the semester and once shortly after the semester concluded, to gather interview and observation data. I analyzed the data using narrative inquiry and Reflexive Thematic Analysis. After recording and data transformation, I conducted two rounds of coding, then formed categories and finally themes. Throughout the study, I engaged in reflexivity, memoing, an audit trail, bracketing, member checks, and thick, rich description to ensure trustworthiness.

In the next chapter, I review my research findings. This chapter is organized into two sections. First, I present my participants' educational narratives individually. Then, I review commonalities in these narratives that are relevant to the present study.

Chapter IV

Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design (TAD). This qualitative study was designed to gather rich data that would not simply report on students' preferences regarding assignment design. Rather, I sought to gain a deeper understanding of how interacting with these assignments in a freshman seminar course could affect students from traditionally underserved populations on a holistic level, with the potential for wide repercussions throughout their academic careers. Therefore, I used the lens of narrative inquiry to compose stories using participants' interview data, for "telling stories is the primary way we express what we know and who we are" (Kim, 2016, p. 9).

McAdams and McLean (2013) discussed the importance of a *reconstructed past*, acknowledgement of the present, and visualization of possible futures in understanding individuals' narrative identities. The creation of such stories can illuminate an individual's motivations and beliefs, how they navigate relationships, and even how they perceive reality itself (McAdams, 2011). Kim (2016) also acknowledged the importance of weaving together past, present, and future during the mimesis process in narrative inquiry storytelling as an avenue for understanding the truths of human existence. Therefore, through the lens of narrative inquiry, I constructed participants' interview

responses into a past, present, and future framework to provide a multifaceted representation of their first-year college experience. These vignettes formed a scaffold upon which I built my understanding of how TAD, as implemented in the freshman seminar at CSUN, fit into the broader milieu of these students' first-year experiences by employing reflexive thematic analysis to analyze the data and form themes.

For clarity, this chapter is divided into two main sections. In the first section, I present the participants' narrative vignettes, which I constructed through the lens of narrative inquiry as described by Kim (2016). I first present individual narratives using a past, present, and future construction in terms of how the participants described their identities as learners over time. After establishing that foundation, I delved into the participants' experiences with TAD by synthesizing TAD-related interview responses into a cohesive narrative about each concept. In the next section, I present the themes I created using Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework of reflexive thematic analysis as a guide, connecting these themes with the research questions guiding this work and supporting each with examples and excerpts from the interview transcripts.

Participants' Narratives

In this section, I present the narratives of six participants who were first-semester students at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) in the Fall of 2024 and who self-identified as belonging to traditionally underserved populations. All of them were enrolled in various sections of the freshman seminar course at CSUN, a course in which at least two major assignments were created using transparent assignment design (TAD).

I referred to the participants using pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity. Their pseudonyms are Ari, Lily, Alejandro, Geraldine, Jonathan, and Jessica. Each participant

was given the opportunity to select their own pseudonym. Alejandro and Jessica chose their own pseudonyms; I selected the remaining participants' pseudonyms with their approval after they declined to select their own.

I begin each narrative with a brief introduction detailing the participant's demographic information. Then, I organize each narrative chronologically into three sections: past, present, and future. I privileged information about each participant that felt most essential to creating a basis for understanding their intersectional identities and experiences in relation to their educational journey, using meaningful direct quotations from the interview transcripts to preserve authenticity by allowing my participants to speak for themselves when possible. In the second part of this chapter, I build upon this narrative groundwork with additional quotations to explicate common themes that address my research questions more directly.

Ari's Narrative

Ari completed my recruitment survey on October 30, 2024. We scheduled our first interview for the morning of November 6, and our second interview was held in the afternoon on December 17. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour.

As I began each interview by asking the participant to provide a pseudonym and pronouns, Ari declined to select a pseudonym and said that I could use any name. Ari also declined to state a specific gender identity and told me that I could use any pronouns for them. Ari agreed that I could use they/them pronouns consistently for the sake of clarity, to which they easily agreed.

Ari is a history major who hopes to become a history teacher at the secondary education level. They identify as Hispanic and specifically Salvadorian. At the time of

our first conversation in early November 2024, Ari was 18 years old. They are a first-generation college student; neither parent attended any college. Like all of the participants, this was Ari's first semester at CSUN. Ari identified their family as low-income, and financial concerns have influenced several aspects of their life, which is woven into their narrative. Their narrative reveals them as a sensitive individual who has very high standards for themselves and who values social connections that have not always been easily accessible to them.

Past. Ari told me that they felt their high school had adequately prepared them for college, but K-12 was not always a smooth journey. While they “really did love going to school” at a private elementary school from kindergarten through the beginning of fifth grade, they “had this sort of down period” after their parents could no longer afford the tuition. For approximately 3 months, Ari did not attend any school at all, and then they had to transition to a public school, which was difficult: “That transition was really hard on me, and I was very stubborn and didn’t want to do any of the work.” However, they were able to get by, and their academic performance improved again in junior high school “because there I learned that, oh, if I don’t do my work, that has consequences. And just me . . . I was doing a lot better mentally.” Ari identified social connections as an important support for academic success:

With the people around me in middle school, I did, like, improve myself mentally, which led to me improving academically. It was still sort of, like, since I was...there’s still like a lack of motivation, but, like, there was still more—From there, I would say in high school, it definitely did get better, I was finally, like, surrounded by friends that were, like, willing to help me and could help me.

Ari also credits their academic success in high school to teachers who were “more motivated to get me [to do] my work.” Although they called themselves an “average student,” they stated that they “could have been doing so much worse,” communicating satisfaction with their academic performance in high school.

When selecting a university, finances were, again, an important consideration. Ari explained that they chose CSUN because the campus location allows them to live at home and save money. In addition to being concerned about finances, they also shared that their older sister did not attend college due to “her own rough patch,” and being the first in their family to attend college puts “a lot of pressure” on Ari to succeed:

It was always expected of me because, coming from a family that didn’t go to college, an immigrant family, and being Christian, my parents always told me that they—like, I’ve always had the high expectations of “I will do better than what my parents had” because they couldn’t do schooling. . . . It was always expected, and, like, I knew that was going to be the goal. Because I obviously wanted to pursue a career that—well, that involves going to college. So, it’s always just been like, oh, this is an essential part of your life that you will experience.

Ari was initially concerned about transitioning to college and felt that they were “a complete mess in the beginning of the semester.” They even considered dropping one of their courses after being “intimidated” by the course requirements. They recognized that their perception of their parents’ high expectations was a source of anxiety, sharing, “What my parents expect of me [is] very high, so, like, not meeting that expectation kind of scared me.” However, Ari’s family helped them work through their concerns and persist in their courses:

They were very understanding. My mom was like, “We understand, it’s a new environment. Things are gonna be scary. That’s why you have us. If it’s really something that doesn’t work out for you, we will talk about it, but you should give it a try, and we’re happy you’re trying.” Even, even my—my, like, 93-year-old Abuelita was making sure that I was feeling okay, and like that was one of my biggest, like, motivators. She didn’t really get that much of education, so she’s very proud of me, too. So, sort of having her be like, “It’s going to be scary. But you will do it. Okay?” That was sort of, like, relieving to me. That’s really what set my mood for the semester. I, like, made sure to give at least the classes a try. It was really like stressful. I knew that what I had to do, but, like, I wanted to make it a point to at least try and not get too intimidating.

The importance of such social support was a recurring theme of Ari’s narrative.

Present. Ari was enrolled in five courses their first semester with a total of 15 units, making them a full-time student: the freshman seminar, an introductory Chicana and Chicano studies course, a history course, a philosophy course, and Queer Studies 115, the highest level first-year writing composition course held within the Queer Studies department. As explained in my description of the research site, my interpretation is that Ari’s placement in a 115 first-year composition course indicates a high level of proficiency and confidence in writing, and I assume that their choice to take first-year composition in the Queer Studies department reflects a desire to read and write about texts by queer authors while meeting their general education writing requirement.

Despite their rocky start, Ari expressed confidence during our first meeting when reflecting on their transition into higher education: “I thought it would be more

overwhelming for me. . . . But so far, a lot of my current classes have been manageable.” Particularly, they appreciated how their professors broke assignments down, “Easing up to those big assignments . . . something’s that definitely helped me is working on bits and parts,” which made large and unfamiliar assignments more approachable and manageable and increased their confidence. When we spoke, Ari reported still felt nervous about their academic performance, but forming social connections in college was a bigger source of concern than academic success.

In the first interview, I asked Ari to pick a few words to describe their experience at CSUN, and their response was focused on social relationships: “Welcoming. But also, lonely.” They explained that they had been making attempts to form connections:

I came to CSUN with a lot of people that I knew who were going to CSUN, but I don’t get to see them that often. I’ve been trying my best to make friends with the people in my class, and I do get along with them like—Like I said, they’ve been very welcoming to me. I’ve joined a club that’s also been very welcoming to me. Um but—Still, I don’t really have like a group of people that I can truly rely on for that college experience . . . I just mostly, like . . . I wish it was more easier for me to have those stronger connections, but I think that’s just something I got to work with.

Ari shared that they felt most connected and engaged in the freshman seminar and their Queer Studies writing course. Being enrolled in this course seemed especially validating “because it’s a class with a lot of queer people like me. So, it’s a very welcoming environment for me. Especially since I’ve never quite had that space of, like, being able to openly be queer.” They also told me that they felt comfortable reaching out

to their Queer Studies professor, who is also queer, in part because that professor had “normal conversations” with them about their career and topics unrelated to coursework, which built rapport. Ari was unable to give me an example of such a conversation, but I got the impression that the professor used casual, approachable language and did not act in a way that made Ari feel judged for asking questions, making them feel “more comfortable” approaching this professor. Although Ari reported Queer Studies was one of their more time-consuming courses, it was also one of their favorites, along with the freshman seminar.

Ari’s section of the freshman seminar was part of a cohort: Ari and a group of other first-semester history majors all took the same sections of a freshman history course and the first-year seminar. During our second interview, which took place after the semester had ended, Ari identified the cohort model as “very helpful” for forming connections:

Being able to, like, make those connections already was very refreshing to me . . . knowing that, like, I had them in a class, they’re still technically on the same path as I am. I probably will run into a couple of them again. As a lot of them are in the program, but like out of all my classes, I felt really close with . . . [the freshman seminar] because, like, they were all like really, like, we were all very like excited for it, like we were sort of able to keep each other motivated through it all.

Ari said they were comfortable talking to the freshman seminar professor and that the course “definitely helped” them succeed in their other courses by providing early, supported experiences with skills necessary in their other courses. For example, Ari did not mention the assignment design specifically, but they learned about conducting

scholarly research using the University Library databases in the freshman seminar, which helped them feel confident approaching a research assignment in their Queer Studies course. Additionally, Ari acknowledged that some of their freshman seminar assignments, which were all transparently designed, “Definitely helped me with my other classes.” Although Ari was unable to give me a specific example, their general impression was that the seminar helped them “break down” larger assignments into more manageable parts, making it “really helpful for me especially.”

Despite some anxiety about fulfilling their parents’ academic expectations, Ari’s narrative paints their first semester as successful. During our second interview, which took place after the semester had ended, Ari triumphantly reported passing all of their courses, some with “high marks”: “No missing assignments at all, like all of my grades are, like, purely based on what my understanding, on my skills, and how well I was able to perform . . . so like it’s a big milestone, like literally. I’m very proud of myself now.”

Future. When asked about the future, Ari’s responses during the first interview were much different from their responses in the second interview. Our first meeting took place shortly after the presidential election results were announced, and political concerns were on their mind. They feared that President Trump’s incoming administration would pose a threat to their identity as a queer, low-income, Hispanic student:

With college and university, I’ve only really been able to see myself—Like . . . very, I’m not sure how to word it. I just sort of like—for me, it’s hard to just even imagine a future for myself? . . . It’s just sort of—hard . . . with how society is [after the election results]. And it’s just sort of—I feel like that’s definitely going

to take a—It *has* taken a toll on me . . . I’m doing all this work, but if the outside world isn’t really improving—Will it even be worth it?

They also shared their fear that financial aid through FAFSA may be decreased under the incoming Trump administration, which they worried would keep them from being about to finish their degree.

However, I felt that Ari’s narrative reflected resilience and perseverance in our second interview, which I believe was bolstered by their academic success and social connections during their first semester. They acknowledged that the workload was likely to “get just slightly a little bit harder, so there’s just sort of always going to be this, like, anxiety that, like, comes with trying something new, or, like, having to start anew, so just those sort of feelings.” However, looking into the future, they felt positive and empowered: “I’m very optimistic. Like, I feel like, okay, I did it once. I can do it again. I know who I can ask for help, where I can get that help, and just sort of I now have a better understanding of the support system that is offered to me, and what I will utilize in that.” They plan to continue pursuing their bachelor’s degree in history as a first step toward becoming a high school history teacher who can help other students just like themselves.

Lily’s Narrative

Lily completed my survey on November 18, 2024. She agreed to be interviewed for the first time the next evening, November 19. Our second interview was held in the morning on December 21. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour.

Lily is 18 years old, and she self-identified as Hispanic and female. She shared that her family is low-income and that she is a first-generation college student, as neither

parent has any college experience. While Lily does have three older siblings, they are much older, with the closest sibling in age born nearly two decades before Lily. She shared that when she was born, her siblings “already all had their lives” and were not close during her young childhood. She initially started at CSUN as a radiologic sciences major but has recently chosen to switch to psychology. Lily’s story contains patterns of tremendous adversity and high academic anxiety, balanced by strong family connections that she relies on for much-needed support.

Past. Lily shared that eight years prior to our conversation, her father was deported, and he has not been able to return to the United States. In his absence, Lily said she developed mental and physical health issues, including depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and “pseudo seizures” related to heightened emotion. She and her mother could not afford to live independently and moved in with one of Lily’s older sisters. Now, Lily, her mother, two sisters, and one of the sister’s children live in a house together. Although her family respects the importance of Lily’s education and although she considers the sister closest in age to be her “best friend,” she does have some responsibilities as a babysitter for her sister’s children, which can require a significant time commitment.

Financial concerns are a frequent source of stress in Lily’s narrative. Lily’s mother, who works as a “maid,” urged Lily to further her education as a means of securing more lucrative employment. Lily said, “I would see her come home and, like, struggle and be tired” and that her decision to pursue higher education was spurred by “the feeling of, ‘I need to help support my family,’” especially in her father’s absence because of his former role as the main source of income: “He was the breadwinner.” Lily remembered feeling this pressure to contribute to the family’s household income from a

young age. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant hardship and coincided with relationship difficulties with her then-boyfriend, leading to detrimental mental health effects and substantial unhealthy weight loss in excess of 60 pounds.

Despite the hardships Lily faced, she performed well academically in K-12 and told me that her high school adequately prepared her for college. In fact, she was one of a select few students at her high school to earn admittance to a program funded by a private foundation that would cover 4 years of tuition at CSUN in addition to extra resources and academic support. She expressed gratitude for her placement in this program; however, the transition to college was difficult.

Present. During her first semester at CSUN, Lily was enrolled in five courses with a total of 15 units, making her a full-time student: the freshman seminar, a general biology course with a one-unit lab, a 5-credit mid-level math course, and Chicana and Chicano Studies 115, the most difficult first-year writing course held within the Chicana and Chicano Studies Department. The freshman seminar and biology courses are open to all students, but the math course requires students to have moderate math proficiency based on multiple measures, such as high school GPA. The writing course placement indicates a high level of proficiency in writing and, I assume, a desire to read and write about texts related to Mexican American culture.

In our first meeting, when I asked Lily for two or three words describing her transition to CSUN, she paused for a moment and then said, “I feel like it was exciting, confusing, and a little rough.” The excitement, she explained, was due to newfound feelings of independence and “feeling like an adult.” When I asked about the more negative words, she explained:

Overall, before college, I was relatively considered honors, like I was, I was always in those kind of programs and school always felt easy for me. But when I got into college—I had like a really bad reality check and I felt like—I felt dumb. . . I just felt that way because—I feel like the stuff that I was learning, like I couldn't comprehend it as good [as other students] or I feel like I was having—just like a hard time in general.

These feelings of inadequacy were both partially caused and compounded by financial stress, which has influenced many of Lily's choices.

Lily originally declared a major in radiological sciences “for the money aspect of it . . . not because I wanted to do it, but because I felt all obligated to help my family.”

Eventually, she decided to change her major to one she felt was more suitable:

psychology. This decision was difficult:

I have a hard time in, like, the math subjects. I've always had a hard time. And then when I got a closer look at, like, the major, I realized that, like, it's a STEM major, so it's mostly math and science. So, I thought to myself, “What am I doing here?” And I talked to my family, and I talked to my sister mainly. And I was like, “I'm not happy. I think I'm just going to change it.” And I felt a lot of regret.

For changing it, for not providing more money for them.

Although Lily felt hopeful about her new major, she made the change too late to withdraw from the difficult math course required for the radiological sciences major. Her distress at not performing well in that course was compounded by financial concerns and uncertainty about financial aid and her tuition program:

I feel like I'm worried. I'm really worried about math and like failing it. And, like, I have this fear that, like, if I fail the class, they're going to take my financial aid away and they're going to kick me out of the program and then like I'm just going to drop out. . . . And I feel like—I also feel like I don't know about if that's how financial aid works. I'm not sure.

When I asked further about that fear, Lily admitted that she probably would not lose all funding just for failing one course, but her feelings of anxiety persisted. Lily acknowledged that her fears were not always rational and that shared that she had issues with what I would describe as feelings of inadequacy and catastrophic thinking from a young age: “I mean, I've always, like, it sounds ridiculous, but I've always had this pressure even since I was a little girl. I was worried about, like, ‘Oh my God, I have to graduate fifth grade.’ Like of course you're going to graduate fifth grade!” However, she also expressed determination to see her goals to completion.

We ended our first interview on a lower note, with Lily expressing concern about her ability to pass the difficult math course and stay enrolled at CSUN. Her tone of voice was subdued as we hung up that first call. However, at our second interview, Lily appeared brighter and visibly more relaxed: She passed the difficult math course “with, like, a low C. So, I was really happy about that . . . I actually ended up passing all my classes, which that was all really I was hoping for.” Especially in her math course, this success was hard-won: “I felt like every other week, I was having, like, a breakdown, being like, ‘I don't want to take this class again’.” Lily attributed her success to individual hard work and time invested in studying. However, she also acknowledged the

importance of tutoring, talking to her family and to the scholarship program director for help, and, to a lesser extent, speaking with her professors.

Lily's overall review of her first semester was mixed. In our first interview, Lily expressed appreciation for her freshman seminar course and specifically transparent assignment design, agreeing that a "purpose" section in an assignment is useful because "all the 'why' helps . . . if I'm being told . . . why it's helping me or . . . this will help me . . . in future, like in life or something, that—it'll motivate me more." She also stated that a "task" section can be helpful: "I like it broken down." Her Chicano studies professor also used the TAD framework with at least one major assignment, and she found it useful and motivating in that context. However, in our second interview, Lily shared that after our first interview, she had a frustrating experience with her freshman seminar instructor's implementation of TAD. Although the professor used the TAD framework for the assignment, the requirements did not make sense to Lily and many of her classmates; from her perspective, the assignment could not be completed as written. Lily's main concern was interpersonal. Although the professor eventually updated the assignment, Lily said she felt that the professor was initially rude and "condescending" when she and her classmates raised their concerns. Despite this irritation, her overall tone when looking back on the semester was one of relief, even about this professor: "Well, fine, whatever. I'm not going to see [the professor] again." As I would expect, passing all of her courses the first semester helped her feel more confident about the future.

Future. Looking into the future, Lily said she still felt external pressure because of her family's needs, rather than feeling a solely internal drive to succeed in college: "I feel like I'm not just doing it for me, like, I'm doing it for my family . . . even when I was

struggling the most and like, like feeling like I had to like—like I wanted to like just disappear. I was like, no, I can't do that." However, her outlook was still quite positive. When I asked Lily for two or three words describing her outlook about the future, she gave me "fun" and "roller coaster," demonstrating a positive outlook while still acknowledging the trials ahead. She explained about "roller coaster:" "I think it covers negative [things] because I feel like there'll be classes where I feel like I'm dying again. But, like, I'll be fine." She identified tutoring, her classmates, and her scholarship program as major sources of support: "I'm better . . . I'm with the people that I know. I feel like I still have trouble with stuff, but at the same time I feel like I can do it." Even regarding the three math courses she would be required to take the next semester, Lily was optimistic: "I hope it'll get better, to be honest. I don't know if it will or won't, but I just hope."

Alejandro's Narrative

Alejandro completed my survey on November 19. Our first interview was held in the evening on November 20, and our second interview took place in the afternoon on December 18. My interviews with Alejandro were longer than those with any of the other participants, reaching approximately 90 minutes during each meeting.

Alejandro is a gregarious 18-year-old nonbinary Hispanic/Latino student majoring in Child and Adolescent Development with an emphasis in special education who plans to become a special education teacher. Both of their parents had some college experience, but neither completed a degree. Alejandro also shared that their family is low-income and that their high school prepared them for college "in a way." They were generous with their time and assured me that they were both happy to help me and interested in the

research-gathering process. They provided me with a detailed, introspective, and often hilarious narrative, frequently punctuated by joyful profanity. Their story demonstrates their determination to carve out a space for themselves in a world that they said was not built for people like them.

Past. Like many of my participants, Alejandro's educational journey has been marked by hardship. They were diagnosed with ADHD "at a very young age," and they remember realizing what the diagnosis meant in early adolescence and thinking to themselves, "Oh, so I'm weird for a reason." They recalled getting along with other children, but told me, "I was annoying. I say that with confidence . . . I was hyper as shit. Like, I would run around all over the place . . . I would eat so much food, even if I was full, I would eat more food. . . . Run around, throw up, and then right after, eat more food." Alejandro told me a story about a time when they ran away from their mother at the park and, from then on, they were forced to wear a leash when outside of the home. They also struggled with classroom behavior in elementary school, sharing exasperatedly, "I would not pay attention for the life of me."

Alejandro received years of in-home therapy during which providers "made me learn how to sit down and actually, like, maintain like diets and, like, talk to people," along with academic support after school and, eventually, in-school special education courses that sometimes made them feel ostracized. They shared, "I remember being told a lot I was weird as a kid. . . . I was like, okay, and that's who I am. Screw you." Alejandro smiled as they told me about a specific special education teacher who was instrumental in shaping the course of their life: "[She] helped me out a lot to understand who I was as a person. . . . When I was a younger kid, like—she treated me as a person." Despite

struggling in elementary school, they improved in middle school and became a “straight A” student winning “awards left and right.” Then, during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic isolation, the lack of social interaction disrupted Alejandro’s education.

When describing this period of time to me, they made a gesture as if a hand grenade had gone off in their face: “I remember having straight As and everything . . . just all thrown out the window and whatever, whatever.” They initially put in their best effort during remote instruction, but:

Nobody really talked . . . it just kind of died out throughout that whole year . . . when I found, like, a way to, like, cheat math, I was like—what’s the point of even doing math if I can cheat it, you know? . . . And then obviously like when AI [artificial intelligence] was a thing, I was like—at first, I was like, well, I’m not going to freaking use it. But then, obviously, I used it.

Alejandro’s academic misconduct went unnoticed, and they were able to use an AI application to generate answers to their math assignments rather than working through the problems. They pointed to a lack of social connectedness and a perceived lack of curriculum worth as demotivating factors: “I had, I guess, no reason to put an effort for things. I just was like, it’s a waste of time. Why? So, I would rather just get it out of the way, the cheating way. And then just do whatever, which was just sleep.” Alejandro deleted the app quickly after in-person instruction resumed, but they regret their choices: “I don’t want to be a bad person, I guess. . . . During high school, I didn’t really—Damn, I didn’t take it seriously. Like looking back at it, I messed around, damn!”

Alejandro had been considering trade school or acting instead of college, but their experience working at a day camp motivated them to pursue a child and adolescent

development degree. They would have preferred to go to the same school as their girlfriend, but they were not admitted. So, they selected CSUN on the advice of their social worker, a CSUN alumnus who “told me, like, the benefits and, like, the good shit about CSUN.” Additional factors included that Alejandro’s cousin was already enrolled at CSUN and that it was geographically convenient.

Present. During Alejandro’s first semester at CSUN, they were enrolled in 16 units, one unit more than is usually recommended by advisors: the freshman seminar, an introductory child and adolescent development course, a statistics course for child and adolescent development majors, a theater class, and English 113A, the lowest level first-year composition course held within the English Department, which is attached to a one-credit support lab. Enrollment in this specific statistics course indicates a lower level of math placement as determined by multiple measures, including high school GPA. Similarly, the English course indicates a lower level of writing proficiency at the time of enrollment. When we spoke, Alejandro was living at home with their father, a mechanic, their mother, a small business owner, and their younger sister, “the princess.” Alejandro often serves as a translator for their parents. Alejandro told me that they were happy to be able to live at home and save money. They explained that their parents are supportive of their education and proud of their accomplishments so far.

When I asked Alejandro to describe their transition from high school to college, they told me, “Dreadful, but worth it.” They struggled with the bureaucratic requirements such as financial aid and admissions paperwork, with which their parents were unable to help them: “It was such a pain in the ass many times, especially with FASA . . . don’t get me started with that . . . I think I spent like at least 10 hours behind the fucking screen.

Trying to figure it out—yeah, I know, because obviously my parents can’t read English. So, it’s like—how to do everything myself and make sure everything was correct.”

Alejandro’s financial aid was delayed for more than four months due to errors and missing information, which necessitated repeated and frustrating corrections and additional wait time. These financial concerns were a distraction from their coursework, although they were very excited when the money finally came through: “I got my check. I was like, fucking, finally.” Alejandro cashed the check and kept the money in an envelope where they could look at it: “I have \$5,000! It’s still there.”

In addition to finances, Alejandro also identified their ADHD as an academic complication. They reported feeling they need more time than other student to process information and that the way they process information is different from most other students. Alejandro shared that staying focused while reading long documents “by myself” can be challenging: “I just stare at a screen, and I’m like, huh?” They also sometimes make minor errors that lead to point deductions on assignments, which they found frustrating. For example, they shared with disbelief that in their math course, “I remember this one time there was this answer, and I was so pissed off about it. I wrote the answer right. And it was completely right. [But] I added a space, and it turned out to make it wrong. . . . A space bar, like a space on the space bar, and it made it wrong.”

They also accidentally used the wrong formula on a test, recalling “I knew the formula perfectly, [but] it was switched . . . I remembered the formula, but I mixed it up. . . . Like, that’s college, bro.” They also struggle with procrastination frequently; even with ample time to complete assignments, they sometimes think, “Eh, whatever, I can do it later . . .

procrastination, woo!” Alejandro shared these mistakes with both humor and exasperation in their voice.

Alejandro felt that social connections with their professors greatly influenced their course experiences. Their child and adolescent development professor was their favorite: “I fucking love her class more than anything . . . literally, I will willingly form my whole schedule around her classes . . . she is such a great professor . . . she’s actually one of the coolest people I’ve met.” Alejandro enjoyed how “real” this professor was; she used casual language and spoke frankly with students about the course topics and how they related to the students’ lives. This course also included fun activities; in one notable example, Alejandro donned a special outfit meant to replicate the weight and size distribution of a pregnant person as part of a unit on pregnancy. They showed me a picture, “You know, there’s just casually me in a pregnancy suit. And then here’s me squatting in it. . . . God, it was such a pain in the ass.” They felt happy to have been chosen as the example and felt that the hands-on experience helped them understand the concepts. They were excited about their new knowledge, which they felt would be relevant when they and their partner have children in the future. They also appreciated how the child and adolescent development professor acknowledged real-world issues like racial disparities in neonatal treatment. Alejandro hoped that the professor could be a useful connection when they seek employment related to working with children.

Alejandro enjoyed their theater course and especially their theater final exam, in which they were allowed to write and act out a scene with a peer. They struggled in their math course but repeatedly assured me that they “respected” their math professor. The math professor gave partial credit for several incorrect test responses because Alejandro

was still able to demonstrate some understanding of the material despite arriving at the wrong answer. They appreciated that consideration. They felt that their English course was “interesting” and “fun.” They felt that the supplemental support lab connected to their English course was helpful and reported feeling a positive connection with the student instructor in that course: “She helps me out . . . a lot.” Alejandro shared that they were happy they came to CSUN and felt their first semester was a success.

The only course Alejandro did not like was the freshman seminar; they shared that “with much respect, I do not like [the freshman seminar] one bit. Not one bit. I see it as a huge waste of time sometimes.” When I asked them to say more, they initially cited concerns about curriculum worth, explaining that there was a “healthy eating” topic that they felt was unnecessary because they already had dietary training in their youth. When I asked for other examples, they stated that they actually did appreciate learning more about fun campus resources, and they enjoyed some of the group work and social connections in that course. They shared that they learned about conducting research, which was helpful, and most of the assignments were easy. They liked the freshman celebration project, a party for the seminar courses at the end of the semester in which each course creates a display related to something they learned.

After further discussion, we jointly realized that their main concern was an interpersonal conflict with their freshman seminar professor, who they felt was “all up in [their] face.” They felt that the professor would call on them in class but not give them adequate time to think through their responses, which was embarrassing:

It’s like they want you to engage [but then] they’re like, “All right, I’m going to call on somebody [else]” instantly, like not even, like, give it a second . . . like

give us a second, at least, damn. . . . It also, like, really, like, demotivates me at the same time because I'm like, well, I don't want to fucking talk if you're going to *make* me talk. Like, I'm taking this class for a reason. Don't fucking . . . make me talk if I don't want to talk, or like, if I don't know what we're talking about—because then you're just putting me on the spot, making me look like an idiot. So, it's like. *Please*. . . . being a dick about it, you know, they're just like, pushy. And I'm like, all right, well, get the fuck off.

These interpersonal issues tainted Alejandro's perception of the course as a whole. While they were able to identify useful aspects of the freshman seminar curriculum, such as time management and breaking down big assignments into manageable steps, they agreed that their adversarial relationship with the professor made them feel disengaged and resentful.

Despite these frustrations, Alejandro spoke positively about their first semester at CSUN overall, saying they did have a sense of belonging: "I guess I do have a sense of belonging at CSUN." They enjoyed working with their peers and found group work and opportunities to socialize to be helpful to their success. For example, after they used the wrong formula in their math course, a peer explained their mistake in a way that finally "clicked," making Alejandro confident that "if it comes up [again], I know it now." Working with others in groups helps Alejandro "feel more engaged." They shared, "If I'm in a group . . . with people that I can actually talk to and it's not awkward? Then I will put 100% into everything. That's what I've noticed." Alejandro felt that they had to work harder than other students to earn a passing grade, but they felt confident they could pass their courses. They shared that completing assignments was not their first priority.

They privileged self-care or “mentally [taking] care of” themselves, then socializing, then academics. Alejandro shared that if a friend wanted to make plans, they would prioritize those plans over any homework or studying. Even though coursework was not their main priority, they were able to pass all of their courses and reported feeling satisfied and relieved during our second meeting after the semester concluded.

Future. When I asked Alejandro for a few words describing their future outlook, Alejandro shared two phrases: “ready to learn” and “YOLO.”¹ They were excited about their child and adolescent development major and pursuing a career in special education: “I like my major a lot . . . I’m ready to learn about that topic. I’m ready to be in that field and whatnot.” About YOLO, Alejandro shared, “Well, I know college is going to be a pain in the ass. It’s going to be a pain in the ass, so . . . Fuck it, we ball.”² Alejandro had already signed up for their second semester of courses, although they shared that they were confused about why the courses were different; they had expected a second semester of each of their current courses, the way that such coursework is designed in high school. Despite this confusion, they felt confident about their ability to succeed in those courses, although at the time we spoke, they reported they were more concerned about having fun during their winter vacation.

After graduation, Alejandro plans to use their degree to work with students in special education: “I can work as, like, a psychologist teacher, like a social worker, or,

¹ An initialism meaning “You Only Live Once”

² This phrase is related to sports and indicates a willingness to persevere through hardship.

like, a special ed teacher for these kids and give them a future. So that, you know, there is a place for them in the world, so the world is a better place.”

Geraldine’s Narrative

Geraldine completed my survey on November 18. Our first interview took place on November 22, her earliest availability. Our second interview was held on December 20. Both interviews were held just before midday. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Geraldine is an accounting major. She identified herself as an 18-year-old female Chicana. She is a first-generation student. She told me that her family is “more than a little bit” low-income and that her high school prepared her for college “the best they could,” but ultimately that preparation was not sufficient because her high school was not adequately staffed or funded.

Like Lily, Geraldine was able to get into a program through her high school that will cover tuition at CSUN for four years. Unlike Lily, Geraldine shared that her program requires 20 hours of community service per semester, but this requirement was not a hardship—she’d already amassed 39 hours doing produce distribution for the campus food pantry and community events before our first interview. During our interviews, most of her answers were direct and concise; she was willing to share her experiences when asked, but her persona appeared more reserved than my other participants’. Geraldine’s story portrays her as a serious, driven, and anxious young woman who sees higher education as a vital component of her desired career path.

Past. Geraldine’s narrative about her past academic experience was mixed. Her parents came from a very low-income background and wanted better for Geraldine and

her siblings. Geraldine started off in a “really good” elementary school and was enrolled in honors classes. She commuted long-distance to attend a middle school far from her home in pursuit of “better schooling.” She described those earlier years as academically successful, which she attributes to her supportive academic environment.

However, her high school experience was markedly different. Mandatory remote instruction due to COVID-19 began during Geraldine’s eighth grade year and lasted through her freshman year of high school: “It very much felt like I lost an entire year, and I’m still kind of upset about that.” She enrolled in advanced placement (AP) courses, but she felt that they were not rigorous and that her instructors “didn’t know how to teach the subject.” She felt that she and her peers were “the guinea pig class” because before her cohort, the high school did not offer AP courses. With reduced perceived curriculum worth, Geraldine lost her motivation: “I just got tired of dealing with, like, the same thing over and over. So, I kind of did slack off . . . not doing my work. Like, I’m going to be honest, I did not pass the exams [to earn AP credit].” As an added complication, Geraldine is often responsible for her three younger siblings, especially when her father takes extended work trips.

Despite these setbacks, Geraldine shared, “I always knew I was going to go to college.” She earned a place in her high school’s scholarship program, which can only be used at CSUN. That and CSUN’s geographic convenience made CSUN attractive: “For many reasons, but mostly because of the scholarship . . . and it’s closer to home.” At the time of our interviews, Geraldine was living at home with her parents and siblings and commuting to CSUN.

Present. Geraldine enrolled in six courses her first semester with a total of 16 units, which is one more than advisors usually recommend for first-semester students: Her courses included the freshman seminar, an introductory philosophy course, a computer course, a mathematics course for business majors with a mandatory one-unit lab, and Chicana and Chicano Studies 115, the highest level first-year writing composition course within the Chicana and Chicano Studies Department.

The math course placement indicated a lower level of mathematics proficiency as determined using multiple measures like high school GPA. The writing course placement indicated a high level of writing proficiency and a desire to read and write about Mexican American texts. When I asked Geraldine for a few words to describe her transition to CSUN, she gave me “stressful” and “emotional.” She shared that the workload was more than expected, and she was having trouble keeping up with her assignments. She told me that wondered sometimes, “Is college really for me? I don’t know.” In addition to time management concerns, Geraldine identified the 8:30 am start time for her first class meeting of the day as a hardship because of her commute and her responsibility to help her younger siblings get ready for their school day as well. During her first semester, she was often on campus from 8:00 am to 6:45 pm. She had an 8:30 pm bedtime because of her younger siblings, with whom she shared a room, although she said she was unable to fall asleep until 11:00 pm. She did not feel that she had enough time to herself.

Overall, Geraldine told me, “It’s very much a whole jumble of emotions that I feel, so I could be happy, or it could be stressed. I can be annoyed, like with my classwork, or like, just feeling, like, calm about it. . . . I’m emotional.” Geraldine told me that she was earning As and Bs in her courses, but she was behind on housework and felt

overwhelmed about balancing her responsibilities. Geraldine identified social connections as an important source of support, but she told me that she did not feel very connected to her classmates: “I usually hang out with, like, three people here at CSUN” whom she knew from her high school. She often spoke with her non-CSUN friends, her parents, her sister, and a counselor at CSUN. She struggled with procrastination on assignments she felt would be difficult: “I look at it, and I think to myself, I’ll do it tomorrow. Tomorrow comes. I don’t do it. But at the same time, it’s just like, I feel so calm for not doing it. So, it just makes me feel like not doing it even more. And then I regret it.” Looming deadlines eventually spurred Geraldine to complete assignments the day before they were due, but she would often feel stressed for weeks ahead of time: “It’s in the back of my head like, ‘Hey, you have this assignment due. When are you going to do it?’ But it’s just like . . . well, I have this idea, but what if it’s wrong? I don’t know. . . . I don’t feel like making mistakes or, like, having that failure of just having a bad grade.” Geraldine identified that fear of failure as a major cause of procrastination in her more difficult courses.

Geraldine felt most confident about her math courses: “Math is, like, a huge passion of mine—I can do, like, with numbers and everything.” However, “I don’t like English. Absolutely. It’s difficult. It’s difficult . . . whatever I write is not sophisticated enough. Or, like, there’s just—the way, like, my writing style is, like, not good enough.” She did find the freshman seminar helpful because it introduced her to campus resources and because the assignments helped prepare her for more opaque but similar assignments in other courses. For example, she completed an annotated bibliography in the freshman

seminar, and that experience made her more confident when approaching an annotated bibliography assignment in her writing course.

Geraldine was concerned about enrolling in courses with good professors, so she conducted research on the website RateMyProfessors before selecting her classes. She told me that she liked all of her professors the first semester, but shared that sometimes, “I feel like I can learn on my own better.” Although relationships with professors are important to her, she told me that if she did “have a problem” with a professor, she would “just have to push that aside” and focus on the work. She did share with me that it was frustrating when professors did not explain assignments sufficiently and did not give her enough warning about due dates: “At least a heads up would be nice.”

She felt that her freshman seminar course was not difficult and was helpful at times. She said that meeting with a CSUN librarian in-person, a required part of the freshman seminar, was especially useful: “It really does help to have, like, at least, like, an eye-to-eye with an actual librarian and being like, okay, I can come to—I can come to them if I ever need help.” While some assignments in the seminar felt like “busy work,” Geraldine told me that she was able to understand the instructions easily. Unlike her writing course, the freshman seminar was not a major source of stress. During our second interview, Geraldine was tired but relieved; she had passed all of her courses.

Future. I asked Geraldine to give me two or three words to describe her outlook about the future. She told me “finally,” “hopeful,” and “rigorous.” She said she felt that the first semester had been difficult and stressful; she was relieved to have reached the end of her first semester, finally, an important milestone. She also reported feeling hopeful because she had recently reviewed her degree progress report with an academic

advisor, which allowed her to see all of the courses she would need to complete to earn her degree. She told me that she felt hopeful about completing her bachelor's and starting her career.

The word "rigorous" represented Geraldine's plans to become a certified public accountant (CPA), which necessitates a very difficult exam process. She told me that she felt nervous about the work ahead of her, but also determined to complete that work to the best of her ability. She shared, "I'm trying to change my mentality from 'Oh, I should get this done' or, like, 'Maybe I'll do this.' It's like, no, I *want* to get this done by a—a reasonable, realistic amount of time." Regarding her career goals, she confidently shared, "I feel like I have the resources necessary and like the connections in order for me to get to that point."

Jonathan's Narrative

Jonathan completed my survey on November 19. Due to his schedule restrictions, our first interview was held in the afternoon on November 26, right before Thanksgiving break. Our second interview took place in the afternoon on December 19. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Jonathan identified himself as an 18-year-old Mexican male. He is a first-generation college student by the CSU's standards, although his mother earned a two-year degree at a private, for-profit institution. He shared that his family was not low-income, but his narrative did occasionally address financial concerns. He also reported he felt that his high school "kind of" prepared him for college. Jonathan is a kinesiology major, and he is pursuing a career as a physical therapist. His story presents him as an

introspective young man because he spoke earnestly about his hardships. However, one major narrative thread was his belief that problems would work themselves out.

Past. Jonathan shared that, when he was younger, he felt that school was his main “purpose.” However, “It never clicked . . . I would always think of school as like just a place to hang out, make friends.” He told me that he first started “focusing on school” and realized “that’s the only thing going for me in life right now” around age 15. Like the other participants, Jonathan identified COVID-19 as a negative influence during his freshman year of high school. He shared that the isolation was not upsetting because he was able to use the additional free time to play video games with his friends and develop an interest in physical fitness, but that online instruction was a challenge: “I didn’t really focus. I failed, like, every class online. [But] coming back my sophomore year, I focused more in school, and I realized it was a lot easier than what I thought it was. And I just passed everything.” In his sophomore year of high school, Jonathan’s parents moved more than an hour away from their original home. To stay enrolled at his original high school, Jonathan had to commute long-distance on public transportation, which necessitated waking up at 4:30 every morning. During his senior year, he moved into his grandmother’s house, which was closer to his high school. His grandmother and a cousin took turns driving him to school that final year, allowing him more time to focus on his education.

Jonathan “always knew” he would go to college, but that abstract assumption did not translate to real-world preparation. Jonathan said his parents are supportive of his education: “My dad has melted that into my brain ever since I was—ever since I could remember—just, ‘School number one, school number one, always.’” Jonathan is the

youngest of three siblings, but his siblings only attended a semester or two at a community college each before pursuing occupations that did not require a degree. He told me, “I just feel like they’re all stuck” despite some career success. Jonathan shared, “My whole life growing up is just me following my siblings. So, before I knew anything, I was actually going to go to [the same community college] until I figured out what to do with my life.” However, his father told him that he was “the last hope” after his older siblings dropped out, which motivated him to pursue a different path.

Jonathan shared that he “didn’t know what to apply for” the night college applications were due. He called his cousin, who had already completed his application the year before and who was able to advise Jonathan about the process. At his cousin’s encouragement, Jonathan decided to pursue a kinesiology degree at CSUN. Jonathan told me that CSUN was the only university he applied to: “I knew I was going to get in for sure. . . . It was way more affordable, and it’s a lot better education than other places too so, and I knew I could get in. So, I was like, why not?” Additionally, most of his high school friends also chose to attend CSUN, although Jonathan lost contact with most of them after the semester began.

Present. Jonathan enrolled in six courses his first semester with a total of 14 units, one unit fewer than advisors generally recommend for the first semester: the freshman seminar, a statistics course with a mandatory one-unit lab and optional one-unit support course, a kinesiology course, and the highest level of first-year writing composition held within the English Department. The math course enrollment indicates the lowest possible level of math proficiency as determined by multiple measures such as

high school GPA, while the English course indicates a high level of proficiency in writing.

When I asked Jonathan for a few words describing his transition to CSUN, he gave me “different,” “confusing,” and “excited.” He told me that college was “unexpected,” especially because it lacked the set routine of high school; transitioning to CSUN came with “a lot more freedom,” but that free time could be misused: “I’ve been wasting like half the time and using the other half good.” Jonathan perceived much less support at CSUN: “You know, in high school, you have someone to kind of hold your hand in a way. Like with everything . . . it’s more like, in college, you don’t have that at all, so you kind of have to figure stuff out your own.” He told me that without his friends and cousins, “I’d be kind of lost, you know, just wandering around the hall is not normal!” Jonathan’s excitement centered on what he called “a new chapter in life . . . a whole brand new thing going for me . . . college is way more important than high school, elementary, or middle school, you know?”

Jonathan explained that his classroom experience thus far had been mixed. He felt a positive connection with his instructors, which was a major source of relief:

I remember coming back after my first week and being like, “I really like my professors. I’m going to have a really good first semester.” And I still am having a great time. And they’re all, you know, they’re all really nice people . . . I’m glad I had that for my first semester and not, you know, a bunch of professors who don’t care about me or anything like that.

However, transportation was a barrier during his first semester. When we spoke, he was living with a cousin and an older brother relatively close to CSUN. Jonathan’s father

surprised him with an old but well-maintained truck as a gift, although unfortunately Jonathan has not yet had time to earn his driver's license. Earning his license is both a major goal and a source of frustration. Jonathan's brother drives Jonathan to CSUN in exchange for financial support from their parents, who still live more than an hour away. However, his brother is unreliable, and he was unable to get to his early morning statistics course on time: "He would just make me late every day, and I just couldn't handle it." Jonathan stopped attending that course and its accompanying lab without officially dropping either of them. He does not qualify for a late withdrawal, so those courses will weigh down his GPA, but he is not concerned. He casually shared: "I'm going to have to retake it. . . . It's kind of bad, but, you know, I will just . . . bounce back. It's not a big deal."

Jonathan told me that he was struggling in his other courses "because I've been lazy about it." He said that the assignments in all of his courses seemed easy, so he procrastinated, thinking "since it's so easy and I know how to do it, I'll just do it later." He shared that this behavior was influenced by his experience in high school, where he felt such behavior was the norm: "There's a lot of lazy kids at my school." He did not feel challenged in high school:

In the last few months of high school, I never did any homework, and I still got straight A's. Like literally I would come home, do absolutely nothing, got straight A's. So, I would, you know, I had nothing to do. So, I just doom scrolled until I went out with my cousins later that day. . . . That's why high school is just—very easy.

Jonathan's voice sounded regretful as he shared more about his high school experience:

I was thriving in a society of really low intelligence people. That's exactly how I feel because I'm looking around—Like, “Guys, this is so easy. How are all of you failing? How do all of you have C's and D's and not A's? It's just too easy.” And it's mostly just because they were pretty—pretty dumb. . . . But then also at the same time, I wasn't, like, at the super top level of the high school. I was more like . . . just, I was up there, but not down here with all them. So, with the majority, but there were some kids at the school, like, I remember like the top eight valedictorians. And I was like, not nowhere near any of them. But I was comfortable. . . . They were—you know, going to like all the popular, not popular—the, all the good, like really, really good—UCLA, USC, all those over there. And I'm comfortable coming here to CSUN without doing anything in my work—or not doing—not doing anything in [high school] classes.

Jonathan shared that CSUN was the only university he applied to and that he was happy with his choice because of its affordability and geographic location. However, the transition was difficult. He initially put off some of his college assignments, assuming he would be able to complete them quickly. However, when he started working on some of them, he realized, “It's not too easy. It's definitely way harder than high school work. . . . I actually have to actually—you know focusing, try to, try to make sure you understand the material, versus in high school where . . . you can just understand the material like it's nothing.” Then he backtracked, sounding unconcerned again, “It's not that hard. I don't know.” As we discussed this statement, Jonathan clarified that some courses were more

difficult than others. He thought his kinesiology course was important and engaging, but he struggled with the material because he did not have any prior experience with it.

The freshman seminar was his easiest course, which was both a blessing and a curse. He had enrolled in a preparatory course over the summer before his first semester started, and that course about being a successful student overlapped with the freshman seminar's content and assignments. Therefore, much of the freshman seminar felt "repetitive." He shared, "It's not too bad because, you know, then it's more easy, more easier for me." However: "Then it gets too easy, and I don't want to do it, and it's whatever . . . and then I get behind." During our second meeting, Jonathan shared that the end of the semester was "not really difficult . . . I still got it done." He did not have his final grades yet, but he felt that he had earned a passing grade in the freshman seminar after a big final presentation that went well. He knew that the courses he stopped attending would need to be repeated, but he expected he would "scrape by" in the remaining classes. He maintained that the work itself was not difficult, but that procrastination and a lack of focus led to lower grades than he was capable of. Still, he maintained a positive outlook: "It wasn't as good as I would have hoped [but] just focus on the future and making sure I can do a lot better."

Future. Regarding the immediate future, Jonathan acknowledged that his lack of motivation could be a problem, he also felt prepared by his first-semester experiences and optimistic about his second semester:

I just came in, I came into college this semester with my high school mindset of [time management] and then going to college this semester, it's like, oh, that's not really going to work for me the same way it did before, you know—so. So now I

have more of a better run. I have a much better understanding of what . . . not really the classes to take, but more of what times to take them, which is, I feel like, would be way more helpful for me. So, then I'd have better time management skills. . . . Yeah, that'd be magical.

When I asked Jonathan for two words describing his outlook for the future, he shared “hopeful” and “mysterious.” As I asked for more explanation about these terms, Jonathan shared that he felt hopeful about his ability to recover and set himself up for a more successful second semester working toward his intended career, but “mysterious about . . . if I can achieve all those things.” While he expressed what I would identify as reasonable concern about the workload waiting for him, his overall demeanor as we discussed the future was positive.

Jonathan had plans to meet with an adviser to design a more appropriate course schedule. He had identified the course times as the main obstacle: “After having a whole semester of experience, I know I have the experience of knowing which classes to take, what times to take them . . . I don't want to go to school the whole five days. And I don't want to be up too early, and I don't want to leave too late so, I have an idea.” He also had plans to make progress toward earning his driver's license. As our last interview came to an end, Jonathan shared advice for other students in a similar position, which also felt like advice to his future self: “Just make sure you always stay focused on everything that you're doing . . . [distractions are] going to happen eventually no matter what. So just do your best to when you get distracted, do your best to just reel yourself back in.”

Jessica's Narrative

Jessica completed my survey on November 21 and agreed to a first interview in the evening on November 26, shortly before Thanksgiving break. Our second interview was held in the evening on December 21. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Jessica identified herself as an 18-year-old Hispanic female. She is a first-generation college student; neither parent had any college experience, and her three older siblings all dropped out of community college. She lives at home with her parents and two younger siblings. She is the first person in her immediate family to attend a university, and she hopes to be able to help her two younger siblings follow in her footsteps. She felt that her high school adequately prepared her for college, and she also shared that her family is low-income. She is a child and adolescent development major who hopes to work in special education or as a child life specialist. During our first meeting, she quickly picked her own pseudonym, and we got right to the interview questions. Her story presents a confident individual who is assured of her future success in life.

Past. Jessica shared that she has always performed well academically: “It was good throughout all like . . . middle school, high school, and like elementary and stuff like that. I, like, as for education wise, I was always like—I don’t want to say like straight A’s, but like, I was always on top of my things.” Even experiencing distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic “wasn’t bad . . . I was still on top of my stuff.” Her three siblings are nearly two decades older than she is and moved out of the home early in her life, but she grew up knowing that she would succeed where they had not: “I’ve always wanted to go [to college] because since my siblings didn’t either, and neither did my

parents. So, I wanted to be, like, the first one to go to college. So, I just didn't know which college, but I knew that I wanted to go."

Jessica is the first to attend university, but all three of her older siblings did start off attending "community college, but they never finished it." Jessica was unsure exactly what stopped their educational progress: "I think it was just, they just wanted to start working already. . . . I think that's what happened." When we spoke, one sister still lived nearby, but the two other siblings had moved out of state. Jessica shared that her siblings were unable to help her apply for college or teach her about what to expect, partially because their college careers had not included university and partially because it was so long ago by the time Jessica needed to start her applications. Despite the gaps in their experience and knowledge, Jessica feels that her parents support her as much as they can. She has some responsibility caring for and helping her younger siblings, but her parents do not overly rely on her for childcare or household duties. Jessica's parents want her to focus on school: "That's, like, my main focus . . . it's important to them."

After applying to and being admitted to several "pretty good" schools, Jessica ultimately chose CSUN because of its proximity to her home and her existing comfort level with the campus: Her high school had sponsored several CSUN field trips prior to graduation, and the campus is close enough to her parents' house that she can "stay close to family" and live at home to save money.

Present. Jessica enrolled in five courses her first semester with a total of 15 units, the normal amount that advisors recommend incoming students take: the freshman seminar, a communications course, a child and adolescent development course, a statistics course for students in her major, and the highest level of first-year writing

composition held within the English Department. The math course indicates a high level of math proficiency because she did not have to enroll in the supplemental lab, and the English course indicates a high level of proficiency in writing. When I asked her for a few words describing her transition to college, she gave me “significance,” “scary,” and “maybe difficult.” By “significance,” she meant that going to such a big campus from her comparatively much smaller high school felt like a drastic change: “I wasn’t, like, used to so many people.” The differences between her time at CSUN so far and her prior educational experience were difficult to adjust to at first, even for simple tasks like finding her classrooms. However, by the time we first spoke in November, she felt that she had made progress with that adjustment: “I’m feeling comfortable with it.”

The “scary” part of Jessica’s transition was social. She was used to interacting with the same small friend group throughout her time in high school, but those friends had gone to different universities: “I don’t have, like, my friends around me. I do have some friends, but like my best friends, they like, go, [to other universities]. So, we’re all kind of, like, separated in a way.” Jessica shared that some of her classmates from high school are at CSUN, but not the ones she is close to: “Going to school basically by myself, I was, like, scared.” Jessica had made some progress forming connections with CSUN students before our first meeting.

Jessica’s final word, “difficult,” described her anticipation about the increased workload in college when compared to high school: “Everyone’s like, oh, like, college is . . . harder. So, I was just scared about that.” However, after a few months, Jessica felt that the workload was “about the same” as she expected and only “sometimes” more difficult than high school. Her perceived level of difficulty and satisfaction with her

courses was strongly tied to her feelings about each professor. Her favorite course was the introductory child and adolescent development course, which was taught by the same professor that Alejandro adored. Jessica shared their sentiment. With warmth in her voice, Jessica shared: “I think I like [child and adolescent development] more than my other classes because—Not only because of the class, but also because of the professor. She’s like very—she’s very understanding. . . . Yeah, she’s great.” Jessica also liked her “nice” communications professor, but not the public speaking aspect of that course: “I’m not comfortable with public speaking like that . . . I get really nervous.” Her statistics course was manageable: “Sometimes it does get hard. But other times it’s pretty straightforward.” Her English course was “good,” but she felt that the professor was “kind of new” and not very engaging.

The freshman seminar was Jessica’s least favorite course. I got the impression that she was trying to spare my feelings and avoid offending me because she perceived me as connected to the course, given my research topic: “I honestly feel like it’s—it’s kind of like—not, like, worth—not like—now, how do I say it?” After I reassured her that I wanted her honest opinion, she sighed and admitted, “I feel like sometimes it’s like—dumb. I don’t get, like, the point of it sometimes.” Similar to her other courses, social influences affected Jessica’s experience in the freshman seminar. When we first spoke, she was embroiled in a frustrating group project, forced to rely on peers who she felt did not take initiative or communicate sufficiently:

I’m like debating on, like, texting the group. Because it’s getting closer like the time and we haven’t started on it or like even chosen a presentation date or even filled out the [group] contract, so—I don’t even know if they know about it . . .

there's mainly, like, two people [in my group] who—who don't really go to that class.

This group experience contrasted with a positive group experience in the communications course. In that course, being able to present with a group made public speaking “not as bad,” and the people she was working with did their part. Despite her frustration with her freshman seminar group members, Jessica still saw a path forward and planned to seize initiative: “I’m just going to tell the group [what to do].”

Jessica’s negative perception of her freshman seminar professor had an even greater impact on her overall feelings about the course than her group work frustrations. She shared, “I feel like the professor—she doesn’t really . . . teach us what we’re supposed to be taught. And sometimes she gets confusing. Like, we didn’t even know what was going on. And as for the assignments, she doesn’t really talk to us about the assignments, they’re just already on Canvas.” Like the other participants, Jessica prefers to have assignments explained to her in real time rather than reading instructions on her own. Worse, although Jessica’s freshman seminar professor did use transparent assignment design, she had added a requirement to one of the default seminar assignments that did not make sense to Jessica and her classmates (or to me, as Jessica described it). When the students asked the professor for clarification in class, Jessica felt that the professor responded rudely, and she did not feel heard:

It was very frustrating because I asked her a question, like for her to clarify, and she didn’t even answer my question, and she just, like, turned to, like, the whole class and asked like, “Oh, like, what are we confused about?” Like for everyone . . . and like students were telling her, like asking her but she just, she wasn’t even

answering the question, and everyone was just giving confused looks to each other . . . I don't think she gets like the—what we're trying to say.

The professor eventually acknowledged that the assignment could not be completed as designed and changed the requirements, but Jessica felt that the error and the professor's reaction were indicative of how “unorganized,” “boring,” and “useless” the course was overall.

The seminar itself also wasn't what Jessica expected. She told me, “I just thought, like, [freshman seminar] was going to be like a homeroom class, kind of like in high school. But she just like—she just talks about things and I didn't—I don't know. I don't really learn anything in there.” When I asked Jessica to tell me more about what she meant about expecting the freshman seminar to be like “homeroom,” she elaborated that at her high school homeroom was:

Just like a class, sometimes they'll let you do like your work. It could kind of be like study hall . . . it was just like the idea of, like, working on homework or basically just like—just like a chill class where, like, you could just hang around and stuff like that.

Even though Jessica preferred to do her work at home with no distractions, meaning a course period dedicated to doing homework would not be as useful to her, she felt that such a “chill” course would be a better use of her time than the actual freshman seminar content. She shared that her current grade in the seminar was 100%, but she was already a good student and did not need it. She was frustrated that she had been forced to enroll as part of a cohort for her major.

Future. When we met for our second interview, Jessica had just finished all of her coursework for the first semester and already knew her final grades: All A's. With pride, she told me, "It was hard, but . . . I, not to sound like, not bragging or anything, but my grade would say otherwise [that it wasn't too hard]." She identified procrastination and time management as possible concerns going forward, and she also had some concerns about her course schedule for the upcoming semester. She chose to register for four courses instead of five because several of them were difficult courses with very large class sizes, and she wanted to set herself up for success: "I'm not sure how that's gonna go, but I'm hoping it goes good." Despite some concerns about course modality and timing, she shared, "I always, like, put my schoolwork first . . . I feel like I am confident." She acknowledged that, despite letting assignments "pile up" sometimes, she felt schoolwork was "pretty easy" for her in general and that she did not struggle as much as most of her classmates.

When I asked Jessica for a few words describing how she felt about the future, she gave me two words with very positive connotations: "rewarding" and "successful." For "rewarding," she elaborated that she was describing how she would feel when she earned her undergraduate degree within four years, after which she might pursue a graduate degree in child and adolescent development: "On graduation day . . . or I'm not sure if they call it commencement, I think? Yeah, I feel like rewarding is going to, I feel like I'm gonna feel, like how do you say it? Like...basically like it was all . . . worth it in a way." As for "successful," she was thinking about how her degree would earn her a lucrative and personally fulfilling career: "I hope after my four years, after that, I can go

into like—basically, what I studied, a job that I studied that will make me successful.”

Overall, Jessica described a very bright and confident vision for her future.

Common Themes

In the above section, I provided the participants’ individual educational narratives using a chronological framework. Here, I explicate the themes specific to the participants and their experiences with sense of belonging and self-efficacy as a function of transparent assignment design. The six participants in this study were diverse in gender, self-reported educational preparation, and self-reported sense of belonging and self-reported self-efficacy. Of course, each individual’s story was unique. However, they had many attributes in common with other first-semester freshmen at CSUN.

All participants were 18 years old when they agreed to be interviewed; 90.6% of first-time CSUN freshmen were 18 or younger in 2024, the semester in which data were collected (CSUN, n.d.-d). They were all first-generation college students as defined by the CSU, like 72.8% of first-time freshmen in 2024 (CSUN, n.d.-d). They also all identified as Latina/o/Hispanic, like 67.7% of first-time freshmen in 2024 (CSUN, n.d.-d). Although one participant did not know his Pell Grant status and did not feel his family was low-income, the other five told me that they were Pell Grant recipients, like 69.7% of first-time CSUN freshmen in 2024 (CSUN, n.d.-d). Receiving this grant indicates low-income status. These similarities with the majority of incoming CSUN freshmen make my participants’ stories and the themes I could draw from them a wealth of useful information for stakeholders interested in supporting first-semester freshmen from traditionally underserved backgrounds.

I created four themes across all participants by applying Reflexive Thematic Analysis to their interview data. The four themes are:

1. “If I’m really stuck, I will read it”: Traditionally underserved learners recognize that TAD provides additional support in freshman seminar courses, but individual perception of its utility depends on perception of task difficulty.
2. “It’s just a matter of how you explain it”: Instructors’ pedagogical practices regarding in-class explanations and assignment design can greatly affect perceptions of TAD among traditionally underserved learners in a freshman seminar course.
3. “It makes you more confident”: Completing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar course can improve feelings of self-efficacy in traditionally underserved learners when attempting non-TAD assignments.
4. “I feel like I’m able to reach out to people better”: Experiencing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar may improve some traditionally underserved learners’ self-reported sense of belonging, although the nature varies among individuals and learners may not credit TAD with this improvement.

I define each theme in more depth below, using direct quotes from their interview transcripts to highlight participants’ own voices in keeping with the tenants of narrative inquiry.

“If I’m really stuck, I will read it”: Traditionally underserved learners recognize that TAD provides additional support in freshman seminar courses, but individual perception of its utility depends on perception of task difficulty

Learners agree with each other that the TAD framework of purpose, task, and criteria contains information that can help those in need of additional support understand how to approach “complicated” assignments. However, they do not feel that such additional support is necessary on “simple” assignments. In fact, learners may feel that the TAD framework adds an “overwhelming” amount of text because they feel that the additional information is extraneous. Learner perception regarding whether an assignment is “simple” or “complicated” varies depending on the individual’s prior experiences.

My participants were unfamiliar with the phrase “transparent assignment design,” but all recognized the format and major sections from their respective freshman seminar course. Their feelings were mixed. For example, Jonathan had participated in a summer bridge program that covered much of the same material as the freshman seminar, so the information and tasks felt “repetitive” at times, usually making the additional support offered by the TAD framework feel unnecessary. Jonathan acknowledged that the assignments could be “very helpful for other people” who had not done the bridge program. Unfortunately, he said that having everything broken down step-by-step sometimes made the assignments feel “too easy, and I don’t want to do it,” leading to procrastination: “And then I get behind, and I got to do more assignments.” Similarly, Alejandro acknowledged that the TAD framework could make difficult assignments more accessible, but felt that it was unnecessary on the freshman seminar assignments: “It’s,

like, self-explanatory . . . easy, short, simple . . . obviously.” They felt particularly negative about how much additional text was in the TAD assignments:

I do not care for [the TAD framework] . . . if I see a lot of text, I will not fucking read it all . . . I appreciate what it’s trying to achieve. But I’m more of a ‘just tell me what to do’ type guy. And then I’ll do it . . . so it’s like, I appreciate it. But at the same time, I don’t see the need for it.

Among participants who expressed negative feelings about TAD, the increased word count was their major concern. Despite these initially resistant responses, many of the participants acknowledged the utility of parts of the TAD framework when presented with example assignments from the Transparency in Learning & Teaching (TILT) website (n.d.). In fact, all but one participant preferred the “more transparent” example assignments, which were designed using the TAD framework. The dissenter, Jessica, wanted the assignments to “get right to the point” and felt the additional sections and supporting information were unnecessary. Of note, Jessica appeared to be the most self-confident, prepared, connected, and self-efficacious participant.

For the participants who preferred TAD, sometimes the framework just made assignments easier to read. Ari explained that the TAD assignments had more white space and were “more visually better to look at,” and the numbered list of tasks was more accessible: “being listed off helps, too.” Lily agreed, “When it’s like formatted like this, I feel like it’s easier to understand and you’re like more focused.” Even Alejandro agreed that the assignments with “more text” would “help explain it more” on difficult assignments. I discussed the separate parts of the framework—purpose, task, and

criteria—with each of my participants to explore their experience with the assignments beyond their initial reaction.

“I’m not wasting my time”: Purpose. Winkelmes et al. (2019) explained that the “purpose” section of a TAD assignment should include information about the knowledge and skills students can expect to gain or practice from completing the assignment and connect that knowledge and skill to their lives outside of college (p. 24). My participants were split about the purpose section. Ari felt that a purpose section increased their motivation to complete the assignment:

I think it’s important to have, like, some sort of explanation, sort of like, “Oh, I’m asking you to do *this* because one day you’ll have to do *this* thing.” Sort of like—explain how it benefits us. . . . It helps me visualize how it’s going to, like, how that’s going to benefit me, and definitely that gives me motivation.

They summarized that understanding “why” is important and is “really what helps me know, like, what to focus on.” When I asked them to compare the more and less example TAD assignments, Ari told me that the less transparent example would make them feel “more lost,” but “I feel like the one with the purpose on top, I can use that more better to apply to the assignment.” Lily agreed with Ari, “I think the purpose is important.” Her reasoning was also related to motivation, and she was candid with me about the importance of feeling that her time was being spent wisely. She explained:

I feel like all the “why” helps, like if I feel like—if I’m being told like why it’s helping me or like what this will help with me and like in future like in life or something that it’ll motivate me more than just like them just giving me like a—sorry for my language, like a bullshit assignment.

Ari and Lily much preferred the more transparent assignments and made note of the purpose section as one reason why the TAD assignments were better.

Geraldine also felt that the purpose section was a “helpful reminder,” but her positive impression was more abstract and directed outside of the freshman seminar. She felt that she had the purpose of most assignments in the freshman seminar “already . . . in the back of [her] head,” but for unfamiliar assignments, a clear purpose would help her “take [it] a little more seriously.” She told me, “I like the context.” More importantly for Geraldine, being told the purpose of each assignment helped her feel “respected”: “it helps me know that I’m not wasting my time.” This sentiment echoes Lily’s concerns about “bullshit assignments.” However, Geraldine did not feel the purpose section was necessary on most of the assignments in the freshman seminar and did not feel that reading them was worthwhile: “I would skim the purpose . . . sometimes I do skip it . . . it feels like the assignment is self-explanatory.” She elaborated, “If I’m really stuck and it’s like 10 p.m. I actually like, will like read word by word of the purpose and then, like, go to the task, but my . . . I usually go straight to the task.” The length of the purpose section made a big difference:

If the purpose were maybe like two sentences of like just everything like broadly . . . then I’ll read it more. Because I don’t know, professors usually make a purpose like a huge paragraph. Yeah, no, that’s why I skim it. No offense.

This tension between feeling that the information is helpful but not wanting to read it was a common thread for the other participants.

Regarding the purpose section, Jonathan gave conflicting information, which I believe could reflect either a change of heart during the semester or his expectations

about what he “should” say. In our first meeting, he said that he preferred to “skim” the assignments, but the purpose section could be helpful at times: “There are actually some assignments that I’m like, why are we doing this? And then it tells me right there, well, [that’s] why I’m doing it right there.” He felt that his college professors who explained the purpose of each assignment were an improvement over his high school instructors: “Because in high school, there’s always, ‘Why are we doing this, teacher? Why are we doing this? I don’t need this!’ . . . so, it’s . . . that’s a lot better, that [the purpose] is there [in the assignment].” In our second meeting, he told me, “I would definitely read the purpose first. I usually, whenever the teachers give me the assignment, I always read everything.”

Conversely, Jessica felt that the purpose section was completely unnecessary: “I honestly don’t even read it. I just—I skip over it . . . I basically do ignore it.” In our second meeting, she told me, “I would prefer the purpose not being there.” Alejandro also told me that they always scrolled past the purpose section. When I showed them the sample TAD assignments, they told me, “Purpose, I immediately just skipped it and went to task.” They thought individual students should come to understand the purpose of each assignment on their own: “If you’re learning a course for a specific reason in your career, I feel like *you* should figure out why.” However, Alejandro also conceded that on a more difficult assignment, a purpose section could “help you understand.” On the scientific sample TAD assignment, Alejandro told me, “I guess it’s the topic . . . [the purpose] is more beneficial to me.” When the tasks were unexpected, Alejandro went back to the purpose section for more information: “I bothered reading the purpose on this one.”

“I like it broken down”: Task. The task section of a TAD assignment simply informs students what they should do and how they should do it (Winkelmess et al., 2019, p. 47), presented as numbered steps students can follow and including “counterproductive steps they should avoid” (p. 73).

Lily appreciated the task section, “I like it broken down.” As compared to high school, “In college . . . sometimes they just give you an assignment [like] ‘Okay, figure it out.’ And like, I just don’t know where to start . . . I’m already overwhelmed with everything else.” Ari also felt that a task section was helpful because they preferred working on assignments in manageable “bits and parts” and preferred the numbered task lists in the more transparent assignments: “being listed off helps.” Geraldine enthused, “I love it so much because then it’s like a little checklist in my head, like, okay, I did this, this, and this. So, I feel a little more confident . . . yeah, I do like having a step-by-step.” However, she felt that many of the freshman seminar assignments were “self-explanatory . . . the more minor ones, it’s just like—it’s common sense.” She acknowledged that “the step-by-step” was helpful for the two “heavy” assignments in the seminar, a big project and an annotated bibliography.

Although Jessica felt that the other sections of TAD were superfluous, she liked having the task broken down into steps:

Those steps, I do pay attention to. I read them, sometimes quickly. And then I’ll just go back to—to the steps—when I’m actually doing the assignment. . . . I think it is helpful for the most part.

However, she much preferred the instructor explain assignments verbally, which allows for questions in real time: “I can’t ask a professor in person [if] it’s, like, typed out. . . . I

can email them, but I'm not sure if they will respond in time." Jonathan also had reservations about the task lists, but for different reasons than Jessica. He said that he "would prefer" the more transparent tasks and that numbered steps in an assignment "definitely helps—in most cases. In some cases, the steps go—they got forward and backwards at the same time. So, it's confusing." He was not able to remember an example, but he had the very strong impression that "it's very specific when it doesn't help . . . but it helps like 99% of the time."

Alejandro similarly felt that the task section was more useful than the purpose section, and they appreciated that the numbered steps were less overwhelming than a block of text: "[Steps] gives me a better reason to read it." They did not like the task section in the less transparent version of either sample assignment: "It's just like, it's not in steps, you know?" However, like the others, they told me that having the task broken down into steps is not always necessary:

If I really don't understand [the assignment], then I'm like, thank God. But if it's like a straightforward, like, type [of assignment] that it's like [unnecessary], you know? So, I appreciate it, and it really helped me out a lot at times, but there's been like some—Very few, but some instances where I'm like, "Well, it's pretty straightforward." So, I understand [the assignment]. But if a lot of people don't understand it, then obviously let it be [with the steps]. But I would rather just not have it for, like, very straightforward assignments, but obviously, like, not everybody's like me, so I respect it.

Alejandro's explanation encapsulates the recurring idea of TAD tasks broken down into steps as a useful support when necessary—but perhaps annoying when not necessary because it adds to the assignment word count.

“Show me how it's done”: Criteria. The criteria section of TAD assignments can vary widely; Winkelmes et al. (2019) only stipulated that TAD assignments should have “clear assessment criteria” to aid students in “self-monitoring” their own learning (p. 55). The criteria must also be available to students before they begin the assignment (p. 56). TAD criteria sections may range from a very simple checklist to a detailed rubric, but multiple finished examples—especially finished examples that instructors and learners annotate, highlighting how it meets the criteria—are “critical” to “illustrate what the finished work would look like in practice” (p. 56). My participants had mixed feelings about grading criteria in TAD assignments, but they all appreciated examples.

The short sample TAD assignments had only a brief explanation for the criteria, which Ari felt was sufficient, and Jonathan agreed: “It's all simple, and it helps a lot.” Geraldine added: “Even if it had a rubric, I probably wouldn't read the rubric. . . . But I know for other students, it obviously may be different.” Geraldine felt that most criteria descriptions were written inaccessibly because of the vocabulary and syntax: “I guess I'm asking to dumb it down a bit more?” Lily wanted more detail: “I would just have questions . . . What do I have to do to show [that I met the criteria]?” Alejandro felt that the short description was unhelpful and added “more pressure.”

Regarding more detailed grading criteria, Lily felt that rubrics were helpful: “I like a rubric because then I can go back to it, but then I also like [instructors] talking about it in class.” Jessica saw the utility of rubrics for measurable information like how

many sentences to include in a specific section, but “if it’s like the same rubric over and over again, or like a very long and detailed rubric, I feel like I won’t go through every box and read every single [thing].” However, she would rather the instructor tell her verbally how the assignment will be graded because “I don’t know if I’ll go to the rubric like on my own time and actually read through it.”

Jonathan said, “A checklist works the best in my experience because that always, just, you know, makes it 100% whenever there’s a checklist.” Then, he lamented:

It’s so rare to be a checklist and mostly a rubric. And every single time I’m reading the rubric, like this rubric is literally the exact same as every rubric in the whole world. It’s always like, “If you did well, then”—or “Student shows”—What do you call it? “Student shows understanding of assignment.” It’s like, okay, what is this supposed to mean? I don’t know, rubrics, rubrics to me are like kind of really . . . ugh!

Geraldine felt similarly: “When there’s a rubric, I tend not to read it just because at the end of the day, it’s like, I don’t understand it.” Alejandro agreed with Jonathan and Geraldine, but expressed their feelings in stronger language: “I hate the rubric aspect of it . . . you want to reach for the top, and then when you don’t get the top, you’re like, ‘Well, what the fuck did I do wrong?’” In addition to their emotional reaction at being graded via an opaque rubric, “The way the rubric is, is like, more text. So, it’s like a fucking—I ain’t reading all that!” Alejandro preferred that rubrics “not be there” in the assignment: “Unless you can tell me how it’s done or show me how it’s done [with an example], then respectfully, get that out of my screen.”

Ari did not share the others' hatred of rubrics, but like all the participants, they preferred examples of finished work. They shared:

Rubrics and samples are definitely helpful, especially samples, because most of the time where I get stuck is, "How do I start?" So, if I have a sample of like, sort of an idea of what I'm supposed to do. Then I'm like, okay, "Then I can word *this* like *this*," it's more of how like—"How do I get myself started?" rather than, "How do I keep myself going?"

Specifically, Ari preferred "perfect A examples," but "I guess [also] more of one where there could be improvement because I think I'm capable of figuring out what needs to be improved." Lily also liked examples: "I always look at the samples even if I don't know—if I feel like I know what—what they're saying, because I feel like, 'Oh, like, what if they want something extra that I'm not getting?'" Geraldine preferred "A checklist and a sample . . . it definitely helps . . . it's like, 'Okay, I can go based off this,' and just, you know, have my voice instead of the sample." Alejandro also found example finished assignments helpful:

I feel like if you show me an example, let's say like a project, then I'll be like, "Ah, okay. I understand it now. I understand it now." And then...obviously do the best way—I visually can see it because I'm more of a visual learner anyways, but—and I'll do my best through that. And to make sure it's, like, properly done, yeah.

Jonathan agreed that examples "help a lot," saying, "There's literally—I cannot count how many times I'm like, 'How do I do the assignment?' And then the teacher . . . shows

an example, [I'm] like, 'Oh, that's how I do it'." He worriedly shared, "Without that sample, I would be, I don't know, failing every class."

Jessica did not share Jonathan's anxiety, but she still appreciated example assignments, "It's also helpful because I'll get to have, like, I'll get an idea of what I can write and, like, what's basically like, what the professors want." She noted an issue the other participants had not mentioned, though: if the sample is "the same [as the student's submission] . . . then it's basically giving you the answers . . . which I wouldn't mind, but . . . you're kind of just going to copy [it]."

Theme One Summary. Overall, the participants agreed that TAD could provide helpful support for students who need additional support to complete assignments successfully. Some participants acknowledged that they could personally benefit from TAD on more difficult assignments. Other participants would initially only admit its utility for other students not as competent as themselves. However, when encouraged to speak more about the purpose, task, and criteria sections, all participants recognized at least one useful aspect of TAD. Some participants found a clear purpose statement motivating if it explained how the skills and knowledge gained from the assignment would apply to their lives outside of college. Others just appreciated the additional communication and found the purpose section helpful for clarifying the instructor's expectations.

All participants found the task section useful, although several thought breaking the task down into steps was not necessary on small or self-explanatory assignments. Participants' reactions to the criteria section were mixed. Many of them did not like rubrics, but several found checklists helpful, and all participants desired examples of

finished student work. Participants shared that examples help them quickly visualize the assignment requirements. However, one participant expressed concern about the possible temptation to copy such examples too closely.

“It’s just a matter of how you explain it”: Instructors’ pedagogical practices regarding in-class explanations and assignment design can greatly affect perceptions of TAD among traditionally underserved learners in a freshman seminar course

Learners greatly disliked reading, including reading assignment instructions, but will do so as a last resort if instructors do not explain assignments in class, if they feel in-class explanations are unclear or insufficient, or if other, quicker avenues such as viewing an example are unavailable. Learners’ perception of instructor proficiency with TAD is also an important factor: Learners who feel instructors have provided misaligned or careless purpose, task, and criteria sections become frustrated and may refuse to continue engaging with the assignment.

To varying degrees, all of my participants shared that they preferred having information, including assignment instructions, explained aloud rather than having to read at all. Alejandro summed up their preferences, which echoed the other participants’ sentiments: “I can understand the assignment, but I feel like I would rather have somebody explain it to me. . . . It’s just a matter of how you explain it.” About reading in general, they elaborated:

When you just give me, like, a whole bunch of text and expect me to read all that—I’ll obviously read it . . . but it’s the fact that I have to read it by myself . . . if you just give me a fat book and explain, like, tell me to cite or give reasoning

why this is the way it is, I will look at you and be like...Give me a minute. And just awkwardly, like, have my finger on the book.

Alejandro then mimed using their finger to keep track of lines of text, a technique that I associate with younger students.

Jessica expressed frustration with her freshman seminar instructor: “She doesn’t really—teach us what we’re supposed to be taught.” By this comment, she meant that the content was not useful in her specific situation because she was already fully prepared for college, but also that the instructor was not doing her job because she did not explain the assignments in class. The instructor spent class time lecturing (“she just, like, she just talks about things”), leaving students to read assignment instructions on their own. With frustration verging on outrage in her voice, Jessica told me:

She doesn’t really talk to us about the assignments; they’re just already on Canvas. So, we have, well, I don’t know if anyone else does it, but I, like, go to the course, and, like, go through it to see like what’s due, like what’s coming up and stuff like that!

Although I wondered whether finding and reading instructions independently was usually a normal expectation for college students, Jessica and other participants felt that it was the instructor’s job to explain assignments: “I feel like that’s way better. That’s basically like the purpose part . . . instead the professor will be telling you, like, straightforward.” She elaborated, “If you basically explain an assignment to students by yourself—Personally, I feel like that helps me way more than having to read it.”

Lily and Geraldine also preferred explanations directly from instructors rather than reading. Lily said, “Sometimes I feel like I’m reading, but I’m just reading to read,

like I'm not really understanding it or, like, it's not processing." Although a short, bulleted list of instructions was acceptable, she felt that instructions given in paragraph format were "just bunched up together . . . it feels draining." Geraldine agreed that long, single-spaced paragraphs were not accessible: "It feels like too much jumbled up . . . like my eyes are going to get lost and they're going to get more, like, distracted or something." She felt that in-class explanations made more sense:

But then, yeah, there's just professors that like . . . give you an assignment, don't explain it, and expect to have it done by a certain day, and it's just like . . . me personally, like as a student, I don't work that way. So, it's definitely like, come on.

For Lily, even when instructors did explain in class:

I feel like, just, sometimes . . . they're just hard to understand sometimes, or I feel like the professors, like, don't care . . . like they make you feel dumb for not understanding . . . I feel like it's their tone or like when they look at you and like roll their eyes or like sigh and they're like—And it's like, "I'm sorry, like, I just don't get it."

Lily's Chicana and Chicano Studies professor was an exception. Lily felt that "he genuinely cares . . . he's very respectful and friendly with his voice and tone. And he likes to make jokes with us." She did not have a strong relationship with her freshman seminar instructor, but the assignments were "easy," and she didn't feel that they needed further explanation. Her only complaint about the seminar assignments was related to the number of them, which felt like busy work, "I feel like they're always giving, like, extra assignments to do."

Jonathan had mixed feelings about assignment instructions. He admitted that having assignments explained in class could be confusing: “At first, they tell you what you’re going to do, and then you’re like, ‘What? I’m lost’.” His comfort level depended strongly upon the instructor’s communication; he preferred having assignments explained to him “if they explain it good,” but sometimes when “the class is over, I go home and I’m like, ‘What am I supposed to do?’” He had a very positive impression of his freshman seminar instructor, and that relationship was woven into his impression of TAD:

When the professors put in something like the purpose and then how are you going to do it and why you’re going to do it, it feels like . . . a little, I get . . . a little happier that they do it because it’s like, “Oh, the professor actually really cares and they want you to know why you’re doing it.” Especially with my current U100 professor. I know that she cares, like, just so deeply about her students and you know it feels. . . . Almost like a mom, kind of, you know, because that’s how it just feels when she’s teaching us, so . . . When they do that it’s—it’s, like, heartwarming, kind of. I don’t know. That’s what I can describe it. . . . Especially when it’s like her doing it because it’s like she, she knows—she wants everyone to succeed.

Almost immediately after sharing this very touching sentiment, Jonathan metacognitively acknowledged the impact of his positive perception of the professor on his impression of TAD: “But I feel like if I look through the lens of your average college kid, I’m just going to skim past it and not even care about why I’m doing it and just do it.” He told me that he would sometimes just “skim” the assignments and think to himself, “That’s nice

that she put [the purpose] there . . . and then I might . . . actually read it more thoroughly” because it was *her* communication with him.

Ari shared that they do “read over the, like, prompt a couple of times and type things out and see if I have maybe a general idea” for difficult assignments. However, as we continued our discussion, I discovered that they also felt that verbal explanations were clearer and more accessible than written information: “I have really big trouble with, like, sitting down and reading everything, especially [when the reading is] like, really long.” Although the specific example they gave me was from their philosophy course, in which the material was more difficult to comprehend than the freshman seminar, their preference for verbal information applied to all coursework. They told me about a time they sat down with an assigned reading for philosophy, “And I decided, I don’t think I’m gonna be able to, like, sit down and actually read all of this.” Conversely, “I do really well with like—if I can connect, like, what’s being said to me with, like, what I’m reading.” They searched the internet for a summary of the reading, but “found a YouTube video of someone reading” the same text they had been assigned. They described listening to that recording as “reading,” explaining, “I decided, I’m going to read this. I’m gonna listen to it . . . I was able to, like, do other things while listening to it so that, like, I could get chores done, but also just in general.” The page with this first recording included links to “a bunch of YouTube videos discussing it. So that, like, even if I didn’t understand the language used in the argument, I could, like, hear it in more, like, simpler terms. So that, like, really helped me.”

When Ari is confused or unsure about an assignment, “I’ll go to someone in that class being like, hey, does this look right? Do you understand this in the same way that I

did?” As a last resort, if reading instructions and speaking with a peer does not help them feel confident, “I’ll take it upon myself to ask a teacher about it to better explain it.”

However, from their tone of voice, it was clear that speaking with the instructor was not their preference and was not usually helpful, in their experience:

My [philosophy] professor kinda wasn’t great at explaining. So, like, he was kind of like . . . I don’t know, he would . . . talk about it like, I’m not saying that he would go like completely on tangents, but, like, sometimes it was hard for me to connect . . . I think a lot of people . . . were also like kind of confused on what the professor meant.

The exceptions to Ari’s preference not to speak with professors were their queer studies and freshman seminar professors, with whom they were able to form a personal connection: “There are definitely more professors that are more accessible to me that I feel more comfortable going to.”

“I still don’t know how to do that assignment”: Misalignment. Despite my participants’ aversion to reading, as discussed in the previous theme, participants agreed that TAD could facilitate the completion of difficult or complicated assignments. One caveat relates to TAD’s implementation; simply organizing an assignment into purpose, task, and criteria sections may make the assignment look more visually accessible, but the written content can still render the assignment difficult or impossible to complete if the assignment is misaligned with the instructors’ expectations.

Even the participants’ preferred mode of explanation, verbal instruction, is an insufficient support if the assignment’s tasks and criteria appear misaligned. Alejandro and Jessica both complained about an unusually misaligned assignment in their freshman

seminar course that they felt was unreasonable. Alejandro explained that in their course, the instructor connected two assignments that are not usually connected in the default course assignment prompts provided on an internal website. Students individually wrote a very similar assignment, but then they would present that information in a group rather than presenting a different topic as in the default curricula.

However, Alejandro told me that the instructor said, “Everybody has to do the same question, but I don’t want to repeat, like I don’t want to re-hear the same information.” Alejandro and their classmates did not understand how to fulfill that requirement: “We’re like, what the fuck? She doesn’t want to hear the same shit. . . but the issue is [we wrote] the same shit.” The unusual requirement was a source of stress for Alejandro: “God, I fucking hate this . . . [the instructor] just made it 10 times more confusing.” They and other students tried to clarify in class, but the students and instructor could not come to an understanding, which made Alejandro feel frustrated and demotivated:

Legit, it was like a solid 20 minutes back and forth with like every student like trying to understand the fucking question. And she just did not answer the question . . . I remember just being like, I will walk out of class one more fucking time if she just does not answer the question. . . . It’s like she didn’t even bother attempting . . . which just pissed me off more. . . . It’s like, if you can’t answer a question that’s straight-up straightforward and you make it more complicated somehow . . . I still don’t know how to do that assignment.

At the time of our first interview, the first part of the assignment was due in a few days, but Alejandro felt stuck. Alejandro told me that they were procrastinating on “especially this one [assignment] for fucking University 100. God, I hated this. I still hate it.”

I did not ask the students for their freshman seminar instructors’ names because my focus was on the assignments; I wanted to intentionally avoid the appearance of critiquing my colleagues, which is not my place or the purpose of this research. I can therefore only speculate that Jessica may have been in the same course as Alejandro. She described a similar assignment and frustrating scene:

We were asking her questions . . . And she would answer a question, but she wouldn’t actually be answering it . . . it was very frustrating because I asked her a question, like for her to clarify, and she didn’t even answer my question, and she just, like, turned to, like, the whole class and asked, like, oh, like, “What are we confused about?” Like, for everyone . . . everyone was just giving confused looks to each other . . . she tries . . . but I don’t think she gets, like, the—what we’re trying to say.

During our second interview, I asked Alejandro about the frustrating assignment: “It ended up working out. And after like the whole class was arguing with her about it, she made it like 10 times more easier . . . she dropped [the frustrating aspect of the assignment] thing overall.” Jessica’s story had a similar conclusion during our second meeting: “She ended up changing it. And honestly, I forgot what she changed it to.” Whether there was a flaw in the assignment itself or the instructor’s presentation of expectations, Alejandro and Jessica’s anecdotes emphasize the importance of clear written and verbal communication. Their stories also demonstrate the impact of

communication on instructor/student relationships. Their confusion with the assignment was a source of aggravation, but to me their real frustration stemmed from feeling that their instructor initially misunderstood or refused to address their concerns. Even after the instructor amended the assignment requirements, my impression was that Alejandro and Jessica used a frustrated tone of voice which could indicate that their relationship with the instructor was not repaired.

Theme Two Summary. This theme described that my participants prefer verbal assignment instructions over written instructions, TAD or otherwise, which I posit is connected to an overall aversion to reading. Additionally, the participants' evaluation of both verbal and written instructions often appeared to be influenced by their personal feelings about individual professors.

Participants had a more positive impression of all assignment instructions if they felt connected to and respected by the instructor providing them. An additional important finding is that while most participants found TAD to be a helpful support overall for most assignments, the framework is not a cure-all. No assignment or instructor is perfect, but a misalignment between task and criteria—or the appearance of misalignment due to unclear communication—can demotivate learners and harm instructor/student relationships.

“It makes you more confident”: Completing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar course can improve feelings of self-efficacy in traditionally underserved learners when attempting non-TAD assignments

Learners from traditionally underserved backgrounds may have had fewer opportunities for positive educational mastery experiences compared to their traditionally

better-served peers (Liu, 2011; Phillips et al., 2020). TAD assignments offer additional explanation designed to address gaps in prior knowledge about process and include explicit grading criteria meant to reassure learners that their efforts will lead to the desired result of a good grade, improving motivation (Winkelmes et al., 2016). This reassurance regarding grading criteria may reduce learners' trepidation about approaching assignments, which would address Bandura's (1977) caution that "emotional arousal" (p. 199) can lead to avoidance behavior, which harms the development of self-efficacy. Such behavior may manifest among learners as procrastination and failure to submit work.

Improving transparency may lead to a greater likelihood of successful task completion that could therefore provide a path to mastery experiences, or opportunities to succeed at a task which then provide a helpful frame of reference and improved confidence on similar future tasks. Bandura (1977) argued that mastery experiences are the strongest influence in building self-efficacy. Although Bandura did not discuss assignment transparency specifically, he explained:

Discrepancies between efficacy expectations and performance are most likely to arise under conditions in which situational and task factors are ambiguous. When performance requirements are ill-defined, people who underestimate the situational demands will display positive discrepancies between self-efficacy and performance attainments; those who overestimate the demands will exhibit negative discrepancies. Therefore . . . it is important that subjects understand what kind of behavior will be required and the circumstances in which they will be asked to perform them. (pp. 203–204)

Winkelmes et al. (2016, 2019) did not discuss Bandura's theory of self-efficacy or explicitly address TAD's relationship to self-efficacy. However, TAD's stated purpose of removing assignment ambiguity and clarifying assignment demands for learners seems to function as a support for building self-efficacy among students who are exposed to it.

Importantly, Bandura (1977) noted, "Once established, enhanced self-efficacy tends to generalize to other situations in which performance was self-debilitated by preoccupation with personal inadequacies" (p. 195). In keeping with this theory, Winkelmes et al. (2019) argued that exposure to TAD assignments improves "academic confidence" (p. 24), which helps learners approach other non-transparent assignments as they "transfer knowledge from one context to another" (p. 134). Overall, Winkelmes et al. (2019) found that students "who received more transparency" as measured by a TILT survey reported "greater awareness of their mastery skills" (p. 33).

My participants' narratives provide modest support for my interpretation of TAD facilitating mastery experiences that then support improved self-efficacy. As part of my recruitment efforts, I distributed a survey that included Chen et al.'s (2001) New Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale, an eight-question instrument designed to measure academic self-efficacy. However, my research focus was truly qualitative. I only used these quantitative survey responses to inform my interpretation of the participants' general feelings regarding their self-efficacy prior to our interviews and to prompt participants to reflect on whether and how their impression of their self-efficacy changed after exposure to TAD in the freshman seminar. The self-efficacy discussions and other sections of participants' narratives suggest that novel tasks are more difficult, TAD can help make assignments easier (but perhaps too easy at times), and mastery experiences on

easier TAD assignments may improve self-reported self-efficacy in the narrow context of future assignments.

“What if you did it bad?”: Lower Self-Efficacy and Trepidation Toward Novel Tasks. Most of my participants stated that approaching a new type of assignment for the first time could cause a negative emotional response, such as fear or self-doubt. Even assignments that were similar to previous tasks could cause additional emotional upset simply because they were being given in the context of a college, rather than high school, course.

Jonathan’s initial self-efficacy score on my recruitment survey was the lowest of all participants at 16 out of a possible 40. He disagreed (2) with most items, and then strongly disagreed (1) with “I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks” and “Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well.” During our first interview, Jonathan told me that he had found college-level assignments to be much more difficult than high school:

High school, I knew [what to do] every single time because it was just so easy.

So, but in college . . . I kind of don’t have an idea, but I kind of do have an idea as long as I do good, then I should get a good grade. But then there’s always that like the voice in my head, like, “What if you did it bad? What if you did, like, wrong, and you didn’t know what you were doing, and then you get a bad grade?” And then the voice in your head where you’re like, “Oh, you did it right.” And then you end up getting the wrong grade, and you’re like, “Oh, well, what am I doing?”

Jonathan explained that his low self-efficacy scores on the recruitment survey were influenced in part by comparisons to others: “When I’m in class and I see everyone else doing . . . they’re doing average [or] really good. And like, I can’t even do that . . . it feels like I can’t do what everyone else can.” In part, Jonathan blamed his self-perceived lower ability on a lack of preparation in high school; he felt that high school was “too easy.” For new types of information and assignments that he did not have a frame of reference for, “I think I had to, like, really focus in on it . . . I haven’t really done anything close to [college content] in my high school years.”

Lily had the second-lowest initial self-efficacy score at 24 out of 40. She was ambivalent (3) about all survey questions. In high school, she was an honors student, but the transition to college made her feel “dumb” because “I couldn’t comprehend it as good . . . [college classes are] just hard to, like, understand sometimes.” Regarding some assignments in courses other than the freshman seminar, she wondered, “What if [the instructors] want something extra that I’m not getting?” Geraldine concurred. She had an initial self-efficacy score of 28 out of 40, answering half of the questions ambivalently (3) and half “agree” (4). She said that college “hits differently” and is more difficult than high school. Sometimes she would read instructions and think to herself, “So, what is the professor trying to say?” And I’m like, ‘Honestly, I don’t know.’“

Similarly, Ari, whose initial self-efficacy score was 29 out of 40 (five “agree” and three ambivalent), told me that that some college assignments were more difficult because they were “sort of new.” Specifically, a research proposal in a course that was not the freshman seminar “did, like, make me feel, like, very heightened in anxiety” because “it was a new experience.” They were also concerned about a paper in their

philosophy class because they were unsure about how to approach it: “I was really nervous about it because I was, like, scared . . . it was supposed to be like, a like, criticism—not criticism. Like a sort of commentary?” These concerns caused an emotional reaction: “Then the intrusive thoughts start popping in and like, usually those are the louder ones, and those are just, like, scary.”

Alejandro had the second-highest initial self-efficacy score, 32 out of 40. They were ambivalent (3) about “I believe I can succeed at most any endeavor to which I set my mind,” but strongly agreed (5) with “I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.” They felt confident that everything would work out, but they acknowledged some confusing assignments in courses that were not the freshman seminar, such as a large assignment in their theater course in which they initially misunderstood the instructions until another student explained their mistake: “I’m like, what the fuck? And then I read the criteria [again] and I was like, oh shit, I would have legit died . . . Yeah, that [was] insane.”

Jessica had the highest initial self-efficacy score at 33 out of 40; she agreed (4) with every item except “Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well,” which she strongly agreed (5) with. Still, she admitted that confusion could hold her back sometimes: “I would just, like, not want to do an assignment because it was confusing.”

“A waste of time”: TAD May Make Easier Assignments Seem Boring. As discussed in the previous themes, participants overwhelmingly preferred the sample TAD assignments and felt that the TAD framework made those assignments clearer and easier to approach. As also discussed previously, most participants agreed that TAD can provide helpful support on difficult assignments. Interestingly, with few exceptions, my

participants did not feel that the freshman seminar assignments were difficult to comprehend, even when they were novel tasks. This ease of completion may have been due in part to the type of content—student success—which may not have been wholly unfamiliar, especially for participants who felt well-prepared for college. The TAD framework itself may also have made the assignments seem easier, given that clarifying assignment expectations and facilitating their completion is the framework’s purpose. However, many of my participants felt that the freshman seminar assignments were too easy. The lack of challenge made some participants perceive the assignments as boring, which they said increased procrastination behaviors.

For example, Geraldine felt that assignments in other courses were a struggle, but the freshman seminar assignments were not difficult, although she still did not like them: “there’s a lot of assignments for that class that I don’t feel like doing.” She admitted, “I guess they’re easier [but] because I have other [harder] classes to focus on, it feels sometimes like a waste of my time, if I’m being honest.” Jonathan admitted that he also found the freshman seminar assignments “very boring.” He said that sometimes “it gets too easy, and I don’t want to do it, and it’s whatever.” Jessica agreed: “The class was . . . pretty boring . . . a waste of time, basically.” Lily complained that she had “like six, seven more [assignments] for [the freshman seminar] that I feel like aren’t necessary.” The seminar assignments were not difficult, but in her other courses:

I have to do like a 10-page essay and then an 11-page essay. And I have to do my math homework and I have to study the things of a pig. So, I feel like it’s just annoying . . . I feel like I shouldn’t have to do this.

Particularly, Lily agreed that TAD-related supports like scaffolding could be helpful, but “I don’t like when it’s mandatory, like that you have to do these steps. I like when it’s like used as like an option.”

Alejandro’s overall assessment of boring freshman seminar assignments was similar to the other participants’: “I think they’re easy and whatnot . . . partly a waste of time.” As usual, Alejandro’s description included more colorful language: “When it’s [something] that I deem fucking boring . . . God, I hated it so much.” When I asked if sometimes the freshman seminar assignments felt like “busy work,” they agreed: “Yeah. I would say that’s appropriate.”

These negative impressions may be disheartening for freshman seminar instructors, but the participants are not impartial observers. A further exploration, below, supports a more nuanced view of the utility of TAD assignments in the freshman seminar.

“I already know what to expect”: Transfer of Self-Efficacy from TAD

Mastery Experiences. Jonathan acknowledged that despite the freshman seminar TAD assignments being “boring,” completing the easier, scaffolded assignments in the seminar helped him succeed in other, more difficult courses: “I do see the purpose in it, especially when the assignments actually make sense to what I’m doing in the classes. Especially when they’re easy, too.” Jonathan felt that the freshman seminar was a helpful experience: “The grades didn’t turn out like how I had hoped, [but] going through it . . . I’ll do a lot better . . . I was able to do a lot of different assignments.” Regarding the TAD framework specifically, Jonathan told me:

I think [TAD] honestly is kind of perfect in the sense that it makes you more confident. And it would make me more confident reading that criteria and being like, “Oh, yes, I—I will be successful in this assignment because I’ve done this and this.’ Yeah, that’s just for me.

Similarly, Geraldine acknowledged the utility of some seminar assignments: “I feel like . . . those library visits [a seminar assignment], like actually speaking to a librarian really does help . . . like, okay, I can come to—I can come to them. If I ever need help. Yeah.” In our second interview, Geraldine was working on an annotated bibliography for a different course, “and I already did that [in the seminar], so I already know what to expect.”

Ari felt more positive about the freshman seminar overall, calling it “very helpful.” They said that their more “assignment-based” courses, including the freshmen seminar, were more impactful in the long term than their “exam-based” courses:

I feel like in that way I get more out of those classes . . . Like through [the seminar assignments], I was able to learn about OneSearch and like sort of become familiar with that. And then I was able to apply that with my QS classes where I’m also doing a research paper.

Alejandro allowed that completing the TAD assignments in the freshman seminar would be “helpful later on.” I asked if it was like “eating vegetables,” as in doing something unpleasant because it is beneficial in the long run, to which they agreed: “Yeah, that’s the best analogy actually for it. Wow.”

I did not administer the self-efficacy survey a second time, but I reminded the participants about their previous answers and asked if they felt that their academic self-

efficacy had changed after completing TAD assignments in their freshman seminar courses. Ari told me, “I feel more confident than I did like in the beginning, like my confidence has definitely gone up.” Jonathan also felt more confident about the next semester after completing the seminar: “I know I have the experience.” Geraldine felt similarly: “I do feel a little more confident that I’m going to accomplish my tasks.” Alejandro also seemed more confident, in their own way: “I’m going to work hard on [college] and I’m going to bust my ass off for it . . . I’m ready to learn.” Lily told me that she still felt like her self-efficacy was ambivalent: “I feel like I still have trouble with stuff, but at the same time I feel like I can do it. So, it’s like in the middle. I don’t know.” Jessica did not feel that her self-efficacy had improved, but it was already strong during the initial survey earlier in the semester. I asked if she felt that she was more capable than her classmates, and she agreed: “I’ve just always been like on top of my stuff.”

Theme Three Summary. This theme described a possible weak connection between TAD assignments in the freshman seminar and improved academic self-efficacy among first-semester students from traditionally underserved backgrounds who did not already have high academic self-efficacy. An explanation for this connection could be that TAD clarifies and simplifies the process of approaching unfamiliar assignments, which is needed because novel assignments can cause concern and hesitation among less-prepared learners.

In my view, the participants described that the TAD assignments in the freshman seminar granted them opportunities for mastery experiences that facilitated improved academic self-efficacy. One possible interpretation of the narratives could be that the freshman seminar assignments felt too easy and boring in part because they were

transparently designed. Without this framework, perhaps the assignments may have seemed more challenging, although increasing the challenge could have also made the assignments less accessible. Experiencing TAD assignments in the freshman seminar may have benefitted the participants even if they did not enjoy the experience or immediately recognize its value.

“I feel like I’m able to reach out to people better”: Experiencing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar may improve some traditionally underserved learners’ self-reported sense of belonging, although the nature varies among individuals and learners may not credit TAD with this improvement

Traditionally underserved learners who experience TAD in a freshman seminar might self-report an increased academic sense of belonging, particularly if they did not have a high sense of belonging beforehand. However, learners may not perceive that TAD had any impact on this increased sense of belonging. Higher academic sense of belonging has been connected to retention and persistence (Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Smith, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1993, 2017a) and learners from traditionally underserved backgrounds are more likely to struggle with sense of belonging (Gillen-O’Neel, 2021; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019; Winkelmes et al., 2016). TAD assignments provide additional support and increase the transparency of instructors’ expectations while demystifying hidden curriculum (Winkelmes et al., 2019, p. 23), which may increase the chance that traditionally underserved students will attain success in the form of their desired grade (p. 33). These experiences with success, in addition to supporting academic self-efficacy, may support an improved sense of belonging among traditionally underserved students who did not already have a high sense of belonging.

My participants' narratives provide modest support for my interpretation of TAD facilitating an increased sense of belonging for some learners for whom the framework improves academic success. As part of my recruitment efforts, I distributed a survey that included Imperial College London's (n.d.) Modified Sense of Belonging Scale, a seven-question instrument designed to measure academic sense of belonging. As with the self-efficacy scale, I only used these survey responses to inform my interpretation of the participants' general feelings regarding their academic sense of belonging prior to our interviews and to prompt participants to reflect on whether and how their impression of their academic sense of belonging changed after exposure to TAD in the freshman seminar.

“I do have some friends”: Early Academic Sense of Belonging. Lily and Jonathan both scored 23 out of a possible 35 points on the sense of belonging scale, and both of their low scores seemed to be connected to academic performance. Most of Lily's responses were ambivalent (3) with “quite a bit” (4) as the response for “How connected do you feel to the university staff at CSUN?” and “How much respect do members of staff at CSUN show toward you?” For the purposes of this scale, faculty are included as “staff.”

Regarding academic sense of belonging, Lily's narrative during our first interview supported a stronger influence from faculty than other students. She focused on how “some professors, like, don't care,” and specifically her biology instructor who “just gets annoyed with people,” which made her “just, like—shut up.” However, of her Chicano and Chicana studies professor, she shared: “I love that professor with my whole heart.” The instructor she did not like seemed impatient, which appeared to threaten her sense of

security in the course. The kind and patient Chicano and Chicana studies professor was a positive contrast. Lily also had “a very close friend group” and a supportive cohort program at CSUN, but academic struggles seemed to harm her sense of belonging in a difficult math course: “I felt like it was easier for others. I just felt so dumb in that class.” Worse, her “best friend in that class” excelled with “90, like 90 or above out of 100” while Lily “got my test back one time and it was, like, 26 out of 100 . . . I was just so shocked.”

Jonathan’s survey responses were more varied. He felt “tremendous respect” (5) from staff but only felt “slightly connected” (2) to them. He was “quite happy” (4) to be at CSUN but felt that he only mattered “a little bit” (2) and was “somewhat” (3) understood and welcomed on campus, although he did feel “quite a bit” (4) respected by other students. In our first interview, he told me, “So far, it just feels . . . really kind of lonely.” He was very connected at his high school, where he was among the top performing students. He struggled academically at CSUN and felt alienated and alone in that struggle. About the freshman seminar, he told me, “I don’t really talk to anybody at class anyway, so I wouldn’t even know. But from what I do know, most of the people around me are doing good in class.” He assured me that “I’m the type of person; I don’t really mind . . . I already got my friends [outside of CSUN] and I already got my family. So, I don’t really care.” From the tone of his voice, I wondered if he was trying to convince himself as much as me.

Ari and Geraldine both scored 26 out of a possible 35 on the sense of belonging survey. Ari’s survey responses were all 3’s and 4’s; they had joined a club and seemed to be succeeding academically, but wanted more social connection: “I wish it was more

easier for me to have those stronger connections.” In the freshman seminar, a group project facilitated some improvement in that area: “I’ve definitely gotten closer with [my group mates].” Geraldine only felt “slightly connected” (2) to CSUN faculty, but was still “extremely happy” (5) to be at CSUN. She told me that she did not feel connected to CSUN specifically, but had a strong sense of belonging in her scholarship and support program: “My sense of belonging does revolve around [that program] a lot.”

Alejandro and Jessica had the highest sense of belonging scores at 30 and 31, respectively. Alejandro’s freshman seminar was part of a cohort, which facilitated connection: “All three of our classes are the same, like, groups. So, it’s like I have friends, and I talk to people there and I’m like, I’m friends with them. So, it’s like I’m chilling there.” Despite Jessica’s high score, she told me, “I don’t have, like, my friends around me. I do have some friends, but like my best friends [went to other schools]. So, we’re all kind of, like, separated in a way.” Her high score may have reflected her academic confidence, which seemed connected to all participants’ self-reported academic sense of belonging.

“I feel like it’s a little bit higher”: End-of-Semester Academic Sense of Belonging. When I asked Lily if her academic sense of belonging had changed during our second interview, she told me, “I feel like it’s a little bit higher. I feel like I’m . . . I’m better. I guess I’m more happy that I came to CSUN.” She did not connect the TAD assignments in the freshman seminar to this improvement, but rather her specific cohort program: “I’m with people that I know . . . I feel like if it wasn’t because of the program, I wouldn’t have gone to CSUN, to be honest.” Her satisfaction with CSUN may have

been influenced by her academic success during the first semester: “I’m so excited that I, like, passed.”

At the end of the semester, Ari told me that they found the freshman seminar “very helpful” for forming connections and improving academic sense of belonging, especially because their freshman seminar course was a cohort with other history majors. They shared:

I’m honestly, really happy at CSUN. I like a lot of people . . . I do really feel, like, secure at CSUN. I feel like I’m able to reach out to people better . . . me and my [freshman seminar] classmates were able to, one, make connections . . . that was another big thing for me . . . we sort of have the same motivations [because we share a major] . . . being able to, like, make those connections already was very refreshing to me . . . out of all my classes, I felt really close with [the freshman seminar] because, like, they were all like really like, we were all very like excited for it, like we were sort of able to keep each other motivated through it all. That was like really helpful for me in terms of the class itself.

This glowing review was in spite of Ari’s prior experience with very similar coursework during a summer program. The social connections—facilitated by freshman seminar assignments that required group work—and applicability to their intended major—facilitated by the seminar’s history cohort section—may have protected them from some of the boredom reported by other participants who had also completed this preparatory course prior to enrollment.

In another positive second interview, Geraldine shared that she had bravely stepped out of her comfort zone to make connections with previously unknown students in the freshman seminar, prompting other students to form connections as well:

It does take a while . . . once I started talking to like the person that sat next to me, like we really—like we managed to study together and we managed to um, understand more of—of the lecture and then it ended up not just being me and my classmate, like there was now like a whole group like more people were willing to talk to each other because they saw like one or two students just talking already. She admitted, “It is scary . . . but usually, it does end up working . . . I have met more people . . . so I’m very happy about it.” Her academic successes also made her feel more connected to faculty. She earned an A in her English course, which may have influenced her feelings: “I’m probably going to keep in touch with my English professor. Because she said she really . . . enjoyed having me as a student . . . So, I feel like I did good. Like, that’s a win.”

Alejandro shared that their sense of belonging was slightly improved after the first semester, and that improvement was at least partially tied to academic success: “I obviously was working just as hard, but there’s obviously smarter people in that class than me.” Successfully completing their first semester helped them feel more connected:

It’s like, I’m more happy with [CSUN] now because, like, I’m done with my first semester and I’m like, okay, well, that was a good taste of it. So, I’m pretty like—I would consider myself like a committed CSUN student, like for sure in that I’m happy that I made the decision to be at CSUN.

Jessica, whose initial sense of belonging score was one point higher than Alejandro's, told me that her sense of belonging was "still the same" at the end of the semester: "I'm comfortable there because I already kind of know CSUN a bit. So, I don't feel like an outsider or anything." Like the other participants, she told me about her academic performance when I asked about sense of belonging, sharing that her grades were positive and she did not have major concerns about her future coursework: "I can say that I can do, like, harder things than other people."

Jonathan's reflection on his academic sense of belonging at the end of the semester was complicated. His academic struggles seemed to have been a barrier to full connection with others, or at least a source of anxiety. When I asked about sense of belonging, he compared himself unfavorably to other students who were "doing average . . . I can't even do that. So, for me, it feels like I can't do what everyone else can. And so, it feels really . . . just disappointing in myself." One highlight occurred when he found out students in his kinesiology course were struggling more than he was:

I was probably the one struggling the most. But I wasn't the only one struggling . . . that made me feel a little like, oh, I'm not the only one . . . there was a couple of people that like, for instance, didn't do their finals. So. And then I was able to do mine, so I was—I was feeling a lot better about that. Because I was like, well, I thought I'd be in their position.

He felt less connected to other students at the end of the semester: "I would change [my response] to 'do not understand at all,'" a 2-point downgrade from his initial "somewhat" (3) answer. He insisted, "It's not a bad thing that people at CSUN don't understand me, it's more of a—I just don't really like talk to anybody, so I don't have the time to explain

to people how I am at CSUN.” Still, “I think I’m very happy that I chose [CSUN] over anywhere else because it’s just really worked out. Just in general in life, you know. Feels like it’s the, it’s the best place for me right now.” Jonathan told me that he felt that he had learned from his academic setbacks the first semester and was ready to try again, although those setbacks did seem to harm his confidence and sense of belonging. Of note, although his academic sense of belonging was low overall, he did feel most connected in the freshman seminar, which was also the course he performed the best in: “It was definitely less intense . . . I think I needed it more as like . . . like a little break from like other classes.” His overall assessment was: “I thought that the class was a very good introduction that you could use as a freshman . . . just to help you settle in.”

Theme Four Summary. This theme described a weak connection between TAD assignments in the freshman seminar and improved academic sense of belonging among learners from traditionally underserved backgrounds as facilitated by experiences with academic success which were supported by the TAD framework. None of the participants specifically said that TAD influenced their academic sense of belonging, but previous themes suggest a connection between TAD and improved academic performance and confidence. All participants spoke to me about their academic performance when I asked them about academic sense of belonging, and participants who perceived themselves as more academically successful also described themselves as having a higher sense of belonging.

Four of the six participants reported a slightly improved academic sense of belonging after completing their first semester at CSUN, which included exposure to TAD assignments in a freshman seminar course. Of the remaining two participants, one

already had a high academic sense of belonging and self-efficacy and reported no difference at the end of her successful first semester. The other participant unfortunately did not experience academic success overall, which I believed influenced his decreased self-reported academic sense of belonging at the end of the semester. However, he still expressed a positive assessment of the freshman seminar, the course in which he performed the best academically.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the lived experiences of six first-semester CSUN students from traditionally underserved backgrounds who experienced TAD assignments while enrolled in a freshman seminar course. The participants' narratives demonstrate their experiences with and perceptions of TAD and its impact on their academic self-efficacy and academic sense of belonging. The themes from this study included:

1. "If I'm really stuck, I will read it": Traditionally underserved learners recognize that TAD provides additional support in freshman seminar courses, but individual perception of its utility depends on perception of task difficulty.
2. "It's just a matter of how you explain it": Instructors' pedagogical practices regarding in-class explanations and assignment design can greatly affect perceptions of TAD among traditionally underserved learners in a freshman seminar course.
3. "It makes you more confident": Completing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar course can improve feelings of self-efficacy in traditionally underserved learners when attempting non-TAD assignments.

4. “I feel like I’m able to reach out to people better”: Experiencing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar may improve some traditionally underserved learners’ self-reported sense of belonging, although the nature varies among individuals and learners may not credit TAD with this improvement.

Although the specific characteristics by which each theme manifested vary between participants, each of them graciously shared very personal information, allowing for the construction of narratives that provide useful insight about the first-semester experiences of traditionally underserved students experiencing TAD in a freshman seminar course. In the following chapter, I discuss findings from the themes, implications for future research, and implications for practice based on this study.

Chapter V

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design (TAD). Existing research has suggested that sense of belonging supports student success and retention (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975). In an educational context, sense of belonging is defined as students' perception of "social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers" (Strayhorn, 2019, p. 4). This construct can be understood to occur on a continuum from low sense of belonging, indicating low social and academic integration and higher danger of withdrawal, to high sense of belonging, indicating high social and academic integration and higher likelihood of retention (Tinto, 2017a). High sense of belonging has been found to be a protective factor against academic withdrawal, especially among students from traditionally underserved backgrounds, although such students are also more likely to struggle with low sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1975; Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019). Winkelmes et al. (2019) asserted that transparent assignment design is an efficacious high-impact practice for supporting sense of belonging for all higher education students, but especially among students from traditionally underserved backgrounds.

Winkelmes et al. (2016) conducted an interventional study examining first-year students' ($N = 1,174$) perceptions of course transparency and perceived gains in academic confidence (self-efficacy), sense of belonging, and mastery of professional skills in courses that implemented at least two TAD assignments as taught by 35 faculty members across seven institutions of higher education in six different states. They found significant ($p < .05$) reported gains across all four constructs with each construct having a medium or large effect size (ES) using Hedges's g (pp. 33–34), wherein .50 is medium effect and .80 is strong effect (Hedges, 1981); for amount of transparency ES was .70; for employer-valued skills, the ES was .43; for academic confidence (self-efficacy), the ES was .35; and for sense of belonging, the ES was .43 (Winkelmes et al., 2016, p. 34).

Sense of belonging and academic confidence (self-efficacy) among students from traditionally underserved backgrounds are most important for the purposes of this study. Winkelmes et al. (2016) found that effect sizes were meaningful across sense of belonging and academic confidence for underrepresented [nonwhite] ($ES = .34$), low socioeconomic status ($ES = .34$), multiracial (multiple nonwhite ethnicities) ($ES = .55$), and first-generation students ($ES = .64$) (pp. 34–35).

Transparent assignment design training, along with training and support for other high-impact practices, has been offered at CSUN with the support of the Office of Student Success to improve educational equity on campus (Michaud et al., 2017). Additionally, existing literature supports the positive impact of freshman seminar courses on sense of belonging and overall student success (Paxton et al., 2024). However, as of this study's conclusion, I was unable to find existing qualitative studies that used a narrative inquiry framework to investigate the impact of transparent assignment design

implemented in a freshman seminar course on sense of belonging among students from traditionally underserved backgrounds at a Hispanic-Serving Institution such as CSUN.

Among CSUN students, a high percentage are Hispanic students, like my participants, who also belong to other marginalized categories as defined by the larger CSU system, such as first-generation, underprepared, and low-income (CSUN, 2020, 2023b). CSUN's administration has expressed a commitment to improving equitable success and retention among such traditionally underserved students (CSUN, n.d.-b, 2020, 2023b, Michaud, 2017). Equity in education has always been and will always be an ethical imperative (Dewey, 1938/1953; Freire, 1968/2014). In the 2026 political climate, support for all students, but Hispanic students particularly, is even more important now than when this study was conceived. Violent, traumatic, and often illegally conducted immigration enforcement raids have further exacerbated existing economic, social, and legal issues for such students and their families (Enriquez et al., 2026).

Transparent assignment design is described as a relatively easy practice (Winkelmes et al., 2019, p. 25), but successful implementation and mastery of this framework as a tool does require an investment of instructors' time and effort (Palmer et al., 2018). Therefore, a deeper understanding of individual students' lived experiences with the implementation of TAD in a freshman seminar course at CSUN and how this exposure affected their sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and first-semester experience is of use to instructors, administrators, and all stakeholders interested in supporting success among students from traditionally underserved populations.

The research questions that drove this study were:

- RQ1: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their experience in a freshman seminar course that uses transparent assignment design?
- RQ2: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging after exposure to transparent assignment design in a freshman seminar course?
- RQ3: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their academic self-efficacy after exposure to transparent assignment design in a freshman seminar course?

I selected narrative inquiry as the framework because of its long history of use exploring lived experiences in educational contexts (Kim, 2016, p. 18) and its utility in challenging dominant assumptions and views (p. 19). Human beings use stories to make sense of their lives and to understand others' experiences and actions (p. 8). The stories we tell ourselves influence our perceptions of reality, and telling stories allows others to understand and empathize with our point of view (Bamburg, 2020). My participants' stories provide insight into their complicated internal processing when approaching a new and difficult experience—their first semester in higher education as a student from a traditionally marginalized background.

I designed this qualitative study to explore the self-reported experiences of first-semester students from backgrounds that are traditionally underserved in higher education. All participants were Hispanic and were 18 years old at the time of participation. I originally recruited nine participants, but only six returned for a second interview later in the semester. Because I was interested in how the participants'

narratives changed after exposure to TAD, I limited my analysis to only those six participants' narratives as composed from the information shared in both interviews. Of the six participants, three were female-identifying, one was male-identifying, and two identified as nonbinary. Only half reported feeling that they had been adequately prepared for college, five described themselves as low-income, and all six were categorized as first-generation students according to the CSU definition (CSU, 2019b). All participants were enrolled in a freshman seminar course at CSUN during the Fall semester of 2024.

Each participant shared their own unique perspective on their first-semester experience as a student from a traditionally underserved background in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design. Although their narratives covered a wide variety of positionalities and impressions, I was able to create four themes across all participants by applying Reflexive Thematic Analysis to their interview data. These themes illustrated larger patterns and made meaning of my participants' experiences from my perspective as a researcher and higher education professional interested in improving educational equity by supporting retention and persistence among traditionally underserved students. The four themes are:

1. Traditionally underserved learners recognize that TAD provides additional support in freshman seminar courses, but individual perception of its utility depends on perception of task difficulty.
2. Instructors' pedagogical practices regarding in-class explanations and assignment design can greatly affect perceptions of TAD among traditionally underserved learners in a freshman seminar course.

3. Completing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar course can improve feelings of self-efficacy in traditionally underserved learners when attempting non-TAD assignments.
4. Experiencing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar may improve some traditionally underserved learners' self-reported sense of belonging, although the nature varies among individuals and learners may not credit TAD with this improvement.

This chapter begins with a discussion of how my findings answer the study's research questions in conjunction with existing literature. I then explore the implications for practice that I interpret these findings to support. Then, I acknowledge the limitations of this study. Finally, I review future directions for research before presenting my conclusion.

Discussion

In this section, I answer the research questions, explain how the findings matter to the phenomenon, and connect them to the existing bodies of literature. Of course, describing an individual's experience with any given phenomenon is complicated, and each participant experienced TAD in their freshman seminar course differently. All freshman seminar courses at CSUN share set learning outcomes and include similar transparently designed major assignments, but my participants experienced TAD in different sections of the freshman seminar taught by different instructors. According to the CSUN Schedule of Classes, there were 62 sections of the freshman seminar and 44 instructors during the fall semester of 2024, when I collected my data (some instructors taught multiple sections). Even if they had all been in the same section with the same

instructor, their unique positionality and lived experiences prior to and during their first semester would influence their experiences of the phenomena.

Despite their differing perspectives, patterns in their narratives still offer powerful insights about TAD's applicability and outcomes within the broader experiences of first-semester freshmen college students from traditionally underserved populations. Narrative inquiry acknowledges the complexity of human phenomena and provides a complex but suitably adaptable framework of interpretation (Kim, 2016). Conclusions drawn using narrative inquiry are understood to be time-bound, "limited and fallible" (McAdams, 2011, p. 102), a guide for making sense of individuals' lived experiences in the narrow scope of a given context. My answers to each research question often overlap; sense of belonging and self-efficacy are inextricably woven into my participants' descriptions of their overall experience with TAD in a freshman seminar course. I have structured my answers to each research question so that I focus on important aspects of students' overall experiences when addressing the first research question, then focus specifically on sense of belonging and self-efficacy in the remaining research questions.

RQ1: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their experience in a freshman seminar course that uses transparent assignment design?

I generated two main themes in answer to the first research question. First, *"If I'm really stuck, I will read it": Traditionally underserved learners recognize that TAD provides additional support in freshman seminar courses, but individual perception of its utility depends on perception of task difficulty*. This theme had three sub-themes describing participants' experiences with the three main components of transparent

assignments: *“I’m not wasting my time”*: Purpose, *“I like it broken down”*: Task, and *“Show me how it’s done”*: Criteria. I found that my participants saw aspects of TAD and much of the freshman seminar curricula as beneficial, although not always necessary in their personal circumstances. The second theme described a major determinant in students’ experiences with TAD in the freshman seminar, the influence of instructors: *“It’s just a matter of how you explain it”*: Instructors’ pedagogical practices regarding in-class explanations and assignment design can greatly affect perceptions of TAD among traditionally underserved learners in a freshman seminar course. This theme contained one subtheme encapsulating a major cause for negative experiences with TAD in the freshman seminar: *“I still don’t know how to do that assignment.”* Misalignment. Together, these themes and subthemes answer my first research question.

All three sections of the TAD framework (purpose, task, and criteria) are designed to make the assignment demands and instructors’ expectations more transparent to students, which Winkelmes et al. (2016) compared to “reveal[ing] hidden manipulations” such as those behind the Wizard of Oz’s curtain (p. 28). This improved transparency has been found to make “enduring and equitable” improvements in students’ “academic confidence, sense of belonging in college, metacognitive awareness of skill development, and persistence” with the most dramatic impact among traditionally underserved students (p. 24). Winkelmes (2013) and Winkelmes et al. (2016, 2019) did not use the term “hidden curriculum” in describing TAD, but that term is used elsewhere in the literature to describe the same phenomenon. The “hidden curriculum” was first described by Jackson (1968/1990) as the unspoken institutional expectations that students must master to achieve academic success. Students from traditionally underserved backgrounds often

lack the same exposure to these hidden expectations, which can put them at a disadvantage when compared to other students (Flinders & Thornton, 2017; Margolis et al., 2001; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). Margolis et al. (2001) argued that the hidden curriculum is a tool wielded by institutions of higher education to “reproduce hierarchy [and] resist change” (p. 17). Orón Semper and Blasco (2018) advised that educators who hope to support more equitable access to education must make the hidden curriculum explicit. TAD would therefore seem to be a useful tool for instructors interested in educational equity.

Given TAD’s purported benefits, I was surprised to find that most of my participants described TAD assignments in the freshman seminar as unnecessary and even unpleasant. I was unable to find similar reactions to TAD in the literature, but my participants’ narratives suggest aversion to reading and feeling overwhelmed by long assignment prompts, especially for assignments that they perceive as less complex such as those in the freshman seminar.

The cause of students’ aversion to reading longer documents is outside the scope of this research, but it greatly affected my participants’ initial reactions to the TAD framework. Winkelmes et al. (2016) stated that TAD would save students time by presenting the necessary steps and resources in the assignment, meaning students would not need to consult additional resources. They also stated that proper implementation of the TAD framework reduced student procrastination, “last-minute requests for help,” and grading questions (p. 37). My findings complicate these assertions. Most participants preferred verbal instructions and felt that the freshman seminar assignments were not very difficult or complex, so they did not need the additional guidance that TAD offers.

Several felt that the TAD framework made assignments so easy that it increased procrastination. However, the freshman seminar assignments may have seemed more challenging if they did not use the TAD framework.

Experiences with TAD in the freshman seminar were also strongly influenced by participants' social relationships with their individual instructors and the instructors' implementation of the TAD framework. When the task instructions and stated criteria seemed to conflict, participants expressed frustration and even hostility toward the instructor. Winkelmes et al. (2016) explained the importance of aligning the purpose, task, and criteria sections so that each TAD assignment functions as intended, and alignment is included as "essential" in Palmer et al.'s (2018) TAD rubric. Even more impactful than assignment alignment, face-to-face interactions featured largely in students' overall descriptions of their experience with TAD in the freshman seminar course. Participants who described their freshman seminar instructors in a positive light (e.g., perceptions of kind vocal tone, support, and respect) also reported that the freshman seminar and its TAD assignments overall were more beneficial. Conversely, negative descriptions of professors (e.g., appearing rude, unsupportive, unclear, and disrespectful) appeared in the narratives of students who said they greatly disliked the freshman seminar and its TAD assignments.

There is a wealth of literature supporting that interpersonal relationships between students and instructors greatly impact students' educational experiences. Bingham et al. (2022) linked positive student-instructor interaction with academic success, retention and persistence, motivation, self-concept, and general well-being. Strayhorn (2008, 2019) further described the positive impact of faculty support on academic success among

students from traditionally underserved backgrounds. Cohen et al. (1999) explained that minoritized students in higher education may be more likely to see critical feedback as threatening and judgmental because of their past experiences with discrimination. Notably, all my participants identified themselves as Hispanic. Maestas et al. (2007) noted that Hispanic students are underrepresented in higher education and experience lower success rates than their White classmates, even at Hispanic-Serving Institutions. Even as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, CSUN student success data reveals comparative disparities in degree attainment between Hispanic students and students from other minoritized racial and ethnic backgrounds when compared with their peers from traditionally better-served backgrounds (CSUN, n.d.-1). The connection between this disparity and the impact of faculty members on my participants' experiences overlaps with sense of belonging, as explored by the second research question.

RQ2: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging after exposure to transparent assignment design in a freshman seminar course?

This second research question is most directly answered by one main theme: *"I feel like I'm able to reach out to people better": Experiencing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar may improve some traditionally underserved learners' self-reported sense of belonging, although the nature varies among individuals and learners may not credit TAD with this improvement.* This theme had two subthemes representing what I perceived to be a change in narrative reflections of sense of belonging over time: *"I do have some friends": Early Academic Sense of Belonging* and *"I feel like it's a little bit higher": End-of-Semester Academic Sense of Belonging.*

Sense of belonging has been strongly connected to retention and persistence (Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Smith, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 1993, 2017a). Learners from traditionally underserved backgrounds have been found more likely to struggle with sense of belonging (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021; Strayhorn, 2008, 2019; Winkelmes et al., 2016). TAD assignments provide additional support and increase the transparency of instructors' expectations while demystifying the hidden curriculum (Winkelmes et al., 2019, p. 23), which in turn may increase the chance that traditionally underserved students will attain success in the form of their desired grade (p. 33). Although they do not use the term "hidden curriculum," Tinto (1975, 2017a) and Strayhorn (2019) also have discussed the need for transparency in higher education and its connection to sense of belonging. These experiences with success, in addition to supporting academic self-efficacy, may support an improved sense of belonging among traditionally underserved students who did not already have high senses of belonging. In repeated studies with college students, Winkelmes et al. (2019) have found increases in self-reported sense of belonging among all students exposed to TAD, and they claim the improvement is consistently highest among students from traditionally underserved backgrounds (p. 16). Therefore, I expected my participants' narratives regarding their experience with TAD to emphasize its effect on their sense of belonging.

My participants expressed varying levels of sense of belonging during our first interview, as represented in the first subtheme. The second subtheme expresses that the narratives from Lily, Ari, Geraldine, and Alejandro indicate modest increases in sense of belonging at CSUN after exposure to TAD in a freshman seminar course. However, most participants did not directly credit the implementation of TAD in their freshman seminar

courses with their improved sense of belonging. As discussed in the above section, I contend most participants felt that the freshman seminar assignments were too simplistic to require the additional support that TAD offers. Indeed, several participants told me that they resented the increased word count inherent in the explanation of each assignment's purpose, task, and criteria; however, most participants reported recognizing that these sections were helpful on more complicated assignments in different courses. I interpret this shared perception among participants to be influenced by their reported aversion to reading instructions in general because they all preferred verbal assignment explanations in class. The participants' perceptions of TAD and the course were also influenced by their interpersonal relationships with their respective freshman seminar instructors.

These findings do not indicate that TAD was useless, however. For example, Geraldine, who shared some improvement in her sense of belonging between the beginning and end of the semester, shared that the purpose section on her assignments communicated that her instructor respected her and was not assigning "busy work." Existing literature connects students' perceived respect to sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993; Smith, 2021; Tinto, 2017a; Yeager et al., 2013). Additionally, it is possible that exposure to the "too easy" TAD assignments in the freshman seminar did clarify aspects of the hidden curriculum and therefore support an improved sense of belonging even if the participants did not recognize this impact.

The two other participants, Jessica and Jonathan, did not report an improved sense of belonging, which may stem from their very high and very low levels of sense of belonging, respectively, when we first spoke. Jessica reported no change in her sense of belonging at the end of the semester, but her sense of belonging was already very high

during our first interview, and she did not narrate a positive experience in the freshman seminar overall. I interpret this finding as suggesting that students who already have a very high sense of belonging may not demonstrate the same modest improvement as students with a lower sense of belonging before exposure to TAD. Interestingly, despite indicating a strong positive perception of his freshman seminar instructor, Jonathan indicated a decreased sense of belonging at the end of his first semester at CSUN. This decreased self-reported sense of belonging might be connected to Jonathan's very low sense of belonging at the start of the semester and his self-reported lower academic achievement at the semester's conclusion. Although TAD may support improvement in sense of belonging among most students from traditionally underserved backgrounds, that impact might not be apparent among students whose sense of belonging is already very high or very low.

RQ3: How do first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their academic self-efficacy after exposure to transparent assignment design in a freshman seminar course?

I generated one main theme to answer my third research question: *"It makes you more confident": Completing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar course can improve feelings of self-efficacy in traditionally underserved learners when attempting non-TAD assignments.* This theme had three subthemes that described different aspects of the phenomenon: *"What if you did it bad?": Lower Self-Efficacy and Trepidation Toward Novel Tasks*, *"A waste of time": TAD May Make Easier Assignments Seem Boring*, and *"I already know what to expect": Transfer of Self-Efficacy from TAD Mastery Experiences.*

Winkelmes et al. (2019) have claimed that TAD increased students' self-reported "academic confidence." Sander and Sanders (2006) defined "academic confidence" as a students' trust "in their ability to respond to the demands of studying at university" (p. 33). Drawing on Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1993) theory of self-efficacy in a practical instructional context, Artino (2012) defined self-efficacy as an individual's "personal belief in their capability to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 84). Multiple scholars have connected "academic confidence" to the concept of self-efficacy and have treated Winkelmes et al.'s (2019) "academic confidence" as equivalent to "self-efficacy" in the context of transparent assignment design (Ojha et al, 2024; Ou, 2018; Ziegler et al., 2021). In the absence of a foundational theory of "academic confidence" appropriate for my purposes, I relied on Bandura's (1977, 1986, 1993) theory of self-efficacy to understand the phenomenon that Winkelmes et al. (2019) described.

Bandura (1986) explained that individuals may have high self-efficacy in some contexts, but low self-efficacy in others. Developing high self-efficacy in a specific context requires both initial confidence and gratification, or experiences with success, early in the development of the given skill (Bandura, 1993). Unsurprisingly, given Winkelmes et al.'s (2019) claims, my participants did tell me that they felt more confident approaching other academic assignments after completing similar TAD assignments. I represent this finding with my main theme, *"It makes you more confident": Completing TAD assignments in a freshman seminar course can improve feelings of self-efficacy in traditionally underserved learners when attempting non-TAD*

assignments. However, as with my findings regarding sense of belonging, TAD's effects were nuanced among these participants.

All participants except Jessica expressed concern about approaching unfamiliar academic tasks such as new types of assignments or even familiar academic tasks in a new context (college essays rather than high school essays). Even Jessica, whose narrative communicated the highest level of self-efficacy, shared that she would "not want to do" confusing assignments. I represent this concept in my first subtheme, "*What if you did it bad?*": *Lower Self-Efficacy and Trepidation Toward Novel Tasks*. This subtheme is connected to the next, "*I already know what to expect*": *Transfer of Self-Efficacy from TAD Mastery Experiences*. This second subtheme describes that, although participants did not always enjoy their experience with TAD in the freshman seminar, most of their narratives supported higher academic self-efficacy after this exposure. Together, these subthemes support my interpretation that students, particularly those from traditionally underserved communities, may benefit from additional support when attempting unfamiliar assignments.

These findings are balanced by my last subtheme, "*A waste of time*": *TAD May Make Easier Assignments Seem Boring*. This subtheme represents a finding that I did not see in other examinations of TAD. Participants often told me that TAD was unnecessary and even a detriment to their motivation to complete "easy" or "simple" assignments such as those in the freshman seminar. In fact, several participants directly blamed the simplicity of these assignment instructions for procrastination behaviors. I interpret this finding as related to the participants' resistance to reading instructions and their belief that the additional support TAD offers on freshman seminar assignments was beneath

their level of competency. Many participants had experienced a preparatory program during the summer that included content and assignments that were similar to those in the freshman seminar, removing the novelty of the course overall and decreasing their interest.

Implications for Practice

In this section, I explore how the study's findings can inform the practices of faculty and administrators who seek to support students from traditionally underserved backgrounds in higher education using the TAD framework. I also discuss the broader implications of the study's findings for society as a whole.

Faculty Instructional Practices

The literature regarding TAD implementation's impact on students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy in higher education, especially among students from traditionally underserved backgrounds, is overwhelmingly substantial (Howard et al., 2020; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Ou, 2018; Peplow et al., 2021; Winkelmes et al., 2019). This study's participants experienced TAD in a freshman seminar course dedicated to supporting student success via introductory topics that many of the participants already experienced to some degree in prior courses. The participants may not have needed the high level of transparency used in the course assignments due to the assignment content's familiarity. Thus, this specific implementation of TAD may have included an "unnecessary or overwhelming" level of detail (Winkelmes et al., 2019, p. 88), which could explain some of the participants' more negative expressed perceptions of TAD. Given some of my participants' expressed frustration with the increased word count of TAD instructions, aversion to reading, and preference for verbal assignment

explanations, faculty reading this study may not feel compelled to implement TAD in their own courses. However, I argue that TAD is a worthwhile tool when faculty implement it correctly, meaning well-aligned and with an appropriate level of detail.

Despite some of the participants' expressing that they disliked the TAD framework, the assignments may have been opaque for some of them without it. Even if not all students need a high level of detail to complete assignments, the detail is there to support students who do need it. Experiencing academic success (e.g., earning a high grade on an assignment) supports sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2008). Earning one's target grade also builds academic confidence (Winkelmes et al., 2019), which has been connected to self-efficacy (Artino, 2012). Both sense of belonging and self-efficacy, constructs that TAD supports, have been connected to retention and persistence (Winkelmes et al., 2016). Perhaps more importantly, TAD is an explicit introduction into academic thinking in higher education. The framework guides students to orient their approach to coursework in terms of the assignments' purpose, task, and criteria, and they can apply this orientation and skills learned in the completion of these assignments to more challenging work in other courses (Winkelmes et al., 2019).

TAD can support instructors in aligning assignments by identifying, clarifying, and then solidifying their own expectations of what a successful completed assignment would look like and ensuring that such completion is possible. All of my participants recognized TAD's utility as a supportive framework on more difficult assignments. One notable exception was related to perceived misalignment between the purpose, task, and criteria sections. When the task instructions and stated criteria conflicted, or seemed to conflict, participants expressed frustration and stated that they felt that the assignment

was impossible. Winkelmes et al. (2016) explained the importance of aligning the purpose, task, and criteria sections so that each TAD assignment functions as intended, and alignment is included as “essential” in Palmer et al.’s (2018) TAD rubric. Both Winkelmes et al. (2016) and Palmer et al. (2018) also emphasize the importance of samples of completed work, which would have also mitigated some of my participants’ frustration: either the instructor would have realized the issue when creating the sample, or the provided sample would reconcile the perceived disconnect. In this way, proper TAD implementation may be seen as a framework that benefits instructors as well as students. Aligned assignments forestall frustration and guide students to success.

Additionally, the TAD framework can help faculty address the phenomenon of the hidden curriculum. Jackson (1968/1990) established that classrooms could be fraught social situations as students adjusted—or did not adjust—to social and behavioral institutional expectations; he characterized successful students as those who endured the bewildering environment, who “learn to tolerate petty frustrations and accept the plans and policies of higher authorities, even when their rationale is unexplained and their meaning unclear” (p. 75). Specific elements of the hidden curriculum vary by institution (Tinto, 1975), but more recent literature devoted to equity has urged instructors to make such social and behavioral norms explicit (Strayhorn, 2019; Winkelmes et al., 2016). Rather than expecting students to conform to institutional expectations unquestioningly, faculty can encourage criticality of thought, guiding students to identify their assumptions.

Faculty can also guide their students’ development into appropriately discerning future professionals by recognizing, communicating, and *explaining* their previously

unspoken expectations. For example, perhaps some of my participants would have had a different emotional experience with TAD in their freshman seminar courses if their instructors explained their reasoning behind not reviewing assignment instructions in class. Even if the students still preferred verbal explanations, they might have accepted the task of reading instructions if they understood that students in higher education are commonly expected to read and follow instructions on their own and that the independent work in their freshman seminar course was designed to help them practice this skill. Such framing would mirror the TAD framework, which requires explaining the purpose of each activity so that students can better understand the value of each task (Winkelmes et al., 2016).

However, the onus is on faculty to understand who their students are and recognize the level of specificity and support they need to approach each assignment. Winkelmes et al. (2019) acknowledged that “too much transparency may be unnecessary or overwhelming” and urged instructors to “adjust the amount of detail” as needed (p. 87). My participants’ concerns about assignment length suggested that some of their freshman seminar assignments were designed with more specificity and detail than necessary. Therefore, instructors who implement TAD should solicit and incorporate student feedback regarding the specificity and detail of their assignment instructions.

Despite some negative reactions to TAD reflected in my participants’ narratives regarding the additional word count, there are sufficient data to support my interpretation that TAD is a worthwhile high-impact practice for supporting sense of belonging and self-efficacy at an individual course level, which in turn can impact student persistence through their undergraduate careers (Winkelmes et al., 2019, p. 33). These two constructs

support retention among all students, but especially those from traditionally underserved backgrounds (Smith, 2021; Strayhorn, 2008, 2024; Tinto, 2004, 2017a). Thus, faculty who hope to improve retention among traditionally underserved students should consider implementing TAD effectively in their courses in addition to a commitment to continued professional development so that they may remain informed about their specific students' hardships and appropriate support.

Administrative Practices

TAD can be and often has been implemented by individual instructors at the course level (Ou, 2018; Winkelmes et al., 2019). However, as discussed previously, individual faculty do not have the power to fight the equity gap on their own. The following sections discuss the implications of this study as related to administrative support for faculty and students.

Supporting Faculty. In the previous section, I urged faculty to commit to professional development that will help them learn about and implement TAD to best suit the needs of their students. For faculty to engage in continued professional development around teaching-learning practices, higher education administrators then carry the responsibility for making current and high-quality training available and accessible to faculty. Within higher education institutions, administrators' main responsibility and impetus is to retain and graduate students. Supporting faculty directly supports students in large part because teaching and learning is a social phenomenon (Bandura, 1986). Higher education faculty, while experts in their respective fields, often lack formal pedagogical training. As such, many faculty recognize that they need additional training and expect their institutions to offer it (Blumberg, 2016; Lowenthal et al., 2012; Oleson

& Hora, 2014). Adequate administrative support leads to competent, confident instructors who are appropriately positioned to serve their students' best interests. A wealth of scholarship supports the claim that positive student-faculty interactions are integral to student retention, persistence, and eventual success (Gutierrez Keeton et al., 2021; Kirby & Thomas, 2021; Kuh, 2008; Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 1975; Whitten et al., 2020).

When used correctly, the TAD framework helps faculty communicate their expectations and thus reduces student frustration, supporting positive student-faculty interactions (Winkelmes et al., 2019). Among other benefits, connections to and positive experiences with faculty have been shown to support student retention and persistence, especially among students from traditionally underserved communities (Smith, 2021; Strayhorn, 2008, 2024; Tinto, 2004, 2017a). In part due to its positive influence on student-faculty interactions, TAD is one of many possible supports for these constructs, which can be fostered in multiple dimensions across students' academic journeys. As Winkelmes et al. (2019) asserted, TAD is a relatively easy and quick adjustment that faculty can implement at the course level to support student success (p. 25). Institutions therefore may support students most vulnerable to attrition by offering appropriate faculty development regarding the TAD framework and supporting faculty in properly aligning assignments and ensuring appropriate specificity and level of detail.

Supporting Students. Faculty-level implementation of TAD is only one of many supports that students from traditionally underserved populations require to succeed in higher education, however. Clarifying course expectations, providing additional instructional guidance, and creating positive interactions with faculty may bolster student sense of belonging and self-efficacy, but these supports cannot compensate for all of the

hardships students face. For example, students belonging to racial and/or ethnic minority categories face subtle or even overt racism that harms sense of belonging and pushes them out of higher education (Liu, 2011; Strayhorn, 2008, 2018; Ziegler et al., 2021).

Students from low-income families may need to work to support themselves and their families, leaving little time for their studies (Tinto, 2004). Additionally, students from traditionally underserved communities often have fewer financial and social resources than their traditionally better-served peers and are therefore less insulated from hardships and setbacks outside of academia (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Brower et al., 2021; Han et al., 2022; Liu, 2011; Pitman, 2015). Individuals cannot learn and grow when their basic needs are not met (Maslow, 1943).

My participants did not narrate the impact of racism and discrimination on their educational journeys, although they may still have been affected by these hardships; my position as a White faculty member might have influenced their decisions about what information they felt comfortable sharing with me. However, most of my participants did discuss concerns related to mental health, both formal diagnoses of mental health conditions and general stress and anxiety related to their education and current political events. Several of them also expressed major concerns about finances, such as worry that they should be working to support their family instead of attending college, needing to graduate quickly to save money on tuition, and selecting a difficult and unattractive major because they perceived that it would lead to a lucrative career.

Additionally, many of my participants shared that their first-generation status was a hardship because their family members were unable to provide helpful guidance about succeeding in college. This finding is in line with existing literature; Bourdieu (1986)

explained that education was one avenue by which individuals could network and form social relationships that provided them and their families with access to power and opportunities for social mobility. Indeed, cultural capital related to parental education has been positively associated with grades (Dumais, 2002; Dumais & Ward, 2010) and degree attainment (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999). My participants who reported that their high school experience left them underprepared for college also shared narratives that demonstrated anxiety and frustration about feeling less competent than their better-prepared classmates. These aspects combined informed my participants' overall first-semester experience and likely impacted their experience with TAD.

For example, one possible explanation for my participants' tepid reception of TAD could be "time poverty," first proposed in an economic context by Vickery (1977) and later in a higher education context (Conway et al., 2021; Wladis et al., 2024). Students from traditionally underserved categories may have less time for academics than other students for many reasons, such as needing to secure employment throughout their academic career to compensate for lower generational wealth (Bennett & Burke, 2017; Strayhorn, 2019; Tinto, 2017b; Wladis et al., 2024). Although Winkelmes et al. (2019) asserted that the TAD framework would expedite the learning process for both students and faculty, most of my participants expressed concerns about wasting time by reading longer assignment instructions. Not all of my participants were employed, and some of our discussions about time constraints included procrastination behaviors and poor time management. However, several participants needed to fulfill mandatory community service hours by working on campus as part of their financial aid agreement. Other

demands on their time included family expectations, such as the need to care for younger siblings or contribute to general household duties. TAD might ultimately save time if students read the instructions, but students who are already stressed about time and have misconceptions about the appropriate amount of time necessary for academic success may never have the chance to realize that.

Administrators who truly prioritize retention and graduation among students from traditionally underserved backgrounds must therefore invest in supporting basic needs, such as mental health services, mentorship, and financial aid and career counseling. These supports take place outside of the classroom, but their impact on student success cannot be overstated; basic needs affect every aspect of the student experience.

Societal Considerations

Finally, this study on supporting student success for traditionally underserved students in higher education has broader implications for society as a whole. The United States has among the lowest rates of intergenerational social mobility (Phillips et al., 2020), but higher education is one of the clearest paths to upward social mobility (Liu, 2011; Phillips et al., 2020). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024b) reported that those with higher educational attainment tended to have higher median earnings; in 2022, the median full-time employment income for 25- to 34-year-olds in the U.S. with a bachelor's degree was \$66,600, equating to 59% higher median income of those who only completed high school, which was \$41,800. Individuals with a college degree are also more likely to be employed; in 2022, the employment rate for those with a bachelor's degree was 80%, as compared to 73% for those who only completed high school.

Beyond income, college-educated individuals reported being healthier, liking their careers more, and engaging in more civically responsible activities such as voting (Gallup, 2024). College-educated individuals are more likely to participate in community service, more likely to contribute to greater economic growth, and less likely to commit crimes (Tinto, 2004, p.7) or use government programs such as Medicaid, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and cash assistance (Trostel, 2015, p. 45).

The growing number of students from traditionally underserved communities entering higher education (NCES, 2024a) creates a pressing need in identifying the factors that facilitate and support this population's academic success at the undergraduate level even more critical. These students' successes or failures will not only affect their lives and their immediate families, but also society at large—they will be future teachers, doctors, engineers, and other professions that shape communities. These connections between higher education, social mobility, and benefits to society bring greater urgency to the discrepancy between degree attainment rates of traditionally underserved and traditionally better-served student populations. When more students achieve their degree goals, everyone benefits.

TAD is a relatively easy implementation that has been shown to improve constructs such as sense of belonging that are related to academic success, especially among students from traditionally underserved backgrounds (Winkelmes et al., 2019, p. 21). TAD is worth pursuing at the faculty and administrative levels as a viable student success initiative for institutions seeking to support traditionally underserved students. As the literature explains, TAD is a low-cost, high-impact practice, relatively easy for faculty to adopt and implement (Howard et al., 2020; Michaud et al., 2017; Ou, 2018;

Winkelmes et al., 2016, 2019), that yields meaningful outcomes for student persistence and academic success (Winkelmes et al., 2016). However, no single implementation can address the equity gap—the difference in success between traditionally underserved students and their traditionally better-served peers (Winkelmes et al., 2019, p. 244)—on its own. Institutions of higher education must dedicate more resources to serving these student populations’ basic needs, as well.

Limitations

The central limitation in this study was the timing of participant interviews. As acknowledged by Merriam (2009), interview data can only reflect the participants’ perception of the phenomena of study at the point in time during which the data were collected. In designing this study, I had planned to conduct two rounds of interviews, with the first occurring within the first two weeks of the semester and the second occurring at the end. My goal in the timing was to capture any changing perceptions participants had of assignment transparency and their descriptions of sense of belonging and self-efficacy, which I assumed would be a function of time-in-course in designing my study.

However, I encountered a protracted IRB approval process when navigating approvals from California State University, Northridge—the study’s site and my employer—and Valdosta State University, where I am a doctoral student, as both institutions required me to undergo their individual IRB review rather than allowing a reliance agreement. The ensuing dual IRB process pushed the first interview round to mid-semester, rather than at the beginning.

With this delay, I must question whether conducting the first round closer to mid-term rather than the start of the semester affected the kinds of experiences and perceptions participants shared. Perhaps my interview data would have been qualitatively different had I interviewed participants at the start of the semester or extended data collection over a longer period of time. What, if any, differences in participant experiences and perceptions would have been captured is unknowable; however, I contend that this study's findings and implications still bear standing and import for this phenomenon and population.

Future Directions

In this qualitative study, I used the framework of narrative inquiry to explore the lived experiences of students from traditionally underserved backgrounds in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design (TAD) at California State University, Northridge. This study points to multiple exciting avenues for future research.

As discussed in the above section, this study was limited by time constraints unexpectedly imposed by the dual IRB process. Future research could build upon this study by implementing the first round of interviews nearer to the beginning of the participants' first semester to capture narrative descriptions related to sense of belonging and self-efficacy prior to TAD exposure. This earlier data could be compared to later descriptions to explore how these constructs change over a longer period of time. Similarly, a longitudinal study that follows participants beyond their first semester could provide additional useful information about long-term retention and persistence and the

effect of exposure to TAD assignments in a freshman seminar course as students progress through to more challenging coursework.

Later research might also benefit from adapting this study into a mixed methods approach by implementing a formal quantitative element. Notably, I included a short survey instrument to gauge prospective participants' self-reported sense of belonging and self-efficacy in my student recruitment survey. The data from these surveys then served as an impetus for conversations regarding sense of belonging and self-efficacy during my interviews with the participants. As this was a purely qualitative study, the results of these scales were not used quantitatively. I also did not re-administer the survey instruments at the conclusion of the study. However, a later study could implement pre- and post-survey instruments to measure self-reported sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Adding such an element could provide the researcher with measurable quantitative data to supplement and provide additional insight to the qualitative analysis.

The study may also be replicated with different populations to yield greater insight into how students' positionality impacts their experience with TAD in a freshman seminar course. Although this study was not designed to focus only on participants who identified as Hispanic, CSUN is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) with a high population of Hispanic students. Students from non-Hispanic racial/ethnic backgrounds also responded to my recruitment survey. However, all participants who agreed to both interviews did happen to be Hispanic as well as belonging to other categories that have been traditionally underserved in higher education (low-income, first-generation, and/or underprepared as defined by the CSU). Future research could include participants identifying with other racial and ethnic backgrounds at CSUN or from any traditionally

underserved racial/ethnic background at other institutions. Such a study could explore how students attending an institution that is not specifically designated as serving their racial/ethnic background might experience TAD assignments differently in a freshman seminar course. Limiting the study to only low-income, only first-generation, or only underprepared participants instead of participants belonging to any of those categories may also provide insight about how belonging to these categories affects participants' lived experiences with TAD in a freshman seminar course. Future research could additionally control for participants who do not already have very high or very low sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

Of course, future research should also investigate whether students find TAD more useful in courses other than a freshman seminar. The freshman seminar includes content and assignments related to student success, such as studying and time management. Many of my participants had experienced similar content related to student success in higher education, such as in high school courses or preparatory summer courses. Students may experience TAD differently in courses in which the content is completely unfamiliar.

Conclusion

This study explored how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations described their sense of belonging as a function of being in a freshman seminar course that implemented transparent assignment design (TAD). Each participant experienced TAD in their freshman seminar course differently. Overall, participants in this study did not describe TAD as positively as participants in past studies, such as that conducted by Winkelmes et al. (2016). Some concerns regarding TAD include that the

framework adds to each assignment's word count and that the level of detail inherent in the TAD framework is not necessary on simpler or more accessible assignments such as those included in the freshman seminar course. However, the participants' narratives did provide sufficient evidence to support the interpretation that TAD exposure supported modest improvements in sense of belonging and self-efficacy in participants who did not already have very high or very low sense of belonging or self-efficacy. All participants expressed that elements of the TAD framework could be a useful support for more novel or challenging assignments. It is possible that some participants only perceived the freshman seminar assignments as simple because of the TAD framework. Additionally, most participants found TAD assignments more visually accessible than non-TAD assignments because of their structured formatting. Also, multiple participants stated that some aspects of TAD, such as clarifying the purpose of each assignment, caused them to feel that their instructor respected them and valued their time.

Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to fully support all students. First, students' basic needs must be met so that they can focus on their studies. Noncognitive aspects of students' experiences, such as sense of belonging and self-efficacy, are another important consideration. Investing in high-impact practices such as TAD can support sense of belonging and self-efficacy among students from traditionally underserved communities. Specifically, TAD can help instructors clarify their own assignment expectations and make previously opaque aspects of the hidden curriculum more visible. TAD can help students complete difficult or complicated assignments, which provides them with mastery experiences that boost sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Skills learned while completing TAD assignments may also be transferred to

non-TAD assignments, supporting student success overall. Although faculty need time, support, and practice to master the TAD framework, it has the benefit of being fairly easy to adopt. When properly implemented, TAD is therefore one of many worthwhile course-level practices for supporting student success.

Personal Reflection

I wanted to focus my dissertation on addressing the equity gap in higher education because of my prior experience as a traditionally underserved student and my desire to support the many traditionally underserved students who enroll in my courses each semester. I selected transparent assignment design (TAD) as a focus because I happened to be co-leading a faculty workshop about the practice at the time of topic selection.

TAD seemed useful and accessible, and I hoped to learn more about how it actually worked (or not) from a student perspective. I am very grateful for the opportunity to speak to and learn from the wonderfully thoughtful and resilient young scholars who were generous enough to participate in this study. If people like them are the future, I really think we will have a chance at a brighter tomorrow.

I expected this endeavor to be difficult and rewarding, and it was, but I had not quite anticipated the intensity of the highs and lows. The topic of transparency was surprisingly relevant, given how opaque the dissertation process can be. At times, when I wrote about the hidden curriculum, I felt like I was writing about myself as much as the students who are the target population of this study.

Other hardships included financial and time constraints, which are not new for me—I really don't recommend pursuing a doctorate while also working full-time *and* part-time, but we all do what we have to do to survive. However, I could not have

foreseen the serious illness, catastrophic wildfire, flooding, housing insecurity, and sudden loss that characterized 2025. These personal hardships were exacerbated by the constant dread of current and worsening world events. I wish that we could all live in less interesting times, but I am grateful for the helpers in my life (and the opportunities I've had to join their ranks, even in small ways).

I took a little longer to get here, but I'm *here* because I did not give up, and that's the message I want to impart to other students from traditionally underserved categories who might struggle with a lack of transparency in their educational journey. This system wasn't made for us, but *we can make it for us, together*.

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Appendix A:

Student Survey

You are being asked to participate in a survey for a research project entitled “Traditionally Underserved Students’ Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design,” which is being conducted by Azure Star Glover, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a Freshman Seminar course that implemented Transparent Assignment Design. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how experiencing Transparent Assignment Design affects students’ sense of belonging. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately twenty minutes to complete. This survey is confidential. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity unless you choose to provide your contact information in the last question. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Data collected from this survey will be used to determine eligibility for the next phase of this research study. Data may also be used in future research.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Azure Star Glover at azglover@valdosta.edu**. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Please indicate your consent below:

Modified Sense of Belonging Scale (Imperial College London, n.d.)

Instructions

This scale is designed to measure your sense of belonging. Please answer the questions to the best of your ability. When you respond to the questions below, think about yourself as a student at California State University, Northridge (CSUN).

1) How well do people at CSUN understand you as a person?

Do not understand at all	Understand a little	Understand somewhat	Understand quite a bit	Completely understand
--------------------------	---------------------	---------------------	------------------------	-----------------------

2) How connected do you feel to the university staff at CSUN?

Not at all connected	Slightly connected	Somewhat connected	Quite connected	Extremely connected
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3) How welcoming have you found CSUN to be?

Not at all welcoming	Slightly welcoming	Somewhat welcoming	Quite welcoming	Extremely welcoming
----------------------	--------------------	--------------------	-----------------	---------------------

4) How much respect do other students at CSUN show toward you?

No respect at all	A little bit of respect	Some respect	Quite a bit of respect	A tremendous amount of respect
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5) How much respect do members of staff at CSUN show toward you?

No respect at all	A little bit of respect	Some respect	Quite a bit of respect	A tremendous amount of respect
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6) How much do you matter to others at CSUN?

Do not matter at all	Matter a little bit	Matter somewhat	Matter quite a bit	Matter a tremendous amount
----------------------	---------------------	-----------------	--------------------	----------------------------

7) How happy are you with your choice to be a student at CSUN?

Not at all happy	Slightly happy	Somewhat happy	Quite happy	Extremely happy
------------------	----------------	----------------	-------------	-----------------

New Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen et al., 2001)

Note:

General self-efficacy relates to one's estimate of one's overall ability to perform successfully in a wide variety of achievement situations, or to how confident one is that she or he can perform effectively across different tasks and situations.

Self-esteem relates to the overall affective evaluation of one’s own worth, value, or importance, or to how one feels about oneself as a person.

Instructions

Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree.”

		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I set for myself.	1	2	3	4	5
2	When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them.	1	2	3	4	5
3	In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I believe I can succeed at most any endeavor to which I set my mind.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I am confident that I can perform effectively on many different tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
7	Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well.	1	2	3	4	5
8	Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well.	1	2	3	4	5

Demographic Information

The CSU’s Historically Underserved Student Factor Model defines “historically underserved” as students who are first-generation, low-income, underprepared, and/or from historically underserved racial or ethnic communities (California State University [CSU], 2019). Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability so that I know how you describe yourself and how you would be categorized by the CSU’s model. Even if you do not fall into any of the CSU’s categories, *I would still be very interested in your responses to all survey questions.*

1. First-generation status: For this question, it does not matter if you have siblings or other family who went to college. Please answer only about your parent(s):

- a. At least one parent graduated from college and earned a 4-year (bachelor's) degree
 - b. At least one parent attended some college, but did not earn a 4-year (bachelor's) degree
 - c. I do not have a parent who attended any amount of college
 - d. I don't know
 - e. I don't want to answer
2. Income status: Income levels can be hard to define, but the CSU model categorizes students as "low-income" using Pell Grant status and Expected Family Contribution (EFC). Please select any of the following statements that are true for you, to the best of your knowledge:
 - a. I qualified for the Pell Grant
 - b. My family is not helping me pay for college, and I'm struggling
 - c. I/my family can afford college, even if it is a stretch
 - d. I don't know
 - e. I don't want to answer
3. Underprepared status:
 - a. My high school/other experiences make me feel academically prepared for college
 - b. My high school/other experiences do **not** make me feel academically prepared for college
 - c. I don't know
 - d. I don't want to answer
4. Racial/ethnic status: The CSU model categorizes the following racial and ethnic communities as historically underserved: African American, Hispanic, and American Indian. **Do you identify as belonging to any of these communities?**
 - a. Yes, I identify as African American, Hispanic, and/or American Indian
 - b. No, I do not identify as African American, Hispanic, and/or American Indian
 - c. I identify as partially African American, Hispanic, and/or American Indian and partially a different category not listed here.
 - d. I don't know
 - e. I don't want to answer
5. Optional: Would you like to add any additional information? [text box]

Reference

California State University. (2019). Redefining historically underserved students in the

CSU: Moving beyond race and economic status to close equity gaps.

<http://ts3.nashonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Historically-Underserved-Student-Factor-Model.pdf>

Follow-up Information

Thank you for responding to my survey! Your responses are very valuable.

The second phase of my research will involve one-on-one interviews with a random selection of participants who meet the study's criteria (students from traditionally underserved communities). The goal of these interviews is to learn more about the personal experiences of students from communities that have been traditionally underserved by higher education (first-generation, low-income, under-prepared, or from racial/ethnic minority communities). The content will move beyond the questions in this survey and instead explore individuals' stories regarding sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and overall educational experiences.

These interviews will be held online via Zoom at a mutually agreed-upon time and date, ideally during the weeks of October 7, October 28, and November 18. Interviews will take approximately one hour each. I need to record these interviews for research purposes, but I am the only person who will view these recordings, and I will delete them immediately after I transcribe them (write down what was said and notes about how it was said). Your identity will be kept confidential in the final published study. If you are selected, you will receive more information in the interview invitation. Note that interviewees may refuse to answer any question and/or change their mind about participating at any time.

1. Please select one of the following choices:
 - a. I belong to **at least one** traditionally underserved category (first-generation, low-income, underprepared, and/or African American/Hispanic/American Indian) **AND** it is okay for you to contact me with an invitation to participate in recorded interviews on Zoom later in the semester. I understand that I can decline later.
 - i. Thank you! Please provide your preferred contact email address:
 - b. I do not belong to at least one traditionally underserved category **AND/OR** I do not want to be contacted further.

Thank you for helping me with my study! Please contact me at azglover@valdosta.edu with any questions, comments, or concerns.

You may now close this survey.

Appendix B:

Institutional Review Board Approvals



Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04531-2024

Responsible Researcher(s): Azure Star Glover

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Gwen Scott Ruttenclutter

Dissertation Research Member: n/a

Project Title: *Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design.*

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DETERMINATION:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

- Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** the recording of interview sessions provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Therefore, upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted from all recording and storage devices used.
- In keeping with established consent guidelines, audio/video recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant understanding, and establishing the participant's willingness to take part in the interview. Each participant must be offered a copy of the research consent statement. Transcripts must document the researcher reading and receiving participant consent.
- Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email list, transcripts, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a **minimum of 3 years**. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.

☒ Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth W. Olphie

08.16.2024

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 06.02.16



The CSUN Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects has determined the research referenced below to be exempt from further IRB review per 45 CFR 46, section 104(d), Category 2: Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior. Please retain and use the IRB protocol number on any correspondence related to the project.

Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design

Exemption Date: October 15, 2024
IRB Number: IRB-FY25-47
Principal Investigator: Azure Star Glover
Department: English

Please retain this letter and information for your records. Please be aware that you must immediately report any change in research activity or amendments to any protocol associated with this study. You must also report any adverse events or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others within one week of the time you are made aware of the problem. Please submit these reports via Cayuse IRB or email irb@csun.edu for assistance.

Enclosed you will find your approved Informed Consent documents. Consent forms given to subjects participating in the research must bear the approval stamp of the IRB. If you require changes to the consent form or plan to continue recruiting subjects beyond October 15, 2025, please contact the Research and Sponsored Programs office.

Important note: Please be aware that this approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and CSUN policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records.

If applicable: Some listservs and websites have policies regulating the types of advertisements or solicitations that can be posted, including from whom prior approval must be obtained before posting a recruitment notice for research. Similarly, most agencies, organizations, institutions, and even classroom instructors, have policies regarding who can solicit potential research participants from their students, employees, etc., what information must be included in solicitations, and how recruitment notices are distributed or posted. You should familiarize yourself with the external policies and approval procedures required of you to conduct your study. CSUN IRB approval or exemption does *not* substitute for these approvals or release you from the responsibility to insure that you have gained appropriate approvals *before* advertising your study or conducting your research. If you have any questions, please call the Research and Sponsored Programs department at (818) 677-2901 or email irb@csun.edu.

Sincerely,



David Boyns, PhD
Chair, CSUN Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects

Review Type: Exempt
Funding: N/A
IRB Registration: IRB00001788
Assurance Number: FWA00001335

RESEARCH AND SPONSORED PROGRAMS
VALERIA HALL 275
18111 Nordhoff Street • Northridge • CA 91330-8232 • Phone: (818) 677-2501 • Fax: (818) 677-4651 • irb@csun.edu

California State University, Northridge
CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design

You are being asked to participate in a survey for a research study entitled "Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design," which is being conducted by Azure Star Glover, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University and part-time faculty member at CSUN as part of the requirements for the Ed.D. degree from Valdosta State University, Georgia. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate. The researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

RESEARCH TEAM

Researcher:

Azure Star Glover
Department of English
18111 Nordhoff St.
Northridge, CA 91330 – 8248
(747) 224-6206
star.glover@csun.edu

&

Department of Leadership, Technology, & Workforce Development
Dewar College of Education & Human Services
Valdosta State University
1500 N Patterson St.
Valdosta, GA 31698
azglover@valdosta.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how certain types of assignments may affect the way that students from traditionally underserved communities experience college.

SUBJECTS

Inclusion Requirements

You are eligible to participate in this study if you:

- Are at least 18 years of age or older;
- Are teaching University 100: The Freshman Seminar at California State University, Northridge, in the Fall 2024 semester.

Exclusion Requirements

You are not eligible to participate in this study if you are under 18 years of age and/or are not teaching University 100: The Freshman Seminar at CSUN in the Fall 2024 semester.

Time Commitment

This survey should take less than 10 minutes to complete.

PROCEDURES

The following procedures will occur:

1. You will be presented with up to 5 multiple-choice and short answer questions to determine whether your students are eligible for my study and, if so, whether you are willing to help me recruit your students for my study.
2. You will be given the chance to share any feedback in a last textbox. All questions are optional.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

This study poses no more than the minimal risks experienced in day-to-day life.

BENEFITS

Subject Benefits

You may not directly benefit from participation in this study.

Benefits to Others or Society

Your responses may help us learn more about how experiencing Transparent Assignment Design affects students' sense of belonging, which may help improve how faculty design courses and could indirectly help future students succeed in college.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT

Compensation for Participation

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

Costs

There is no cost to you for participation in this study.

WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. There will be no consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Subject Identifiable Data

You may optionally choose to share your email address if you agree to help me recruit your students for my study. Otherwise, no identifiable data will be collected by this survey.

Data Storage

All data from this survey will be kept in password-protected cloud storage for 3 years after the study's completion, at which time it will be destroyed.

Data Access

The researcher named on the first page of this form will have access to your study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required

by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

Data Retention

The researcher intends to keep the research data for approximately 3 years, and then it will be destroyed.

Mandated Reporting

Under California law, the researcher is required to report known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information in the course of conducting this study, they may be required to report it to the authorities.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the first page of this form.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research and Sponsored Programs office, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, by phone at (818) 677-2901 or email at irb@csun.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

You should not endorse this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your relationship with California State University, Northridge. Your agreement below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

 I agree to participate in the study.

California State University, Northridge
CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design

You are being asked to participate in a survey for a research study entitled "Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design," which is being conducted by Azure Star Glover, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University and part-time faculty member at CSUN as part of the requirements for the Ed.D. degree from Valdosta State University, Georgia. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate. The researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

RESEARCH TEAM

Researcher:

Azure Star Glover
Department of English
18111 Nordhoff St.
Northridge, CA 91330 – 8248
(747) 224-6206
star.glover@csun.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how certain types of assignments may affect the way that students from traditionally underserved communities experience college.

SUBJECTS

Inclusion Requirements

You are eligible to participate in this study if you:

- Are at least 18 years of age or older;
- Self-identify as belonging to a community that is traditionally underserved in higher education (first-generation college student, low-income, underprepared, and/or African American, Hispanic, and/or American Indian);
- Are enrolled in University 100: The Freshman Seminar at California State University, Northridge, in the Fall 2024 semester.

Exclusion Requirements

You are not eligible to participate in this study if you are under 18 years of age, do not self-identify as belonging to a community that is traditionally underserved in higher education as described above, and/or are not enrolled in University 100: The Freshman Seminar in Fall 2024.

Time Commitment

Participation should take less than 20 minutes.

PROCEDURES

The following procedures will occur:

1. First, you will be asked to respond to a Sense of Belonging Scale. There are 7 questions. Each question will ask you to rate your response from 5 options.
2. Second, you will be given some information about self-efficacy and then asked to respond to a Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale. There are 8 questions. Each question will ask you to rate your response from 5 options.
3. Third, you will be asked to provide demographic information. I will define what I mean by "first-generation," "low-income," "underprepared," and "historically underserved racial/ethnic communities" and ask if you self-identify as belonging to any of those categories.
4. Finally, if you belong to at least one traditionally underserved category (first-generation, low-income, underprepared, and/or African American, Hispanic, and/or American Indian), you will be asked whether you are interested in being interviewed further about your college experience so far and about your experience with specific types of assignments.
5. If you provide your email address, I may contact you with more information and invite you to participate in a follow-up interview. I will randomly select up to 10 interview participants, so you may not be chosen even if you agree to be contacted. Even if you are contacted, you can still say no at any time.
6. You may skip any questions other than the consent agreement. You may stop the survey at any time. You do not have to enter your email address at the end.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

This study poses no more than the minimal risks experienced in day-to-day life.

BENEFITS

Subject Benefits

You may not directly benefit from participation in this study.

Benefits to Others or Society

Your responses may help us learn more about how experiencing Transparent Assignment Design affects students' sense of belonging, which may help improve how faculty design courses and could indirectly help future students succeed in college.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT

Compensation for Participation

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

Costs

There is no cost to you for participation in this study.

WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. There will be no consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Subject Identifiable Data

You may optionally choose to share your email address if you belong to a traditionally underserved category and are willing to consider participating in a follow-up interview. Otherwise, no identifiable data will be collected by this survey.

Data Storage

All data from this survey will be kept in password-protected cloud storage for 3 years after the study's completion, at which time it will be destroyed.

Data Access

The researcher named on the first page of this form will have access to your study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

Data Retention

The researcher intends to keep the research data for approximately 3 years, and then it will be destroyed.

Mandated Reporting

Under California law, the researcher is required to report known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information in the course of conducting this study, they may be required to report it to the authorities.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

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☐ **I agree to participate in the study.**

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Valdosta State University
1500 N Patterson St.
Valdosta, GA 31698
azglover@valdosta.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how students like you experience college and how you think about and react to certain types of assignments.

SUBJECTS

Inclusion Requirements

You are eligible to participate in this study if you:

- Are at least 18 years of age or older;
- Self-identify as belonging to a community that is traditionally underserved in higher education (first-generation college student, low-income, underprepared, and/or African American, Hispanic, and/or American Indian);
- Are enrolled in University 100: The Freshman Seminar at California State University, Northridge, in the Fall 2024 semester.

Exclusion Requirements

You are not eligible to participate in this study if you are under 18 years of age, do not self-identify as belonging to a community that is traditionally underserved in higher education as described above, and/or are not enrolled in University 100: The Freshman Seminar.

Time Commitment

You may be invited to participate in up to three interviews, each about one hour long. If you participate in all three interviews, your participation should take approximately three hours total.

PROCEDURES

The following procedures will occur:

1. We will agree on a mutually convenient time to meet on Zoom, and I will provide you with a Zoom link to use at that time.
2. At the beginning of each Zoom meeting, I will turn on the automatic transcription, begin recording, and then read you a research statement and ask if you have questions. After answering your questions or if you do not have questions, I will ask if you still agree to participate. This step may take only a few minutes, but we will not move on until and unless you feel ready.
3. During our first meeting, I will ask you to choose a pseudonym (a name to use in place of your name to ensure confidentiality). The pseudonym cannot be related to your real name or a nickname that people actually call you. I can also choose a pseudonym for you if you want me to.
4. If you consent to continue, I will ask you questions about your personal story and your experience in college. Questions may cover topics such as your family background, courses you're enrolled in, time management, stressors, emotions, how you approach and think about assignments, use of campus resources such as tutoring, and educational plans. We may explore related topics in the course of our conversation. You may skip any questions you wish or pause or stop the interview at any time. Each interview should take about an hour. I may invite you to up to 3 interviews, for a total of 3 hours.
5. Our second and third interviews will proceed much like the first, if you agree to participate in them. You may stop participating at any time.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

This study poses no more than the minimal risks experienced in day-to-day life. Medical and/or psychological services will not be necessary as a consequence of the study. If I learn that participants need medical or psychological services due to factors outside of the study, I will urge them to dial 911 in an emergency, contact the Klotz student health center for medical assistance, and/or contact UCS for psychological assistance.

BENEFITS**Subject Benefits**

You may not directly benefit from participation in this study.

Benefits to Others or Society

Your responses may help us learn more about how experiencing Transparent Assignment Design affects students' sense of belonging, which may help improve how faculty design courses and could indirectly help future students succeed in college.

ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT**Compensation for Participation**

You will not be paid for your participation in this research study.

Costs

There is no cost to you for participation in this study.

WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time. There will be no consequences. **If you decide to withdraw from this study, please notify me as soon as possible.** I may also end your participation in this study in the unlikely event that your safety and welfare are at risk.

CONFIDENTIALITY**Subject Identifiable Data**

All identifiable information that will be collected about you will be removed and replaced with a code (pseudonym). A list linking the code and your identifiable information will be kept separate from the research data.

Data Storage

All video recordings will be kept on password-protected cloud storage for the short duration of time needed to produce the transcripts. I will destroy video recordings immediately after transcription, which I will complete as soon as possible. All other data will be kept on password-protected cloud storage for 3 years after the study's completion, at which time it will be destroyed.

Data Access

The researcher named on the first page of this form will have access to your study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies you will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about you.

Data Retention

The researcher intends to keep the research data for approximately 3 years, and then it will be destroyed.

Mandated Reporting

Under California law, the researcher is required to report known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information in the course of conducting this study, they may be required to report it to the authorities.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS

If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the first page of this form.

If you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research and Sponsored Programs office, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, by phone at (818) 677-2901 or email at irb@csun.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT

You should not sign this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question or discontinue your involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your relationship with California State University, Northridge. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

___ I agree to participate in the study.

___ I agree to be audio recorded

___ I agree to be video recorded

Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Researcher Signature

Date

Azure Star Glover

Printed Name of Researcher

Appendix C:

Letter of Cooperation

Ms. Tina Wright, Compliance Officer
Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration (OSPRA)
Valdosta State University
1500 N. Patterson Street, Valdosta, GA 31698

Subject: Letter of Cooperation (LOC)

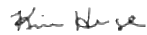
Dear Ms. Wright,

This letter acknowledges the request to conduct research made by Azure Star Glover for the research study entitled "Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design."

I understand the purpose of the study is to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a Freshman Seminar course that implements Transparent Assignment Design. Assuming IRB approval, I agree to forward Prof. Glover's survey link to faculty teaching the Freshman Seminar in the Fall 2024 semester at California State University – Northridge (CSUN), and I understand that Prof. Glover will ask faculty who meet the criteria and agree to participate to forward a second survey to their students. Prof. Glover will then contact up to 10 eligible students who agree to participate with an invitation to be interviewed up to 3 times.

All participation in the research study is strictly voluntary. Participants may withdraw consent at any time during the study with no penalty. Furthermore, there is no penalty for anyone who chooses not to participate. There is no more than minimal risk anticipated for participants. The study is for research purposes only. There will be no benefit for participants in this research study aside from a \$10 gift card offered to interviewees after each interview. All information is confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

Sincerely,



08/15/2024

Authorized Representative Signature

Date

Kim Henige, Ed.D.
AFYE Director

Appendix D:

Faculty Survey

You are being asked to participate in a survey for a research project entitled “Traditionally Underserved Students’ Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design,” which is being conducted by Azure Star Glover, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a Freshman Seminar course that implemented Transparent Assignment Design. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how experiencing Transparent Assignment Design affects students’ sense of belonging. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take less than ten minutes to complete. This survey is confidential. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity unless you provide contact information. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Data collected from this survey will be used to determine eligibility for the next phase of this research study. Data may also be used in future research.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Azure Star Glover** at azglover@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Information: Transparent Assignment Design is an equity implementation designed to make assignments easier for students to understand and complete at a satisfactory level. One basic marker of a TAD assignment is that it has a **purpose, task, and criteria** section.

- 1) The following assignments are already transparently designed and are provided on the shared 2024-2025 Course Content (CC) Canvas site. Please check the box next to any of these assignments you plan to use without major modification. Major modifications would include completely removing the purpose, task, and/or criteria sections:
 - a) Academic Planner Assignment
 - b) Asking for Help Assignment

- c) Self-Report Card
 - d) Attend a Campus Event
 - e) Time Log
 - f) Major Explorations Essay
 - g) My Ideal Career Essay
 - h) Proud Learning Moment Essay
- 2) Do you use Transparent Assignment Design in your Freshman Seminar course?
Please select “Yes, for at least two assignments” if you checked at least two boxes in question one or if you give your students at least two assignments that you’ve designed yourself using the transparency framework (with a purpose, task, and criteria section):
- a) Yes, for at least two assignments
 - i) Would you be willing to forward a recruitment link for my study to your Freshman Seminar students this semester? If yes, please provide your email below. If no, please skip to the next question.
[text box]
 - ii) Would you let me visit your class for about 5 minutes to explain my study and invite your students to participate? Such a visit would need to take place near the beginning of the semester (before week 4).
 - (1) Yes
 - (2) Maybe; you may contact me
 - (3) No
 - b) Yes, but only for one assignment
 - c) I don’t know/I haven’t decided
 - d) No
- 3) Optional: Would you like to provide any additional information, is there anything you think I should know, or do you have any questions (please email azglover@valdosta.edu for urgent questions): [text box]

Thank you for helping me with my research! If you’ve provided contact information, I will be in touch soon. Please feel welcome to email me at azglover@valdosta.edu with any questions.

Appendix E:

Faculty Email

Subject: Please Help Me with My Dissertation: Short U100 Transparent Assignment Survey

Dear U100 faculty,

You are being asked to participate in a survey entitled “U100 Transparent Assignments Survey” which is being conducted by Azure Star Glover, one of your Academic First Year Experiences colleagues and a doctoral student at Valdosta State University: [link]

The purpose of the study is to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a Freshman Seminar course that implemented Transparent Assignment Design. This survey is designed to identify sections of U100 that use at least two transparently designed assignments and that are being taught by faculty who are willing to forward a second survey link to their students.

You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how experiencing Transparent Assignment Design affects students’ sense of belonging. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. **Participation should take less than ten minutes to complete.** This survey is confidential. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity unless you provide contact information. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Azure Star Glover** at azglover@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu. Alternatively, you may contact my supervising faculty, Dr. Gwen Scott Ruttencutter, at gwescott@valdosta.edu.

I am very grateful for your help!

Sincerely,

Star Glover

Appendix F:

Student Email

Dear CSUN Student,

You are being asked to participate in a survey for a research project entitled “Traditionally Underserved Students’ Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design,” which is being conducted by Azure Star Glover, a doctoral student at Valdosta State University: [link]

The purpose of the study is to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a Freshman Seminar course that implemented Transparent Assignment Design. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how experiencing Transparent Assignment Design affects students’ sense of belonging. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take less than twenty minutes to complete. This survey is confidential. No one, including the researcher, will be able to associate your responses with your identity unless you choose to provide your contact information in the last question. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Data collected from this survey will be used to determine eligibility for the next phase of this research study. Data may also be used in future research.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to **Azure Star Glover at azglover@valdosta.edu**. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Thank you for helping me with my research!

Sincerely,

Star Glover

Appendix G:

Invitation to Participate in an Interview

Subject: Invitation to Participate in an Interview

Dear CSUN student,

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design, which is being conducted by Azure Star Glover, a student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a Freshman Seminar course that implemented Transparent Assignment Design. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how experiencing Transparent Assignment Design affects students' sense of belonging. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately one hour for each interview. If you participate in all three interviews, your participation should take approximately three hours total. The interview will be audio recorded to capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the interview recording has been transcribed, the recording will be deleted from recording devices. This research study and your participation will be kept confidential. Your identifiable information will be replaced with a pseudonym in publications or presentations. No one, including the researcher, will associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding, or to skip questions you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Azure Star Glover at azglover@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Interviews are set to take place close to the weeks of October 7, October 28, and November 18.

If you are no longer willing to be interviewed, I would be very grateful if you'd let me know by replying to this email. This will allow me to find other interview participants.

If you are willing to be interviewed, please reply to this email and indicate your availability **around the week of October 7 (October 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, or 12).**

Thank you,
Azure Star Glover

Appendix H:

Interview Protocol

Traditionally Underserved Students' Experiences with Transparent Assignment Design

Setting

I will conduct interviews via the web conferencing software Zoom. I will conduct all interviews in a well-lit, quiet, private room in my home.

Prior to Participant Logging In

I will open the Zoom room a few minutes prior to the scheduled interview time. I will have a document open on my computer to make notes on body language, visual cues, and other information that will aid the transcription process. I will turn on Zoom's captioning function and ensure that it is working. I will turn on Zoom's recording function and ensure that it is recording. I will use my iPhone as a backup audio recording.

Preliminary Engagement

When the participant joins the Zoom room, I will welcome them and re-introduce myself. I will ask what they would like to be called and if they would like to share their pronouns. I will verify that they are joining from a private location and that they are comfortable beginning the interview. If the participant is ready to begin, I will read the introduction.

Introductions

Hello. My name is Star Glover. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research project. The purpose of the study is to explore how first-year college students from traditionally underserved populations describe their sense of belonging as a function of being in a Freshman Seminar course that implemented Transparent Assignment Design. This interview should last approximately 60 minutes and will generally consist of me asking a few questions to guide the conversation.

Informed Consent

Before we get started, please take a few minutes to read over the informed consent document sent earlier via email. I will display it on my screen now. This document explains the study in writing, and your agreement means that you understand what the interview is about and that you have had the opportunity to ask any questions or clarify any concerns you may have about your participation. If you agree, please reply to the email I sent earlier typing your name and stating that you consent to participate.

Recording

I am recording our conversation throughout the interview. The purpose of recording is so that I can focus on our conversation and talk freely now, then review all the details of our conversation later. Everything you say will be kept confidential. I will not share the recordings. I will destroy the recordings 4 years after the study's completion.

Appendix I:

TILT Sample Assignments

Psychology Example (Less Transparent)

PAPER INSTRUCTIONS

Your task is to explore a psychological topic in relation to your life, in a 3-4 page paper. Papers should be (a) double-spaced, (b) 12 pt Times New Roman font, (c) include your name in the header, and (d) a title at the top of the first page. Papers will be graded on the following criteria:

(a) addressing the question / topic, (b) writing quality, (c) integrating outside sources (at least one quality source; if you are not sure whether something is a good source, ask me), and (d) following instructions.

TOPIC:

One of my goals in this course is to introduce students to ideas that can potentially change the way that they view the world. This can relate to any topic in psychology (e.g., how people learn, disorders of the brain, how memory functions, intelligence, what happens when we sleep, personality, how people interact with others, etc.), because psychological research is applicable to so many aspects of human life. Pick something that you have learned in this course that has changed the way you view the world. For example, imagine if on the first day of class I had asked you something like “how does short-term memory work?” and your answer then was very different than what you learned later in the semester from lecture/textbook. Think about the idea more deeply (especially in the context of your life), and apply it to your philosophy of life.

Once you have an idea, describe how you used to think about the topic, discuss the topic itself (i.e., what you learned about it), and then explain how your view has changed going forward. Please be as specific as possible when writing.

You will do this assignment at the beginning of term and again at the end of term.

Psychology Example (More Transparent)

Purpose:

The purpose of this activity is to help you monitor how your beliefs change throughout the semester. To do this, you will do a metacognitive activity (thinking about your own thinking) by answering some questions to document your current beliefs. These questions relate to some of the important topics we will study in this class. Later in the semester, we will look again at your views on these same questions.

Task:

Your task is to answer the following questions based on what you truly think (do not look them up online or in your textbook). After you answer each question, please note how confident you are in your answer (1 = not at all confident, 3 = somewhat confident, 5 = extremely confident).

1. What percent of the brain do people use?
2. When we look at an object, do we always see that object? If yes, why? If not, why not?
3. Why do we dream? What is happening in our minds / brains?
4. Do abilities such as extra-sensory perception (ESP), including reading people's minds or seeing the future, exist?
5. Briefly, how does memory work?
6. Is intelligence an easily measured construct that is stable throughout one's life?
7. Do most people use stereotypes? Do you?
8. Can humans and animals be trained using similar methods? Why or why not?
9. Are most people generally good or generally bad?
10. How can we measure a person's personality? Is it possible?

Your completed assignment should include two or three sentences in response to each question. Bring this write-up with you to the next class and you will pair up with a classmate. When paired up, you will swap papers and read through each other's answers to determine whether you can understand each other's views.

Criteria:

You will be successful in this activity if you can: (a) Provide an answer to all the questions with descriptions that are clear to another reader, and (b) Provide feedback to a classmate about how clearly you can understand their answers.

Science Example (Less Transparent)

SCI 101: Scientific Evidence

Read through your example scientific poster and answer the following questions.

Title of your example poster: _____

1. What is the ethical question that is being asked?
2. What pieces of evidence do they provide in support of and in opposition of their question? In
Opposition: In Support
3. Are the pieces of evidence from peer-reviewed scientific sources (look at the references to be sure)?
4. How are the pieces of evidence presented (numbers, graphs, tables, figures)?
5. How are the pieces of evidence analyzed in the Discussion section?
6. What is the ethical conclusion?
7. Do the pieces of evidence support their conclusion? Why or why not?
8. Are you convinced by their evidence of their ethical conclusion? Why or why not?
9. What questions do you still have after reading this poster? What could they have done better?

Science Example (More Transparent)

Exercise 3: Scientific Evidence

Purpose: The purpose of this assignment is to analyze an existing scientific poster. This will increase your familiarity with how scientific posters are constructed, and will help you later in the course when you research, design, and create your own effective poster with sufficient scientific evidence that supports your conclusion. As a result of completing this assignment, you will be able to identify the sources of scientific information, interpret the results, and critically analyze the scientific merit of the conclusion of an existing scientific poster.

Task: Read through your example scientific poster and answer the following questions.

Title of your example poster: _____

1. Identify the ethical question that is being asked.
2. List the evidence the authors provide in support of **and** in opposition to their question.
3. Examine the pieces of evidence listed in #2 above. Identify whether they are from popular (Pop), scientific peer-reviewed (SPR), or non-scientific peer-reviewed (NSPR) sources, and note each statement above as (Pop), (SPR), or (NSPR). Do you think there is enough scientific evidence from peer-reviewed articles? Why or why not?
4. Describe how the pieces of evidence are presented (e.g., numbers, graphs, tables, figures).
5. Explain how the pieces of evidence are analyzed in the Discussion section.
6. Identify the ethical conclusion.
7. After analyzing the content of the poster, do the pieces of evidence support their conclusion? Explain why or why not.
8. After assessing the scientific merit of their evidence, are you convinced of their ethical conclusion? Explain why or why not.
9. List the questions you still have after reading this poster. What could they have done better?

Criteria: The grade on this assignment will reflect how completely you answer the questions.

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