“Bridge the Gap” with Community: Approaches for Community Building for First-Year Writing Across Two- and Four-Year Colleges

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Contents

Introduction

The topic of community building is often cited in scholarship on writing pedagogy. Scholars claim that the writing and sharing that students do informally as a class creates the ideal conditions for fostering community in the classroom. Some articles suggest that building community in "linked courses" is a way to better support student learning on non-residential campuses, while others state that shared literacy contributes to a sense of community. Perez, Acuña, and Reason recommend encouraging connection and vulnerability through autobiographical reading and writing as a way to cultivate community. Additionally, Gilken and Johnson claim, through quantitative analysis, that students who engage in community-based activities like peer workshop experience a stronger sense of belongingness and positive effects to their learning. There appears to be a shared claim within the literature I read: when instructors intentionally build community in the classroom through instructional activities, students feel a stronger sense of belongingness in the class, which in turn benefits their learning. In my literature review, I outline what various researchers suggest as methods for building community in writing classrooms, building community on nonresidential campuses, and quantifying students' senses of belongingness in the classroom.

For the purpose of this thesis, I not only reviewed literature on the topic of community building, but also conducted virtual interviews with five different writing instructors at Piedmont Valley Community College (PVCC). With the help of my advisor, I designed this series of questions to gain further insight on the role of community building within first year writing classes on nonresidential campuses. First, I asked instructors to describe how community building plays a role in their pedagogy. I then requested that they share some of their methods for creating a sense of belongingness in their classrooms, which ranged from icebreakers to peer

review workshops. Next, I posed a question about any challenges or resistances that instructors may have experienced while attempting to build community through these activities, as well as how they navigated those challenges in the classroom. As a follow up to the previous two questions, I inquired how instructors knew building community was working in their classes and any benefits they had observed. Additionally, I inquired how my interviewees would compare building community within two- and four-year colleges, including how the process might differ in either context. I concluded the series of questions by asking why instructors strive to create community in their classrooms in the first place. Speaking with these instructors enabled me to gain a more nuanced perspective on the impact of community building in first-year composition courses on nonresidential campuses, which is central to my project.

As a graduate student teaching for the first time this year, I was intrigued by the idea of community building because of my investment in the idea of creating a welcoming, inclusive, and engaging classroom environment. In Section III, I compare my experience of teaching two different sections of first-year composition (ENWR 1510: Writing and Inquiry) at UVA during the Fall 2023 and Spring 2024 semesters. First, I describe some of the methods that I used in an effort to foster community in my Fall 2023 class, including an ice breaker activity, a group presentation, and communal rubrics. I then detail how these same activities worked when I implemented them in Spring 2024, noting any modifications that I made to the activity in each iteration. I also assess how these activities compared in both sections and acknowledge the various factors that may have impacted their overall outcome. I reflect on the perceived successes and failures of community building in each respective class in an effort to improve my own developing teaching practices and raise important questions about the role of community building in the classroom. To conclude, I offer some considerations and questions for future

research on the potential benefits of community building and my own takeaways from the experience of attempting to foster community in two sections of first year writing.

Section I: Literature Review

Methods for Building Community in the Writing Classroom

In their article "Informal and Shared: Writing to Create Community," Dean and Warren describe their methods of sharing writing informally to encourage community building within the composition classroom setting. They state that writing with the knowledge that it will be shared encourages the "meaningful interaction and deepened understanding" community requires and can even improve our conditions for learning.[1] Dean and Warren also reference the "specific practices" researchers Quate and McDermott believe contribute to community building. According to Quate and McDermott, communities "share a common purpose, participate in routines and rituals unique to the group, and follow norms of behavior."[2] Dean and Warren claim that informal writing and sharing in class enables these community building practices.

One specific method Dean and Warren use to build community is an activity in which students informally write and share about their "inquiry" or research experiences. Students independently write their responses to the questions, "What does [inquiry] mean to you? When have you used it in relation to writing?"[3] then break into small groups and either swap their writing or read it aloud. Dean and Warren appear to use informal writing to lower the stakes of sharing and create common experiences amongst their students. This method could be useful for bonding students together, especially when introducing a new mode of writing. Though Dean and Warren's questions specifically relate to inquiry- or research-based writing, it seems

[1] Dean and Warren, "Informal and Shared," 50-51.
[2] Dean and Warren, 51.
[3] Dean and Warren, 51.

plausible that instructors could apply this type of questions and activity to different genres and modes of writing. Dean and Warren claim that this activity creates opportunities for students to bond over shared experiences and establish learning as a common purpose. While this may be true for some individuals, they do seem to assume that all students have the same experiences with sharing.

Dean and Warren implement informal writing prompts at the beginning of each class to create a regular class routine, and students share that writing to further their sense of community.[4] The way Dean and Warren stress the connection between informally writing, sharing, and the formation of a community makes me want to re-evaluate the routines and rituals in my own course, especially when it comes to sharing our writing. It could be beneficial to anchor composition courses in a class routine beyond the various discussion formats and written responses students might complete each week. Creating more regular opportunities for students to share could aid in exposing them to one another's informal writing and building their confidence with sharing.

Dean and Warren also suggest daily informal writing entries, or "scribbles"[5] as a method for lowering the stakes of sharing. This form of assessment provides the opportunity for the class to establish norms of behavior through responding to each other's informal writing. Dean and Warren call the daily informal writing entries their students complete "scribbles" instead of "journals" because students associate journals with personal writing, making them feel less inclined to share with their classmates.[6] They note the importance of using a prompt that compels students to write *and* share; their prompts range from inquiry-based questions related to their

[4] Dean and Warren, 52.
[5] Dean and Warren, 53.
[6] Dean and Warren, 53.

assigned reading to writing in response to a piece of art or media they view as a group.[7] Students read their writing aloud in whole or small group settings, or they might swap responses and write a short response back to another student. Structuring class in this way could prompt students to write and share regularly in a way that allows them to learn more about their classmates as learners, writers, and human beings.

Dean and Warren conclude that "sharing is essential to creating community with writing,"[8] and that students' capacities to share grows when instructors create supportive environments to do so. Through reading their methods, I can see real benefits to asking students to write informally with the intention of sharing their writing, as well as practical ways to begin building community in a classroom. Although they situate their proposals within middle and high school education, Dean and Warren do offer accessible methods for community building that can be modified to better fit the needs and time constraints of courses within two- and four-year college composition courses. For example, while a middle or high school course might meet five times per week, college instructors typically spend one to three sessions (or about 150 minutes) per week with each section. It might not be possible to spend as much class time engaging in the informal writing and sharing that Dean and Warren propose due to time constraints/meeting frequency in higher education, but I do think that there could be real benefits to creating a supportive environment that prioritizes sharing informal writing as a frequent class activity.

This article is beneficial to my research because in it, Dean and Warren move past simply arguing for the value of community in a writing classroom and go on to describe practical methods that they use to in their own teaching practices to develop classroom communities. They help answer, at least in part, the question of how we as instructors should structure courses that

[7] Dean and Warren, 53.
[8] Dean and Warren, 53.

prioritize developing a community of writers. One question that we might raise in light of Dean and Warren's research is how the specific community building methods they propose might translate from a middle and high school learning context to higher education, especially with the considerations for actual class time mentioned above. It does seem possible to transfer their suggestions to other contexts, but additional literature might help clarify any limitations.

Methods for Building Community on Nonresidential Campuses

I found that Richard C. Raymond's article, "Building Learning Communities on Nonresidential Campuses," helped me to gain insight into how we might build community on nonresidential campuses within/through introductory composition courses. According to Raymond, students of nonresidential institutions such as community colleges and urban universities often transfer to more traditional four-year institutions or struggle to with learning owing to the lack of built-in community on nonresidential campuses.[9] Students at his nonresidential institution, University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR), are 27 years old on average and usually work full- or part-time jobs off campus, which limits the kind of bonding students on nonresidential campuses can do in comparison to their residential student counterparts.[10] After seeing positive results in studies about other nonresidential institutions, Raymond and his colleagues experiment in creating a "learning community" at their own by linking their courses—Comp I, speech communication, and cultural anthropology—through interrelated themes to "[enrich] learning" in their student population."[11] I'm interested in assessing the potential benefits of the "connected, communal learning"[12] experience that Raymond and colleagues emphasize when advertising the course to eligible students.

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[9] Raymond, "Building Learning Communities on Nonresidential Campuses," 393.
[10] Raymond, 394.
[11] Raymond, 393-4.
[12] Raymond ?.

I could see myself implementing something similar to the initial ice-breaker activity that Raymond describes using as a community-building activity on the first day of his Comp I course in my own future writing classes. To ensure that the class is bonded from the first day, all three instructors as well as an assessment expert attend the first linked session.[13] They provide coffee and donuts (courtesy of a grant budget) and conduct a workshop in which both students and teachers organize themselves based on their birth orders ("Older Children, Middle Kids, Babies, and Onlies") and ask each other related questions. Raymond states that participating in this activity allows students and instructors to break the ice, models "the interconnectedness of speech and composition" (students record their answers on a poster), and "[bonds us] with laughter," allowing the course to focus on content in the following weeks.[14] To me, the potential benefit of this type of ice-breaker is that it allows students to learn about each other while still preserving the course theme and learning as the central goal of the course. Utilizing this type of ice-breaker activity could encourage students to work collaboratively and begin forming a learning community from the first day of class.

For the remainder of the course, Raymond and his colleagues bond students together by creating opportunities for students to establish a learning community, including scheduling writing group days (essentially peer review) and communal reading days. During midterms, their assessment expert, Kathy Frankin, begins meeting with a student focus group outside of class with the promise of free pizza.[15] While Franklin's midterm assessment reveals some negative experiences in the class, including students struggling to find time to meet as groups outside of class, she notes that "they also admitted—now—to seeing their peers as friends, their teachers as

[13] Raymond, 396.
[14] Raymond, 396.
[15] Raymond, 398.

fellow learners, and the classroom far less stratified."[16] While Raymond admits that it will take years of research to confirm the benefits of learning communities relative to previous modes of learning, he is "encouraged" by the results his assessments generate.[17] He notes that most of the portfolios—which include pieces from Comp I, speech, and cultural anthropology as well as a reflective journal and "metacognitive cover essay"—that students complete for a portion of their Comp I grade demonstrates the sense of interconnectedness and "belonging."[18] Raymond concludes with these "impressions" of his findings: that "most first-year students can write and think metacognitively in thematically linked courses."[19]

I think that Raymond's article shows that composition courses that encourage students to work collaboratively as a learning community and celebrate individual voices within that community can help remedy the lack of "built in community" on nonresidential campuses. I can see the benefit of thematically linking courses for this purpose—in linked courses, students spend more time together, so they're able to form stronger bonds around their shared experiences and knowledge. Raymond does make it clear that linked courses demand careful collaboration amongst faculty and administration, and institutional support will dictate whether they are a possibility at each respective institution. Whether courses are linked or not, though, students benefit when we intentionally build community in our classrooms.

Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh also write about the value of promoting community through in the two-year college in their article "Emphasizing 'Community' in the Community College Experience: The Value of a Liberal Arts Education." They claim that their "commitment to create and promote community" in their classrooms distinguishes their approach to liberal arts

[16] Raymond, 398.
[17] Raymond, 399.
[18] Raymond, 400.
[19] Raymond, 401.

education.[20]The authors describe methods for creating community around shared texts in and out of the writing classroom, such as "cold reading."[21] Instructors who model "cold reading" read a text for the first time with their students and "speculate, infer, respond, and reflect" together as a way to create a communal experience around reading.[22] They also describe a campus-wide effort at their institution, Kalamazoo Valley Community College (KVCC), to incorporate a "common reading" (Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*) into twenty composition classes as a way to bring students and faculty together. Faculty organized a "snack food potluck" for current and former reading class students to gather informally and socialize, as well as a visit and talk from Nguyen herself for KVCC's Visiting Writer's Series.[23] If a college can't afford a guest speaker or visiting author, they say, faculty-led programs or student panels are other ways to create shared community and encourage intertextuality.

In the classroom, instructors encourage students to respond to prompts about their own experiences and memories in relation to Nguyen's memoir. They also write that all sections require students to read their first assignment—a one page descriptive/narrative piece—aloud to the class as a way to bond students through a shared experience. In their courses, instructors complete writing activities and assignments with their students, including freewriting, brainstorming, drafting, peer reviewing, and editing. They write that teachers and students sharing their writing as a class is "essential" to bonding as a community.[24] Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh conclude, "By emphasizing both the rigor of *college* and the inclusiveness of *community*, our community colleges can provide students with the benefits of a liberal arts education."[25]

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[20] Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh, "Emphasizing 'Community' in the Community College Experience," 166.
[21] Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh, 169.
[22] Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh, 169.
[23] Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh, 169-70.
[24] Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh, 173.
[25] Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh, 175.

Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh's article could be valuable to my research, but it doesn't fully deliver in terms of the methods that the authors suggest for fostering community. First, they suggest that shared reading contributes to the development of community; most students do share reading in their courses regardless of content, but community doesn't instantly develop through shared literacy alone. Many of the community-building events that they describe also require institutional support, and while they say that faculty-led programs or student panels are other ways to create shared community, I wonder if programs that lack the funding required for visiting authors would experience the same buzz around a common reading text. I also question if we should concentrate our community-building efforts on activities that occur outside of the normal class schedule, which might be a barrier to the many students who have extracurricular responsibilities. In general, I would have liked for Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh to share more about the in-class activities and methods that they and their colleagues draw on to develop classroom communities, as well as more about how their own students respond to the types of community building that they do as a class.

In their article, "Pedagogy of Validation: Autobiographical Reading and Writing Courses for First-Year, Low-Income Students," researchers Perez, Acuña, and Reason analyze how instructor validation as well as self-reflective learning practices influence community building and student learning. They explain that most first-year composition classes often have "unwritten rules" that reflect dominant cultural values (i.e. White, middle- and upper-class), which can cause marginalized students to feel that their "experiences, values, and voices may not be valued in the classroom."[26] They use two theoretical frameworks to guide their inquiry: Rendón's (1994) validation theory and self-reflection for transformative learning. Validation theory suggests that

[26] Perez, Acuña, and Reason, "Pedagogy of Validation, 626."

"institutional agents" (like instructors) are responsible for validating and supporting the success of marginalized students, and that "using culturally relevant curriculum" can help create validating learning environments.[27] They also say that autobiographical writing is self-reflective in nature and "situates [students'] experiences as part of the learning process."[28] This kind of learning can be transformative when low-income or marginalized students are able to affirm their ways of thinking as "valuable" in spite of dominant cultural norms.[29]

Perez, Acuña, and Reason use a social constructivist approach to descriptive embedded case study methodology[30] to gain an understanding of how the important characteristics of the autobiographical reading and writing course "at one institution within a larger programmatic study"[31] impact experiences in the class. In this case, the researchers observe two sections of the "Autobio" course and two autobiographical public readings as well as conduct 30–45-minute interviews with four Autobio course instructors. They also collect "longitudinal digital diary entries" and interviews from two cohorts of students, which they followed over three-years of college.[32] They admit that the transferability of their findings is limited due to their embedded case study methodology; they also didn't observe the courses in their entirety, which limits their insights. One of their findings is that "sharing stories, building relationships, validating experiences" through autobiographical reading and writing builds community.[33] They also find that community building happens when instructors validate students through positive feedback and affirm their experiences in the course content. Finally, critical self-reflection encourages

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[27] Perez, Acuña, and Reason, 627-8.
[28] Perez, Acuña, and Reason, 628.
[29] Perez, Acuña, and Reason, 628.
[30]Scholz and Tietje, *Embedded Case Study Methods*. Scholz and Tietje write that embedded case studies "involve more than on unit, or object, of analysis and use *qualitative* and *quantitative methods.*"
[31] Perez, Acuña, and Reason, "Pedagogy of Validation," 629.
[32] Perez, Acuña, and Reason, 630-31.
[33] Perez, Acuña, and Reason, 633.

students to reflect deeply on their lived experiences and gain a better understanding of themselves, although some students may feel hesitant or resistant towards self-reflection. Perez et al. recommend "moving towards strength-based approaches that attend to students' stories as part of the teaching and learning process" as a way to better support marginalized and low-income college students.[34]

It seems that autobiographical and reflective writing could be useful for encouraging the formation of communities in writing classrooms, especially since some of the most rewarding activities in the classroom allow us to learn something about one another as individuals. However, I'm concerned with the level of vulnerability that we require of students when we ask them to share personal stories or details frequently in class. Instructors described increasing the intensity and depth of the narratives they shared gradually, as well as modelling sharing their own narratives to increase comfortability with being vulnerable. I want to point out that it is much less risky for an instructor to be vulnerable than it is for a student due to the instructor's position of authority in the classroom. Some students may find it empowering to share their deeply personal stories and struggles with the class, but other students may feel pressured to publicize private, even traumatic experiences they would rather not expose to their classmates, which could lead to a detrimental or traumatic experience in itself. Autobiographical reading and writing could be valuable tools for creating community in a writing classroom. We should be conscious, though, of exactly how vulnerable we ask students to be when writing and sharing their autobiographical narratives.

Measuring "Belongingness" in Classroom Communities

[34] Perez, Acuña, and Reason, 638.

Gilken and Johnson claim that engaging in peer feedback is a valuable method for strengthening students' sense of belonging and promoting their academic success in their article "Supporting Belongingness Through Instructional Interventions in Community College Classroom." Students participate in a Communities of Practice (CoP) during the "peer feedback writing intervention", which "[promotes] the learning of the participants and…[fosters] their participation as active contributors to the learning community."[35] Using Rovai's (2002) Classroom Community Survey, they examine how "content-based peer feedback writing intervention[s]" contribute to community college students' "feelings of belonginess" and academic writing skills in "remedial" first-year composition courses.[36] Six of the twelve total sections that participated in the study were assigned the peer feedback intervention, while the other six continued using self-editing interventions. Students completed a pretest of the Classroom Community Survey during week five, then as a posttest again at week eight, when students hand in their final drafts. Their data analysis reveals that students in the peer feedback intervention groups experienced greater gains in "feelings of belongingness" than the control groups.[37]

The authors expand on the current literature about community building in higher education by highlighting "the connection between 'doing' and 'being,' i.e., the notion that authentic, active engagement in the community nurtures [students'] individual sense of belongingness."[38] They suggest using instructional interventions like "content-based peer feedback" because interventions that encourage dialogue around course content appear to better

[35] Gilken and Johnson, "Supporting Belongingness Through Instructional Interventions in Community College Classrooms," 32-3.
[36] Gilken and Johnson, 35.
[37] Gilken and Johnson, 41.
[38] Gilken and Johnson, 43.

promote a sense of belongingness and positively affect learning.[39] Content-based peer feedback also forms "information networks" that support academic writing skills (and possibility the formation of an "academic identity") and contribute to feelings of belongingness.[40] Creating an academic community of practice supports the development of academic and nonacademic social skills "appear to create a pathway for college success."[41]

Gilken and Johnson's article is helpful to my research because it quantifies the connection between students' sense of belonging in their academic communities and their active contribution to the knowledge-making that occurs in those communities. I wonder how adapting the questions from Rovai's Classroom Community Scale to a short-answer response format might further develop our understanding of the impact of community building on feelings of belongingness and academic writing skills. We could learn about students' experiences through a more qualitative approach like written responses because writing gives students an opportunity to reflect on and share the nuances of their experiences in the classroom. Instructors might use a set of written response questions near the beginning of the course and again near the end to gauge the impact of the instructional interventions in my course on student's feelings of belongingness.

Section II: Building Community in Two-Year College Writing Classrooms

Scott Weaver

I interviewed Scott Weaver, an Associate Professor of English at PVCC, about the role of community building in his pedagogy.[42] When I asked how community building contributes to his pedagogy, Weaver said that community building is a key part of his pedagogy and practice.

[39] Gilken and Johnson, 43.
[40] Gilken and Johnson, 44.
[41] Gilken and Johnson, 44.
[42] Scott Weaver, interview by Olivia Barrett, February 28, 2024, interview 1, Zoom video and audio recording.

Weaver said his only goal for the first day of class was to get students to feel more comfortable in the classroom and to create a sense of belonging amongst his students. In the first four or five weeks of class, he encourages students to continue introducing themselves to group members so that students learn each other's names. During that first class, he asked students to read three published pieces of writing in different styles, genres, and tones, and make quick assessments about which of them qualifies as "good writing."[43] He then arranged them into groups, where they established "roles" such as "group leader," "note taker," etc. To establish in-group roles, students shared answers to "arbitrary" questions that Weaver designed as a way to increase students' sense of familiarity and comfort with each other before they share their opinions about the initial pieces of writing. Groups responded to questions such as: Who woke up the earliest this morning? Who was born the furthest distance away from campus? When was the last time you saw a movie in a theater? Weaver expressed that he often uses the think-pair-share model in class so that students not only engage in discussions about the assigned text, but also get to know each other a little better. He said that asking students to share their experiences and points of view so that when difficult topics and disagreements inevitably come up, students do so as a developed community.

I asked Weaver if the questions that he shared are related in any way to the reading material they discuss as a class. He said that the only purpose of the questions is to get students to share a little bit about their lives with one another. Using the question, "When did you wake up this morning?" as an example, he explained that the question encouraged students to talk about aspects of their lives outside of academics. A student might say that they woke up at 5 a.m. to go to the gym or drop their kids off at daycare, revealing much more about the student's life

[43] Scott Weaver, email message to the author, March 18, 2024

than one might initially expect from that question. Starting on the first day of class, he wanted to encourage students to have conversations that have nothing to do with the course material but everything to do with students feeling like they belong, that they know their fellow students and their instructor. When we don't form and strengthen these kinds of bonds in introductory courses, students may be more likely to "fade away from the college," as Weaver put it. He added that the questions students respond to in group settings or in writing enable him to get to know them as individuals and understand what it is they bring to their assignments.

When I asked about the challenges of building community, Weaver was open about the resistance he experienced. He mentioned shyness, inexperience with sharing personal details in a group, and discomfort around "touchy-feely…[exercises]" as reasons for why students may be resistant to sharing. Weaver also noted that students who are neurodiverse or on the spectrum often relate to their classmates differently and may be unable to participate in every "interactive" activity. In any case, he explained how he navigates student resistance by simply allowing students to do what makes them comfortable. He said he tries to create a space with multiple, differentiated opportunities for students to interact to their own comfort. He also claimed that, when doing personal writing activities, he always informs students of their "audience" so that they can dictate the information they share.

Weaver said that while the model he now uses has been central to his pedagogy for years, he can't quantitatively measure how well community building is working in his class. He expressed knowing a community is forming qualitatively when he walks into class and students are sitting together and talking (or even talking while he's talking). He gave an example of two students in his current composition course who are both English language learners; they started out in very different physical places in the classroom, but now they sit near each other and leave

class together. He also mentioned observing students getting to know each other through common interests and forming study groups for other shared courses. While Weaver remarked that he could see connections forming amongst his students in these ways, he also wasn't sure his methods had any amount of influence on these relationships. With this statement in mind, he said he has tried to create a space or community in class that allows student connections to form more easily.

I also asked Weaver if building community is different in two- and four-year institutions. Weaver responded that while he has limited experience teaching in four-year colleges, the community building was usually a bit easier in those instances because students often (but not always) come from similar backgrounds and share a culture on campus that helps to foster community. In contrast, community colleges are usually nonresidential, commuter schools, so students tend to leave as soon as classes finish. Weaver claimed that the primary way that students experience community at nonresidential institutions is in the classroom, so instructors at community colleges need to be more intentional about community building and start laying foundations early. He said research shows that creating a sense of belonging is crucial to retention and eventual completion, particularly in the first year of community college. Weaver suggested two additional reasons for striving to build community in the classroom. First, he noted how community helps students to expand their worldviews through "learning about different experiences and thinking outside of [their] own."[44] Second, Weaver claimed that community helps students learn. He said that students feeling comfortable within a group or space cultivates security and a sense of belonging, and that that sense of belonging is conditional to acquiring new knowledge and experiences. Weaver conveyed doing his best to inform his

[44] Scott Weaver, email message to the author, March 18, 2024.

students about what they can expect from every class on the very first day—that students will write something, read something, move around the room, and talk with each other.

I think the qualitative evidence Weaver provided during our interview suggests that his methods do, on some level, strengthen his classroom communities. Weaver seems to begin building community on the first day of class—not only through reading and writing, but also in asking students to share about their lives and perspectives. Weaver uses similar methods to what Dean and Warren suggest in their article, including asking his students to repeat the process of reading, writing, and sharing informally in large and small groups during almost every class session. I do appreciate how Weaver acknowledged that students may struggle with sharing for a variety of reasons and provides differentiated opportunities for students to share writing and get to know one another. This interview also confirmed Raymond's suggestion that building community on nonresidential campuses is intrinsically more challenging; Weaver emphasizes the importance of utilizing time in class to build relationships in introductory courses because community college students don't have the same kind of "built in community" as their residential counterparts. Fostering senses of belonging and forming meaningful connections is crucial to retaining community college students and ultimately improving their conditions for learning.

Bill Edwards

Bill Edwards is an adjunct instructor of English at PVCC. Edwards said that he builds community in his classroom through a few key methods.[45] During the first class, Edwards assigned students to random groups by picking names out of a hat, then asked them to come up with a creative and fun name for their groups. Students in these groups usually stay together, but his students are also used to him rearranging their groups if a student is missing that day or drops

[45] Bill Edwards, interviewed by Olivia Barrett, February 29, 2024, interview 2, Zoom video and audio recording.

the class. He also mentioned peer reviewing their essays as a way to create a sense of community. He said that through this exercise, students realize that they can no longer "keep their compositions hidden anymore" and become more aware of their audiences when they do peer review. He also claims that students are able to get to know each other better once they've gotten more accustomed to sharing.

Edwards also shared that the choice of assignments in his classes contribute to a sense of community. When one of his "developmental writing" classes developed an interest in writing about food and food deserts last semester, he designed a project in which students developed print and online educational materials about nutrition for elementary and middle schools. He took students on a tour of the food bank located at PVCC and arranged for the director of the PVCC food bank, a PVCC nutritionist, and representatives of the Blue Ridge Area food bank to speak with the class. They wrote presentation scripts, informational brochures, and text for the presentation itself. At the end of the semester, faculty from the college attended the class's presentation. Additionally, he also assigned smaller projects like registering to vote and creating a set of instructions on how to do so. Students worked together in groups divided by county to create voter registration instructions for the communities that they live in. In both examples, it seems these community engagement-focused writing projects could be a method for bonding students to their classmates and local communities through shared experience and purpose. Edwards claimed student learning is enhanced when they have the opportunity to apply their assignments to situations and events within their communities. He said students often wish to consider and convey this connection between their academic work and their community once it is made.[46]

[46] Bill Edwards, email message to the author, March 24, 2024.

Edwards said his most frequent challenge in building community is anticipating which students might attend during specific activities like peer review. He explained that he tries to encourage students to participate by awarding participation grades to those who attend class. However, he admitted that that method doesn't always work as well as he would like. Some students "just don't want to do it" he said, and that he finds it challenging when students "don't want to learn." It doesn't seem that Edwards intends to adjust his method of awarding "points" to students that attend and participate in peer review activities, and I wonder if there might be alternative ways to motivate more "resistant" students to participate.

I asked how Edwards observes that his community building efforts are working. He responded that he intentionally uses the groups he creates to benefit students with documented learning disabilities, noting that other student's "generosity" helps those students to thrive better in the classroom. One benefit that he notes is that students who might otherwise struggle academically receive support and encouragement from their classmates in learning the material. I then asked Edwards to speak more about his general student population. He said that he sees community building happening when students working in groups start to joke with and tease one another. I think back to how Raymond cites bonding through laughter as a way of community building. Students actually have to get to know each other to be comfortable enough to playfully poke fun, and it seems like an opportunity to bond students together similarly to how Raymond describes it.

I'm most interested in how Edwards' response to the final question contrasts that of my previous interviewee. Edwards told me about his background in four-year institutions as a faculty member in the Public Relations department at Virginia Commonwealth University. Interestingly, he said that he found community building to be more difficult in four-year institutions because of

the frequency in which students run into each other outside of class. I told him that I often hear the opposite—that community building is more difficult in nonresidential schools—and followed up by asking him why he thinks this is the case. He shared that students at residential institutions like VCU usually only have one class together due to the size of the student population. Edwards claims that the students he encountered at VCU were less likely to take more than one course together in comparison to his students at PVCC. Like Weaver, he sometimes observes his composition students talking about their work for another course during breaks. Edwards said that the relatively small size of the community college campus makes students more likely to interact with each other and get to know one another.

After interviewing Edwards, I find myself asking additional questions about his methods for building community. Emphasizing group work in class might create the right conditions in which students are more likely to engage with each other and thus develop community, but I'm wondering if and how peer review specifically impacts the instructor's ability to build community. I'm not certain peer review itself contributes to a sense of community; rather, students strengthening community through learning more about each other, possibly because of something that another student wrote, seems more likely to me. Another consideration I might raise is whether we should rely on our general student population to support students with formal accommodations. When instructors ask students with lower support needs to assume a "helper" role for students who may need more support, we risk overburdening those students and even overlooking them. Finally, I want to consider how instructors who struggle with resistance towards community-building activities (like peer review) might encourage their resistant students to attend. Based on what Edwards said about his challenges with some students resisting peer review, it seems clear that not all students respond to the promise of earning participation points.

While I can't say for certain what might motivate each individual student, I wonder if explaining to students how working together in groups, peer reviewing, and building connections with their classmate directly benefits them/their learning would contribute to overall engagement.

My interview with Edwards did, in some ways, complicate my own perception of building community on nonresidential campuses. Weaver asserted that it is more difficult building community on nonresidential campuses, yet Edwards raised a compelling point about how relative student population and campus size contribute to a sense of community and belongingness. His point that his students seem more familiar as a result of sharing multiple classes together immediately reminds me of the kind of "linked" courses or learning communities that Raymond notes as benefiting students in his nonresidential college. While courses at PVCC aren't formally linked, it seems like sharing more than one class could contribute to stronger bonds between those students. I'm interested in tracing how individual instructors perceive the relative ease or challenges of building community at residential and nonresidential institutions.

Justin Wert

I also spoke with Justin Wert, an Associate Professor of English who teaches first-year composition courses (English 111/ 112) and writing-intensive literature courses at Piedmont.[47] In response to my question about the role of community building in his pedagogy, he said he emphasizes "process" in the classroom as a way to develop community. He explained that when his students work on writing during class time, he works on writing with them. Much of the writing they do in English 111 is narrative, observational, or otherwise "informal" or "non-academic." Wert said he typically shares what he's written with his class, not as a way to show

[47] Justin Wert, interviewed by Olivia Barrett, February 29, 2024, interview 3, Zoom video and audio recording.

his students how they "should" write, but rather to demonstrate the idea that they are all writers. Wert stated, "The idea of community building is really about building a team," emphasizing this idea that he and students support each other out the writing process. Everyone on the team helps one another, plays certain roles, and learns through the process together. He described prioritizing workshops during class time so that his all students (many of whom have responsibilities outside of courses) have the best tools to complete their work and learn.

Wert detailed using methods like sharing informal writing, paired discussions, and peer review workshops as ways to build community in his courses. At the beginning of each unit, Wert said that he provides students with "introductory material" on pre-writing and the topic they're writing about. He noted consistently using "summary-response" method during class time as a way to build community. Using summary-response—which Wert says can be applied to any topic, assignment, or essay (other than personal narratives, which he wants them to write themselves)—students compose one paragraph that summarizes what the text says, and another with their own observations and thoughts about the text. He claimed this method encourages his students to be aware that they're all doing the same thing as a class; he often shares practical examples of his own summary of the text they read as a class, his observations about that text, and how he might use what he wrote to build a proposal. He typically pairs students up into groups of two, admittedly to simplify group dynamics and mitigate any issues with the number of students in attendance and asks them to discuss their informal writing and responses. Wert also noted many first-year students, especially students who are returning to classes, feel or are inexperienced as writers. For that reason, his class spends a lot of time sharing real-life examples of when, where, and how they write. In addition, Wert frequently uses workshops as a way for his class to share in the writing process. He said his students' peer review workshops will

typically begin during one class and extend through the next. On workshop days, students have time to work towards completing their in-progress drafts or peer reviews with their classmates. They can then exchange contact information and complete peer reviews outside of class or during the beginning of the following class. It seems that Wert uses this type of peer review model as a way to acknowledge that his students are not all in the same place in their own writing processes and better support their learning.

The challenges Wert mentioned seem to center around the fact that many of his students have extracurricular responsibilities—like work and family—that can detract from the time they have to do work outside of class. When his students discussed when, where, and how they write, Wert shared strategies that students can use to write when it feels like they don't have time. He suggested his students download a voice memo app so that they're able to write on the go, a strategy that may not seem apparent or valid without an instructor's suggestion. Wert recognized how many of his students have limited time to devote to writing outside of class, so utilizing class time to writing and workshopping as well as being flexible with writing deadlines are some of the best ways to support his students. He said using "artificial deadlines" in his class—which means starting an assignment during class but giving students additional time outside of class to complete it—gives students a sense that their assignments aren't "all or nothing." In Wert's opinion, using an "all or nothing" approach is particularly detrimental to first year students because they "too often just give up." Wert claimed that some students would rather accept a zero on their assignment than potentially embarrass themselves by sharing something incomplete and concludes that the method he's adopted works better than previous models he's used.

Wert expressed that his community building efforts are most noticeable between students in his English 111 and English 112 sections. A lot of students who take his English 111 class in

the fall also take his English 112 class in the spring; he said that he's able to see that most of the students from the previous class are comfortable and doing well in the subsequent course. Wert has observed his repeat students helping new students in English 112 with understanding the class culture: that they're going to get things done as a team. He also said purposefully teaching these courses in succession has allowed him to see when he's reached a core of group of students who move from English 111 to English 112. He said that a large part of this is getting students trust in the writing process and to buy in to the idea they're all on the same team together, that they're all writers who are doing the same things. He mentioned here that some students resist these ideas because they don't believe their writing requires any major changes, if any at all, but it varies from student to student. For the most part, though, a good many of his students, especially once they get to English 112, are motivated. Wert found when his students have a "system," they can more easily find success in the course even with demanding school and work schedules. He further explained that this system involved emphasizing writing as a process (rather than as a product) from the beginning of the course, which included creating a system of writing process steps to generate, revise, and submit documents. Additionally, he claimed that this system helps increase his students' confidence as writers and reinforces confidence and skills within more advanced writers.[48]

Wert also discussed the differences in building community in two- and four-year colleges. He shared his experience with teaching composition and literature at both two- and four-year institutions, including the University of Mississippi, Northwest Mississippi Community College, the College of Charleston, and Limestone College. Using the College of Charleston as an example, he said that students in his composition classes at four-year institutions were typically

[48] Justin Wert, email message to the author, March 19, 2024.

much more confident in themselves as writers than his students in community colleges or night classes. While this confidence could be beneficial at times, about half of those students also resisted making revisions. Wert didn't claim that community building is inherently easier in four-year colleges, but he said that residential students have more "natural" opportunities to connect with classmates due to proximity. Students at community colleges, in contrast to students at residential colleges, come and go from campus, so they often get to know each other through classes, clubs, and school events. Though technology now makes it easier to continue working with classmates outside of the traditional classroom, working together in class arguably becomes more important for students in community college because of their more limited opportunities to build community outside of class. Wert

One aspect of Wert's practices that seems to work particularly well is the promotion of the idea that he and his students are all a team of writers. Wert seemed think that his practice of consistently writing and sharing with his class, something that Almeda and Stotz-Ghosh recommend, positively contributed to the classroom community because his students were able to see evidence of his full investment in the writing process and the idea that they are all writers. Though I can't draw any conclusions about his claim, I do value his perspective as an experienced composition instructor. One of Wert's most intriguing observations was that the success of his community building becomes the most evident in tracking students between English 111 and 112. Students who were in a previous section of his class often take up the work of making community by welcoming new students and introducing them to the community's norms, values, and purposes. Wert's English 111 and 112 sequence does, in some ways, remind me of the "linked" courses or learning communities that Raymond describes in his articles. While not all instructors may have the institutional support to link courses or intentionally

sequence them as Wert does, there seem to be clear benefits when students continue to learn in familiar group contexts. Community building in one class may prove beneficial to student learning outcomes, but learning communities may be even more beneficial for supporting learning because students can build familiarity with each other over a longer period of time.

Jennifer Koster

Jennifer Koster is a Professor of English at PVCC who also serves as Director of the college's Writing Center.[49] She teaches the college's introductory composition course, ENGL 111, creative writing, American literature, and a course called EDE 111. EDE 111, she said, is a composition "support course" for incoming first-year students with lower GPAS (2.0-2.9) that incorporates embedded tutors[50]. Though she previously taught ENGL 112, an argumentative writing course, she noted that she discontinued teaching the course due to tense political climate following the 2016 presidential election. She spoke with me about how she builds community in her ENGL 111 and EDE 111 composition courses.

Koster said that community building really is significant in her class and that she spends most of the first two weeks "laying groundwork." She claimed that students are more likely to attend class when she creates a sense of belonging in the course; Koster ensures that everyone in the class knows each other's names. In the past, the first day of her class has served as an introduction to one another and the course rather than as a syllabus review day. She noted that her students all make and decorate placards, which feature their names and pronouns, that she passes out and collects during each class (even when they no longer need them) as a way to emphasize learning names and keep attendance. She also mentioned how, especially in the first

[49] Jennifer Koster, interviewed by Olivia Barrett, March 13, 2024, interview 4, hand-written notes.
[50] Embedded tutors are, essentially, writing tutors employed at the institution who are attached to (usually "stretch" or supplemental) first-year composition courses. They help support students in the course by assisting them during workshops or even facilitating brief lessons.

several weeks, she frequently reconfigures the class into different groups so that students build familiarity; she did say this works less well with some classes after they've built some relationships with other students and may reconfigure students less over time. Koster said building community is especially important for her EDE 111 students because many lack confidence when they come into the course and need support to feel they can succeed. Additionally, she noted difficulties with teaching her courses, especially EDE 111, have appeared since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Koster, students in her "entry-level" classes post-pandemic are not as used to assignment deadlines, have spottier attendance, and are "less resilient" due to a rise in mental health issues.

Koster relayed how she incorporates paired and group activities into each class and described an activity she used on the first day this semester. In this activity Koster called "inside-outside," students each received a blank envelope containing a slip of paper with five questions (e.g., What is something that you love? What is something that bothers you?). After students wrote down answers to the questions inside the envelope, they described themselves on the outside of the envelope; Koster told them to pretend they're describing themselves for someone they've never seen, and that person is picking them up at the airport. Once students described themselves, Koster collected envelopes from half of the class and swapped them with the envelopes from the other half of the class. Then, students were tasked with finding one another based on the description outside of their envelope. Once students found each other, they were able to introduce themselves and talk about what was on the inside of their envelopes. Students kept their own envelopes throughout their personal narrative unit and continued to add to them: they addressed the envelopes and added art. Students also did "private writing," in which students reflected on more personal topics such as social class, that seemed to be inspired by

their "inside-outside" envelope projects. Koster got the idea for this activity from a book called *Waking Up White*, and she used the concept of what's on the inside versus what's on the outside as an entry point into personal writing.

Koster also mentioned using an activity that she called "Eagles and Hawks" as a way to encourage students to move around the room. Students will take time to write an "IOU"—a response in which they note what is interesting or useful to them about a piece of writing—that they will then share with their classmates. Students typically write these "IOUs" in response to selections from writing craft books that Koster selects. When students are finished writing, the "eagles" will fly to the "hawks" and share their writing for two minutes, after which "hawks" fly to another "eagle." The class repeats this process until students have spoken with at least three or four of their classmates. Koster noted that many of the informal writing activities (like "Eagles and Hawks") that she's used in class are from Elbow and Belanoff's book *Sharing and Responding*. She said that her class practices their writing techniques in small groups, using informal responses as a way to move towards their formal writing assessments, including a personal narrative and annotated bibliography.

I asked Koster about whether she faces any challenges with building community in the classroom, and she responded that shy or introverted students present the most challenges to building community in her classroom. Koster said that it's important for more shy or introverted students to "find their people" within her classroom and added that the "chit chat" about unrelated topics that happens during group activities is actually part of building community. Koster also noted that some students were nervous to share their writing out loud with classmates, but most expressed feeling more comfortable after completing a full "feedback cycle" in her course. She explained that in her class, students spend two back-to-back days in

assigned peer review groups. During those days, students read first and second drafts from each group member and provide comments. Koster said she comments on the third draft, wherein students receive a "ghost grade"[51] that they can improve upon. She also comments on the fourth draft and assigns a final grade. She suggested doing this in part because she noticed her students who have already received feedback before peer review sometimes end up resisting their instructor's advice, as they may be friends and want to preserve one another's feelings. Koster also mentioned being intentional when planning formal workshops; her students provided a list of three classmates they'd like to be in a group with ahead of workshop, and she guaranteed that she'll honor one of their preferences. She said when she does compose groups, she tries to spread out students who appear to be struggling or less motivated as well as students who may be so affirmative that they struggle with offering critiques. She also honors when students with interpersonal problems would prefer not to work with each other. Koster asserted students in Composition I are in a new place, so it's important to be careful about how students develop academically within the classroom.

Koster stated she's able to see qualitative evidence of community building in her classroom through reflections that she assigns at midterms and again at the end of the course. Her students write in these reflections that they made friends in the course and look forward to seeing them during class time. She said some students have said that hers is the only class where they know everyone's name. Koster shared some interesting community dynamics that she recently observed in her classes. In one case, she said a group of students in her class formed friendships that extended to texting outside of class. When a fellow student in her class started sitting at a table with them, she noticed that the group moved to a different table during the next

[51] A temporary grade that does not impact the student's final grade in the course. This mark is ultimately replaced with a final, permanent grade after a revision period.

class. This highlights an unexpected negative outcome of community building. One positive outcome of fostering interpersonal relationships in the classroom that Koster offered is that students in her class show up for their friends. She said that while some students don't mind submitting work late to a teacher, they often don't want to disappoint their friends in the class by not completing their assignment—a kind of positive peer pressure.

Compellingly, Koster claimed that the way she teaches as a community college instructor is a reaction to how instructors taught her as an undergraduate student at UVA. Grades in these classes were typically comprised of two graded assignments and a final exam; she said her professors expected her to submit "thoughtful" written assignments, but she never received the kind of formal writing instruction that taught her how to develop those ideas in writing. As a result, she said she is much more "intentional" about building a community in her classroom. Koster reported that she doesn't really see a difference between building community in two- and four-year institutions, and that instructors in both contexts are using active learning increasingly, especially in English and composition. She noted that asking students in EDE 111 how the course fits into their larger academic purpose seemed beneficial to their development as students.

Finally, Koster stated that she strives to build community with her students because it helps them to learn more effectively. She referenced "Glasser's control theory" (or, Glasser's choice theory)[52] as a key framework in her pedagogy. Koster claimed the most significant learning takes place when we learn about ourselves. While she said that she can't say for certain, she finds learning to be more meaningful when it happens within a community. When we learn in community, we're able to see models for how we might approach a task or examples of what not

[52] Gabriel and Matthews, "Choice Theory: An Effective Approach to Classroom Discipline and Management." According to Choice Theory, developed by William Glasser, basic needs such as survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun dictate human behavior. He theorized that people make choices based on their own individual feelings and needs rather than due to external circumstances.

to do. In addition, she noted that sharing writing often helps students stay motivated in the course. Koster said that while most students see peer workshop as receiving feedback on their own work, many don't realize that they're also actively internalizing expectations for writing and learning to anticipate their readers when they engage in group feedback like peer review workshops. Finally, she said students at community colleges coming from different walks of life may factor into the importance of building community in the classroom.

After speaking with Koster, I admire the way that she seems to be very intentional with incorporating community-building activities that require students in her class to learn actively. I could certainly see myself using something similar to the "inside-outside" activity that Koster described, as I think that it encourages students to learn more about themselves and their classmates, as well as build comfort around sharing with classmates. In addition, I think that the "eagles and hawks" activity she detailed could be useful for encouraging students to continue collaborating with and getting to know their classmates throughout the semester. I'm interested in what Koster said about the relationships that form in her classroom concerning the potential challenges within developing communities. In one of the examples she provided, a group of friends moved tables to avoid including a fellow classmate in their conversations. Her anecdote suggests to me that while we often discuss the positive effects of friendships forming in the classroom, tight friendships can lead to the exclusion of others. While I'm not sure how we should address this problem as instructors, it's worth thinking about how we can prevent this kind of exclusion in the classroom. During our conversation, I found it intriguing that Koster said that she doesn't see much of a difference between building community in two- and four-year contexts, and this seems to be in response to the way that she experienced a lack of community in the classroom as an undergraduate student. Her position on community building tells me that

although many instructors at residential institutions may believe that community building "naturally" happens in this context, it is nevertheless important that writing instructors in all educational contexts make efforts to create a sense of belonging in their classrooms.

Manon Ehrlich

Manon Ehrlich is an Assistant Professor of English at Piedmont Valley Community College. Ehrlich currently teaches PVCC's required composition courses, English 111 and 112.[53] In addition to in-person sections of English 111 and 112, Ehrlich also teaches an online, asynchronous course and an in-person course at the Fluvanna County Women's Correctional center. Ehrlich said building community in an asynchronous, online classroom is specifically more challenging because her students lack face to face interaction. Ehrlich shared regularly uploads videos of herself to her class Canvas page and frequently reaches out to students in an effort to connect with them. Ehrlich also described how the class that she teaches at the women's correctional center greatly differs from her other courses due to highly restricted access to technology. In this course, students must handwrite assignments and are unable to communicate with their instructors outside of class time, so the time they spend together in-person is crucial to student success. We primarily focused on her efforts to build community in her more traditional in-person classes, but it's worth noting that Ehrlich teaches in a variety of contexts. Community building plays a significant role in Ehrlich's pedagogy, she said, because it enables her to "bridge the gap" between a wide range of needs and experiences she has seen within her students.

Ehrlich's methods for building community in the classroom involve using active learning[54] activities, including writing prompts, sharing, group work. She said that she scaffolds

[53] Manon Ehrlich, interviewed by Olivia Barrett, March 13, 2024, interview 5, Zoom video and audio recording.
[54] "Active Learning." Active learning occurs through instructional activities that engage students in learning beyond reading, listening, and memorizing. It often involves group work or pairs as well as independent activities like written reflections.

activities in her lessons so that students develop necessary skills for their assignments. Ehrlich noted their classes often start with responding to a short writing prompt about a specific topic and used the question "What comes to mind when you think of plagiarism?" as an example. She emphasized the importance of giving students "choices" like writing on paper versus a laptop, as students may prefer one medium over the other for a variety of reasons (including accommodations). Students quickly discussed what they wrote with a partner once they finished responding, then Ehrlich gave a "mini lecture" about plagiarism. Her "mini lectures," she said, *never* run longer than five minutes, as students tend to lose focus after that point. After lecturing, she used two video examples—Melania Trump's speech that garnered accusations of plagiarism in 2016, and a similar speech Michelle Obama delivered in 2008—as textual examples for a guided class discussion on plagiarism. Ehrlich emphasized always using visual aids on the board like videos, PowerPoints, or worksheets to guide students through instructional activities.

To cultivate a sense of belonging in the classroom, Ehrlich expressed that she often asks students to share their writing in groups. Since sharing formal writing during draft workshops can be intimidating to students, Ehrlich said that her students share informal pieces of writing with their classmates early in the semester. One activity she claimed was effective in her own classroom involved students writing and sharing with the entire class in what she described as a "go-around" activity. For this activity, students spent time writing to a short prompt, usually something more personal, and took turns reading what they wrote aloud. She also asked students to take notes while their classmates shared their writing in order to be more active listeners. Ehrlich said she tried to insist with her class that there is no judgment when sharing their "raw, unedited writing," and the focus of their comments should be on the ideas rather than spelling or grammar. Students then went back around the room and offered only positive verbal feedback on

two to three of their peer's writing. She admitted that the whole group setting can be intimidating, but the activity seems to work well since students are able to draw more from personal experience. Ehrlich suggested that this process of informally writing and sharing as a class helps to "demystify" the writing process, as students are able to see that most writing isn't great in the beginning.

Moreover, Ehrlich mentioned that her students always write short thank you cards to each of their group members after peer review workshops. Students say something that they appreciated about their group members, such as comments on their outline. The purpose of this activity, she said, is that students become aware of writing to one another and are able to somewhat strengthen their bonds. She said that her students frequently do activities in small groups, including informally writing and sharing. Ehrlich also clarified that students only share with the entire class during the previously mentioned "go-around" activity and that they always know their audience before they begin writing. She claimed that sharing writing can be additionally benefit to students in that it allows them to see how others in the class interpret the prompt.

Ehrlich stated that "flexibility" is how she has navigated the challenges of building community. Ehrlich recognized that community building can be more challenging in some classes than others and used her two in-person classes as examples. She observed that students in one of her classes seemed comfortable talking with one another and switching up group members, whereas students in the other section were quieter and much more hesitant about sharing. To mitigate this fear of sharing, Ehrlich said that she tells her students that they'll share for no more than two minutes. She also said that being flexible means always having another option when going into class activities. In one activity that she recently tried, she planned to have

students generate a list of keywords on their topic using ChatGPT. ChatGPT wouldn't work for about half of the students on their laptops, though, so Ehrlich adapted by asking students to work with a partner, brainstorm another part of their writing, or conduct an independent database search. She also said that it's important to adjust to the individual classroom, as some classes may need more time with certain activities than others. In addition to technology issues, she expressed that tired and/or unprepared students also present a challenge within a classroom. Many of Ehrlich's students have responsibilities outside of class—families, jobs, and "difficult personal circumstances" that hamper their ability to complete work. She said that she often provides time at the beginning of class, as "there will always be students who are unprepared," and that she's lenient with students about deadlines and absences. Ehrlich conveyed that her students pursuing an education on top of the demands of their personal lives is remarkable to her, so her aim is to be as accommodating as possible while supporting their learning.

Looking at the progress of individual students, Ehrlich explained, is one way that she can see evidence of community building in her classes. She described reaching out to individual students early in the course as a way to build a rapport with them, as well as assist students who are going through difficult personal situations. Ehrlich said that she tries to be approachable with students and communicate with them, and that she positions herself as a resource rather than a punitive or authoritative figure. One way that she saw evidence of community building then, is the strength of her rapport with her students. Additionally, she shared that she could see evidence of community building between students when they become more comfortable talking or sharing more personal things with one another. She mentioned that she has seen students exchanging their social media accounts, and that it's a good sign when students' conversations in groups become more tangential.

Ehrlich said that she became more aware of the need to build community as a community college instructor than during her studies at a four-year institution. She realized from the first semester teaching at PVCC that her all came from different backgrounds (adult students returning to their studies, very young students in high school, and international students), whereas students she taught as at a four-year college tended to be around the same age and have common experience. She said that her students are often in different places with their writing, so she constantly checks to see how her students are doing and provides additional activities for students who are done earlier than others. Ehrlich said that her students being at different places academically has been one of the most challenging aspects of teaching community college, but also one of the most rewarding. Rather than pointing out student's deficiencies, she claimed that she focuses on identifying their strengths and building them up during the class.

Finally, Ehrlich conveyed that she strives to build community in her classroom because it helps students learn, but also because it helps them to continue on their educational path. She noted that many of her students are the first in their family to attend college, so the environment may not be familiar to them. Ehrlich claimed that it's important to foster a sense of belongingness for these students in particular because it can help them feel like they have a place in the college. She explained that boosting student confidence, especially if they have had a negative relationship with education in the past, can go a long way in supporting their learning. Students who learn in community, Ehrlich concluded, feel that they have classmates and instructors who care about them and are invested in their success.

I appreciate what Ehrlich shared about how she creates a sense of belonging in her community college classes, particularly because she was able to offer the perspective of someone who is relatively new to community college instruction. I could see myself trying to emulate the

"go-around" activity that she described in my own classes, as it seems like it could be a useful method for increasing students' comfortability with sharing their writing while also encouraging positive interactions between students. My only concern would be ensuring that the "personal" writing prompts students respond to as a class don't force them to share overly vulnerable or traumatic experiences with their classmates. Something that I found intriguing about our discussion on community building was that Ehrlich seemed almost as concerned about her relationship with students as she was about her students' relationships with one another. A large part of community building is, of course, getting students to know one another through writing and collaborating as a class, but she reminds me that the instructor is also part of the community. While I can't say for certain, I think the way Ehrlich makes a concerted effort to connect with her students on a personal level could help to "set the tone" of the classroom community, much like how we can set the tone in the physical classroom. Acting as a supportive figure in the classroom could potentially encourage students to support one another in similar ways.

Section III: Building Community in a Four-Year College Writing Classroom

In this final section, I will turn to my own experience teaching two sections of first-year composition at UVA. Though I acknowledge that building community can be different between two- and four-year institutions, my experiences with building community in a four-year college writing classroom could be valuable for understanding how community might benefit students more broadly. My goal to teach at a community college initially inspired me to pursue the topic of community building. I want to learn how to best serve the population of students I may one day teach in a community college, and one of the problems characterizing nonresidential or community colleges seems to be the lack of "built-in" community on campus. My goal as an instructor has been to create a space where my students feel a sense of comfort and familiarity

with one another. When I designed my ENWR 1510 course, I prioritized using group activities like small and whole group discussions, turn-and-talks, and think-pair-shares because I thought these types of activities would be more likely to bond students together.

Fall 2023

When I began teaching ENWR 1510 during the Fall 2023 semester, I aimed to begin creating a sense of community on the first day of class. Although some of this class time was devoted to taking attendance and explaining the syllabus, I used an icebreaker activity as a way to start cultivating a sense of community. For this icebreaker, I asked students to turn to a partner, introduce themselves, then interview each other about a movie or television show they had enjoyed watching over summer break. When I first entered the room, my students were generally quiet and even seemed a bit nervous to speak. When I asked them to interview each other, however, they erupted into noise and began discussing the question. After about five minutes, I asked students to go around the room, say their partner's name, and tell everyone what they had watched over the summer. My goal for this exercise was to encourage students to introduce themselves to their classmates without feeling like they have to reveal something personal on the first day. Additionally, interviewing one another and sharing their partner's answer rather than their own might be a way to reduce some of the anxiety associated with sharing, as well as establish common interests between students. I can't say if or how this activity might contribute to community building, but I find it to be a useful adaptation of a traditional icebreaker and also used it in my subsequent course.

To build community, I also tried an activity involving a mini research project called "A Very Short Research Project" and a group presentation. Since the subtopic I chose for the class is "Writing about Horror," I directed students to research "a folk horror story, local legend, or

urban myth that is important to [them]" and create one to two presentation slides identifying the "four W's (Who, When, Where, and What)" [55] of the stories. I also shared a slide I had created as an example. Once students submitted their slides, I compiled them all into one presentation. During the following class, we went around the room, each student taking turns sharing the story they had chosen to research. Everyone stayed seated and talked about their slide for no more than ninety seconds to mitigate some of the anxiety associated with sharing. A motivation for using this activity was to create a shared experience and the opportunity to learn something about each other through sharing. Many students chose stories that supposedly occurred in their hometowns, states, and countries, as well as other places that hold some sort of significance in their families, and shared why they chose the story with the class. I can't say my class instantly bonded following this activity, but it was engaging and enabled us to learn new things about each other.

My students also created "communal rubrics" for their Unit 2 writing assessment, a scene analysis essay, and their Unit 3 assessment, as a community-building activity. Though I had provided the rubric for their first major writing assignment, I decided to try communal rubrics as a way to engage students with one another. I told students very little about the first communal rubric ahead of class. After spending several weeks reading model essays, I shared a Google document containing a blank table with the class and instructed them to spend time as a whole group filling in the categories they thought they should be graded on for their scene analyses. Once they determined these categories, students also wrote details about the criteria required to receive "A," "B," "C," and "NC" grades. I then spent time going through the rubric and asked clarifying questions about the categories while students revised what they had all written previously. Though my students in this section seemed hesitant about the idea of collectively

[55] Barrett, ENWR 1510 Fall 2023 Course Calendar, 1.

setting their own grading criteria when we first tried this activity, I observed how they all immediately started adding categories to their communal rubric for their second major writing assignment, an analytical essay. Admittedly, some of the categories and descriptions they added seemed to mirror the kind of language I used in the rubric I created for their first unit assessment, but there were parts of the rubric in which students' voices came through clearly. For example, I had to ask my students to describe what they meant when they wrote in the "Transitions" category of the rubric that "Low-key Mid transitions" receive a B grade,[56] so they added the description, "Transitions are present, but not smooth."[57] This statement seems vague in retrospect (though less vague than "low-key mid"), and I continued to work on clarifying these kinds of ambiguities when students worked on their communal rubric for their Unit 3 assessment (a film review).

Students seemed a lot more comfortable during their second attempt at the communal rubric activity, where I observed how they drew from the previous two rubrics in their choices. A debate about whether film reviews required a thesis statement developed amongst the class during the activity. Based on the published film reviews they had read previously, students ultimately determined to omit the requirement from the final rubric, as they noticed the lack of clear thesis statements in the published reviews they read. Instead, they decided to include a category titled "Overall Review/Recommendation," which required them to articulate something about the themes, style, and/or significance of the film and clearly state whether they recommend it to readers.[58] The class also used the word "flow" in the context of organization, which led to a discussion about what we mean when we use the word "flow" to describe writing. To them,

[56] Appendix A, Fall 2023 ENWR 1510-066, "23F ENWR 1510 Unit 2 Communal Rubric."
[57] Appendix A, "23F ENWR 1510 Unit 2 Communal Rubric," 1.
[58] Appendix B, Fall 2023 ENWR 1510-066, "23F ENWR 1510 Unit 3 Communal Rubric."

"flow" meant how they organized and transitioned from one idea to another in their writing. Through this process, I learned how student-generated criteria can be ambiguous or unclear to them as well, and that it's also unclear how these rubrics further students' understanding of the assignment. The way this activity required students to negotiate and come to a consensus as a group suggested to me that some community building was occurring, so I continued to use it the following semester.

Though I have no way to measure the actual strength of my Fall 2024 ENWR 1510 class's sense of belonging and community, I do want to acknowledge the ways I saw them come together as a class during the course of the semester. I noticed how friendships formed and developed between students throughout the semester, which became apparent in who they chose to sit near and talk with during class as well as which students entered or left the room together. Near the end of the semester, I would overhear my students laughing and joking with each other about seemingly trivial things like owing each other pieces of chewing gum. It wasn't part of my intention to make an absolute measurement of community through this project. Quantitatively, though, the class appeared to be increasingly more comfortable with one another as the semester progressed, which showed in their enthusiasm to engage with one another during group activities as well as their willingness to civilly disagree with each other in our class discussions.

Spring 2024

The Spring 2024 semester presented new considerations and challenges around how and why we build community in first-year writing classes. The attitudes in this new group were different from the first; when I walked into the room, a lot of students were already talking like they knew one another. I used the same ice-breaker activity with this group as I did with the last: turn to a partner and interview one another about a movie or TV show they watched over their

winter break. Students erupted into discussion during this activity, then they all went around and shared their partners' answers with the entire class. In some ways, the activity seemed to go the same way as it had in the previous class, but I had a realization about the question itself due to one student's answer. One student shared that her partner, an international student, didn't really watch movies or television and read novels instead. I followed up by asking about some of the novels this student liked to read, and the student herself shared they were written in Chinese and didn't provide any titles. I had asked this follow up in an effort to make this student feel more included in the activity, but I failed to see how movies and television references could cause some students to feel excluded since most of the references students made were predominantly about American or Western media. Additionally, the student may have felt uncomfortable sharing the novels she likes with the class due to the group setting or because she felt her fellow classmates wouldn't understand her references. In the future, I want to take this experience into account and potentially alter or add to the questions students ask each other on the first day of class. I could see myself using similar questions to the ones Weaver shared using in his own first-year writing class, as asking questions about different aspects of students' lives (like their day-to-day routines or even the proximity of their birth in relation to campus) could provide students with opportunities to connect and be overall more inclusive of a range of students from different backgrounds.

I also chose to replicate the "Very Short Research Project" and group presentation I had used previously in the Spring 2024 semester. I gave students virtually the same instructions, the only difference being the timing of the project. In the previous semester, students had the entire weekend to research and produce their slide contribution, so I gave students time in the class before their presentation to work on researching a story. During this "research project," many

students lacked connections with regional "horror stories," and some students also struggled to find culturally relevant stories that fit the mold of Western horror. This caused me to informally expand our class definition of "horror stories" to include stories that aren't necessarily scary, but rather mysterious, eerie, or difficult to explain logically. During the presentation itself, we were again able to learn something about each other through the stories we shared. Students did, of course, use stories related to their hometowns, states, and countries. Other students chose stories related to experiences they had had in their lives; one student shared a story he had heard while working as a camp counselor the previous summer, while another chose a story her grandfather told her as a child. One of my favorite moments was when a student conveyed a story about a haunted place she had actually visited, which was a story in itself and a source of humor and laughter for the class. I do foresee myself using a similar kind of project in future writing classes because it seems to serve as a low-stakes way to introduce students to sharing informal writing with their peers. However, I want to borrow from the whole-class activity Professor Ehrlich shared to include peer notetaking and comments as a component. I think this inclusion might help with engaging students who aren't speaking during the project, and it might be a way to create more of a dialogue around the stories students share.

As I said previously, I chose to use communal rubrics in my Spring 2024 section of ENWR 1510 to create opportunities for student engagement and collaboration. After reading a combination of published and student-composed personal narratives, my students worked together as a group "to determine the categories and criteria that [they] should be graded on"[59] from their Unit 1 Personal Narrative Essays. I recall what appeared to be confused looks as I explained the activity, and some laughter and comments about the unfamiliarity of it all ensued.

[59] Appendix C, "24S ENWR 1510 Unit 1 Assignment - Communal Rubric."

Unlike the class before, this class expressed a lot more hesitancy as they filled out the rubric; they added an overwhelming number of categories, and they struggled to fill in the descriptions in some places since they had no prior examples. Once students had filled in as much as they were able, I asked them to pause and talk about the rubric as a group. First, we addressed each of the twelve categories they had originally generated and determined which should be combined or eliminated. In one instance, students initially created three categories, titled "personal essay?," "Does the essay answer the prompt?," and "Focus."[60] After we discussed what each category had asked of them, they chose to combine these three categories into "Focus" since they seemed related in terms of content. Students also determined to eliminate categories such as "Entertainment Value" after I asked them whether they thought I could accurately grade using this kind of criteria. In this class, I also noticed that communal rubrics took considerably longer and needed to be spread across two classes. Students seemed quieter and less forthcoming during this attempt, which could've been due to having no previous examples or hesitancy speaking as a larger group in Week 4. The task of creating categories and simultaneously filling in criteria, I realized, might be overwhelming, which I kept in mind when we did this activity again in Unit 2.

The second time the class created a communal rubric, I instructed students to focus only on creating categories for the rubric rather than filling in the specifications. We would then review the categories they created before writing the criteria. My intention here was to make this collaborative task less overwhelming and reduce the total number of descriptions students might need to write. Unlike the previous time, I overheard students speaking with one another as they came up with categories and even joking about some of the more comedic ones they had included the first time. As we spent the rest of the class discussing which categories they would

[60] Appendix D, "24S ENWR 1510 Unit 2 - Communal Rubric."

ultimately include, I observed how students seemed more willing to debate one another this time around. In one instance, some students thought evidence and analysis should be included under the same category since they are related ideas, but other students argued an essay might have strong evidence yet weak analysis. They all made compelling points, so I put it up for a vote in the class, who ultimately decided to separate the two categories. Like the first time, students took 50-60 minutes total across two class periods to complete the rubric. During the second class, students struggled to stay energized after about 15-20 minutes of me asking them questions about the rubric, as the last part of the activity seemed to drag on for a while. I happened to have an instructor observing my class that day who suggested breaking students into groups and assigning them different sections to write collaboratively—potentially over multiple classes—as a way to improve student engagement. Since the class hasn't yet created the third and final communal rubric, I plan to try further modifying this activity to see if the energy levels around it improve.

Conclusion

My experience attempting to create a sense of community and belonging within these two first-year writing classes has complicated my own views on community building and raised important questions about how it actually benefits students. Students often have varying social needs in learning, so I hesitate to claim a strong sense of community in the classroom is of universal importance to every individual student's success. Moreover, the smaller groups that form in these spaces can be exclusionary instead of inclusive to their peers, which is something to consider in a highly collaborative class environment. I don't mean to suggest there are no benefits to fostering community and belongingness in the classroom; rather, it seems crucial to investigate how building community actually benefits (or potentially harms) students as well as

which students it benefits most. If there is, in fact, a connection between instructional activities and the formation of communities, then we also need practical methods for facilitating community building in the classroom. This project has been instrumental in my understanding of what kinds of questions we should be asking when we discuss the benefits of building community in first-year writing courses. To conclude, I've composed a list of questions to consider in future projects seeking to define the benefits of community building in the context of first-year writing.

Questions:

1. Do instructional activities intended to build community meaningfully influence the formation of classroom communities? If so, how?
2. What are the benefits of community building in a first-year writing classroom? What unforeseen challenges may arise, and what potential detriments could they present?
3. How can instructors create opportunities to cultivate community while recognizing students' varying social needs in learning?
4. To what extent should writing instructors encourage students to share about themselves through autobiographical reading and writing?

These are questions that I'll continue to pursue for years to come, but here's what I've learned in my year of attempting to build community in two sections of first-year writing. First, I've learned that community isn't something that happens instantaneously; from what I've observed, it seems to develop over the course of a semester through activities that encourage students to engage with one another's ideas and perspectives. I want to continue incorporating community building activities within my own class because I saw how my own students appeared to gain comfort and confidence in the classroom as the semesters progressed. I've also

learned the importance of being flexible as an instructor, especially when teaching students who are diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic background, and other factors, through situations that occurred in my own class. Expanding our definition of horror beyond that of a story that produces fear, for example, demonstrates to me how being flexible as a teacher enables us to expand the circle of community within our classrooms. Finally, I learned how the community building activities we design as instructors can generate overwhelmingly positive responses amongst students, but there are also times when these activities don't work as intended. In my own experience, activities can go differently depending on the group of students and even the timing in the semester, which can make it hard to anticipate how students will respond. These "failed" activities can feel demoralizing, but I've realized that each failure is also an opportunity to improve as an instructor. If an activity in my class doesn't go as planned, I take time to reflect on why it might not have worked and adapt it for the future. Using my findings from my first year of teaching, I intend to continue experimenting with and refining community building in the classroom with the goal of creating a secure, inclusive space where students feel like they belong.

Appendix

Appendix A. Fall 2023 ENWR 1510 – Unit 2 Communal Rubric

Unit 2 Assignment: Analytical Essay

Build Your Own Rubric

	A	B	C	NC
Thesis	Has a unique, clearly stated thesis and is arguable (supported by evidence).	Thesis doesn't clearly present a claim, but instead a general argument.	Thesis is simple and non-arguable.	Thesis is not present.
Format/Organization	- 1000-1500 words - MLA header - Double spaced, 12 pt Times New Roman - Creative Title - Essay is organized and separated by topics	Has most of the formatting requirements: - Slightly below word count - No creative title	Essay is choppy and lacks paragraph organization. -Significantly below word count	Essay is not organized at all and thus hard to follow/read.
Transitions	Essay uses transition sentences between topics that allows for a good flow.	Lowkey Mid transitions Transitions are present, but not smooth (?)	Essay rarely uses transitions.	No transitions.

Consistency (Focus)	Essay stays on topic throughout. All evidence supports the thesis statement.	Essay mostly stays on topic, losing track once or twice. It does not relate all evidence back to the thesis.	Essay somewhat stays on topic.	Essay rarely stays on topic and is not focused.
Evidence/Analysis + Summary of Scene	Essay summarizes the scene and analyzes the prompt (audio, visual, and/or narrative) without too much evidence. Analyzes portions of the scene.	Essay somewhat lacks either summary or evidence. Analyzes most of the evidence given.	Essay summarizes rather than analyzes/ analyzes a few pieces of evidence.	Essay uses no evidence or analysis, includes no summary of the scene.
Grammar/Style/ Tone	Essay maintains "proper grammar" (correct spelling, few run-ons or fragments) and a consistent tone throughout the essay. Writer's voice is present.	Essay maintains a fairly consistent tone and grammar doesn't impact the argument.	Writer's voice and tone are often missing, with many grammatical errors.	Essay filled with excessive and careless grammatical errors and does not establish a tone. Writer's voice not present. AI wrote it.

Appendix B. Fall 2023 ENWR 1510 – Unit 3 Communal Rubric

Unit 3 Assignment: Build Your Own Rubric

	A	B	C	NC
Format/Organization	- Times New Roman font, 12 pt. double-spaced - 1000-1500 total words - Uses transitional phrases - Ideas are well organized	- Missing one or more of the format requirements - Mostly organized and has transition sentences and flow	Has some organization but minimal/no transition sentences throughout the review	No organization – paper is "all over the place" and doesn't flow well
Opinion/Supporting Details	Opinion of the movie is clear and established with details to support the argument	Opinion is almost established and has some supporting details	Opinion is not clearly stated and has minimal supporting details	Opinion is not mentioned and contains no supporting details
Grammar	Contains correct spelling, proper punctuation, little to no run-ons or fragments, and a consistent tone throughout.	Contains some grammatical errors and the tone is mostly consistent.	Contains grammatical errors that confuse/distract the reader; tone is inconsistent at times	Contains many grammatical errors and does not keep a consistent tone throughout.

Overall Review/ Recommendation	Goes beyond opinion and says something about the themes, artistic style, and/or significance of the film. Writer clearly either recommends or does not recommend	Goes beyond just an opinion of the film, but does not have strong claims about themes, style, and/or significance.	Only stating opinion without evidence	Overall extremely mid

Appendix C. Spring 2024 ENWR 1510 – Unit 1 Communal Rubric

Unit 1 Assignment: Build Your Own Rubric

Please work together to determine the categories and criteria that you should be graded on as a class for your completed Unit 1 Personal Narrative Essay.

	A	**B**	**C**	**NC**
Focus Is the essay and details the narrator is trying to get across clear? Events and subjects are clarified and unified. The essay uses evidence and description to develop ideas consistently.	The essay is consistently on topic	The essay is mostly on topic	The essay is not on topic very often	The essay deviates from the topic

Organization Does the story make sense? Is it logically coherent?	The narrative sequence moves logically	The essay is logically consistent, but has some leaps; doesn't flow very well	It hardly makes sense for most readers	**"I HAVE NO CLUE WHAT IS HAPPENING"**
Impact Does it create a feeling towards the audiences well?	The impact of the horror experience was conveyed by the writer	The impact of the horror experience was mostly conveyed, could have talked about it more	The impact of the horror experience was barley explained	The impact of the horror experience was not in the writing
Grammar/ Coherence	There are few if any mistakes that don't affect the essay's understanding	There are some mistakes that may affect the essay's understanding	There are numerous mistakes that impact the overall coherence of the essay	There are a large number of errors that greatly impact the coherence of the essay
Narrative Voice and Tone	Uses writing techniques to create a distinct voice, such as word choice, figurative language, or narrative style.	Kind of a voice	Inconsistent voice	No voice
Format The essay is 1000-1500 words, double spaced, 12 pt Times New Roman or Calibri font, a title, and a heading (your name, the class, instructor's name, the date)	Yes	Somewhat	A little	No

Appendix D. Spring 2024 ENWR 1510 – Unit 1 Communal Rubric

Unit 2 Assignment: Build Your Own Rubric

	A	B	C	NC
Thesis	Concise, specific, makes a defendable argument, Answers the So What? (and prompt)	Leaves out the So what? Has evidence, but lacks clear analysis/ argumentation	Lacks an argument. States facts rather than an argument. Unspecific and vague/unrelated to the prompt	Non-Existent
Evidence	Picks relevant moments from scene(s) to the thesis. Scene(s) can be logically understood without having seen the film. Includes thorough details on scene(s)	Scenes are relevant to the analysis, but the reader is confused by the evidence without more context. How they fit into the argument is good however.	Poor description of the scene(s)/descripti on that lacks detail. Vague relation to the thesis.	Scenes described are difficult to understand, and don't relate to the thesis. Poorly chosen scenes that don't fully relate back to the thesis.
Analysis	Author's argument is nuanced, and goes beyond a casual viewing of the movie. Holistic explanation of the movie and effect on the audience.	Author thoroughly unpacks evidence presented and relates it back to the essay's main argument.	Author unpacks evidence, but does not effectively use it to make a clear argument.	The analysis is off-topic, too general, or doesn't have a coherent train of thought

Organization (: Does the story make sense? Is it organized logically?	The evidence and analysis is consistently presented in a logical, concise, and structured manner in the paragraphs Author delves into the complexities of their argument	The essay is logically consistent but has some leaps that interrupt the flow. Connection between paragraphs is unclear.	Not very straightforward. Hard to follow.	It hardly makes sense for most readers. Perhaps not written in the English language
Grammar/ Coherence	There are few if any mistakes that don't affect the essay's understanding	Some mistakes may affect the essay's understanding	Numerous mistakes impact the overall coherence of the essay	There are a large number of errors that greatly impact the coherence of the essay
Format	Times New Roman/Calibri /Arial/Comic Sans, 12 pt. font, double spaced, titled, 1000-1500 words, page numbers	Missing one or two of these elements	Missing three or four of these elements	Missing all of these elements

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