

**LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY: THE ACADEMIC
EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-YEAR ARTS AND SCIENCE STUDENTS IN A
LEARNING COMMUNITY PROGRAM**

by

Nancy Schmidt

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education
Department of Theory and Policy Studies
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

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0-612-50020-9

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Nancy Schmidt, Ed.D., 2000
Department of Theory and Policy Studies
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

This study explored the academic experiences of two groups of first-year students in university, one in the arts and one in the science, who participated in a residential-based learning community program. Using qualitative and critical analysis of in-depth student interviews conducted over a fall and winter semester, I constructed their world as implied from their stories and narratives. From this vantage point, I investigated how students as novice learners negotiated their role as learners; the belief systems they brought with them to minimize academic risk; their coping strategies in a 12 week semestered system; and the tacit theories they acquired within their day-to-day educational experiences. A number of themes emerged from the research: students intentionally minimizing faculty contact until they developed 'worthiness'; learning as 'teacher pleasing'; disciplinary learning differences between the arts and sciences students; and a grade orientation that influenced what and how students learned.

Within the broader political, ideological, and cultural framework of the university, I identified student patterns of accommodation, resistance, silence and submission in negotiating their roles as learners. By critiquing the academic side of university life as

students experienced it and lived it as a community of learners, I exposed the tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes that emerged. I revealed the points of disjuncture that came from competing discourses within the university for these students: the discourse of community, the discourse of collective harmony, and the discourse of the market place.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For excellence, the presence of others is always required.

Hannah Arendt

Whenever I examine theses and dissertations, I am immediately drawn to the acknowledgement sections for it is inside them that I first hear the voices of the authors. Some acknowledgements are very brief, giving thanks to committee members and family. Others are more lengthy, spelling out in more detail the multiple debts incurred to the many individuals who provided guidance, inspiration, and support in their research and in their lives. Each one is a story, providing a small personal glimpse into the life of the researcher. I had not realized until now, as I try to craft my own thoughts, how difficult it is to recognize in a meaningful way those who have guided and supported me during my doctoral studies.

Throughout my research journey, I have been surrounded by the “presence of others.” For the sake of brevity, I cannot honour everyone who has provided me with support, advice, a cup of tea, or a listening ear. That I do not specifically mention their names, does not mean that they have gone unnoticed in my thoughts.

I thank the members of my thesis committee. Each one has contributed uniquely to this work: to Jamie-Lynn Magnusson, my advisor, for encouraging me not to settle for what was comfortable and safe, and for her patience while I found my voice for my study; to Linda Muzzin, whose quest for clarity in my writing and thinking enhanced the final

manuscript, and to Joel Weiss, for his interest and suggestions at the final stage of my writing.

I also want to acknowledge the help and support from my colleagues in The Learning Commons. You were a sounding board for me to sort out ideas and conceptual themes; inquired regularly as to my progress; and provided ongoing encouragement. Your understanding, when I was at times preoccupied with my research, has been most appreciated.

I have been most fortunate to have had two mentors who gave me inspiration and strength. To Nancy Bailey whom I worked with as Co-Director of the University College Project, and Peggy Patterson who “showed me the way,” thank you for your faith in my ability to undertake and complete this journey. As well, I also want to acknowledge the contributions of my parents who instilled in me a strong value for pursuing higher education. Their regular inquiries about the status of this study, showed me that they cared.

Finally, my deepest gratitude and indebtedness go to my husband Harold and sons, Ben and Sam. Thank you for adjusting your lives in a way that made it possible for me to complete this research. Your love and support have been instrumental in helping me to stay focussed throughout my doctoral studies.

In closing, I dedicate this research to the students in the study whom I owe deep gratitude and to the students entering university who will come after them. You gave so willing of your time and allowed me to enter into your lives, sharing your stories and experiences, and providing me and hopefully others with a “different set of lens” from which to understand student life.

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CHAPTER 1

A JOURNEY INTO PARADOX

Introduction

This is a journey into paradox, a journey fraught with ambiguity, contradictions, uncertainties and fear. This is also a shared journey, mine and that of the students in my study, who were participating in a residential-based learning community program in their first year at university. In this study, I sought to understand what the academic side of university life looked like to these students as they experienced it and lived it as a community of learners. Through their words and stories they provided me an insight into their world as I thought I knew it, challenging me to confront my own values, biases and beliefs on student life, learning and community.

Discourses on Community

Discourses on community have dominated the post-secondary education agenda for over 25 years. Major research studies that address the American undergraduate experience-- *Four Critical Years* (Astin, 1977); the follow-up report, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited* (Astin, 1993); Boyer's (1987) *The Undergraduate*

Experience in America; the special report by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Campus Life: In Search of Community* (1990); and *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991)--all speak indirectly or directly to the theme of community:

By community, we mean an undergraduate experience that helps students go beyond their own private interests, learn about the world around them, develop a sense of civic and social responsibility, and discover how they, as individuals, can contribute to the larger society of which they are a part (Boyer, 1987, p. 67).

It has been popular for educational reformers, in blaming the absence of community as a critical deficiency in higher education, to seek a renewed commitment to community and a return to community values within the academy. More recently, as a response to improve student learning on college campuses, the Joint Task Force on Student Learning (American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association and the National Association of Student Personnel Administration, 1998) has called for increased coherence in the curriculum, integrated learning opportunities, and collaborative learning pedagogies as part of learning environment that “cultivates a climate in which students see themselves as part of an inclusive community” (p. 8).

Kuh et al. (1991) cited three major factors that have contributed to the perceived loss of community on college and university campuses. These include larger and more complex universities, the change in student demographics, and the change in faculty roles with a greater emphasis on research, limiting their interaction with students and

colleagues. One particular approach designed to lessen the impact of size, distance, and lack of connection between students, their instructors, and the course content, has been the development and proliferation of learning communities.

Learning communities within this context purposely restructure the curriculum to link or cluster courses around common themes, topics, or attendance patterns and enroll common groups of students. Models of learning communities vary greatly within and between campuses, from year-long thematically linked courses, to those that arrange shared course-load patterns for students in first year. Despite such variations, learning community programs share “common intentions to foster community, coherence and connections for students and teachers” (National Learning Communities Dissemination Project, 1999, p. i).

Implicit within these various reports and curricular reforms are the assumptions that community in whatever form is good; that barriers that inhibit community should be removed; and that effort should be expended to promote opportunities for cultivating strong bonds of community on university campuses. But what kind of community is envisioned? And bonds of community to whom and to what? Who becomes privileged by such membership and who becomes “other”? These are the kinds of questions that often get left unanswered in the emotional appeal of a “return” to community. The amorphous concept of community lends itself to multiple meanings and definitions conjuring up images of belonging, security, identity, and tradition and as such becomes susceptible to misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

Approaches to Studying Community in Higher Education

Magolda (1994) identified four strategies used to define and assess community in higher education. The first approach involves the development of community typologies (Crookston, 1974) that identify distinct community domains by breaking down community into identifiable components. The second approach identifies community characteristics and conditions that constitute community (Gardner, 1989). The third is concerned with designing interventions to achieve a greater sense of community (Ender, Kane, Mable and Strohm, 1980; and Mills, 1989). The fourth examines the philosophical underpinnings of community (Myers, 1972, Schwehn, 1993). Somewhat related to the second and third strategies is the focus on assessing students' psychological sense of community through elements of membership, influence, interaction and sense of emotional connection which has also received attention lately (Berger, 1997; McMillan and Chavis, 1986; McCarthy, McCarthy, Pretty and Catano, 1990; Sarason, 1974).

What is missing from these approaches is a more critical examination of community; one that questions and critiques the implicit theoretical assumptions behind the term; reveals hidden meanings and hidden agendas, and examines relationships of power. This study will address this missing approach by critically examining how the various discourses on community have been institutionalized in higher education settings through its pedagogies, organization and practices.

The focus of this study will be the experiences of two groups of first year students, one in the arts and one in the sciences, who participated in a residential-based learning community program. Through their voices and actions, I will examine how they

made sense of their university experience and in doing so illuminate the contradictions and distortions in their beliefs and practices. By critiquing the academic side of university life as they experienced it and lived it as community of learners, I will expose the tensions between the values associated with community and the more powerful values within higher education that place more emphasis on competition, individual achievement, personal freedom and autonomy.

Using qualitative analysis of in-depth student interview material, I will construct their world as implied from their stories and narratives. From this vantage point, I will investigate how students as novice learners negotiated their role as learners and the belief systems they brought about learning to minimize academic risk. I will seek to make more explicit the “hidden curriculum” (Apple, 1979; Carspecken, 1996), the set of beliefs, coping strategies, and tacit theories students acquire within their day-to-day educational experiences. From their voices, I will highlight the complexities, contradictions, paradoxes that emerge; critique the underlying assumptions of their actions, and reveal the points of disjuncture that come from competing values and ideologies within the university for these students.

Although exploring student perspectives through ethnography has been found to be an effective approach in many different educational settings (Berquist, 1992; Capelli, 1992; Magolda, 1994; Moffatt, 1989), there have been very few case studies that have provided a critical analysis of students’ experience as learners in a residential-based first year learning community program. No research of this kind has been undertaken at a Canadian university. In addition to giving voice to students’ perspective on their

university experience, the findings from this study will also be significant by providing a critical analysis of their participation. In doing so, I hope to create new frames for researchers and policy makers by uncovering the dissonance in students' personal experiences within the larger academic environment. This will provide policy makers with a "different kind of lens" in understanding students and their academic experience from their perspective and determining possible solutions (Tierney, 1991). Finally, this study has special significance for me in that it has given me the opportunity to enter into the academic world of these students from their vantage point, challenging me to confront my own preconceptions and beliefs about university as I thought I understood it.

Positioning Myself in the Study

Lakeoff and Johnson (1980) argue that the conceptual assumptions and constructs that shape how we make sense of the world are fundamentally metaphorical; that it is through metaphors that the unknown is explained through known experiences. If metaphors consciously and unconsciously shape my definitions of education, learning, and the role of students, can I name them? It is the metaphor of "community" that has strongly influenced my particular way of knowing and making sense of the world. It has become a powerful heuristic tool for me to use in guiding and reinforcing practice and in responding to the fragmentation that exists in higher education. To understand how the various discourses of community have impacted on me as researcher and how I have appropriated the term, it is necessary to provide some information on my professional role, educational background and my role as creator of the project under study.

I would define myself as an educator who specializes in student learning at university. In this capacity, I am responsible for providing a range of support through various programs and workshops for students, faculty and teaching assistants designed to enhance learning. As well, I serve as a resource to the campus community on various learning and writing-related issues. Throughout my professional life, I have been interested in approaches to learning that integrate social, intellectual and emotional processes. As a member of the student affairs profession, I have been acculturated within a particular orientation which has very much influenced my interest and perspective on undergraduate education.

From 1991 to 1994, I and a faculty colleague were seconded to be Co-Directors of the University College Project. Our mandate was to create a structure that would coordinate activities across the campus to improve the entering year experience for students with our efforts culminating in the establishment of the Office of First year Studies. Within this mandate, we were also given responsibility to plan and implement a residential living/learning experience for a group of first-year students to help them make a successful academic, social, and personal transition into the university community.

In the last 15 years, there has been increased attention focused on entering year students and how they experience their first year at university. Responses include freshman seminar courses, extended orientation programs, faculty mentor systems, curriculum modifications, and special academic advising that takes into account the transitional nature of the first year (Upcraft, 1989; Levitz and Noel, 1989; Erickson and Strommer, 1991). I was looking for something else. In my research, I came across

residential-based living and learning programs that defined themselves as “learning communities” and in exploring them in more detail, discovered research which I had completely been unaware. The learning community model links or clusters courses around common themes, topics, or attendance patterns and enrolls common groups of students. Participation in these types of learning clusters enable students to develop a small supportive community of peers who help each other negotiate their transition to university (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith, 1990).

What most interested me about this approach was the idea of the socially constructed context of learning communities that provides students with opportunities to integrate their course material with their personal experiences and thus extend the nature and direction of their academic conversations. It was the theoretical underpinnings of the learning community research that I used in framing and designing the residential living/learning program, which became University College Connection, the subject of my research.

Educational Background

My resonance to the learning community literature with its emphasis on connected and integrated learning is very much intertwined with my own educational background. For my undergraduate education, I attended the University of Wisconsin, which in 1970 had a student body of 42,000, and was 1200 miles away from home. Selecting Wisconsin was a very conscious decision on my part. The academic reputation of the university was outstanding; the campus was beautiful, situated between two lakes

with ample outdoor activities; and the political activism, in particular, the anti-war movement against government intervention in Vietnam was a strong defining attribute of the university and the community-at-large. As an antidote to entering first year alone without friends or even acquaintances, I responded to a program flyer sent to me the summer before I registered for classes to be part of the Integrated Liberal Studies Program (ILS). I don't recall exactly what the program brochure specifically stated, only that it did promise smaller classes, an integrated approach to course content and the fact that I would be with a regular group of students (100) in most of my classes for the first year. During the dissertation process, I was made aware of the significance of my decision to enrol into ILS when I began researching learning communities and discovered that ILS was a remnant of the 1927 Experimental College founded by Alexander Meiklejohn, one of the early voices and activists behind the learning community movement.

The program I enrolled in was a pale comparison to his original version and I transferred out after one semester. The program had no residency component and what integration that did occur within and between my courses was not reinforced outside of classes. I don't remember attending any kind of co-curricular activities associated with the program. I do recall in talking with roommates and floor mates, none of whom were in ILS, feeling isolated from them in discussions about my classes as well as being restricted in my selection of courses. I created my community outside of my courses, in extra curricular activities, separate from the world of the classroom.

The themes of community, interconnections, wholeness, and connected learning have been interwoven in my professional life, through my educational background, as well as in my personal life (Peace Corps, various community volunteer activities). It should not be surprising that they have also been interwoven throughout the design of the cluster project, some more intentionally than others. These themes have emerged as a response or reaction to the fragmentation, disconnection, lack of cohesion that I see in the lives of students, in the lives and practices of members of the university community, and in my professional practice.

The Institutional Setting

The study takes place at the University of Guelph, a mid-sized, publicly-funded research university located in southwestern Ontario. The University offers a range of undergraduate and graduate programs in the biological, physical and environmental sciences, the humanities and social sciences, as well as a number of professional degree programs including Veterinary Medicine, Landscape Architecture and Engineering. The University has demonstrated a strong commitment to new student transition by creating in 1994, the Office of First Year Studies (OFYS) responsible for the implementation, coordination and assessment of programs and services for entering students.

Two learning community-type programs are currently administered through OFYS – Akademia, a coordinated studies learning community program for first year students interested in the arts and in the sciences and University College Connection (UCC). UCC, or “the cluster program,” as it is commonly referred to, is the setting for

this study. Within the design of UCC there has been no intentional reorganization or rearrangement of the curriculum to provide major collaborative learning practices in the classroom or greater coherence through restructuring. Instead, the cluster students' course registration patterns have been coordinated to ensure shared enrollment in large multi-sectioned courses. Students are clustered into small academic-based learning communities of 20 to 25 members. Students in each cluster share enrollment in at least three of their Fall courses and two Winter courses. A senior student Peer Helper is assigned to each cluster and in the case of residence clusters, the Peer Helper lives with his or her first year students. Peers are matched with cluster students who have similar academic backgrounds. It is the Peer who provides the learning community connection for the participants by living with their students in these residence-based models.

Overview of the Study

This study unfolded over a time period of two and a half years through three general phases. In phase one (May 1997 to September 1997), I reviewed documents on the cluster program, met with program administrators, worked out the design of the study, and contacted the peer helpers responsible for the two clusters in which I would be conducting my research. My goal was to ensure I had the cooperation and trust of those responsible for the cluster program and to acquaint myself with various program documents and the literature sent to the students prior to their arrival on campus. During phase two (September 1997 to May 1998) I conducted formal interviews with participants in an arts cluster and a science cluster over three separate periods of time in their first

year of university. In Phase three (June 1998 to October 1999), I analysed the interview data, and wrote and shared drafts of my findings with my thesis advisor.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One provides an introductory setting for the study. Chapter Two is an overview and rationale for the theoretical approaches I have chosen. As the protagonist in this study, I recognize that I am part of the setting and the context and therefore will investigate the theories and a priori assumptions that I bring. These have shaped and influenced the design of the learning community under study and the way the data has been collected and analysed. Chapter Three describes the methodological approaches I used in the research and detailed information on sources of data, data management and analysis procedures. In the next three chapters, I shift my focus to the experience of students as members of a particular learning community and will present the data in a linear story over the course of an academic year. Chapter Four offers an in-depth analysis of students' initial entry to university. Chapter Five continues their stories by examining data from second interviews, completed at the end of the Fall semester. In Chapter Six, I analyse through their words and actions, their perspectives on academic life as second semester students. In Chapter Seven, I examine the inherent political dimensions of students' actions, words, and the institutional environment, and address what the findings mean in terms of a more critical engagement with the discourse of community as it relates to the cluster project.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Communities

Learning communities grew out of curricular reform movements in the United States beginning in the 1920's and the debates at that time on general and liberal education. Three programs in particular have had the most influence on the learning community movement of today (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith, 1990). Alexander Meiklejohn, concerned about the increasing specialization and fragmentation in higher education, established the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927. His program, which lasted five years, was an integrated two year lower division course of study with a residency requirement, that focussed on democracy in fifth century Athens and in 19th and 20th century America. Tussman, a former pupil of Meiklejohn's, established the Experiment at Berkeley from 1965 to 1969 which like the Experimental College at Wisconsin, was arranged around a program of study rather than a series of discreet courses (Jones & Smith, 1984).

The most modern adaptation and long lasting of Meiklejohn's approach has been Evergreen State College. Founded in 1971, Evergreen is a state supported alternative college designed around a series of coordinated studies programs that are team-taught and organized around interdisciplinary themes.

Models of Learning Communities

Since the founding of Evergreen, a wide range of learning community programs have emerged, diverse in design and intention. Although they vary from campus to campus and serve many different purposes, they do tend to share two particular themes echoed from their earlier roots. First, they attempt to provide some degree of curricular coherence by linking courses around a common theme or question so students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of material they are learning. Second, they provide students with opportunities for greater interaction with one another and their instructors, thus building both academic and social community (MacGregor, 1991).

A survey on learning communities conducted in spring 1995 by the Washington Centre for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education, the national clearinghouse for learning community information, identified over 150 learning community programs in the US and five in Canada. The Canadian programs include two in British Columbia, one in New Brunswick and two in Ontario at the University of Guelph. Some of these programs have been designed for students in their entering year to provide a more coherent social and academic learning experience. Others provide thematic clusters of courses for specific cohorts of students--those under prepared, returning adult students, honours students or second language speakers. Most of the current learning community programs are based on variations of five particular models (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990). These are: 1. Linked Courses, 2. Freshman Interest Groups, 3. Course Clusters, 4. Federated Learning Communities and 5. Coordinated Studies Programs. In

linked courses, a group of students co-register in two courses that have been intentionally paired. Often, one is an academic skills course such as writing and the other is a content course such as History or Sociology or one could be a theory course and the other an application course. In this arrangement, the two faculty members work together to coordinate their instruction and assignments so that the work in both courses is complementary. Learning clusters are an expanded variation of the linked courses and involve groups of students who register for three or four courses that are linked by a common idea or theme. These courses usually represent a major portion of a student's course work for the term or the entire course load. Faculty may coordinate their syllabi slightly or to a great extent. An honours cluster at Western Michigan University includes three courses - Principles of Cultural Anthropology, Myth and Folk Literature and Myth and Ritual in Religion under a cluster defined as Culture, Myth and Folklore. Students in this cluster register for all three courses and attend as a cohort but they are only a subset within these larger classes.

Freshman Interest Groups (FIGS) are another variation of the linked courses and in this model a group of entering students (20 to 25) co-register in three to four courses together. These courses are regular credit courses and are available to any student. Some of these courses can be formed around themes. For example, a pre-law triad of courses could include a Political Studies course, a Philosophy course on ethics, and a course on public speaking. There would not be any formal curricular connection between these courses. In addition to the shared enrollment in these courses, students in a FIG attend a specially designed discussion group for credit. These discussion groups have a peer

advisor, usually a more advanced student, who convenes weekly group meetings to form study groups, to learn about campus resources and to plan social gatherings. In this model, the learning community connection is provided by the peer advisor.

Federated Learning Communities (FLCs) are a somewhat more complex type of learning community but also more rare as an offering. A cohort of students and a Master Learner--a faculty member or graduate student, together attend three diverse courses bound by an over-arching theme and then engage in a regularly scheduled seminar where the content of the other courses is synthesized. The Master Learner's role is to help students integrate material from the three courses as well as provide feedback to the federated course faculty.

The most complex and fully integrated type of learning community is the coordinated study model, a direct descendent from the Meiklejohn-Tussman experiments and the operating model for the Evergreen State College. These programs tend to be interdisciplinary and are coordinated around a central theme. Generally students register for this program as their entire course load and faculty co-plan and team-teach in the program. The full-time nature of this model provides alternatives to the traditional lectures and seminars scheduling giving students and faculty opportunities for extended learning experiences.

Assessment and Evaluation

Much of the evaluation and assessment on the various learning community models has come from within their particular institutional settings. Quantitative measures

used to examine student achievement and development in learning communities have focussed on student retention (persistence), student performance (grade point average) and student intellectual development (using an Intellectual Development Instrument). Qualitative measures have included written journals by both students and senior student mentors, cluster or group journals, focus groups and student self-evaluations (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews & Smith, 1990).

Beginning in 1992, The US National Centre on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment studied three different types of learning community programs at three separate higher educational settings--the FIGS program at the University of Washington, the course clusters at LaGuardia Community College and the Coordinated Studies Program at Seattle Central Community College to ascertain whether learning communities made a difference and if so, how? None of these models were specific to a residential setting. The research design for the project combined both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative studies measured persistence, achievement and quality of effort. Qualitative methods consisted of student interviews and ethnographic research involving observation of the programs themselves. Findings of the project indicated positive impacts of learning communities on first year learning and persistence (Tinto, Love, and Russo, 1994).

The FIPSE-funded National Learning Communities Dissemination Project (1999) is currently examining ways to strengthen, expand, and assess learning community programs at 21 diverse higher education institutions in the US. Although the final project

will not be completed for another year, the case studies speak to their innovative potential for creating community and cohesion:

Learning communities are proving to be remarkable in their capacity to engage students, faculty members, student affairs professionals, administrators, and institutions in new ways of considering and experiencing teaching, learning and community (MacGregor, 1999, p. v).

University College Connection

In UCC, a FIG-type learning community program, students are clustered into small academic-based learning communities of 20 to 25 members. Students in each cluster share enrollment in at least three of their Fall courses and two Winter courses. A senior student Peer Helper is assigned to each cluster and in the case of residence clusters, the Peer Helper lives with his or her first year students. Peers are matched with cluster students who have similar academic backgrounds. Like the FIG learning community model, it is the Peer who provides the learning community connection for the participants and does so either through regular meetings with students in off-campus clusters or through living with their students in the residence-based models. Since there is no link between courses identified for UCC, it is the cluster students' course registration patterns that have been coordinated to ensure shared enrollment.

The program objectives of UCC are as follows:

1. To provide first-year students with a manageable reference group that links social, personal and academic life
2. To promote intentional collaborative learning endeavours
3. To promote formal and informal interaction between faculty and

students

4. To empower students as learners by helping them to develop effective learning strategies for university-level courses
5. To encourage students' participation in all aspects of university life
6. To provide Peer Helpers and students with opportunities to develop leadership and organizational skills

Seventeen first year courses have been identified to be part of UCC. These are regularly offered courses that are multi-sectioned, are chosen by large numbers of students, and contribute to distribution requirements. They include Chemistry, Math, Economics, History, English, Psychology, Zoology and Sociology. A first-year student participating in a UCC Biological Science cluster would take the same courses as any other biological science students but this student would be sectioned in the same lectures sections, labs and seminars as the other 25 students in the cluster.

In 1992-93, there were 97 students in five residential clusters and 32 students in two off-campus clusters. In 1993-94, this increased to 187 students in 10 clusters. For the 1996-97 academic year there were 500 students in 27 clusters despite a newly required administrative fee of \$50 per cluster participant to offset the cost of the senior Peer Helpers. In 1997/98 when the study took place, there were approximately 600 students in over 30 clusters.

Perspectives on Community

I enter this discussion on community recognizing that my understanding of the concept has changed and evolved over the past few years. Some of my initial perspectives could at best be described as simplistic, nostalgic, even utopian in nature, but this perspective has had a significant influence in the design and grounding of the cluster project. In taking a critical analysis of community, I do not want to lose sight of some of my a priori assumptions about the term.

In my various readings on the improvement of undergraduate education, student diversity and campus life, moral development, and student/faculty relationships, I have been especially attuned to invocations of community. "Community" as it appears in these various articles, reports and commission recommendations is often used singularly or in a number of phrase formats such as learning community, academic community, or intellectual community. What are even more plentiful are the terms used to describe the eclipse of community in higher education. Fragmentation, alienation, disconnection, lack of wholeness, and lack of common ground are a few examples.

Community is a word that conjures up images of belonging, security, identity, tradition, and commitment and as such it is susceptible to misunderstanding and misrepresentation. For me, it is the relational aspect of community that I have been most interested in. In particular, it is the forms of relationships characterized by personal intimacy, emotional depth, social cohesion, and moral commitment. As well, I am also attracted to the idea of community as a form of empowerment, as articulate by Biddle (1969) who defines community as a way by which ordinary people can become articulate,

especially in spheres of social influence where they are often voiceless. What undergirds these definitions is my belief in community as a search for connectedness, a relational construct, and its potential for collective power. Community is something that must be created. It is a purposeful act that cannot be decreed into existence.

My conceptions of the term fit closely with the three different usages of community that Heller (1989) has identified: 1. as locality; 2. as relational; and 3. as collective power. Locality refers to the geographic or territorial notion of community such as neighbourhoods where individuals live within a certain geographic boundary. A relational community is characterized by social cohesion or ties that evolve from common interests. Social relationships develop not from locality but from group members who share common bonds, common experiences or a common history. These communities, according to Heller (p. 6) "serve to connect individuals to the larger social order while providing a vehicle for the satisfaction of personal need through group attachment." The third way community has been invoked is connected with the notion of community as collective political power where the emphasis is on organized constituencies to leverage for social change. This attribute recognizes that while many of our social ties are no longer location-based, political power is still based within geographic regions. Power comes from organized constituencies whether they be geographically connected or linked by social ties.

Higher education institutions, in particular the American academy, has been built around the rhetoric of community. Sociologist Daniel Bell states that for many people "the university has become, without its being explicated, the transcendental institution in

society because it seems to promise the notion of community. It is a place where people feel an attachment to something beyond themselves - scholarship, learning, books, ideas, the past" (Bell, 1969, as cited in Parks, 1986, p. 161). The metaphors and myths run deep because the creation and fostering of community were intentional components in the early colleges in the United States. Most of these were patterned on the Oxford-Cambridge model where the professor served roles as both moral and intellectual teacher. The magistrates in Massachusetts Bay, responsible for the founding of Harvard, wanted to have their students brought up in a "Collegiate Way of Living", with a common residence, structured community life, a shared intellectual interchange and a spiritual purpose and practice (Ryan, 1992). During their four years, young men would live in close community making lifetime bonds with one another, and sharing common goals, common purposes, and a common curriculum with a unitary view of knowledge. The early women's colleges, such as Vassar, founded in 1865 and Wellesley, established in 1875, were also designed to emphasize community in learning, in living, and in social interactions (Horowitz, 1987). The fostering of community was an intentional component of early American campus life and provided the seeds for a metaphor of community which still very much impacts on how community is conceptualized in US higher education today and how important it continues to remain as an institutional goal. The Carnegie Foundations's (1990) survey of college presidents found that 98 percent stated that it was either "very important" or "somewhat important" to devote "greater effort to build a stronger overall sense of community" on their campuses (p. A-4).

Conceptions of “Community” in Learning Communities

It should not be surprising that the rhetoric of community pervades the learning community literature. Behind this rhetoric, there are a number of theoretical assumptions, educational traditions and values that undergird the learning community movement. In this section, I will examine ways that community has been invoked and the various research theories and traditions appropriated to support and legitimize their existence.

Learning communities attempt through curricular reform to establish conditions that promote a sense of common purpose, coherence, community, and opportunities for intellectual interactions with faculty and students (Gabelnick et al, 1990). This emphasis on curricular change as a reform strategy to foster greater coherence and community has been intentional. The size of campuses, greater student diversity, change in student attendance patterns with more part-time students, more part-time faculty, and competing missions make it difficult to support community where time and space no longer bring members together. In recognizing limits for universities and colleges to build community under such circumstances, those in the learning community movement have focussed their attention on intentionally reconfiguring the curriculum, claiming “the curriculum must now assume responsibilities for building community formerly assumed by the college as a whole” (p. 10). Thus by linking courses through shared themes, and building relationships through subject matter, learning communities provide intellectual coherence for students. By enrolling a common group of students into a large block of course work, they also have the potential to build academic and social community.

There are three particular areas of research in higher education that frame the learning community movement: The first is on educational excellence or improving the quality of the undergraduate experience; second is the importance of quality of encounters between students and students and students and faculty; and third is the promotion of particular pedagogies for shared inquiry and collaborative learning.

Educational Excellence

There have been a number of reports in the higher education literature that by focussing their attention on the undergraduate experience of students speak directly or and indirectly to the theme of community (Astin, 1977, 1993; Boyer, 1987, 1990; Brown, 1990; Kuh et al, 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Spitzberg and Thorndike, 1992, Study Group, 1984). What they all share is the fundamental assumption that strengthening community will improve both the quality of experience and the quality of encounters between various members of the academy. The Carnegie Report (1990), most specific of all of the studies in examining community in higher education, identified fragmentation of knowledge, narrow departmentalism, intense vocationalism, and diversity of students and faculty as the strongest characteristics currently describing the modern campus. To counter this, Boyer, the principal author, argued for a common purpose and a more integrative vision of community in higher education that would give meaning to the enterprise. He identified six principles that addressed how members of the community should interact with one another and a set of values to reinforce the notion of common goals, common interests, and common bonds. In his first principle, Boyer (1990,

p. 7) claims that a college or university should strive to be:

first an educationally purposeful community where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on campus.

These metaphors of community speak to the notion of community as a place where individuals respect and value one another for their differences yet are drawn together by certain fundamental values that define the larger community. Underlying this metaphor is the tension between the whole and the parts, between individuality and community and between striving for oneself and contributing to the common good. Boyer (1987) further elaborated on this tension between the individual and the group:

By community, we mean an undergraduate experience that helps students go beyond their own private interests, learn about the world around them, develop a sense of civic and social responsibility, and discover how they, as individuals, can contribute to the larger society of which they are a part (p. 67).

Within this particular discourse of community, there exists the assumption that students need to understand that they are not solely autonomous individuals but are inextricably linked to a broader intellectual and social community. Much of the learning community literature has appropriated a discourse that speaks to the importance of education as a way to prepare students to live as responsible citizens, for life beyond the classroom as members in a larger community. Implicit within these assumptions is the belief that universities and colleges, despite their elitist beginnings, serve as social frontiers for democracy in American society (Crunkleton, 1991). Tied into this theme of

civic responsibility is the importance placed on the building of community in higher educational settings as a way to ensure that democracy prevails. In an article describing collaborative learning approaches in various learning community programs, Smith and MacGregor write:

If democracy is to endure in any meaningful way, our educational system must foster habits of participation in and responsibility to a larger community. Collaborative learning encourages students to acquire an active voice in shaping their ideas and values and a sensitive ear in hearing others. Dialogue, deliberation, and consensus building out of differences are strong threads in the fabric of collaborative learning and in civic life (1993, p. 4).

But serving the individual needs and interests of faculty and students has always been a priority of higher education in America. There has been, and continues to be, a strong focus on individuality, autonomy, independence and competition in the academy. These are the prevailing values inherent in higher education academic culture. Because most learning community models exist along side regular offerings within an institution, they are still part of the larger cultural setting with its values, beliefs, and reward system for both students and faculty. In recognizing these competing traditions of community and individualism, most learning community models have focussed their attention on reform efforts in those areas that can strengthen community (e.g. curriculum integration) without deviating in major ways from how universities grant course credits, reward faculty, and assess students. Those programs that have more openly challenged the traditional ways of “doing business” in a college or university (eliminating grades and the tenure system), have been part of broader reform efforts that have been institution wide.

The Evergreen State College is an example but there are few institutions that fit this profile. The various beliefs and assumptions about community that frame the learning community movement imply a commitment to the larger educational enterprise and an acquiescence to these competing traditions. It is the tensions that evolve from such competing values that lie at the heart of the learning community ethos.

Quality of Encounters: Faculty and Students

Spitzberg and Thorndike (1992), in their follow-up study to the Carnegie Report, echoed and expanded upon Boyer's initial themes and addressed in more detail the importance of faculty and student interactions. The authors examined how the expectations, attitudes and behaviours of students and faculty limit the potential for undergraduate community. Credentialing and obtaining a degree in a major to assure them of a job are the strongest common denominator among students. More recent studies have verified this as a continuing trend toward self-fulfilment, self-enhancement and financial security (Astin, 1993, Levine, 1998). Opportunities for intellectual community are rare for many students and when they do exist, few students choose to participate in them. Faculty, likewise, with increased specialization in their disciplines prioritized their time to focus on research and scholarship. In Spitzberg and Thorndike's scenario, faculty and students are engaged in parallel play. Students, concerned with practical careerism are often at odds with faculty who are professional intellectuals. Consequently a "conspiracy of silence" evolves, a tacit agreement between students and faculty not to burden one another. The cultures that both students and faculty work and

live within sustain this conspiracy, since both benefit from such an arrangement. This mismatch of expectations is most acute in the first year of university where there are few overlapping interests between the two groups.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) documented the educational importance of informal student-faculty interaction outside of class and found that a faculty member's educational influence is enhanced when that contact extends beyond the formal classroom setting. This was especially true when the interaction focussed on ideas or intellectual matters extending or reinforcing academic goals. The outcome of such interaction included "perceptions of intellectual growth during college, increases in intellectual orientation, liberalization of social and political values, and growth in autonomy and independence" (p. 620). Their research highlighted the fact that not all student/faculty interactions are of equal significance. Faculty influences are greatest when they are involved in intellectual discussions with students that extend the boundaries of the curriculum.

A key defining ingredient for most learning communities programs has been the creation of intentional opportunities for intellectual interaction between faculty and students. By increasing opportunities for both groups to see the importance of interacting with one another, learning communities can lead to more effective learning and teaching. The community discourse found in these studies speaks to the importance of relational aspect of community, notion of common goals, common aspirations and the importance of finding common bonds to bring students and faculty together. Within this rhetoric is

the general assumption that the the quality of life for both students and faculty will improve if a sense of community is established.

Quality of Encounters: Peers

Student socialization at colleges and universities today has been abdicated to the peer group which provides members with frames of reference for evaluating their attitudes, values, and behaviours. The similar experiences of living together in an unfamiliar residence environment and the common needs, challenges and interests that they face make it easy for peer groups or subgroups to thrive on campuses. Extensive research over the last 40 years on the impact of college on students has demonstrated the centrality of peer influence in promoting student learning and development (Sanford, 1962; Feldman and Newcomb, 1969; Chickering, 1981; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; and Astin, 1992). These findings highlight the student's peer group as the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years.

The influences of peers has been found to affect students in such areas as intellectual development, values, personal development and educational attainment . In particular, students' values, beliefs, and aspirations tend to change in the direction of dominant values, beliefs and aspirations of the peer group (Chickering, 1974; Astin, 1993; Pascarella, 1985; Terenzini and Pascarella, 1991) .

While there are a multitude of peer groups on campus, these occur primarily in social settings. Many of these groups provide students with a strong sense of identity but provide little common ground between the groups, and have little or no connection to the

broader university as an academic community. Studies on first year transition have identified the importance for students to become integrated both academically and socially into their college or university (Tinto, 1987; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). The need to belong and establish a network of friends is crucial if students are to develop a sense of congruence to their campus but this need for social support often takes place at the expense of academic work. Learning community programs which have been designed specifically for entering year students provide opportunities for students to develop a small supportive community of peers who help each other negotiate their transition to university. The socially constructed context of learning communities provides students with opportunities to integrate their course material with their personal experience and thus extend the nature and direction of their academic conversations (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith, 1990).

Pedagogical Practices Within Learning Communities

There are a number of pedagogical approaches that have been highlighted as defining characteristics of the learning community movement. Collaborative learning, team teaching, integration of skill and content, and active approaches to learning are some of the common themes. Philosophically, a number of these practices can be traced to the works of Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky. Dewey was a major influence on the specific teaching and learning practices used in the original learning community programs at both Meiklejohn's Experimental College and at Tussman's Berkeley program. His progressive approach to education focussed on "development from within"

as opposed to the more traditional model of “formation from without” (Dewey, 1938, p. 17) . Recognizing learning as a social process, he was concerned with the distancing that occurs between students and teachers, and saw teachers not as transmitters of knowledge but as “partners in a collaborative relationship” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 16). He also believed that shared experience was the essence of community life.

Extending the theme of learning as development and shared inquiry were the works of Piaget (1928, 1952) who recognized the importance of student centred instruction and that learning and development take place in social settings; and Vygotsky (1978) who emphasized how meaning is shared and negotiated among members of a community.

Within the learning community literature, collaborative learning has become the umbrella term used for a wide variety of educational approaches that involve joint intellectual effort either by students or students and faculty or faculty and faculty (Smith and MacGregor, 1992). There is a range of collaborative learning practices employed in learning communities. In some there is intentional group work built around in- and out-of- class activities, for others, assignments and tasks which connect courses from separate academic disciplines; others are less intentional and do nothing more than create a space and time for students to meet for informal study gatherings and study sessions. Themes of community echo within the collaborative learning rhetoric.

Roberta Matthews (1996, p. 103), in writing about collaborative learning practices within the learning community movement states:

At a time when higher education and society are torn by divisiveness, collaborative learning offers a way into community. It extends a pedagogy that has at its centre the assumptions that people make meaning together and that the social process enriches and enlarges them.

What tends to get lost in these discussions on the merits of collaborative learning are the inherent challenges for both students and faculty in using teaching and learning practices that go against institutional values and cultures. For faculty, there are issues of authority and voice. Because collaboration places students at the centre of learning, and in more equitable relationships with faculty in terms of knowledge construction, teachers must be prepared to give up control of the classroom. Likewise students bring resistance as learners when they experience collaborative learning given the expectations of greater student responsibility as they move from recognizing the teacher as sole authority in the classroom to recognizing themselves and their peers as sources of experience and knowledge (Lawrence, 1996). Having been conditioned to function along an educational assembly line that has graded, ranked and sorted them, students often find collaborative learning very threatening. There also continue to be the ongoing issues of assessment:

what remains problematic... is that faculty members are still the expert witness of student learning, and the holders of power relative to the grading process. And more than any other factor, instructors' evaluative processes act to divide students, and to press the classroom atmosphere back into a competitive mode (MacGregor, 1990, p. 28)

Implicit within the various pedagogical practices and processes are assumptions that learning is an active, constructive process; that learning depends on rich contents, that learning is inherently social; and that learning is developmental. It is this latter notion, learning as a development process integrating students' emotional, social and cognitive development that has become a major defining theoretical construct of learning communities. Numerous reports (Astin, 1985, 1993; Love & Love, 1995; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Springer et al. 1995; Tinto, 1993, 1994; Student Learning Imperative, 1996) have called for a more integrative understanding of student learning and development. Recent theories of cognitive development (Baxter Magolda, 1992, 1995; Belenky et al. 1986; Chickering and Reisser, 1993) have acknowledge the role played by social processes and interpersonal relationships. By intentionally linking students' social and academic worlds, learning communities provide a more seamless learning environment that integrates both the curricular and co-curricular experiences of students, thus tying together all facets of students' college experience.

Community as Moral Imperative

Within this rhetoric of community, there is the fundamental belief that postsecondary education is a public good that aids in the development of the individual, the community and society itself. This kind of moral imperative differs from the more current Total Quality Management (TQM) perspective which dominates higher education today with its emphasis on effectiveness, quality, and assessment. Within this context, students are seen as consumers and universities and colleges are markets that compete for

consumer preferences. Developing future citizens becomes a distant second or is no longer is even considered as a goal in this commodity culture. But the learning community movement, with its emphasis on collaboration, integration, and cohesion appeals to particular perception and purpose of higher education. Battling against a market discourse where students are viewed as individual consumers of educational services, the reform discourse found within learning communities seeks to go beyond this limited, utilitarian vision to endorse a more transformative, integrative kind of education for both students and faculty.

Liberal, Communitarian, and Political Community

Magolda and Abowitz (1997), in their study examining conceptions of community in a university residence, used political philosophy as their frame of reference in describing the two dominant models of community--liberal and tribal communitarianism that most impacted on how students experienced community in their lives. Within the liberal context, Mill, Locke and Kant have made distinct contributions to the heritage of modern liberalism. In the liberal view of democratic social life, there are clear distinctions between public and private life; a concern with justice, fairness and individual rights; the notion of the autonomous self; and the recognition, that as individuals, we are freely able to choose our commitments and identities:

The liberal community is a discursive community in which we approach one another as mutually respecting individuals with our own agendas, and commitments (Magolda and Abowitz, p. 272).

Communitarian critiques to the liberalism gradually emerged in the 1970's and 1980's as a challenge to the neo-Kantian theories of individualism. From a communitarian perspective, individuals can be understood only through reference to their social, cultural and historical contexts or their communities. Unlike liberals who argue that individuals are free to choose their commitments, tribal communitarians (MacIntyre, 1981; Sandal, 1982) argue that there are social attachments that determine the self and that these are not necessarily voluntary. Our tribal affiliations limit our life choices.

In higher education today, both these conceptions of community co-exist, creating tensions and misunderstandings. Students enter university with multiple tribal identities based on common goals, traditions, gender, race, histories or shared cultural forms of music and leisure. These tribal identities provide them with a sense of loyalty and purpose, fulfill needs of affection, and foster identity development (Magolda and Abowitz, 1997). Yet in calls for community, these multiple tribal allegiances have been seen as barriers to unity and community. According to this theory, because each tribe brings its own folklore, values, and code of accepted or required practice, its members take on a particular social identity, a certain kind of parochialism, thus excluding non-members. With no sense of common aims or projects, tribal identities clash with the liberal notion of the common good.

According to Frazer and Lacey (1993, p. 16), the dichotomies of the liberal and communitarian visions have “unduly polarized the debates in which middle positions are marginalised as mere compromises and as unprincipled.” It is in this middle ground that Magolda and Abowitz (1997) propose a third kind conception of community--“political

community"--which they argue is a better framework for understanding how community can be built and supported in higher educational settings. A political community does not call for the dissolving of tribal ties but recognizes the need for space where both tribal and larger political concerns can take place. Building on the works of Barber (1986) and Dewey (1927) and their ideal of community life, Magolda and Abowitz see political community resulting from common activity, where "citizens are joined together not because of what they believe in common, but because of what they do together--handle common problems they face through public discourse, as well as build bonds through association"(p. 275).

It was this framework of community that allowed Magolda and Abowitz to better theorize about the tensions and conflicts that emerged for students in a residential setting where their tribal subcultures created loyalties to one another that were much stronger than their commitment to any broader or more residence-wide communal norms. Walzer (1992) speaks to the power of these tribal bonds:

Tribalism names the commitment of individuals and groups to their own history, culture, and identity, and this commitment (though not any particular version of it) is a permanent feature of human social life. The parochialism that it breeds is similarly permanent. It can't be overcome; it has to be accommodated [N]ot only my parochialism but yours as well, and his and hers in their turn, (p. 171)

In a political community there must be both space for tribal groups to form their own communities of interest and at the same time a common, public culture that must be continually constructed and reconstructed through dialogue across difference. In bringing

together members of various tribes, conflict becomes a necessary and integral aspect of the community (Magolda and Abowitz, 1997). This theme is further echoed by Tierney (1993) who expands on the notion of creating “communities of difference” where different values, and different experiences are respected and nurtured. To ensure that such a community does not silence individuals and groups, the community must be de-normed or at least the dominant norms must be disrupted and challenged. The ensuing conflict that results must be embraced and seen as a way to transform the community.

Developing a More Critical Perspective on Community

There is a utopian quality behind the language of community that has guided and influenced me as an educator over the last 10 years. I had not named it as such then but it seems more obvious now. In reading Kanter’s (1972) description of utopia, I am struck by how close the wording echoes those found in the quests for community literature:

Utopia is an imaginary society in which mankind’s deepest yearning, noblest dreams, and highest aspirations come to fulfilment, where all physical, social, and spiritual forces work together, in harmony, to permit the attainment of everything people find necessary and desirable...[T]he interests of the individuals are congruent with the interests of the group; and personal growth and freedom entail responsibility for others. Underlying this vision of utopia is the assumption that harmony, cooperation, the mutuality of interests are natural to human existence, rather than conflict, competition, and exploitation, which arise in imperfect societies... (p. 1-2)

The calls for community that I initially resonated to now read as a nostalgia, a longing for a time that never really existed. Crunkleton (1991) describes these kinds of

calls for community as a "flight to community" (p. 8) because those who make such calls infer that if community were to occur conflicts over inclusiveness, curriculum, and diversity would disappear. Community, he claims, is not to function "as a warm blanket", shielding universities from the conflicts and challenges greater democratization brings (p. 8). Carlson (1994) is also critical of the dominant conceptualizations of community in higher education "where authority was respected, members knew their place and culture was homogenous" (p.6). This romanticized notion of community is "hypernormalizing" where a cultural centre or norm situates "others" in the margins.

The various discourses on community in higher education cover a broad political and philosophical spectrum. At one end are calls for communities of cohesion and consensus. Fearful of the multiplicity of contesting voices within the academy, these calls for community are based on a discourse of universalization and normalization, privileging a particular set of traditions and values and in doing so silencing and excluding those who are in any way different from the norm. In the middle are those calls that recognize the multiple voices within the academy and call for them to be assimilated into some kind of multi-cultural chorus. At the opposite end are calls for a more inclusive kind of community building based on a discourse of contingency, difference and conflict.

The metaphors of community that I initially resonated to, spoke of community as a way for different peoples to study, work and learn together--a melting pot par excellence for those who shared a common conception of the purposes of higher education. This conception of community while it celebrated difference, still emphasized

the need for a reconciliation of these differences into some kind of consistent, unified account. Such a reconciliation would smooth over any possible disruption by placing limits on the degree and intensity of the different voices. This kind of discourse had a personal appeal to me because it provided a framework that privileged similarity and consensus over difference and conflict. I had failed to understand how living with conflict is an integral component of community if all are to have a voice and not be silenced.

I have to learn to live with conflict but I am caught in a paradigm that I refer to as the tyranny of harmony. I work to preserve relationships, to minimize conflict, to make sure that everyone gets heard, and to lessen ambiguity. My actions are guided by a cultural imperative “to be nice.” But I now know that conflict is necessary, if not essential to ensure that differences get understood and respected. Zelda Gamson (1993) writes:

Community based on diversity must welcome, not just tolerate conflict. It must develop ways for members to disagree with one another without losing the respect of other members. People in colleges and universities are notoriously uncomfortable with conflict. We run away from it or stomp it into the ground. We deny it or over-dramatize it... Dealing with conflict... requires respect and civility. It does not ask that parties love or even like each other, just that they continue interacting (p. 6).

In examining the various discourses of community in higher education, I am struck by the dualist postures that have appeared in the literature. Frazer and Lacey (1993) identify these “either” “or” propositions that dominate Western philosophy:

Our analysis and judgements, it is argued, tend to be structured in terms of binary oppositions which find their roots in western culture and philosophy: subject/object; reason/emotion; individual/community; mind/body;

form/substance; public/private; culture/nature; male/female
(p. 167).

As a result, exaggerated dichotomies get created using myth, power, presumptions, nostalgia, and even fear to support or position one over the other. Abstractions get created devoid of real people, real students, and the everyday world in which they live:

And so the illusion of the individual seems to be confronted with an equally illusionary fantasy of harmonious togetherness, and as the long-standing debate between individual autonomy and community proceeds - and in many ways the definitive social debate between medievalists and moderns - it becomes more and more apparent that both are empty abstractions, not flesh and blood descriptions of real people or their relationships. The truth, I want to argue, is that there are no individuals, there is no autonomy and no real freedom, outside of a social context. But neither is there any such entity as community that is not first of all made up of flesh and blood, increasingly independent, and often obstinate individuals whose membership in that particular community is almost always contingent rather than essential (Solomon, 1990; p. 98).

In examining the tensions and contradictions of students' personal academic experiences in a learning community program, I hope to further shed light on how they have negotiated their role as learners within a particular learning community program and in doing so expose the tensions between the values associated with community and the more powerful values within higher education that place more emphasis on competition, individual achievement, personal freedom and autonomy.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter provides documentation of my research methodology from the design of my study through to the analysis process. As noted in chapter one, I was engaged in a qualitative case study in which I examined the experiences of a group of first-year students participating in a residential-based learning community program. Through their voices and actions, I critiqued the academic side of university life as they experienced it and lived it as a community of learners. In doing so I exposed the tensions and contradictions between the values associated with community and the more powerful values within higher education that place more emphasis on competition, individual achievement, personal freedom and autonomy.

Research Design

Because I wanted to focus on the “commonsense world of the student” (Becker et al., 1968, p. 30), I pursued an initial research design that would be emergent, broadly focussed and flexible. Hence I framed my dissertation as a qualitative case study, a research strategy defined as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance” (Merriam, 1988, p. 21). A case study approach would provide the framework

for me to examine cluster students' experiences from their vantage point within a particular educational setting.

To provide a more interpretive research framework that would allow for more contextual data and a richer understanding of students' experiences, and to build concepts, hypotheses, and theories, I used a symbolic interactionist approach. Symbolic interactionism is a distinctive perspective that is concerned with the study of the "ways in which people make sense of their life-situations and the ways in which they go about their activities, in conjunction with others, on a day-to-day basis" (Prus, 1996, p. 10). Hewitt (1994) describes it as a way of understanding and explaining human social conduct and group life through an emphasis on the meanings that individuals construct through interaction with others. In the symbolic interactionist framework, human behavior is studied as human lived experience, rooted in people's meanings, their interpretations, their activities and their interactions. It is an interactive process of meaning making which emphasizes the role of others as co-creators in the construction of human conduct (Mead, 1934, Blumer, 1969, Prus, 1996).

Using a symbolic interactionist model, I was able to generate insights, explain events and seek an understanding of students' university experiences. I placed students and their negotiated meanings at the center of my analysis. But in doing so, I came to realize the limitations of this strategy for this approach allowed me to ask and answer only certain questions. As I heard more and more of students' stories, I became aware of the role that the university played as a site for the reproduction of particular sets of social

relationships and more cognizant of the relations of power and ideology within the higher education setting.

Therefore, in addition to symbolic interactionism, I have also used critical approaches (Harvey, 1990; McLaren and Giarelli, 1995; Tierney, 1993; Tierney and Rhoads, 1994; Weiss, 1985) to question and critique students' underlying assumptions and to explore the inconsistencies and contradictions between their actions and words in terms of inherent political dimensions. This critical research strategy provided a more detailed analysis of students' experiences linked to wider social structures and systems of power relationships. It has allowed me to ask and answer those questions missing from a more interpretivist perspective. In particular, it has enabled me to examine the connections between what went on in cluster groups, the differential power relations, the hidden paradoxical messages, and how these were continuously mediated or reproduced in the daily lives of the students. (McLaren and Giarelli, 1995, Tierney, 1991).

Data Sources

In the previous chapters, I examined my relationship to University College Connection, including the rationale as to why I purposely selected the cluster program to research. Using a process of sampling referred to by various researchers as *purposive* (Chein, 1981) or *criterion-based* (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984), I identified strategies for interviewing students predicated on three general criteria. The first was based on relevant subgroups within the population under study. Because I wanted to examine the discourse of student learning from the perspective of arts students and science students, I selected

one cluster in the arts and one in the sciences since these were the two largest academic programs for first year students at this university as well as the two largest programs in which the majority of cluster student were enrolled. The second criteria for sampling was related to comparability. During the summer of 1997, I met on numerous occasions with the program coordinator of UCC to decide on which two clusters to include in my study. Since the intent of the research was to examine cluster participation from the perspective of arts and science students, she suggested I select an arts and a science cluster located in the same building with similar floor patterns and room arrangements. This would make my access to the clusters easier as well as provide similar geographic patterns of communal living for both of the clusters. There were a few clusters that fit this geographic arrangement. The final sampling criteria was based on reputational case selection. In this instance, the Coordinator further narrowed the selection by identifying two Peers whom she thought would be very cooperative and supportive of the study. Through this process, the final location was in the northern residence area, in a seven floor, co-ed facility that had both new and returning undergraduate students.

Once the location of the clusters had been agreed upon, I sent a letter to each of the Peer Helpers introducing myself, the purpose of the study, and asked for their permission to conduct the study within their clusters (See Appendix A). It was important for me to have their full cooperation since their assistance would be integral in helping to set up interviews as well as serving as informants in the study. Both of the Peers responded positively to participating and assisting with the study.

I arranged with each Peer Helper to speak to their students at their first general cluster meeting during Orientation week. At that meeting I distributed a handout describing the study, my role as researcher, and their role as participants. I saw no visible minorities at the orientation meetings. Of the students in the actual study, all were white and all, except for one student, who had graduated from a high school overseas, had attended high schools in Ontario. Cluster participants were between the ages of 17 to 22, and the majority were 18 or 19 years of age. These student demographics fit within the overall profile of first year students at the university. At the end of my presentation, 22 out of 25 students at the meeting from the science cluster and 21 out of 26 students in the arts cluster, expressed an interest in participating in the study and gave me their names and phone numbers for further contact.

Data Collection

I conducted my interviews in a conversational style of everyday interaction (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973; Denzin, 1978) or what Kahn and Cannell (1957) describe as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 149). This method of communication encouraged empathy and understanding and allowed the students to feel that what they were saying mattered. I assumed a “presuppositional” stance as defined by Patton (1980) which recognized that students had something to contribute and had experiences worth talking about. I also recognized that these interviews, unlike conversations, had a script, an agenda, and a purpose set out by me, the researcher.

All of the data collected for this case study was done through semi-structured interviews. This kind of format ensured that certain information was elicited from all students and yet allowed me some flexibility in providing opportunities to probe for clarification, pursue tangents or redirect my questions (Patton, 1987). I introduced each topic and the students talked about that they deemed important within the context of that particular theme. The interviews took place in my office, a large room complete with a window and no door which lessened the feeling of enclosure or that of a private counseling office. The student and I sat at a round table where neither of us were visible to anyone outside the office thus ensuring privacy and confidentiality. The interviews were approximately 75 minutes. At the first meetings with each of the students, I sought permission to record the interview and had students read and then sign, if they chose to do so, the letter of consent (See Appendix B).

First Round Interviews

During the first two months of the Fall semester, I met with 15 science students, their Peer Helper, and Resident Assistant, and with 10 arts students, their Peer Helper, and Residence Assistant (See Appendices C and D, indicating names of students¹ who participated in the study; the number of interviews held; and the dates they occurred). Because I did not start interviewing arts students until October, there was a considerable gap in time from when I had first talked with them during Orientation week. By the

¹ Participant names are pseudonyms.

middle of October, many of them were in the midst of studying for midterms and writing papers and found themselves too busy to participate.

In these first set of interviews, I wanted to understand what the academic side of university life looked like to students participating in a learning cluster; the cultural norms and values held by these students that shaped their learning; and their perspectives and coping strategies acquired during their first six weeks at university. The kinds of questions I posed were life history type questions; those of a general nature that would allow students to focus on their everyday lives. To ensure these initial questions would be seen as safe and non-threatening, I concentrated on their direct experience, asking students to talk about what they actually did in their cluster and in their classes. I opened each interview with the question, “Why did you come to Guelph?” followed by, “Why did you join the cluster?” The remaining questions were grouped into five major categories:

1. **A day in the life:** I asked them to take me through a typical day at university starting when they first woke up until they went to bed that evening. I had them describe the courses they were taking, what it was like going to their classes; what they did in between classes and what they did with their time in the evenings.
2. **Studying and learning:** I wanted to hear from them what they did when they studied; what they considered to be their difficult or easiest courses; and the differences as they saw it between university and high school learning.
3. **Professors:** To understand the role their course instructors played in their university experience, I posed questions about the kind of contact they had with them and the circumstances under which they would make such contact.
4. **Goals for their courses:** I asked what kind of goals they had established for themselves in their courses and what they had heard about the grade drop at university.

5. Cluster living: In this general topic area, I explored with students what it was like living in the cluster and the kinds of activities that were taking place within it.

These topic areas guided the direction of the questions. Some I pursued in more detail over others depending on the responses and stories students told me. In these first interviews, I wanted to make sure that students had the chance to tell me something about who they were and how they were experiencing university. In particular, I hoped that their time spent with me would provide them a brief opportunity to assess how things were going for themselves within this new environment and that I would be an appreciative listener of their stories as they were emerging.

Second Round Interviews

The University's 12 week semester system greatly influenced the timing of the second interviews. The Peer Helpers in both clusters identified the first two weeks in November as major midterm period and paper due date time so that left me with three weeks remaining in the semester and two weeks during finals.

After each of the first round interviews, I had asked students if they would be willing to be interviewed again but said that I hadn't yet set up the criteria as to how I would make the final selection. All students interviewed said they would be willing to meet with me again. The remaining time forced me to rethink my strategy and be more selective in terms of who I would be able to meet with for a second time. I identified three science students who provided very limited information and what they did have to say was confirmed by others and so decided not to contact them. Likewise for the arts

students, there were two who had difficulty talking about themselves and even when prompted to elaborate, still found it difficult to respond in any kind of detail. In the end, I completed second interviews with 10 science students and seven arts students.

I came up with six general topics as a guide for these interviews. I opened each face-to-face encounter with the question: How have things been going for you? Their responses determined the order of questions I would pursue with them. The topics were:

1. Midterms/exams: what were they like? How did you do on them?
2. Professors: I continued to ask them about their professors, wanting to find out if they had increased their contact with them and what they expected from them.
3. Learning: What did they do as learners and how did they do it?
4. Cluster Activities: I asked them to describe the cluster and what it was like living in the cluster at the end of a semester.
5. Community: This was a new category where I wanted to examine how important it was for them to feel a sense of community and how this was talked about in the cluster.

These topics guided the direction of the interviews. At times, I pursued one area more in-depth over another or even new ones depending on what students wanted to tell me. For example, I altered some of my questions, especially the ones related to community. For the first few interviews I posed the question: In what way has the cluster experience impacted on your sense of community? This was met with some degree of confusion and sometimes a blank stare. I discovered that “community” is not a term in use in their everyday vocabulary. I was caught in this instance of trying to structure the conversation around what I wanted to hear. Instead, students told me through their own

words and experiences that “fitting in” or “belonging” were a more immediate concern to them.

I found the second interviews easier to conduct because I was more familiar and thus more comfortable with the process. I think this was also true for the students and I found it easier to engage in conversations with them. Many approached their interview as a continuation of our first meeting, making reference to what they had last told me and I likewise did the same. I believe the students found their interview time with me to be valuable. They mattered; they were heard; someone wanted to listen to their stories about what university has been like; and to have their experiences validated.

Third Round Interviews

In my research study, I wanted to conduct multiple interviews with students over the course of their two semesters at university. In particular, I wanted to hear how they would describe and talk about their university experience after having completed their first semester. Would they still consider themselves novices? Did the cluster have as great an impact on them as it did in the first semester? How had their perspectives on learning changed over the course of two semesters? Of the 10 science students whom I had interviewed a second time, one student had left university and another had left her double room in her residence building to live in a single room elsewhere on campus. I met with the remaining eight students. In the arts cluster, of the original seven whom I had interviewed a second time, one had left the university so I decided to meet with the remaining six. One student failed to show up for her interview and despite messages left

with her roommate, she did not get back in touch with me. Another student said she was in the midst of writing papers and could not participate. As a result I decided to talk with a student who I had only interviewed once before which left me with six arts students participating in the final round.

Our conversations were an extension on what we talked about in the second interviews. I came up with general topics to pursue and opened each encounter with the question: "Tell me about your Winter semester." I wanted to hear from them what they were doing and how it was different or similar to the Fall. I continued to ask questions related to faculty interactions, their academic plans, cluster experiences and learning activities. Similar to the previous two interviews, these topics guided the direction of the interview and some were covered more in-depth than others depending on what students were willing to share with me. Unlike the first interviews where students focussed on the concrete details of their university experience, in these final interviews, I wanted to find out what being a student had meant for them and how they had put that experience into perspective.

Some of the comments from students indicated that on their way to the interview they had done some rehearsal of their responses and reflection on their university experience in anticipation of our meeting. After his interview, one of the arts students asked when I was going to interview two of his friends whom I had interviewed a second time. He said they were waiting for me to call and that they didn't want to be left out. Similar to my first and second interviews, I found the students willing to share their personal reflections and provide me with a filtered glimpse into their lives. Our meetings

offered them a chance to continue to investigate who they were within a particular context and to have their stories heard and validated.

In summary, I conducted 33 interviews with the science students, three with their Peer Helper and one with the residence assistant assigned to their floor. I held 23 interviews with arts students, three with their Peer Helper and one with their residence assistant. Although I was initially concerned that the number of interviews I conducted was too few, I came to realize that it was not the final number of respondents I needed to be worried about but the potential for those of whom I did meet with to contribute to the development of my understanding of their cluster experience as well as provide an explanation of the social phenomena under study. The final number of students I interviewed was appropriate for that task.

I transcribed the 64 interviews tapes myself, an extremely time-intensive task but one that provided me with the opportunity to listen to what students were saying a second time outside of my interview role. I was able to identify changes in intonation, instances of sarcasm, episodes of purposeful repetition and made notes accordingly.

Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis are simultaneous activities in qualitative research. My initial insights and hunches from the first set of interviews informed the second phase of data collection which then influenced the third set of interviews. As a result this became a recursive process of data collection, analysis and reporting.

Following a framework outlined by Taylor and Bogdan (1984), I read and reread the

data to gain a more clear and deeper understanding of students stories related to their university experience. Using field notes, I wrote memos to myself, noting initial hunches, ideas, and possible themes as I searched for regularities, patterns, and emergent themes. I originally intended to use the Ethnograph (Seidel, Friese, and Leonard, 1995) to code and analyse the interview data, but found the topics too interwoven within the text to separate them. In addition, I thought my initial time and attention would be focussed too much on the mechanics of learning a new computer software system, instead of listening for the nuances within students words and stories. I was also afraid that such a mechanical system would limit me from taking a more holistic reading of the transcripts.

Qualitative data analysis is “the process of bringing order, structure and interpretation to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 150). This is not to imply that such analysis is orderly or linear. On the contrary, the analysis of qualitative data is a rather messy, ambiguous and very time consuming process. At times I was lost in the data, venturing off on tangents that led me in directions that later proved to be less relevant to the study. This was frustrating and yet I realized part of the research process. I used a process of qualitative induction in analysing my data, a strategy of organizing data, generating categories and themes and then testing the emerging hypotheses against the data (Bogdan & Biklin, 1992). My initial system of classification used whatever ideas, patterns, and explanations that emerged from each interview data set. These were then transformed into categories under which subsequent items were then sorted and then further reduced and refined .

Deriving hypotheses and theory from data involved both the integration and the refinement of categories. Hypotheses about the relationship between the codings were developed using constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which I compared incidents or information both within and between the two clusters. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recommend that in the study of groups, the researcher should maximise and minimise “both the differences and the similarities of data that bear on the categories being studied” (p. 55). Minimizing the differences between the two cluster groups allowed for the emergence of general categories within the data. Once this was completed, I was then able to maximize the differences between the two comparison groups.

In presenting my findings in the following three chapters, I followed Patton’s (1990, p. 430) notion of “thick description” providing detailed descriptions of the phenomena studied, including contexts, student perspectives, behaviours, and insights. I also have employed extensive use of verbatim quotations to convey the feelings, surface and deep meanings, and consistencies and inconsistencies of students’ experiences (Fetterman, 1989). It is through this process of thick description that I was able to expose the tensions and contradictions of students’ university experiences and examine the hidden paradoxical messages that pervade the higher educational system.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Because the value of qualitative findings cannot be discussed in the quantitative terms of validity and reliability, Lincoln and Guba, (1985, p. 290) have argued for a new

rhetoric and vocabulary to use in discussing these issues. They substituted “trustworthiness” for that of validity and introduced four criteria to inform what qualitative researchers must do to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Two of these, credibility and transferability, were incorporated in my research. Credibility was established through the passage of time over the two semesters which helped me to understand the students’ experiences; become more aware of my own assumptions and biases that impacted on my interpretation of the data, and to build trust with the students. Credibility was also accomplished through triangulation by testing my insights and findings with the Peer Helpers. Serving as an additional data source from my formal and informal meetings with them, the Peers alerted me to happenings on the floor, particular interpersonal dynamics, students’ general coping strategies, and levels of increased stress at major exam periods. They also provided different perspectives on cluster activities as well as another student voice from their own role as second and third year students. In addition, I was able to engage in regular and ongoing discussions with the program coordinator and ongoing discussions with my work colleagues throughout the study to test my emerging interpretations and understandings.

Transferability or possible usefulness of the study in another context was established by providing sufficient information and details about the setting, context, and student cohort to those readers who may want to apply the findings to their own situation. In providing a thick description, I have given sufficient information to aid those in judging transferability as to whether they may want to compare their situation to the one under study.

Ethical Considerations

Dobbert (1982) identified four ethical criteria appropriate to consider for qualitative research: 1. confidentiality, 2. honesty, 3. responsibility, and 4. fair return. Fetterman (1989) added two additional criteria, that of trust and rigour. Confidentiality was assured by protecting the anonymity of the students and the data. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents and permission was granted to use direct quotations. No interviews were conducted without their written consent. Honesty was established by letting the students know the nature of the study, who would have access to the data and how the data and results would be used. I tried to ensure responsibility by scheduling interviews at times that were convenient for students, recognizing the hectic nature of a 12 week semester system. I also made certain that the interviews honoured the time commitment I asked of the students and that the location and setting provided a confidential and relaxed environment for them. Finally, participation in the study gave students the chance to tell their story within an environment that seldom provides such opportunities. They were heard and felt validated. The students also had the opportunity to think about their university experience and gain insights into their situation and setting (Whitt and Kuh, 1991).

Subjectivity

As noted in the literature review, I was the original designer of the program under study. My concern over this close relationship and issues of subjectivity were related not to my inability to distance myself from the program but to my closeness to the values

behind the learning community program. I had identified UCC as my research topic in my letter for admission to the doctoral program. This choice was very much tied to my personal interests, as well as educational and pedagogical beliefs. Peshkin, in describing his subjectivity as a researcher stated:

My subjectivity is the basis for the story I am able to tell. It is a strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person and as a researcher, equipping me with the perspectives and insights that shape all that I do as a researcher, from the selection of a topic, clear through to the emphasis I make in my writing. Seen as a virtue, subjectivity is something to capitalize on rather than exorcise. (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992, p. 104).

During the process of interviewing students and transcribing their tapes, I completed a reading course in which I examined my preconceptions of community and how these influenced the design of the cluster project. This writing process helped me to further explore issues of subjectivity and to recognize that my values, conceptions and beliefs have been an integral component of every part of the research process.

CHAPTER 4

SIMILARITY, SAFETY AND SECURITY

Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles because there are stories within stories, and stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. If you're lost, you really start to look around and listen (Metzger, Circle of Stories, 1986, p. 104).

Introduction

It was the fear of getting lost that I was most concerned about when I began analyzing students' stories from our first meeting. In listening to their narratives, I was uncertain I would be able to truly hear the interplay between their actions, thoughts and feelings. As well, I was concerned that once drawn into their stories I would not know where to go next, lost without a map to navigate my way out. This chapter represents the beginning story of a shared journey that both the students and I as researcher were engaged in, a journey of novices, and as a result the stories that unfold at this time reflect uncertainty, fear, self-discovery and possibilities. I hope in my writing to bring an understanding to the reader of students' initial cluster experience within the context of their personal and cultural environment, recognizing that each of their stories is one of many voices within the cluster and that I too have a story to tell.

Initial Reactions

In analyzing their interview transcripts, I find that there is so much that students were telling me. If I step back and try to recall as a cohort their collective stories, what comes to mind? They came eagerly; they came out of curiosity; they came because I asked them to; because I told them that I was interested in them and their stories; and that I wanted to hear from them how they were making sense of this place called university. They came because they wanted someone to hear what they had to say and validate their experience.

I remember Katherine, so glad to be finally away from home and the hovering of her parents and Jean, a high school drop-out who returned to complete her OAC's and now wants to become a veterinarian. There was Ben who seemed so wise beyond his years as he talked about the need for depth in his friendships, and Jamie, 17 and away from home overseas for the first time. I can still recall some of those first interviews as we both dealt with being a novice and the awkwardness of silence.

There were a number of emerging themes that illuminated academic life from a cluster students' perspective. What I have come to realize from their stories is that students brought multiple perspectives that were at times ambiguous, contradictory, and often shifting creating not a single reality but a construction of realities. To provide an example of such contradictory data, I quote a response from Ben when I asked him about going to classes:

I always go to my classes. Well, I didn't go to my English class this morning 'cause my--I don't know what's wrong with my alarm clock--and I figured I had readings to do

anyway and English I enjoy the least of all but I know it won't be a perpetual thing with me but I don't think there's any social pressure to go. There might be for some people but for me there isn't. In the morning people are walking down the hall and everyone's screaming, "Lets go, lets go, lets go." I can see how others would go but for me I usually go anyway. I always go.

Students like Ben, through their words, ideas and metaphors, constructed an understanding of their university experience as they saw it. As a result, their beginning stories reflect a journey into paradox.

The Academic Experience

Students' academic experience - their courses, going to lectures, interactions with instructors, talking about their classes - took place within a social and cultural context. To explore what this landscape or fabric looked like from their perspective, I focused on their talk about these academic activities as they experienced them from within the context of their cluster.

Going to Class: Are You Sleeping, Sick or Dead?

"Whoever gets up first goes and *bangs* on the doors to make sure everyone is up" and if they weren't banging on doors, students talked about *pounding* on them while others running around *yelling* "Lets go! Lets go!" to ensure that everyone was up and going to class. Tom described his morning wake-up calls in the following way:

I have three 8:30's and I tend to sleep in so people come wake you up and help you. They go pounding on your door, "Get up! Get up!" They encourage you.

In small groups of two to three, sometimes in larger cohorts of seven to eight, cluster students would set out to attend their large lectures, sitting together and saving seats for others in the cluster. In these initial interviews, students operated on the initial expectation that one goes to class. They also expressed an obligation to other cluster members to attend class. Kate explained:

You kind of feel guilty if you don't go. Well I skipped one class. I had six hours of straight classes and I was hungry, but yeah, they were like, "Why aren't you going?" And you feel guilty about asking them for notes afterwards or something like that. Yeah, they get you motivated.

I asked students what it was like sitting in large lecture halls that held 300 to 600 people and they responded by describing them as intimidating and feeling alienated within them. Most had come from high school classes no larger than 20 and in fact some of their university lecture classes were larger than their entire high school. Sitting within a lecture with these kinds of numbers led to a sense of anonymity, intimidation, detachment and distance. Jamie reacted to the large size of his classes by taking on a much more passive role to his learning:

I don't ask questions, it's pointless whereas in high school I would. You could establish a personal relationship but here there's more distance and a bigger barrier.

It seems difficult to imagine that in a gathering of 400 students, similar in age and experience, it would be so hard to establish any kind of personal connections or to make friends, but that, in fact, was the case. Laura put it most succinctly when she said, "You get to know people by going to class with them, not by sitting in class with them."

Meredith fussed about the fact that in one class she had no cluster students to go with her. "I have at least two people in the cluster in each of my courses except Economics which is so horrible. I go and say where are all of my cluster friends?" Classmates were not trusted friends but strangers with whom they had no relationship with, so attending class together provided cluster participants a safe haven and a refuge from anonymity within such a nameless, friendless, arena.

Others also echoed these fears of intimidation and how this made them unwilling to participate in class, or to ask questions, for to do so would be taking risks, setting themselves apart from their peers. Such insecurity came not only from not knowing others in your class, but in not wanting to identify the fact that you did not know or understand something in such a large setting. No one wanted to admit their ignorance in public and face judgement by their peers.

Some of the cluster students talked about sitting close to the front of the lecture hall to better pay attention, and commented that it would be easier to ask questions if you sat in front because you would not have to yell over the whole audience. When I asked Carol if in fact she had asked questions, her response was, "I haven't asked a question in class but if I have to ask one, I'd rather be in the front to ask it." It was safer for most students to stay quiet, silent, and remain reticent within the large classroom setting.

Two students told me how the large class size allowed them to be anonymous by choice, especially if they had to come in late or wanted to nod off in class. A few talked about either sleeping in class or having classmates sleeping on either side of them during

lectures especially for those held in the early morning. Barbara took great pride in the fact that she did not fall asleep in class:

We sit through class and sometimes it's really hard and you try not to fall asleep. But I don't fall asleep. If I'm tired, I may space out a bit but I get all my notes down.

Katherine related an interesting story about what her course instructor does to students who sleep in his class:

Our Chemistry prof will come right up to the person and tap him on the shoulder just because he doesn't know if they're sleeping, sick or dead. So he told us if you want to go to sleep, leave. If you're dead, just lay there and if you're sick, go home and sleep.

Both arts and science students commented that sitting together with others in your cluster allowed you to do things that otherwise would not have been considered appropriate if you did not know the person next to you. Said Ben:

People in my cluster go together and sit together so it's comfortable to be there and you don't feel nervous to look over to the person's next to you notes if you missed an important point. You couldn't do that if you were sitting next to someone you didn't know.

Jamie concurred. "We go and sit together and if we miss notes, we can just copy off the other person without feeling guilty."

No one questioned why their classes were so large nor did anyone propose smaller classes as a more ideal setting. It was just accepted that university involved sitting in large lectures and being with a cluster member helped to break down the distance barriers between the professor and other students. What large lectures did was shape students

behavior and expectations regarding their role, purpose, and function as learners within that particular context.

One particular expectation that emerged from their stories was that lectures were a place for students to gather information, and by the fourth week of classes they soon discovered that this information could be collected elsewhere or through other means. Consequently, going to lecture became more of an optional activity, and for a number of students in both of cluster students, skipping classes after the third week of classes became common practice. They gave themselves permission not to go to class if the professor didn't make sense or went too fast, especially if that information could be clarified or repeated in the textbook. By the fourth and fifth week of classes, when time became tight, students would assess whether they would receive a better payoff in terms of their time if they went to class or not, and often, going to class was sacrificed for other time commitments. Carol confirmed this:

It's not doing them any good. They might as well spend the time doing homework or something more productive. It's not like they're going to get out of the work.

What emerged from these conversations was a norm of student culture that said it was okay not to go to class as long as you did the homework and the readings. Going to class and reading the text were different ways to gather the same information. Students assumed these were interchangeable activities. In such talk, there was no recognition of the teaching role of their course instructors other than to present information to them.

For those students who continued to attend class regularly, I discovered three particular reasons: 1. the guilt factor-- "If I don't go and I don't do well, I'll feel bad afterward;" 2. the stoic factor--"We don't want to get lazy"; and 3. the value for money factor--"We're paying \$4000 to be here." Many of these regular attendance-goers defined going to class as part of their definition of being studious-- "Yeah, we actually get up and go to our classes."

Students enrolled in Physics were told by the course instructor that lectures were optional given the design of the course. When I asked Ginny why she still went, she told me:

It helped to make the textbook come clearer. It helps if you are at the right spot in the work that you are supposed to be doing on your own. If you are behind, you write it down and come back to it later when you get to that part.

Others explained that they no longer went since the textbook supplied everything they needed to know and they were doing well. These comments further reinforced the notion that going to class was a means to gather information to be stored for future use.

I was curious if notes would be readily shared for whatever reason with those who didn't go to class. I discovered a number of unwritten rules which governed this practice. Willingness to share notes tended to depend on why students didn't go. For Ben, whose alarm clock didn't work causing him to sleep through class, getting notes from a cluster member was not a problem. "With the cluster I didn't have to go looking all over the place for notes and everything. I got the notes right away." Caitlin found no difficulty in getting notes when she came back late from Thanksgiving. When I asked if it was okay to

ask for notes if you didn't feel like going to class she responded:

Oh, yeah. There's a lot of people who don't go to classes on Friday. They're hung over and I don't mind giving them my notes.

This view though wasn't shared by Janet when I asked her about sharing her notes:

No, most who decide not to go don't really ask because it's not really fair but if someone had something else they had to do and miss class, then yeah, I'll lend them my notes.

I learned from their conversations, that any kind of reason, whether being hung-over, hungry, or the need to spend time on something else was acceptable. Laziness or wastefulness were not.

Learning in Lectures: The Banking System of Information Collection

Students' responses to my questions as to what they did in their classes were quite varied, dependent on the particular class, pace, organization of the lecture material, and what they saw as their purpose within the lecture. I was left with an image of them on a treadmill which they did not control, racing to keep up with the instructor. Ginny admitted that "I'm hurrying up to write down the notes so much that I'm not paying attention to what they are saying. I just write it down." Laura also commented on the speed and pace saying:

Lectures go pretty fast. Usually I try to understand what's going on but sometimes he just goes too fast so I get it down and will understand it later.

Joan further confirmed this stenographer role by adding that “ I get the information and then take it home and make sense of it.” Little mention was made as to any kind of processing of this information received in class. All they could hope for was to “capture” the information by copying it down before it could escape out of their grasp, and then figure out later what do to with it. Kerry presented a more sophisticated understanding of learning in lectures that went beyond the role of information gatherer:

I think in most classes the classroom is the theory and the stuff you do outside the classroom is applying the theory by doing the problems. I try to figure out in class how to use those concepts to your advantage when you are attacking the problem.

This notion of the classroom as the place where concepts, theories and abstractions were presented was identified most often by students in negative ways. They resented and complained about professors who “are just babbling on” and who “go all over the place.” There seemed to exist a clash between the students’ need for structure and a linear approach to learning and the professor’s abstract and conceptual approach. The result of this mismatch left students confused, frustrated, and as a result less likely to attend further lectures.

Professors: The Pronouns Without Antecedents

Throughout the interviews I was struck by the fact that students never identified their instructors by name. In my work with students over the past 10 years, I have met a few who were unable to tell me the names of their course instructors despite having

attended classes throughout the semester. But it still surprised me that for these students, their instructors would be such nameless entities even though they spoke about them in great detail. They referred to them as teachers, instructors, profs, and professors but never by name. Most often they were “he” or “she,” pronouns without antecedents. Interaction with professors was rare and seen as too risky despite the fact that students made a number of comments on how approachable their instructors were. For a few of them, this was different from their initial understanding that professors did not care based on information they had received in high school. Kate was most surprised at her instructors:

I really, honestly thought it would be like profs don't care about you, well not that they care but they're here to teach their stuff and you hear that profs are into research and don't want to teach and teaching is secondary but all my profs have been great. They're really sociable. You can talk to them. They try to get the class involved.

But students also spoke in conflicting realities about their professors for despite describing them as approachable, most said they would not go to talk to them. Carol explained:

Generally, yeah, I found the professors approachable but I haven't gone to talk to any one of them. If I had a question, I would tend to ask someone in my cluster as opposed to asking my prof. I don't want to go and ask him and have to admit I'm behind.

Andrew reinforced this perspective. “I expected the profs to be old, stuffy, strict and unapproachable but they're not like that.” But when I asked him if he had made any contact with his course instructors, he said no. For Jamie, it was the size of his lectures

that was a inhibiting factor for him in making such contact:

No, I haven't had the need to yet. Maybe later on or if I get more comfortable. In high school, it was small, 600 people and here my classes are at least half that size so the teachers know everyone in their classes in high school. Here they don't and it affects my in-class kind of thing.

Janet, on the other hand, was the only student who took a more pro-active approach and purposely set out to meet all of her profs. "I set goals such as to meet my profs and I went on my own and met them. I plan on doing it again. I thought I might as well let them know who I am." A number of the students who saw no need to make contact with their professors now, said they would probably do so in later years, when their classes would be smaller and they took more specialized courses. As nameless novices, they saw no need to make such contact now.

Talking About Their Courses

In these first interviews, I asked questions that focused primarily on students' everyday experiences. I wanted them to take me through a day, beginning when they first got up until they went to bed that evening. I asked them to describe what it was like going to class, what residence food was like, whether they had been away from home before, their major, what courses they were taking, and to identify which courses they found easy and which ones were difficult. Students in the science cluster, in rating their courses as easy or challenging, tended to base their assessment on how well they did in

that subject in high school. According to Joan:

Chemistry and Physics, I'm finding easy for me. I took Chem twice in OAC. I got a 79 the first time and wanted to get a high average so I took it last year so it's pretty fresh in my mind right now.

Many of the science students described their courses as a review from high school, where the information presented was familiar and was not seen as too difficult. Kate came to the conclusion that this review in her courses was intentional for first year. "I expected first year to make sure everyone's on the same plane and then second year you'll get into the nitty gritty." If a course was identified as challenging, it was often the instructor who was blamed, either in going too fast when presenting material or in being difficult to understand. I should point out that the timing of these interviews took place before a number of students had taken any midterm exams and so their assessment related to course ease or difficulty was based on their perceived ability to solve homework problems, comprehend readings, and understand lecture material.

For students taking arts and social science courses, there was no identified link made between OAC courses and what they were currently taking and as a result, no mention of any of their courses as review except for Andrew taking Economics.

I thought I would be bored because I took it in high school but so far I understand it a lot better. It gave me advantages over the other students who didn't take it in high school so right now I'm thinking of majoring in Economics.

Familiarity of content from high school courses provided students with an anchor and sense of security though as I will talk about later, for some a false sense of security with

the familiar. Students described courses as easy not only because of having prior information about the subject but also due to the workload requirement. "Film is easy so far, you just go. I haven't handed anything in yet so maybe I'll change my mind" was how Jamie evaluated his course. Katherine liked zoology "because the teacher doesn't give assignments or anything. We just listen to them talk." Said Miriam about microbiology:

I like microbiology 'cause there's no homework in it and there's no real reading. I don't want to say it's easier 'cause I haven't written the midterm in it so I'm not sure. They just said if you don't understand the lectures use the textbook and the text isn't even required.

Students taking courses with new content commented on their difficulty in trying to figure out where the course was going and their inability to relate to the information presented in their courses. Mike identified History as his least interesting course. "Other people may think it's good but I'm not interested in the Arab movement, especially when you have to read and write two papers on why the Arab movement failed in World War I." Likewise for Jamie who named his English course as the one he was most worried about and least interested in. "I find the topic of race and gender so overdone and that's all we talk about in that class. You get tired of it." Janet, in a moment of despair, said she was not excited about any of her courses:

I didn't get into the Economics course I wanted. I'll take them next semester. Right now, I don't see a connection between what I'm taking and what I want to do.

Extending Conversations Beyond the Classroom

When students spoke about their day and going to classes, I asked if they talked with others about what happened in their lectures afterward. Did they continue the conversations beyond the classroom when walking to their next class or back to their residence? Students often responded to this question as if it was a separate, one dimensional topic but as I listened to their stories I discovered that in their practice and every day world this wasn't evident. They tended to have a broader conceptualization of the academic realm though they may not have identified it as such.

"Once the prof stops, we're done," exclaimed Joan. Miriam added, "If something different happened or something was new, we'd talk about it but mostly we talk about what we should be doing." This theme was also echoed by Kate who commented, "maybe if we didn't understand something or if something was funny or strange but no deep real conversations." I found that when students did talk about what happened in their lectures it had less to do with the content and more to do with whether it was worth their time to have attended. They often went through some kind of cost-benefit analysis in deciding how much attention to spend on talking about a class. Mike echoed this theme.

Nancy: After you leave class together, would you talk about what happened in class?

Mike: Yeah, we normally start talking about the class, whether we thought it was worth going to, we critique it, sometimes we think it wasn't even worth talking about so we don't.

Subject matter influenced the extent to which students continued the classroom conversations. Information-laden classes which required students to spend their time taking notes and “number crunching,” as they referred to it, usually left them numb afterwards. In her interview, Ginny described how overwhelmed she sometimes was after some of her classes. “Coming out of Calculus class everyday, it’s like--what was that? No, we don’t discuss it until we later pull out the books.” She was not alone in feeling the need to “talk about something else” after class. On the other hand, those classes that seemed to engage students in issues that they could connect with elicited more discussion outside of class. Ben described this scenario when he left his Anthropology class:

Fraser and I were walking back from Anthro and we started talking about concepts and we discussed culture -- between classes you tend to reflect with the people in your cluster, you talk about what's just gone on and in most circumstances everybody has a different take on it.

For most students, it was at night, back in their residence when they would extend their classroom conversations, a consequence of shared classes and a shared living arrangement that will be explored later when I examine cluster living.

Students as Learners

After asking students about themselves, their courses and their classroom experience, I then tried to engage them in conversations about what learning at university meant to them. I wanted them to tell me about what they did when they sat down to study; how they defined their learning tasks; and the ways they found university-level

learning different from high school learning. In particular I wanted to examine how what they said about their learning matched with what they actually did as learners. Their responses showed great variation, sometimes interspersed with contradictions, uncertainty, and for a few, an inability to provide an answer. “I don’t know” or “I haven’t figured that out yet” were some of the responses to questions that required some degree of self-reflection.

How They Define Learning

Although learning is a very broad concept, students talked about it primarily as academic in nature, within the context of the classroom. Since I was the one who brought up the subject, their responses were dependent on the kinds of questions I posed. For example, when I asked students to tell me what they did when they sat down to study, they usually focused on the mechanics, such as homework to complete; practice sets to solve; notes to review; and chapters to read. They often went into great detail describing their workload as set out by their course outlines which provided them with a breakdown as to what they were responsible for. Some followed them very seriously, as demonstrated by Olivia:

I just work through every single problem that the teacher recommends that we do. I do all the readings right now. I’m trying to do everything they suggest. I don’t know how long I will do that but right now, I’m trying to do everything they say.

Most students defined studying as a daily requirement with due dates and test dates governing as to when and what subjects to spend their time on. 'Problem-solving' was identified as the major study activity for students taking science courses, while 'reading' was the primary task for arts and social science courses. Some students described in detail their particular methods for studying. Katherine talked about her system in the following way:

It depends on the subject. Chemistry we do in units. We have an outline of stuff to do already so I go through the questions at the end of the chapter and I write them down and just read them and then I go through the textbook and read the example problems and then I read the summary at the end of the chapter and then try the questions. If I don't get them, I'd flip through and try to find the answers. For Psych, I read over the chapter and then I go back into the chapter, highlight important stuff and then I'll read the study guide.

Ginny described a more elaborate approach using separate notebooks for each course; writing questions in pen and answers in pencil; in addition to writing herself instructions if she didn't think she was going to remember something. As students explained their methods, I found I sometimes wanted to interject and provide reassurance or praise, offer advice, suggest alternative approaches or point out limitations to their methods. Take the case of Sam who told me that he was worried about the effectiveness of his study methods which consisted of going over the day's notes and reading the textbook. He went on to say, "I rely a lot on lectures. I don't take notes. I just listen and stuff goes into my brain but I don't know how much will be left at the end of the year." At the other

extreme was Laura who I found to demonstrate a very sophisticated approach to her studying:

I take things apart one step at a time. It's a lot less work than memorizing. If you have to do a question that is a bit different you can figure it out whereas if you just memorized the formula, you won't be able to. Plus, if you memorize it, you will just forget it later.

The students I interviewed knew I worked in a learning support program but I was introduced to them initially as the person responsible for creating the cluster program and was now interested in understanding what took place within it. I had made arrangements with my colleagues that if, during an interview, a student asked for specific learning advice, I would make a referral to one of them; however, I decided that if such information or support was not sought, I would not respond in these areas. I did not want to compromise my researcher role with my professional role within the context of the interviews but it was challenging at times to conceal approval or not provide advice.

I found in these conversations that students' approaches to learning varied depending on the type of course, interest in the topic, pressures from other courses, amount of content in the course, motivation, time in the semester, and testing formats. There was much talk about rewriting notes and writing information out. Copying served as a review as well as making notes look neater. According to Jenny, "I have to write things out. I need time. It takes me awhile unless I truly understand something." Susan added that making notes helped her to think about the material more. "I have to read it over and then pick out what were the points in the paragraph and write it down. It's slow

but if I did it any other way, I wouldn't be absorbing it as well." Kerry claimed that she just couldn't listen to information but needed to use paper and pencil to see the logic of it. All these variations were examples of strategies students employed to acquire facts, increase their knowledge, and develop competence through some kind of manipulation of course information.

A number of students identified memorization as their basic approach to learning. Caitlin was surprised at this. "I'm having to write things out a lot and coming up with acronyms. I'm more use to trying to know something as a concept, not memorizing things so that's what I find hard. My courses have a lot of memorization." Other students though were beginning to recognize that memorization as a sole learning strategy was no longer adequate. Tom put it this way:

You're actually learning it, not just memorizing. You have to go out and learn it instead of keeping it in your mind for three days and then losing it. I have to learn how to do that because I've never done that before. My whole high school career was just memorization but this is different. This is actual learning.

Ben further elaborated on this theme:

I don't feel satisfied or if I gained anything if I've read 20 pages of a text and it has just gone out of my head so I have to go back. People will say, "Oh, well, we'll just give you the notes we took." but I'm--like concepts that I'm not familiar with--I can't accept that because I have to learn for myself now. I can't rely on old exams or whatever and just memorize stuff. It's not like that anymore.

For some students, the approaches they talked about using were based on successful methods they had developed in high school and so for them, learning at university was just a continuation of that process. Kate stated that she was doing the same kind of studying as high school and that so far it was working. She and a number of other students felt their high school had prepared them well for university, if not even giving them an advantage over other students. A few, though, bemoaned the fact that they had been able to get good marks in high school without doing much work. According to Carol:

In high school, I didn't do much work. I was the type of person who if I read it or if I heard it in class, I would know it and I didn't have to do all of the questions assigned but now I have to sit down and do all of the problems 'cause you never know what's going to be on [the exam].

Others bragged about how little work they had to do and still do well. Tom described his high school learning strategies this way:

I could leave everything up to the last minute, the night before, spend three hours on a paper and get a 90 percent on it. Here, you can't do that. In high school you could cram the night before. I never had to study for exams in high school more than the night before and I always had good marks. You just didn't have to. It wasn't necessary. It was all reinforced. I wasn't that hard. You could memorize it all.

These kinds of comments illustrate how students had successfully adapted to their high school learning environment and a recognition that such strategies at university would

short change them now. Said Susan, “You could get away with not doing your homework if you understood the topic but now if you don’t do the questions and practice them and read the text then you’re not going to get anywhere.” For Jamie, university level learning required a more integrative approach, or, as he so aptly put it, a “higher” level of learning:

High school learning is more based on short-term memory-study the night before and write it down the next day and you’re done. Here I find you’ve got to know it, interlock it, make all the connections and even between different courses, not just different chapters. Dare I say the level of learning is higher here?

With these kind of comments, I expected students to be angry with their high schools for not preparing them adequately for university, but that didn’t seem to be the case. When I posed that question to Mike, he responded:

High school learning is easy. It’s basically a little day care centre. I didn’t find it very challenging. I had a job, a girl friend, I played hockey. I worked at fund raising, I did all that and was still able to pull 87’s. I had 95 in one class. I never studied. I studied for only two exams and they were Calculus and Geometry. I don’t feel cheated, just a little unprepared.

When I asked him if his high school could have done things differently, he told me no. If there was anger, it was expressed inwardly at themselves. Lamented Janet:

That’s the part that I’m mad at myself about. I don’t recall ever studying in high school. I never studied for an exam. I didn’t have the patience to sit down and memorize. Even in OAC’s they wrote everything on the board for us. If I understood it, I could apply it. I did real well on essays and assignments. But here it’s different. You’re required to read.

Another difference between high school and university level learning that students identified was the identification of themselves as the locus of control. As Kim saw it:

You have to rely on yourself a lot more. In high school you didn't really have to read the textbook. Honestly, I don't remember ever reading a textbook. I did what I was told to do. I answered the questions I was told to answer. I got the assignments in I was told to do and there were certain due dates. Here you have to rely on yourself to do the work, to learn it, understand it. No one is checking up on you or forcing you to do the work.

There was universal recognition that the teacher-dependent role they had experienced in high school role had been replaced by a role that now made them responsible for their own learning. Some students expressed personal doubts about their ability to handle this new responsibility, but others, like Ben, relished this new found freedom:

I'm forming my own opinions and thoughts. I'm doing some of that because I'm reading the text and I'm reading the concepts and situations and stuff and I'm then interpreting it in my own way and inferring my own beliefs on it. Whether they're biased or not. I don't really care. Where a teacher in high school would tell you what it means and so on.

Consistent throughout these first round interviews was the message from students that the challenge in learning was not related to the difficulty or complexity of the material but the amount of information to learn, in such a short time, in a setting where they were now responsible for their own learning. Despite the fact that students recognized that university-level learning would be different, many of them still operated under approaches to learning that they had grown accustomed to and were successful with in

high school. They still expected direction; they expected the purpose of their courses to be revealed to them; and they expected their study activities to be structured for them.

In my position as counselor, when I meet with individual students who are frustrated by their academic performance, I often ask them to tell me how they know they are learning anything when they sit down to study. I pose this question to assess their level of meta-cognitive awareness, the knowledge they have about their own learning and the ways they use that knowledge during the learning process. I want to find out what they do as learners, why they do what they do, and their sense of personal control in adapting or changing to specific learning tasks. I posed this same question to the cluster students I interviewed. I wanted to understand how aware they were of their own learning and whether they exhibited any kind of flexibility in responding to different learning demands. There was a range of responses to these questions. Some spoke with great certainty; some admitted they were still trying to figure that out; and a few declared they just didn't know. When I asked Jenny how she knew if she was learning anything, she answered, "It's when presented with a question and being able to do it or carrying on a conversation about it." Jamie though had more doubt about how to assess his learning expressed best the dilemma many felt :

It's kind of hard to assess how well I'm doing. In Calculus with quizzes I can tell if I'm on the ball and it's pretty much all review but in other classes - Psych, Sociology - we haven't had any tests. I'm going by reading it and if I remember it in the morning, then I kind of know it but if I don't remember it, I have to read it over again.

Susan further described these difficulties related to learning in courses which had no problem sets and the uncertainty this brought:

That was my problem with Psychology. I first started studying with my book but I wasn't getting anywhere because I didn't feel like I knew what was going on. I'd look at what I studied and I couldn't remember without reading it or knowing what the terms meant or how they were used. So I think it's a matter of - if you can answer questions about it or if I can give myself a mini lecture, if I'm able to do that then I think I get it. It's easier with other subjects where you can do the problems because if you can do the problems, you probably understand it.

This uncertainty was echoed consistently by students taking arts and social science courses who were often left guessing in assessing their level of understanding in a course.

When I posed the question to Andrew, he replied:

I was actually wondering that myself. What is the prof getting at? What are we supposed to know? What is he teaching us here? What is he going to test us on?

Andrew saw his teacher as the primary factor in deciding not only what to learn but how much effort should be applied to class. He was looking for clues and directions, and, at this early point in the semester, was finding none.

Within this context of uncertainty about what to study and how to study, there existed a kind of academic discomfort that students seemed to accept or tolerate. I was therefore curious as to how they held themselves accountable within such an environment. When they talked about getting down to do "school work," I was intrigued about what drove them to engage in activities that they often described as unrewarding

and unpleasant. Students discussed in detail their self-discipline in achieving their goals; the fact that they felt they had no choice but to do the work; the financial implications if they didn't; and their fear of failure. For some students, doing the work was just a matter of habit as described by Miriam who said:

[I did the work] just because I know I have to do it. I've never not handed something in. I've never not written a test. I've never failed an exam. I don't know anything else. I've always done my homework. I just know it has to get done. If I want to get anywhere, I have to do fairly well.

This theme of wanting to "get somewhere" was also reiterated by Susan, who went on to say:

If you fail high school, you know that you can go back but if you fail here, it's a big deal. Plus, I want to get on with it. I want to become whatever I am going to be in the end though I don't know exactly what I'll do yet but I know I want to get on with my life and so I think that really helps.

This notion of "getting anywhere" and "getting on with it" was particularly evident in the science cluster where many of the members entered university with the intention of getting accepted into the highly selective veterinary medicine program. Since students could apply in their second semester, how well they did in their Fall courses would be a major determinant for admission and a major step in achieving their career objectives. Ginny, who entered with the goal of becoming a doctor, seemed to epitomize this strong goal focus within the science student cluster:

If I want to be a doctor then I have to get into the biomed program and if I have to do that I have to get an 84 percent average in first year and if I want an 84 average I have to pass this test, I don't want to wreck the big picture at the end so I have to do it now.

Fear of failure also played a role in motivating students to get their work done. When I asked Kim how she held herself accountable, she replied, "It's just the person I am. I know I don't want to fail. I can't afford to screw up. In my family we don't fail." For Kim and others, academic success or failure would not only impact on them but also on their family either financially or, in terms of social status. This point was also made by Andrew, who reiterated a theme of "wastefulness" that he had developed earlier in our interview, when he said, "If I don't do it I'll fail out for sure. If I fail out that's my parents and my money down the drain."

Time Management and the Sin of Wastefulness

In their stories about studying, going to classes, and even in describing their motivation, the theme of wastefulness came up over and over again. It permeated their talk, and appeared to direct their actions and set limits on how much time they spent on their academic activities. Students operated under what I would call an "efficiency principle," which required all of their academic activities to undergo some kind of cost-benefit analysis. Those activities deemed to be too time consuming without an appropriate payback were then eliminated. For Andrew, this principle was used in his decision to drop German, "'cause I'm not that strong in languages and I was not willing to put out the time." Students fretted about 'wasting' their money or their parent's money if they didn't do well. Decisions about whether to go to class or not underwent the same kind of analysis, as well as where to put one's study efforts in a particular course. Even eating came under the same kind of scrutiny. Most of them, if they ate breakfast, did so in

their rooms because it was quicker and allowed them to sleep longer in the mornings.

Olivia was critical of the time required for lunch:

By the time we walk over there, get our food, wait in line and eat and then get back it takes 30 to 35 minutes. That's kind of a lot of wasted time I find.

By the third week of classes, there already was talk of trying to 'catch up', not to get further behind and concerns about the workload. Students described themselves as "buried in the work" and feeling overwhelmed because there was "so much to do and not time to do it in." No one ever admitted to being ahead of where they should have been in their courses or even being caught up. Kate came closest when she described her situation as, "I'm not ahead but I'm not that far behind."

Taking five courses in a 12 week semester meant that exams started in the fourth week and continued until the 10th week of classes. Papers, laboratory and other assignments were also required throughout this time. Students continually complained about the speed and pace of their courses, as well as testing formats that were now timed. One student expressed this concern by stating, "It's always constant, constant work and you don't have time - you have to understand and move on - you learn to do that." There was a sense that work was never ending, and that to be caught up was an elusive goal. Some soon realized it could never be reached. As Olivia moaned, "I feel like there's always something you can be doing, you can never say you've done everything." Susan saw this as a dilemma:

The problem is that you do one subject until you are caught up but then everything else falls behind so it's an impossible juggling thing. You can never get everything

caught up at once because one thing makes you get behind in another.

Even though many students described themselves as working “every spare minute,” there were others who admitted they needed to do more. They identified procrastination as a major impediment to getting work done and at times felt powerless to confront it. Barbara lamented the fact that she seemed unable to motivate herself to do her work:

Homework wise, it's much more work than I expected. I'm already behind since there's so much work to do. I'm procrastinating. I have a tv in my room and I watch a lot.... I find that since I don't have any homework to hand in the next day, then I usually don't have my work done for the next day. So it drags on a bit. There's a lot of work and I thought I would be able to sit myself down and do the work but I'm having trouble to get it done.

Caitlin, who also seemed to be having difficulties getting her work done, spoke in terms of what she “should” be doing:

I should probably start buckling down and doing a bit more work. That's what I feel. I should be doing more of what I do. In high school I was pretty good at it. I should be doing more studying. Sunday I do homework all day. It's more catch up. My main focus right now is to get all caught up. I think I should be okay. I think I'll feel better if I, when I get all that work done. I know I'll work hard enough to get all that work caught up. I'm not going to leave it and not do it but once I've done it I'll feel a lot better.

Issues related to procrastination were further compounded by living and learning in a residence environment. Although this will be explored in more detail when I examine cluster living, it is worth noting here that Mike linked some of his procrastination

problems to the challenge of studying in residence:

After dinner you procrastinate for a couple of hours and fooling around and stuff and then you study awhile. A few people have a tv so we'll watch a movie. It just goes on from there.

I was not surprised then when I asked them what advice they would give to new students based on their initial university experience, that they chanted the mantra, "Don't get behind," over and over again. Within such a short semestered system and a typical five course-load pattern, time became a valued commodity that students never seemed to have enough of.

'Grade Expectations'

In learning skills workshops that I conduct for new students each Fall, I usually congratulate them on their records of high achievement based on their academic performance in high school. Many of these students enter with A averages, grades in the 80's and 90's, a testimony to what they consider to be a measure of their success. Despite the uncertainty regarding what lies ahead of them as learners, they tend to be confident in their abilities to adjust to and handle university-level learning, since they have not received any feedback that would indicate otherwise. I then proceed to talk about the challenges of maintaining that level of success, cautioning them to expect some downward adjustment of grades in their first year. This caution often falls on deaf ears for I have discovered that while students recognize that a grade drop does occur, they attribute the drop to others, not to themselves.

Over the last 10 years, I have noticed students becoming increasingly adept at playing what I call 'the grading game'. This preoccupation with grades starts well before they arrive at university. I hear it most often as it relates to their courses in their final year in high school. Students know that the grades they receive in those courses determine their eligibility for scholarships, entrance into certain programs of study, admission to the university of their choice, and participation in such programs as co-op. They are knowledgeable about cut-off grades for acceptance to various programs of study within the universities they are applying to and as a result take strategic approaches to ensuring they have the necessary grades. This may include retaking courses a second and third time to better their grade or retaking courses at a different school known for its easier grading. Once students arrive at university, this emphasis on grades continues. They know that these grades will determine retention of scholarships, entrance into certain majors, entrance into professional schools and graduate schools and whether, in fact, they remain in school.

With such an emphasis on grades, I purposely sought to find out what kind of grade expectations students entered with and whether this changed over the course of the semester as they received feedback from their midterms and finals. How did students talk about their grades? How did their grades impact on their plans of study or career choices? Assessment in Guelph's 12 week semester means that most entering students experience one or two midterms per course which account for 30 - 40 percent of their final grade, the remainder coming from quizzes or papers and a final exam. In a typical setting, the first midterm, usually occurring in week five or six, would count for 10 to 25 percent, and the

second midterm, held in week nine or ten would be worth 25 to 40 percent. This was a different scenario than what many reported in high school where tests were held every couple of weeks. Not only were students now facing exams held less frequently but they also were now accountable to learn more information within an expanded time frame. From their talk, I found that in the first five or six weeks in the Fall semester, prior to their first set of midterms, there was great anxiety and uncertainty for many students in the two clusters. Rebecca expressed the sentiment felt by others when she said she preferred her high school system with its regularly-scheduled tests throughout the term:

For me, I'd rather have more tests that are more often 'cause it's hard to wait until a month in a course. It would be better if it were unit by unit. It would be easier if they had more little tests than big ones.

Since most of my first-round interviews took place prior to students' first formal set of exams, their talk in these interviews tended to be shaped by expectations and hearsay rather than reality. I asked them whether they had set specific goals for themselves in their courses. I wanted to find out what they had heard about the 'grade drop' and whether they had adjusted their expectations accordingly. Since there seemed to be some major differences based on whether a student was in the arts or sciences, I will discuss their responses from the perspective of each cluster.

What influenced responses from students in the sciences was the fact that many of them hoped to be able to apply to the veterinary medicine program after their first semester and to do so they would need first semester grades between 82 to 83 percent based on last year's cutoff marks. As a result, many of these students were aiming for

high grades. When I asked Kate what grades she expected in her courses, she responded:

They say to expect your marks to drop five percent. I don't know whether they think the workload is heavier or whether high school marks are inflated or that's just how they mark. I'm not sure what to expect. I'm use to having 90's so I'd like to be in the 80's at least. 70's would be disappointing but I'm not sure how that's going to work.

I found students very cautious in identifying their grade expectations, particularly those who had not received any formal feedback yet. Caitlin provided an example of this cautious approach:

I'll see how midterms go. I don't want to set [my expectations] too high and come crashing down but I don't want to set them too low.

Miriam also identified her uncertainty about maintaining her high school level of performance when she exclaimed, "I knew it was realistic in high school to have a 90-- that was something I could do but here I'm not sure." Carol further elaborated on this theme:

I don't think it's extremely realistic to think that you can keep the same grades that you achieved in high school 'cause it's a different atmosphere, a different environment, a different kind of classes.

Others were not willing to concede a reduction in grades, as witnessed by Rebecca who claimed:

I'm very tough on myself for grades. Even a 12/16 which is a fair grade, it's not a bad grade but I'm not satisfied. I don't tell anyone about it but I do get upset about it. I'm hard on myself but I want to get over an 80 average. I'd like to keep about the same average that I kept in high school which was in the high 80's.

For many of these science students entering with grades in the 90's, a possible 10 percent drop in their first semester grades would still allow them to achieve marks in the low 80's to be able to apply to the vet program. By the time I interviewed the last two science students in the first round, they had in fact received some midterm marks back. I heard a marked difference in tone from Jenny, a kind of a defense mechanism to justify her lowered than expected grades:

My marks are not as high as I would like them to be but I figure that it's normal. I mean you are coming in from high school there's this huge adjustment. Yeah, I was going to get high grades so now I'm reassessing because I realize in university for your first semester, a 65 is acceptable.

Feedback from exams tended to confirm or question a student's choice of major as well as career aspirations. I found this somewhat surprising since many of these exams were only worth 10 to 20 percent of a student's total grade for the course. Susan, who had done well in her first set of exams, provided this response when I asked if students are forced to rethink their goals and aspirations when they get exam results back:

It does a bit for some people. A friend of mine who isn't in a cluster - she's always wanted to work with animals and be a vet or something along that line. She got her zoology exam back and did very poorly and she felt like--how could she do so badly on something that she wanted to do with her life so I think people do tend to think like that quite a bit.

The following exchange I had with Rebecca who failed her first Chemistry exam highlights the impact first midterm results had on students future career aspirations:

Nancy: Did you set for yourself specific goals you wanted to achieve?

- Rebecca: I wanted to try to get into vet med. I'm giving myself some time to adjust to-- my parents told me to take my time and that I can apply whenever I want, so I'm just trying to see how things go.
- Nancy: Has your feedback so far made you alter your plans?
- Rebecca: Well I probably won't apply this year.

Arts students also talked about grade drop and the uncertainty about what to expect in terms of grades at university. A number of them identified grade drops of 10 and 20 percent based on information that they had heard from either friends, teachers or university staff. For some this was difficult news to digest. Meredith did not want to have to accept lower standards than what she was used to:

I'm not really an overachiever but I've always achieved a lot. It's weird for me to be thinking about dropping 20 percent--that just struck fear in my gut. I couldn't handle that.

Liz also was not willing to concede lowering expectations but still had personal doubts:

I have the same expectations as I did in high school. Nothing is ever good enough. I didn't push myself enough in high school. I'm very competitive with myself. I understand marks go down at university but I will try to get over 80 but I doubt it.

What I found different between the arts and science students, were the variations in grade expectations that they identified. Whereas the science students were all aiming for A averages, the arts students on the whole set their sights lower.

Jamie expressed his course goals this way:

Obviously, I'd like to get really good grades but I haven't said I'll get B's or A's. My general feeling is C's and up.

Mike told me he would settle for at 70's as did Anne who wanted to get at least a B. Janet provided further evidence of this trend when she said:

I know they say it's normal if you drop 10 percent. My RA went up 10 percent in her first semester. You just want to do well within yourself. I would be happy with 70's.

The urgency for high grades was less evident in the arts cluster where students seemed less driven by the need to attain A's in their first semester courses. Although some of the arts students had professional aspirations and talked about attending graduate school, they were not consumed by high grade expectations nor did they assume that failure to achieve an A on a midterm in their first semester would prevent them from achieving their career goals. This is not to say that grades did not have an impact on their career plans or course of study. The following exchange I had with Janet speaks to this uncertainty:

Nancy: Do people in your cluster talk about what they want to do?

Janet: No one is certain what they want to do. Everyone is waiting to hear different ideas, different angles.

Nancy: Were people fairly certain about what they wanted to do when they first came?

Janet: We were focused. We came with a good idea of what we wanted to do but now everyone is changing their major or minor. We laugh about it 'cause one week you're going to do this and then something bad happens in that class and you change your mind.

The arts students as a cohort articulated a different kind of cultural norm as it related to grades and achievement. It was not that academic life was not important to them but their desire for social support and the maintenance of social connections often took place at the expense of academics. Mike epitomized this difference in attitude between the two clusters:

No matter what you get in grades, it will always be a good semester because you've met so many more people and done so many different things. Your grades are important but you've done so much stuff. If you get good grades on top of that, it's a great semester.

Even though there were differences in how students in the two clusters talked about grades desired in their courses, they shared the expectation that hard work, not performance should be rewarded. Andrew epitomized this understanding that effort should be recognized when he commented, "If I do my work, everything will turn out." Students associated failure with a lack of responsibility, not being studious or not doing the work. They did not see failure as a lack of ability or lack of effort. Kim expressed this point succinctly when she stated, "In my family we don't fail. It's not something we do. We're studious and responsible." Miriam provided another variation on this theme in her comment, "If I don't pass the exam doing the homework and studying then I have a problem!" For Miriam and others, there was a recognition that effort and hard work were what counted. Ability was not an issue, otherwise they would have not been accepted to university. Therefore, any student can do well if he or she is responsible and gets the work done.

If this was their initial understanding, I was curious as to how this matched against what they said when they received grades back that indicated poor performance and listened for any disclaimers, excuses and justifications used by students in explaining their performance. What kind of face-saving techniques would they employ?

According to Kate:

Most people if they didn't do well, blame someone else. They'll say they didn't understand it or it was hard or the teacher didn't mark it right but in the back of our minds, we know they didn't understand the question but we let it go because we use that excuse too.

Mike blamed his poor performance on a variety of factors. Ability was not one of them:

I guess I was really tired and I'm getting behind in my reading and I'm doing it later at night and it's not sticking as good as it normally would. It's just nerves too.

Jenny also identified nerves as the reason for her performance and stated, "Just because I did poorly didn't mean that I didn't know my stuff 'cause I know I did. I think it was just an anxiety factor." She later talked about the exam in more detail:

I went into the exam very, very confident and I think my anxiety is especially to blame for my mark. I don't think it's only me because the average mark wasn't very high. I didn't leave the exam thinking that I had done very well. I knew then. Usually, when I feel that I have done well, I have done well but I've never gone into an exam feeling as confident as I did for that Chemistry exam and coming out feeling that I had done so poorly. I was so nervous that I couldn't interpret the questions or the questions were just so - I mean, I could probably do them if I saw them now. I couldn't recognize the stuff. I couldn't interpret the questions.

Rebecca, who failed her Chemistry exam, provided this rationale:

In Chem, I didn't do well. I got a 41. I felt prepared going into the midterm. I did all the chapter questions and the practice exams. I thought I knew it.

When I asked her if she would do anything differently for the next midterm, she responded:

I think I would get all of the work done earlier so I would have more time for redoing things. I did all the work but I needed to do some of the questions a couple more times.

From the limited data I was able to collect on students' exam experience, what I heard most often were problems related to the exam itself or performance issues. Exams, in particular multiple choice, were described as "tricky," "using language we had never seen," or using words that students didn't understand. As well, students continued to expect their hard work and effort put into studying, preparing, and learning to be rewarded and recognized as it had been in high school. When I asked Jenny if it was comforting to know that others in the cluster had also not done well, she answered:

Yeah, it is. It's good to know that you are not alone and that it's not you. I mean, we are not an unintelligent group of people.

Science vs. Arts or Fact vs. Opinion

My intent in interviewing students in a science cluster and an arts cluster was to note whether there were differences in how students "experienced" learning within the context of their discipline. If there were such differences, I wondered how in their stories

and conversations, these variations would emerge. Certainly there was similarity in experience for most students in the adjustment they faced as part of their transition to university. But despite their similarity in age and status as direct admits from high school, I found differences related to goals, grade expectations, peer group formation, and dynamics between the two clusters. Some of these differences could be attributed to the unique nature of each cluster and the individuals who made up the membership but others were a reflection of disciplinary differences.

A major theme that emerged from my data is that students tended to self-select into majors that reflected their own attitudes towards learning. They brought particular epistemological beliefs about what it meant to learn within a science or arts field and these beliefs very much influenced their patterns of learning. Joan, a science student, described what learning meant for her:

Learning is getting information and applying it. Like in sciences, that's the way it is--getting information and applying it. It would be different in arts. I think in arts you are doing more like thinking and feeling but in science and math you are getting information and applying it.

Students' conceptualizations of what constitutes learning tended to be very polarized between the arts and the sciences. This is how Katherine, a science student, responded to my question on what it was like to take a Psychology course:

I've never taken a Psych or Sociology course before so that's different. It's not math or science. The teacher is more interested in what people are thinking, like your ideas and stuff. In math, it's either right or wrong but here you can argue your point. I haven't really gotten used to that side of it yet. I'm worried about, I'm not really worried

about Psych. I just don't know what it's going to be like because it's more English part instead of the sciences, like there's no right or wrong answers. It's basically opinion.

Students who took courses outside of their discipline acted as if they were entering some kind of foreign territory, an unfamiliar land with different inhabitants, different customs, different learning tasks and with a different language spoken. When I asked Miriam how she had done on her midterms, she answered:

I didn't get the Anthro back yet but it was bad because of the multiple choice. I'm not an English student at all and it was just the words. I didn't know what some of the words meant. I had no idea.

When I asked whether it required a different approach to learning, she replied:

Yeah, there's so much reading that I hate. I love the course. I love sitting in the lectures and it's so interesting but for me to sit down and read two chapters at 40 pages per chapter - I just, I die. It takes me eight hours to do. I can't stand it.

I was surprised at how fearful students felt outside their discipline. Science students in particular saw university as safe haven from having to take non-science courses confirming previous research findings on discipline-specific learning (Tobias, 1990, 1992). Kate was relieved that she no longer would have to take an English course:

I'm looking forward to taking specialized courses. Biology is pretty broad. Calculus is whatever. I'd like to start applying that stuff--like taking Genetics courses because it's really my interest. But even this is great because in high school I had to take English but it's not going to get me here.

It was not only the learning methods that students saw as different when they ventured outside their discipline but also the atmosphere within the class and the role of instructor and students. Carol, in the sciences, in describing her arts class:

My Geography class is mostly arts students. It's smaller than my other lectures. The prof always asks questions and people put up their hands and answer and you have to come up with the reasons why something is like that whereas in my other classes being like sciences and math, it's not like that because we're working through problems and there's a specific answer--[in Geography] there's a lot more than one answer so it has more class interaction that way.

Katherine, also in the sciences, spoke to a different kind of atmosphere in her Psychology class:

Psych class is more interesting because there's a lot of English majors and Art majors and they're not just the science people. The science people seem to be more strict, like they don't act out in class but this one, people get up and make jokes and they make fun of the prof and he laughs.

When I asked if there was a difference in behavior among students, she replied:

Definitely. Even the other girls on the floor--they say, "We're going off to our fun class now" 'cause there's one guy, he's about 6'2"--big blond hair, 275 pounds and the prof just makes fun of him every day. He'll joke back at him or make fun of him back. They [arts students] are a lot more relaxed, a lot more outgoing, expressive. You can tell right away--like the "aggies"²--you can tell who the "dippers"³ are--that's an easy one. And the arts are anyone with different coloured hair, like different outfits, like you know they're arts but then there's always a few exceptions

²Students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science Agriculture Program

³Students enrolled in a two-year Diploma in Agriculture Program

and then the sciences--there's a wide variety of people but not the extreme.

Laura talked about her arts class being more relaxed and described arts students as less driven than science students. Jenny described arts students as "bigger talkers, able to beat around the bush rather than straight logic." In their conversations about courses outside their discipline, I found science students to view their arts courses as lacking any kind of objective truth.

When arts students talked about their science courses, they were somewhat apologetic for actually liking or enjoying the course. As Anne explained:

I really like Genetics but I'm not really a science person and it is hard for me to follow but I really like it.

Kim echoed a similar theme:

I never took any sciences in high school. I took what was required of me and I didn't like sciences - they're not my strengths. I have two brothers both in the sciences and they want to be doctors so I thought I'd have to keep up with them so not taking sciences meant I didn't have to be like them and I could do something different. It's not that I'm not capable of doing well. We have to have some sciences and this fit my schedule. I love it. It's really interesting.

It so happened that most of the science students whom I interviewed took an arts course as an elective in their first semester, typically Sociology, Anthropology or Psychology. Arts students, on the other hand, tended to take all five of their courses within their discipline. These courses included languages, Film, History or Philosophy. Their required science course could be delayed until later.

Cluster Life

Students joined a cluster for various reasons and as a result had different expectations and experiences, as well as different responses as to its effectiveness. Despite these variations, what became apparent through my first round interviews was the cluster's power as a social cohesion mechanism which helped students to create immediate friendships and which provided support for them in navigating the university environment. By grouping students with similar course patterns and similar workload requirements, the cluster took advantage of what I refer to as a "similarity in situation" in supporting them in their transition to university. It is through their words that the power of the cluster is best expressed, so I will use excerpts from the transcripts to identify themes and patterns emerging from the data.

Joining the Cluster

Students self-selected into a cluster by completing a form that came with their residence application and paying an additional \$70 fee for the academic year. There were no prerequisites for membership other than the matching of their program of study with a specific program-defined cluster. Students heard about clusters through friends, through campus visits, or from information received in the mail. Some made their own independent decision to join the cluster and some were signed up by their parents. Others acknowledged the strong endorsement and influence of one or both their parents to participate in the program. Andrew said it was mostly his Dad's decision. "He thought it

would be a good idea so it was 75 percent my Dad's and 25 percent mine. Once I got here, I realized it was a good choice." Kim admitted to some uncertainty about joining and said it was her Mom's decision. "My Mom told me to do it. I wasn't that keen because of the money issue and I didn't think I would benefit all that much from it."

Kerry also was somewhat uncertain about joining but for very different reasons:

I was a little skeptical at first because I don't have a lot of trouble with my studies so I thought maybe if I do this I won't have time for my own because everybody will be asking me for help but it hasn't been like that.

One of the most often cited reason for joining was for the support that would come from students taking the same classes together. In particular, students identified as a potential benefit the motivation that could come from other members in the cluster.

Three students below all voiced similar themes:

- Jean: I figured being in a cluster would help, having support and help when you get stuck with things, and it would be a motivational thing to help study and do the work.
- Olivia: It would be helpful since I have difficulty getting down to school work.
- Ginny: Well, I'm a procrastinator and I figured if everyone is doing the same thing we could all do it together and that could keep me on track.

Students also highlighted the need to be with students in the same program, students with whom they felt they had some commonality through shared needs and shared goals. This affinity by program of study seemed to convey to students that they

were linked by similar career directions. From Kate's perspective:

It is nice to have people around taking the same courses. I did the START⁴ program in the summer and everyone was in a completely different program so it was interesting to see the different aspects of what everyone was going into but you don't have that kind of connection with them. In a cluster everyone has some kind of direction. They're going kind of at the same way. They understand our problems. We can complain about the work loads together and they understand.

It was not just the notion of a similar focus that appealed to students. Some had a fear of being paired with a student in another program with different courses and with different workload standards. Ginny described this concern:

I remember my sister having problems because she was a science student living with arts students so she had double the class hours everyone else had and she got really, really behind and couldn't have fun with everyone else 'cause they all had time to have fun and she didn't. I figure if we all have the same amount of work, we'd all have the same amount of time.

Miriam had similar fears. "I was worried that I would get a roommate in an arts program and would have ten hours of classes and I'd be distracted because I get very distracted." Not one of the arts students talked about difficulties if paired with a science student, but they too voiced the need to be with like-minded individuals. These kinds of responses spoke to students' need for a smaller, more manageable sub-group affiliation within a large, unfamiliar environment. As such, participation in a cluster was seen as a

⁴ START is a one or two day pre-orientation program for new students.

way to ensure such a safe oasis. It provided a means of belonging, so that as Jenny simply put it, "I wouldn't be all alone".

Students also noted practical reasons for joining a cluster. The ability to immediately access help was often cited as a major benefit. Susan exclaimed:

I thought it would be a good opportunity to meet other people who would be doing something similar to what I was doing and then there would be people around with the same classes and if you had questions or if you wanted to study with someone right down the hall there would be ten people.

Mike was even more succinct in further expanding on the efficiency principle when he added, "If you have a problem, you just go down the hall and knock on someone's door." The availability of other students for help was identified over and over again as one of the major reasons for joining. Only Anne talked about the joining a cluster to get better grades. She revealed, "I remember reading that people in the cluster tend to do better so that made me want to sign up." The program brochure did state that cluster participants performed better academically than non-clustered students which may have contributed to a selection process whereby students who joined were either more serious about doing well or at least wanted to be located within such a successful academic environment. This would also explain why parents thought the program would be such a good opportunity for their son or daughter by giving them an academic edge.

How Students Talked About the Cluster

I asked students to tell me what it meant for them to be in a cluster and to describe their experience. As well, I was alert for any discourse that stemmed from cluster involvement in other parts of their conversation. What became apparent was that first and foremost, students defined themselves as members of a cluster. This identity permeated how they talked about being a student at university and how they differentiated themselves from non-cluster students. Cluster membership provided them with a group cohesiveness and uniqueness, creating a subculture for these students that differed from the larger cultural body of first-year students. What was telling about their cluster identity was *how* they differentiated themselves from non-cluster students. Ben described cluster students as more academically oriented:

I look at other floors that are not clustered and I think people who sign up for clusters tend to be a little more - they go out with the intention that they want to do well in the first place so that's why they put themselves in a cluster.

Jenny, in contrasting her experience with non-clustered students, highlighted the support it gave her at the beginning of the semester, when she felt she needed it most. She commented:

I look at my friends who are taking the same courses and have the same goals as me and who aren't in a cluster and I think they're experiencing more difficulties in adjusting especially at the beginning.

When I asked Tom if it would have been different if he had not been in a cluster, he responded, “Yeah, I think so. I don’t think there would be that community feeling. Everyone on the floor is so nice. It’s great.” What was repeated over and over again, was the importance of the intentional community formation based on shared courses. Janet found her cluster to have a closeness that non-clusters did not have:

Some of my friends are in East⁵, a totally different situation. Other friends are elsewhere and say, can we join your cluster? We get along very well. We’re all closer than they are. From the first day we had meetings and did things together. We don’t eat a meal without each other. We had that extra - we were matched up more.

Ben also spoke about the degree of comfort that came from such an intentional grouping:

My whole life revolves around human contact and I really need support sometimes ’cause I worry and get stressed out and I need the academic support. In smaller groups you can meet people and develop closer relationships faster and I enjoy that because you get to share and the bond becomes closer quickly.

He added:

There’s a lot of common experience. I don’t see this on other floors. I don’t know if it’s unique to the cluster but it’s just the way we connect. I don’t know if people are more willing to connect or whatever but you feel comfortable talking about how stupid you feel because you’re doing really dumb things.

Students, by self-selecting themselves into a cluster, talked about how this created a special bond that Jamie defined as an “unmentioned similarity between you.”

⁵ A residence building on campus

The power of such membership was touched on by Joan when she stated, “You understand the people more if you are in the same boat. You have the same kind of problems and the same schedule.” Liz reiterated the importance of this intentional, community formation when she proclaimed, “We wouldn’t have gotten so close in the beginning.”

Friendship Creation

The need to build relationships and make friends is one of the important tasks that new students face at university. Students cited the cluster as a major catalyst in helping them create immediate social support networks. Said Laura:

I thought I was going to be homesick being so far away but once I got here and made a bunch of friends I was okay. The cluster had a lot to do with that. I talked to other people, some of my friends at other universities and they still don’t know very many people.

For Ben, the value of the cluster was not so much in the immediacy of making friends, but the opportunity to develop more in-depth social interactions:

Depth comes to mind. You have friends and you have acquaintances that are just acquaintances and you talk about the weather but I see on our floor people actually having conversations of substance. It’s a neat kind of social interaction. I don’t think people understand or notice it initially but I, just from taking a year off, I look at how people interact and I just think it’s a different environment. Your similarity in courses and it’s just how close you are and how much you see the people all the time.

As Ben noted above, a theme that emerged from the interviews was the intensity of immediate friendships that resulted as a by product of cluster participation. Other students such as Caitlin, also identified the need for closeness in their relationships and the hope that the cluster could provide that. She said, "I've been friends with my friends from home for like it feels like forever so I want to find that closeness here." When I asked her if she thought that would be possible here, she replied:

Oh, yeah--I think so. Because you live so close together friendships just seem to speed up so much faster. You see them all the time. You basically live with them.

An Ethic of Caring

Students, in discussing their university experience, talked about the emotional safety that came from living in their cluster. They spoke of a shared emotional connectedness or feelings of belongingness in their relationship with one another. Said Mike, "We're like a family. We all look out for one another." Meredith likewise offered, "It feels really safe. It's like a big family." This ethic of caring was also extended to invited guests and friends. Meredith, in talking about being away from home, reported:

I wasn't really homesick but I did miss my friends. When my friends came up to visit they quickly were welcomed by the cluster. It's a mind set-- your friends are my friends-- everything melds together. One guy's girlfriend is writing to some of the girls on the floor. It's like a big family-- .that's what I think of it.

Although there were variations in students' articulation of their cluster experience, what emerged from their conversations was an emphasis on the importance

of making friends for social support and to meet their emotional needs. The cluster not only played a role in facilitating this but also created an ethic of caring that influenced and guided their initial actions and behaviors as well as an acknowledgment of their interdependence with others.

The Cluster and Its Impact on Studying and Learning

One of my research interests was to understand how participation in a cluster shaped what students did as learners. To find answers to this question, I first sought to discover how students talked about their learning within the context of the cluster.

Students identified the cluster as providing an environment conducive to studying. This influence was apparent to Ben even before the start of classes:

Ben: Everybody was laughing at us the first night because the Sunday night before classes we were reading. We were reading to get prepared for our classes.

Nancy: Who would have encouraged that? Did it come from the cluster leader?

Ben: I don't think so. It just happened. I don't know if I would have read the first night. I knew that I had to but don't know if I would have but my friends around me were reading so it's a good opportunity. You can't socialize with people who are reading so it's a good opportunity to take out my books and work.

Susan elaborated on the fostering of this studious environment:

The cluster has something to do with why it's so easy to sit down and keep going because everyone else is working. If you walk down the hallway, somebody is working and it makes you think that I should be working. Everyone in the cluster is doing their work and so it feels like it's easier to settle down and get things done because everybody else is too.

She later added:

One of my friends is in a mixed floor and she gets a lot less done with her time that I do. She finds it hard to work in her room and hard to work in her study room. She ends up studying hours in the laundry room but for us, people are always working in the lounge or your room, people aren't running up and down the halls all the time.

The cluster environment, in the beginning weeks of the semester, fostered a climate conducive to studying and established an expectation of studious behavior on the part of its members. As Jenny exclaimed, "Everyone in the cluster is doing their work and so it feels like it's easier to settle down and get things done because everyone else is too." What I will speak to later is how the cluster continued to influence the learning environment but in more varied, complex and contradictory ways.

Using Each Other as Resources

I was interested in how students used each other as resources or supported each other in their learning. I remember listening to Kerry's concerns about joining a cluster and her worry that she would be spending all of her time helping others at the expense of getting her own work done. I listened to hear if she herself had benefitted from the help

of others. Later in her interview she highlighted the importance of being exposed to different perspectives on learning:

I have to ask questions about stuff and people have explained it and having so many people in the area that are all in the same courses, you can ask several people if you don't understand the way that one person explained it so you can get a few different wordings. Just because one person makes sense for one question doesn't mean that they will make more sense for another. You get different perspectives that way.

Students in both clusters used each other extensively as resources in their studying and learning but there were some differences related to the assistance they provided one another. In the science cluster, students talked about helping each other with problem sets, completing labs reports and explaining or clarifying terms and concepts in their courses. When I asked Carol what she did if she needed help, she replied, "If I don't understand what's in the textbook, I get somebody else to explain it to me." Kate expressed a similar idea: "I usually study by myself but if I don't understand something, that's when we'll go and ask someone." Jean reiterated the theme. "I usually study on my own but there's always someone around if you get stuck on a problem." I was curious about who they went to for help. When I posed this question to Carol, she replied:

It's really who ever is at the same point in the study guide as you or whoever is working on the same thing. Generally you can go and ask anybody who has already done it.

This was verified by Kerry:

Whoever has already done that part--they'll help out. We're all at different stages in the different courses so it's dependent on where you are at. Some people are more ahead on one course than another.

The general pattern that emerged from the science students' comments was that students sought help from those who either had already completed the material or were currently working on it. Timing was very important in terms who was where, in which course. Information about assignments was also shared by those who had classes in the beginning of the week with those in classes later in the week. Jean described this sharing of information regarding her Chemistry lab quiz:

It's written by your TA so everyone has a different quiz so no one has the same one but everyone wants to know what were the questions asked and what was the format of it. Whoever has one at the beginning of the week shares with those who have it later.

Timing was also identified by Kate as a crucial factor in the sharing of course-based information:

The girl down the hall already has gone to the Calculus lab so she can share whatever info she gets. Everybody finds out about it as soon as possible so we all don't have to go through the same headaches.

Several students talked about seeking help from someone whom they considered "good" in a subject. When I asked Jean whom she would go to, she replied, "We go to someone who is stronger. We'd know by now who is good." What I discovered was that this connotation of "good" was not based on intellectual ability but on students' time management and course-load management skills. Miriam confirmed this when she

identified people she wouldn't seek out help from, "just because they're on Chapter Three and we're on Chapter Six and they're not known to do all the work."

Students in the arts cluster tended to provide support in the areas of proof reading essays, brainstorming ideas, and providing feedback and advice. When I asked Andrew how he had received help from cluster members, he replied:

Last night I was working on a political science essay and a couple of guys in the cluster had already finished theirs and I was stuck on how to get going so I looked over their essays and discussed the questions a bit and we didn't really agree--we had opposite points of view but he could still help on how to prepare the essay.

These students, operating under the efficiency principle, devised ways to share information within their courses as well as ways to divide the workload. Ben described how he put this plan to action:

For History there's a lot of reading and we can divide up the reading and we can pile them up all together and talk about it later.

Jamie commented that he helped students in English by proofing for them. "Everyone is trying to help everyone else. People have their different strengths and weaknesses and you use them as best as you can." When I asked him if there was an expectation of helping one another he replied:

I don't think it's an expectation. I think it's just--if you need the help you might as well get it and you might as well get it from people who know what you're going through. It's easier to go to a student for help than the prof or TA.

Learning Alone or Learning Together

I was interested in exploring whether cooperation was considered essential by cluster students in the achievement of individual goals. What emerged from their stories was a description of both individual and social aspects of learning. There was a strong preference to learn individually supplemented by support from members within the cluster. This theme was spoken of by a number of students:

Laura: I learn independently. I like to learn by myself. If I really need help I'll go and ask other people.

Jenny: I study better on my own rather than with a group of people even though I'm in a cluster. When I need help, I'll go and ask but I can't really go and study with other people.

The comments from these students reflect a dichotomy between individual learning and learning with or from others. Peer support was recognized and valued only to the extent that it aided in mastery of knowledge. Susan, though, described the evolution of a more integrative approach to her learning:

I never studied with people in high school. I liked to go over it myself. I find I get more done. I get distracted otherwise but when I was studying for Chemistry, I did study on my own and a couple of us got together and we went over problems. So I think it's a mixture of both.

Competition in the Cluster

With students taking the same classes together, I wanted to know if this encouraged an atmosphere of increased competition between the cluster members. What I heard most often were concerns related to intimidation rather than competition, though

a number did cite the potential for competition given the desire for some who hoped to get accepted into the veterinary program. When I asked Jenny whether there was competition in the cluster, she replied:

Sort of because I know that when I was in high school, I was the only person who wanted to go into vets so coming to Guelph, everyone wants to get in so it's sort of scary. It really hits home.

Rebecca expressed similar views but identified competition not so much related to performance in courses but to the animal experiences students brought with them:

Yeah, 'cause you come here and I have lots of experience but then there's always someone who has more experience or different experience than you. No matter how much you think you've done, there's someone who has done more.

Carol, though, had a different take on competition as it related to the vet program:

Not really at this stage. People are not going to tell someone an answer or help them because they're trying to get into the program. They all know that the marks will get you an interview but it's the interview that will get you in so they can all have identical marks and one will get in and not the other.

I sensed from some of the responses to my question about competition that students had not really thought about the issue very much. Jenny was one of these students who provided a more ambiguous answer:

I guess in a sense it does 'cause if you are not in a cluster then you don't get that sense that everyone is here doing the same thing that I want to do but when you are in cluster and everything is going for the same thing, I guess so. I don't find that we're especially competitive but I guess it could happen.

While Ginny talked about a more competitive environment, she also was surprised at the degree of support students provided one another:

I'm surprised that we help each other so much because we had a zoology review period the night before the exam and one of the girls had gone to the library and got all of the practice exams and we went through them together and she could have kept those to herself.

Students in the arts cluster responded differently to the question of competition primarily due to the variation of grades they entered with from high school. Ben did not find the atmosphere within his cluster competitive:

I don't think so. I think everyone's had different abilities, different attitudes. I haven't felt it and I haven't seen it.

Meredith added a clarification on this issue:

We're not competing against one another. It's just sort of wanting to do well. There's a real range on the floor from 70's to 90's of high school grades. Everybody has their own thing they're really good at. I'm really good at English but when it comes to sciences, it goes right over my head. It works out well that way.

Kim provided a very pragmatic response:

I don't feel that way. When we get marks back, like we got an in-class essay back that was worth 10 percent and we were all kind of--ugh--I got 70 percent. It was a real shocker for me because it's a lot lower and someone got 85 percent and so I'm not used to someone getting higher than me and so that was hard. There's no grudges and I got her to edit my essay for the next one.

From these conversations, I learned that for students in both clusters, the issue was not so much competition but the need to use each other as reference points related to work completed and grades achieved. Take the following quote from Barbara, who integrates these two themes of competition and reference checks:

Just at times when you're doing homework or when you're talking about classes and they'll say I've done this and this and that--they'll be asking, well where are you but there's a way of saying things. It's more like in passing and then there are the times where it seems kind of pointed asking--well, where are you, how much have you done?

Students' use of each other as reference points provoked a variety of responses ranging from reassurance and comfort to doubt and fear depending on how students measured themselves within the group. They talked about comparing themselves to one another to see if they were "on the right track" as well as not wanting to "be on the bottom of the pile." Janet expressed feelings of inadequacy in comparing herself to others in the cluster:

We were talking about the cluster and how we joined a cluster because we never had to study in high school but others in the cluster seem very intelligent. They know what they are doing. Sometimes we're blown away by how much they know.

Knowing that others in your group did not do well provided some support and comfort.

This is how Mike described one of his midterm experiences:

Mike: We got together this morning and then later kind of cried a bit when we left the exam this afternoon. We think we all failed but at least we were happy 'cause we all failed as a cluster. So much for here's to academic probation! It was our first midterm and we didn't know what to expect.

Nancy: Was it comforting to be with others who had gone through the same thing?

Mike: Oh yes, you know there are other people. You can comfort each other, help each other answer questions.

Using each other as a reference point worked well for those who in fact were doing well, but for those struggling in their studies, it served to add to their uncertainty and detract from their confidence as learners. Jean, who was having difficulties in some of her courses expressed this thought:

In a way you know people are gonna want to work just as hard as you to achieve that goal but on the other hand you're also thinking but what if they do better than I do? It kind of makes you feel bad if they get a 90 on the quiz and you only got 75.

Despite the negative reactions at times that occurred when using one another as a reference check, students seemed to dismiss these consequences. The opportunities to receive, as well as support one another in their learning, outweighed any negative results related to grouping by similar courses.

Points of Tension

Although much of what I have presented has focused on points of commonality in regard to cluster participation, there were points of tension surfacing from students related to living in a cluster. One of my concerns in the original design of the cluster model was that membership by program of study would create a homogeneous learning environment that would screen out intellectual and social challenges. In particular, I was concerned that the cluster would create too safe an environment for its members. Therefore I asked in addition to advantages to belonging to a cluster, whether there were disadvantages. Few students cited any disadvantages. Of those concerns raised, most tended to centre around issues of diversity as identified by Jenny:

I think so. One of them is that you don't really see outside of science. It's often nice to be around people who are in arts and sometimes they rub off on you and you can get the best of both worlds, even if you are in the sciences.

Laura lamented that she was forced to choose between the arts and the sciences but compromised by taking one arts class as an elective in her science program:

Laura: I did well in art in high school and my art teacher wanted me to continue so I thought I would take at least one course. I like the sciences but I also like art and the piano so I'm torn in between the arts and sciences.

Nancy: How important was it for you to be with people in the same program and in the same classes?

Laura: Well, probably it would have been harder to meet people because you get to know one another by going to classes together. I think

it would have been nice if there had been some arts people in the cluster. Everybody is in science in the cluster and I like art but no one is into that.

Susan articulated this perspective on the issue:

I don't think that this is a disadvantage but some people have mentioned that there's a lack of diversity but you meet people from other places so it really doesn't matter that they are not living in your hall so I don't really consider that a disadvantage.

Rebecca, on the other hand, identified a different kind of drawback related to the consequence of a shared class schedule:

Yeah, I switched rooms. My old roommate had exactly the same schedule so I never had time in the room when she wouldn't be there. If I were in different courses, maybe there would be times where she would get the room to herself and then I would get it to myself.

Clusters were perceived by students to be a safe haven, appealing to those who wanted to be surrounded by like-minded or similar goal-directed individuals. Some of these students seemed to be fearful not only of those outside their program of study but those whom they perceived to be different somehow from them. I have two examples to highlight this issue. The first relates to rural and urban differences and concerns

Katherine who lived in a small rural community:

Katherine:

Well there was a few things like roommates - that was a big fear of mine. I knew my roommate was from Toronto but that's all I knew.

Nancy:

So what did you imagine that meant?

Katherine:

Oh, I just imagined this psycho person, red hair, piercing everywhere but it worked out great. I couldn't have picked a better roommate I don't think.

Mike identified somewhat similar issues that focused on north vs south differences:

I'm from up north and normally everyone tries to get along with one another but when I visit down south I tend to find it's pretty cliquey. This is just a northern perspective. Everyone seems to have a cause--sexism, women are suppressed-- not to jump on it, or racism--blah, blah,--like just enjoy life. Just relax.

Because the cluster limited students' interactions with those outside of their discipline, the only exposure to any kind of diversity of perspectives came from those students within their same program of study.

CHAPTER 5

HOW'S IT GOING, EH? OR B? C? D? OR F?

Our stories are the masks through which we can be seen, and with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can (Noddings and Witherell, 1991, p. 69).

Introduction

As I listened over and over again to students' stories, I found myself sometimes affirmed, often enlightened, and on occasion disoriented by their experiences. As a student affairs professional, I pride myself on thinking I know students at my institution but I now realize that I understand them from my own vantage point, not theirs. I often find myself in situations of listening to them in order to design an intervention, or a solution to their problem. In these interviews, I could not play that role and so what I heard were stories from students based on what they wanted to tell me, not necessarily on what I wanted to know.

Initial Reactions

When I met again with cluster students later in the Fall semester, I sensed that they were different. They sounded more settled and no longer considered themselves newcomers. They had developed strong bonds of friendship and now were going through a major 'reality check', with midterm results that either confirmed or questioned their career aspirations. The sense of physical energy that emerged so strongly in the first

interviews in terms of going to class together, socializing, and participating in cluster activities, had mostly disappeared or worn off. Instead what I heard were stories of survival, of trying to complete all that had to be done, of limited sleep, a general tiredness, and from some, a wishing that the semester had ended so they could start over again. All of their attention and energy seemed to be devoted to academics, whether that meant studying for midterms or finals, writing term papers, completing labs, or just trying to get caught up. In their conversations, I noted a 'grade perspective' or orientation that permeated how they talked about their role as student and what they did as learners which pervaded their conversations and actions.

I listened to their worries, heard them talk about their failures, and their uncertainty over their future. Two students told me they were leaving university and one decided to leave the cluster. Through their words and metaphors they continued to construct an understanding of their experience that remained complicated and contradictory:

Janet:

I knew that it was going to be hard but not like this, like being hit by a mac truck or something - you really realize how hard it is.

Laura:

I think I came here expecting it to be a bit more difficult. I don't want it to be harder but more difficult in terms of complexity. It's been quite a bit of review from what we did in high school.

Kim:

I think I'm less naive about university in general. I didn't really know what to expect. I had heard that it was a lot of work but what is "a lot" of work? I

thought it would be a great time and I would be so into my courses because they would be things that I like and it would be so wonderful. It's not all that wonderful. It's a good time and it's a lot of work.

Barbara (who decided to leave university at the end of the semester):

I've only lived one semester. I only have that to compare to. This has been an awful first semester. I've gotten out of it alive and with decent grades but there is the fear of not knowing exactly what I want to do. I'm scared that I won't be able to figure it out. I'm scared that I'm making a mistake. I'm scared of making another mistake if this is a mistake.

During a break in rereading transcripts, I spent some time sorting through files and cleaning my office and came across an article I had seen earlier but never read, *Telling Tales in School* by L. Williams. His words struck a particular chord in me when he stated, "Our students usually tell their stories in less conventional forms through their opinions, their actions, their decisions. We must be receptive to each of these, and constantly on the lookout for other tales they tell (p. 3)." This is what I have tried to do with this second set of interviews. Rereading their stories has given me the opportunity not only to learn about students and their lives but to learn about myself and a chance to recognize and confront my own preconceptions, attitudes and beliefs.

Grades

How's It Going, Eh? Or B, C, D, or F?

I start with this particular focus because it was the most prevalent in students' conversations and stories. My opening question to them, "How have things been going?", was most often met with a reference to grades and course performance issues.

Grades defined how they felt about their role as student, their competence, career aspirations, and sense of self. In effect, students became their grades.

Because most of the students in the first interviews had not yet received midterm results, they had talked about grades desired and grade expectations. They tended to share the expectation that hard work, not performance, should be rewarded. They did not see failure as a lack of ability or lack of effort. Now some five weeks later, I was curious to find out how they spoke about their grades; how they viewed academic achievement; and how this impacted on what they did as learners within their cluster environment. In presenting my data, I will compare comments from the arts and the science students to note similarities and differences in their stories.

There were a number of shared patterns that emerged in how science students described how their semester was going. First, students' point of reference in assessing their academic achievement tended to be based upon their high school performance. Second, students often included their Chemistry grades as a defining piece of evidence to support whether things were going well or not. Third, they often identified the class average as a marker to justify or reference their grade. Laura presented information using two of these markers when I asked her how things were going:

I have pretty good marks in most of my classes, a little bit lower than high school. In Chemistry I got an 86 on the first midterm so that's fine.

Ginny, who was "happy with how everything has been going" added, "in Chemistry, I did better than I did in high school. I was really happy with that." She had received a 79 on

her midterm. Kate continued to echo these patterns when she described her semester as:

Not too bad, pretty good. I'm use to getting 90's but they told us in the beginning to expect your marks to drop eight to 12 percent so I think I'm averaging 88. I'm pretty happy with that... [In Chemistry] I didn't do too badly, actually I did really well. I got an 80. The average was 60 something.

Kate's words highlighted another theme that emerged from students' stories, which was the tendency for students who were doing well to often downplay their success. In Kate's case, each positive achievement was preceded by a more negative comment, a practice she continued throughout the interview.

What about students who responded more negatively or differently to my opening question? When Katherine was asked how things have been going, she continued with a variation of the pattern, answering:

Not as well as I had expected, that's for sure. Getting exams back was a big shock. Chemistry which was my best subject in high school, half the class failed. I got a 48. I knew I had bombed it right away.

Despite the fact that all the science students I interviewed took the same Chemistry midterm, I often heard conflicting comments on the actual class average for the first midterm and the pass rate. In both the first and second interviews, the science students focused more attention on Chemistry than on any other of their courses. They referred to it as "killer Chem" since it was reputed to have a high failure rate with difficult midterms and exams. It was the one course, that even before the start of classes, had a reputation

that preceded it. Jenny, in her first interview, remarked:

I heard a rumor that the average last year was 35 percent which it turns out was wrong but hearing things like that really make you scared and also about it being a 'weeding out' exam. Things like that aren't really good for learning 'cause you're worried about what you don't know instead of thinking about what you do know.

I was not surprised then that it had become such a major course of reference for science students in assessing their academic achievement.

Jean responded to my opening question in a different manner from the other students:

Things have gotten a little bit more crazy. It's just overwhelming with all the planning time you have to get in and all the exams at once so it's stressful.

Jean was one of the students whom I was concerned about after her first interview. I had heard similar stories before from other students who had come to university to pursue their dream of becoming a vet. What worried me about Jean was the fact that she identified herself as a student who was not very strong in high school, someone who had dropped out for two years and then had gone back to school to complete her OAC's, which she described as "challenging." She explained to me that "people had told me that in the sciences, you work harder in your OAC year than in your first year at university." As a result, she did not anticipate the amount and difficulty of the workload and had expected to have "tons of free time." When we met the first time in the third week of the semester, she was already feeling overwhelmed. At the second meeting, some seven

weeks later, when I asked how she was doing in her courses, she stated, “not too bad. They’re not high grades at all. I think it’s kind of a big adjustment for me, everything and all the workload.” Because she didn’t specify her grades, I probed more by asking how she did in Chemistry. Her response:

I didn’t do very well in the first one. I didn’t do as bad as some people did but that didn’t go very well but the second one went a lot better but that one wasn’t worth much.

I did not request further detail about her grades because I thought if she didn’t want to divulge that information after my initial questions, then I should respect the responses she gave me. I felt uncomfortable at times in these kinds of situations. Some students seemed to have no hesitancy in revealing specific information about their grades or for that matter other details about their personal life while others were more reserved in what they disclosed to me. Most often, I let them dictate how much and what kind of information they wanted to share with me.

Olivia, who entered with plans to become a doctor, also differed in how she responded to my opening question:

Stressful, very stressful. Things have changed a lot since the last time, a lot more work. I find that I’m not handling it as well. It’s a lot of work.

She told me she dropped her Psych course because “I got 60 on the midterm and was disappointed in that. For some people 60 is okay but not for me.” She added that she received a 76 on her first Chem midterm, and was doing well in Physics and in her other

courses. When I inquired as to whether her grade expectations had changed since midterms, she replied:

Oh yeah. In high school, I would have never been okay with a 76 but now a 76, if I get that, I'm thrilled which I'm still going to try to improve upon because I want to go into medicine and I won't get there with averages like that.

Olivia disclosed halfway through the interview that she was leaving the cluster because she didn't like living in a double room with a roommate. She hoped by transferring to a single, which meant leaving her residence building, she would be able to study more, be less distracted, and have more personal space.

It was Barbara's opening responses that most caught me off guard:

I'm no longer sure, well, veterinary medicine is no longer what I want right now. I'm not even sure if I want to be in biological sciences any more. I'm actually, might be, going home next semester and working part-time and taking theater courses which was my other love and that is what I had to decide--maybe that will make me happier because I have been very depressed here at Guelph.

Part of my surprise was that I didn't fully comprehend the degree of certainty in her initial response regarding leaving school. What did "actually, might be" mean? During the remainder of the interview, she became much more confident with her decision not to return. I think having to tell me her story gave her a chance to both rehearse and become more at ease with that decision. I asked if her reason for leaving had to do with how she was doing in her courses. This question was based on some assumptions I had made about her as a learner from the first interview when she talked about her practice of

studying with the tv on most of the time. On the contrary! Barbara informed me that she had a 75 percent average and that her grades ranged from 87 to 63. She reported that 50 percent of the class failed the Chem midterm but that she passed it “by the skin of my teeth.” Her decision to leave was based on an “unhappiness” she felt over a number of issues, including the pull between an arts or a science career, a dissonance she felt that came from her French language and culture and learning/living in an English institution, and the isolated nature of living in Guelph as opposed to Toronto or Montreal.

Like their science student counterparts, arts students also responded to my opening question with references to grades and midterms. Even Mike who, in his first interview, seemed to be very nonchalant about his grades, began with this statement, “Things are going alright, I guess. My marks are a B-, about a 70.” When I interviewed Meredith the first time, she described herself as “not really an over achiever but someone who achieves a lot.” She was especially concerned about grades. “It’s weird for me to be thinking about dropping 20 percent--that just struck fear in my gut.” When we met again, she was very positive in how she was doing:

Actually really, really well. I’ve been very pleased with the marks that I’ve been getting. I’ve been getting 80’s and 90’s so it’s going very well. I got some high marks like that in high school and I sort of expected that they would go down when I got here. Some people said they would go down 20 percent and that 60 was good and I was like - oh my God, what if I got a 60? I would start to cry!

Not all of the arts students made an initial reference to grades. Jamie instead focused on how fast the time seemed to have gone by and the difficulty in trying to keep

up with the pace of the semester and staying on top of the workload with final exams approaching. I found their responses as well as mood very much dependent on the timing of the interview. In Jamie's case, I talked to him just prior to the start of finals. Kim, on the other hand, came to meet me just after she had gone to find out how she had done on her two most recent midterms, and began her story with a look of despair and despondent voice:

Well, today is kind of a bad day. I got two midterms back and one of them is Psych which is my major and I got a 54 and the last one I got a 64. I knew the stuff so it's really, really disappointing. I'm just kind of frustrated right now.

I spent the beginning part of the interview listening to Kim talk about her academic difficulties, and how she was coping; I provided a sympathetic ear. She was especially upset at the fact that she had tried different study methods and had talked to her professor prior to the second midterm but ended up doing worse:

Psych is bothering me because it is my major. I have a friend who didn't even read the chapters, none of it and got 50 on the exam and I read the chapters and studied so hard and I only got four percent more than her and it's really discouraging, like I wasted my time.

I was also surprised by Janet's opening comments:

Well, the last week of classes is exciting. Actually, I'm not coming back next Winter. I decided I don't like the Guelph environment but aside from that, grade wise it's scary because you go from 80's and 90's in high school to getting 50's and 60's. It's hard to say. It's true, you can study so much for a test and fail, and you can not study at all and pass sort of thing and some things you get 80's in still and other things you get a 50 in. Everything is all over the

place. That's the one reason why I'm not coming back....
Up until OAC, I never studied for an exam. I never had to.
Now it's like, I just got a 52 and feel relieved that I passed.
People come back with 50's and do cartwheels. It's very
different.

When I set up second interviews with Janet, Olivia, and Barbara, none of them gave any hint that there was going to be a change in their status such as leaving school or leaving the cluster. I had assumed that if they had changed their plans, they would not have wanted to participate in another interview and so I found myself caught off guard all three times. I think the opportunity to talk with me to complete their story was an important process for them, and gave them a chance to bring some closure and validation to their decision. Our time together was spent talking about their reasons for not returning; the kind of support they had in making such a decision; their plans for the future; and how this information was then shared with others in the cluster. I told them I thought they had made a decision that required courage in confronting their fears and uncertainties because it meant a degree of self examination and self reflection.

These responses to my opening questions illuminate the importance of grades in the lives of these students. Although some defined themselves more by their grades than others, most of their talk and actions were congruent within variations of a grade point perspective as defined by Becker, Geer and Hughes, (1968). Those who operate within this framework recognize that academic work is measured by formal institutional rewards. These rewards or grades, similar to a money economy, become the chief currency on campus, that are used to reward specified performance requirements. For

students, the higher the grades, the better are their chances in exchanging them for entrance into professional schools, graduate programs or cashing them in for future employment opportunities. Consequently, grades come to have immense value for privilege and position. Although grades were seen as an inescapable fact of life for students, they were not of equal importance to all of them. There were variations to the extent to which students operated according to this perspective. This was especially evident when I noted some of the differences between the arts and the science students in the way they talked about their grades in the first round of interviews. This grade perspective influenced students' understanding of how they should be judged and rewarded for their academic work, and what they considered to be a fair and equitable wage for their efforts.

Sweat Equity: The Rewarding of Hard Work and Effort

In their first interviews, students seldom brought up the notion of ability as a contributing factor for their success. Most made the assumption that admission to university conferred upon them a recognition of their ability to do university work. Instead what they recognized as factors for success were hard work and effort, a strategy confirmed by Olivia:

I think it's probably a lot of effort and time on task. I know that definitely if I spend more time studying I could usually do better. I think they can tell how much time you spend working on the course.

The “they” in this reference referred to her course instructors. Olivia believed that time-on-task was synonymous with effort and the more time put into studying, the better would be her corresponding grades. Jean confirmed this view when she said, “ I think it has a lot to do with how much time and effort you put into it and the less time you put in obviously the less, the worse, the grade can be.” She later added:

I don't think anyone on our floor didn't put in a lot of time. I think everybody did put in a fair bit of time. I know there were people who put in more time than some of us and I think maybe they did a little better. I find it kind of hard to try and balance 'cause you sit in your room all week and you kind of want to go out and get out for awhile on the weekend. Some people don't do that. They spend the whole weekend studying.

Katherine recognized there were other factors impacting on academic performance, such as difficulties related to transition, but she differentiated these from ability:

Nancy:

Some people would claim that hard work and effort will result in good grades. Do you think that is true for you?

Katherine:

It can lead to better grades, not necessarily good grades. Of course if you are not studying at all you're going to do worse than if you did study.

Nancy:

Where does ability fit in?

Katherine:

That's a good question. I think that first semester is basically getting used to the idea of midterms and how tough they are and everyone who is here was

good in high school so they have the ability. It's just moving away from home for the first time. It's a big adjustment.

Grades for many of these students were a sign of maturity, discipline, a measure of a successful adaptation to the academic environment, and/or using the right or correct study methods. When I asked Laura, who was doing well in her courses, why others were having difficulty, she seemed a bit perplexed and responded by saying, "I think it's their study techniques or something. You can spend a lot of time on something but still it won't be that productive."

Arts students responded in similar ways in recognizing the role of time and effort in leading to good grades. According to Jamie, "The courses that I'm doing well in-- English, Film and Calculus. I enjoy all three of them and since I enjoy them I don't mind reading. I don't mind doing the work whereas the others like Psychology and Sociology-- I read and that's about it. I don't put any extra effort into them." Meredith explained that for her, academic success was a combination of ability and time:

I think that you have to have - well, ability is the base and then you can build on that because I know that in English, I've always had the ability to write and now it's just a matter of improving on what I already do. If you don't have a base of ability then you are on really uneven footing because there is so much that can go wrong. I think most people have that ability, you've had to have something to have gotten in here, it's just a matter of how much you are willing to put in the time and effort.

Those students who were receiving consistently successful grades, tended to identify their hard work and effort as reasons for their success. On the other hand, students who

were getting poor grades or a mix of good and not so good grades were starting to question why this formula didn't always work. Hard work would usually pay off, but there were those times when it didn't and when that happened students tended to experience major frustration. Barbara's story speaks to this dilemma:

My grades have changed a lot. I came in to Guelph with a 90 average. I'm going into the Chem final with a 63 percent and that's the class that I've probably worked the most at. You look at your grades and wonder what happened. I sometimes find that it's the class that can effect your grades - how competitive it is or how the teachers are, but yeah, it is how much I put into the class but generally my grades have dropped so I haven't really been able to evaluate that as much. This is only my first semester so I look at the grades and try to compare it to high school but this is a totally different arena. It depends on how much a particular test is worth and then how it all adds up 'cause I didn't put that much work into the History of Vet Medicine. There is no homework to do, there is a midterm, an essay and a final and I haven't had my final back yet but going into the exam, I had an 87 percent and then I look at Chemistry.

And then there were other students like Joan who realized that there was another factor other than effort or ability that determined how well she did on an exam: "Sometimes it's just luck."

Multiple Guess Exams: They Know What You Are Going To Do Wrong!

The topic that generated the most reaction from students was related to multiple choice exams. Students questioned the objective nature of this type of exam in which instructors choose questions covering information they think is important and select answers they think are more correct than the other options presented. Even students who

were doing well described them as 'tricky' or difficult. A few students mentioned that they had taken multiple choice tests in high school but most of them had not and found them unfair, difficult and frustrating. There seemed to be little difference in how arts or science students talked about them. Said Meredith, an arts student:

There's one girl who is working really hard but she's just not getting the results that she wants and I know that it's really frustrating for her because she is doing the work and reading the chapters and not going out all the time and it's just not coming together. I know that when we discuss things, it's apparent that she understands but I think it's more--multiple choice tests are really messing up a lot of people because it's something where you are either right or wrong. I think that multiple choice exams can be tricky because sometimes you just - things sound the same or there's something that sounds so good or sometimes you look at the answers and I can think of an exception to that or I can think of an exception to all of them, so I'll figure out the best one. It's difficult.

A few experienced difficulties with multiple choice exams related to the mechanics of the tests, such as circling the wrong answers. Some identified problems with the number of questions presented, the time allotted to complete the tests and the relative weight of each question to the final score. But the bulk of complaints centered on tricky nature and the arbitrariness of these kinds of exams. A lengthy but telling story from Mike illustrates a number of these concerns:

For my Sociology exam, I read 13 chapters in a space of two days so it was just kind of garbled in and all mixed up, especially with the multiple choice which makes it very hard because I got eight out of ten for my essay on that exam but I only got 15 out of 37 for the multiple choice. I'm not used to multiple choice because back home we never had multiple choice and they were like--oh, you'll

never have multiple choice in university and I said, I have a cousin in university and that's all it is 'cause there are so many people there they can't afford to correct as many.

You've got to know the teacher because on my first exam in Principles, it was more just the stuff and the science of it but on the last one that was what I was expecting again and he garbled me up 'cause he put everything into applications, like he would give us a situation and say what is this? And he didn't do that the first time. I know someone who really studied for the Sociology midterm and he only got 22 out of 37 multiple choice right and he got three on three for fill in the blanks and 10 on 10 on his essay so he knows his stuff. It's that the multiple choice is just--sometimes they will try and trick you by changing one word or they will put in a word that you have no idea of what it means but to them it means the opposite of what they want kind of and you're like, that's what they want and that's what they would have wanted if they had not put that word in. They always try and trick you.

Katherine complained about the wording of the questions on her exam and added,

“there was a lot of multiple choice and they know what you are going to do wrong!”

Barbara resented the fact that with multiple choice exams, “your work doesn't count.” It

was Kim who found them to be an especially painful experience:

I left the exam feeling I had done well. I knew it. It was all multiple choice and I find the professor's exams are really, really tricky and I feel that it is unfair to do that. I wish there were a better way to test because I don't think that the multiple choice exams in first year Psych are a good way of testing knowledge. People are just getting used to the set up at university and then they are handed a 10 page midterm of 55 multiple choice questions and it's like, what? We didn't get multiple choice questions in high school. They are tricky. As the prof said, they are trying to test how well you know the material, not if you know it. I just don't think it's the best way but I don't know what the best way would be.

Because grades mattered so much, students wanted to be rewarded in a way that was fair, predictable and a measure of what they knew. Multiple choice exams for many of these students did not measure what they knew but in fact were an assessment of how quickly they could read, think, or out guess their professor. Consequently, students tended not to make any kind of change in their strategies in studying for second midterms or finals.

Grades in a Relational Context

I was interested in how students within the clusters talked about grades and with whom they shared such information. I was also curious to find out how the issue of competition was addressed or recognized within the context of shared classes. Through their conversations, I heard a number of stories about support received and affirmation given to one another in the clusters. Kim, after receiving a poor midterm mark, related this episode:

I told one of my friends that I got a 54 on my exam and he said, "Don't worry about it. It's only worth 10%, there is still another one." And I'm just, "Ah, another one! Oh my God!" But he's like, "Don't worry about it." That kind of makes me feel a little better but the part that really bothers me is that my friend didn't even read the chapters and got a 63--that really bothers me. That is pure luck, pure luck.

Carol was not a recipient of support but in fact a provider of help:

There are some people I've seen who didn't get the grades they expected and keep saying to themselves, "Well, I just have to pass this one" like degrading themselves and I say to them, "Well, you can do it! Just because you didn't pass the last one doesn't mean that you can't do it this time."

The sympathy and support given or received were dependent on students knowing how each other did on their exams. I was curious then about what kind of rules governed what they said and to whom about their grades. I did not see any major differences between the two clusters regarding how marks were divulged. Students inferred there were particular rules to follow in terms of how one talked about their grades. Bragging was considered a major breach of protocol. Katherine offered this response when I asked whether grades were shared within the cluster:

We don't really discuss our marks. If people did well, they say they did well and other people will say they passed or they failed. A lot of people - one girl on our floor did really well on her Chemistry exam and was bragging about it all the time. Most people on the floor just respect other people.

Meredith was also concerned about the issue of bragging from the perspective of someone who had done very well on her exam:

I don't like instigate stuff like that 'cause I don't like-- I've never really liked telling people the grades that I'm getting because I've always got good grades and then I'd feel bad if somebody failed something or didn't do well. But we do check our marks over in McKinnon and someone will say, "How did you do"? and I'll be like "Well"...and then someone would say, "Don't apologize for that because you worked hard, you got what you deserved!"

Mike, on the other hand, seemed to have no hesitation about telling others how he did in his courses as well as having no inhibitions about asking others for the same information:

Yeah, I always ask. Some people have a thing about giving out their grades but myself, I don't care. I'll tell people that I got 53. I'll tell people I got an 86 in Philosophy. Some people won't say a grade. If they didn't do that well they'll

say, "It doesn't matter" or "I don't want to tell you," but they will be the first one if they get a high grade and go rub it in your face and it's not in a good way.

I was interested in how someone would respond if they didn't do well in a particular exam. Kim, who had received disappointing results on her midterms, made this comment when I asked her if she would share her grades with others:

Only if someone asks do you offer. People are pretty respectful if you don't say too much. If you're proud of it, of course you want to say straight out, "I got an 80" but in my case, I wouldn't even tell anybody that I know my mark. Certain people are more accepting of other people's marks that they get and you don't mind telling them even if they do better than you but other people are just - oh, my God! And stuff like that so that's why I didn't say anything when I got back. My roommate was in my room with two other friends and I would have told my roommate but not the other two.

Grades served as a ranking of students, a sorting that helped them to place themselves on some kind of hierarchy. That is why the referencing of their grades against the class average was an important component in assessing how well they were doing, not how well they were learning. Kate told me a story about an incident that happened in her Chemistry class of 300 where those students who did very well were singled out to get their exams, not as an outright recognition of having done well but in an attempt to keep their exams from being stolen by other students:

People if they got a bad mark didn't go running around telling everyone but we did say a little bit about how did you do, did you get this question right? There was more of it in high school I think--comparing marks--'cause we knew where the top students were so you could see how close are we but yeah, actually there were just two or three of us who

got over 80. It was strange. Our prof pulled out all the papers in his section that had over 80 'cause he's had problems with people stealing them. If someone has a better mark, they'll take it so that student doesn't know where their paper went so he pulled out all of them and put our last initial and student number beside it so you'd see someone pop up 'cause he had it on overhead and go to the front of the class and take theirs so you knew--okay, they did okay--so I think there were just about two or three of us in our group.

I heard instances of constant referencing with one another in the cluster and it was described not as competition but as a way of placing yourself in a continuum with others.

Said Carol in comparing herself to those who had done better than her:

You see people getting better grades and you think, hmm, well, what's the difference between me and them because they got that grade?

Kate offered this in response to those who had done worse than her:

People two doors down from me, they're pretty studious. They often have their door closed 'cause they are always hard at work doing their stuff. They're always way ahead of me and then last night they both did the homework over again for Calculus and yet they did that the last time too and I came out with much better marks. They didn't do badly or anything, they did above average but it still wasn't as good as what I did.

Grade referencing or comparison was not only done with other cluster students but also with members of one's own family. Ginny referenced herself against her sisters:

I was just talking to my roommate about this last night and my older sister failed in her third year. My younger sister hasn't completed high school yet even though she should have two years ago and so all I have to do is basically pass

and I'll be ahead. My roommate is not doing too well and I said all you need are some siblings to compare to and it's so much better.

Kim continued to compare herself with her brothers whom she described as "very bright"; and had earlier declared, "In my family, we do not fail." She noted:

The pamphlet that we all got on clusters before we got here said that the people in clusters generally get higher grades and I think that it makes or puts some pressure - we want to be part of that statistic but I don't feel that there are expectations. I feel expectations from within myself, I feel expectations from my family but not from the clusters.

She found some additional support when she discovered that her cluster leader had also failed the same course during her first semester:

My cluster leader told me that she failed the course her first semester and I laughed because I thought that was really funny and she thought it was really funny too 'cause you just don't think that someone like your cluster leader--you think they are straight A's the whole way but the fact that she failed a course her first semester is--okay, I've got some room.

Grade sharing and referencing seemed to be more talked about in the science cluster where so many of the students were hoping to apply to the vet program in the Winter.

Ginny seemed to be ever watchful of her friends' activities:

Some people you never see studying or you'll hear them say, "Oh, I haven't studied yet." I imagine some of it is just talk. "Oh I didn't study and look at what I got and remember I didn't study." But some of them I wonder about. Within my seven friends, I know what everyone is getting. We all share what are marks are and I know who studies and who doesn't. I know who went shopping today instead of studying for her Latin exam but I also know that she's ready and she's been working on it for a couple of

days now. I know who studies and I know what they get and sometimes it irritates me 'cause , like Kerry studies for an hour before the exam and then does really well and I've been studying for days. That's really frustrating.

Laura expressed some of the paradoxes students faced when she described referencing activities as both competitive and noncompetitive:

I think with everybody being in the same courses and we ask each other how did you do, there's competition involved. It hasn't affected me that much 'cause I'm doing okay but I know for other people you feel kind of bad when you didn't do as well as the others. It helps to motivate us. I'd ask someone how they did just because I'd want to hear that they did okay. A lot of people wanted to get into the vet program in our cluster and a lot of them now are comparing marks and seeing how they're doing and rethinking things.

Kate added, "There's definitely comparison to see where everyone is, a pecking order but I don't think there's any animosity." I found science students (all female) reluctant to use the word "competition" and when they did, they often contradicted themselves.

During the beginning of my interview with Olivia, she commented:

When we were in high school, well anyone who is here is towards the top of the class, so in high school you're the top dog but then you come here and you're in here with all people that were at the top of their class so there's a lot more competition.

Later in our conversation, when I inquired about the level of competition in the cluster, she gave me a different response:

So far it's not. I had thought it would be because most people had wanted to apply to vet med so they'd be all competing against each other but I find it's really helpful. If

you are having problems with something, someone will sit down and help you whereas I thought it would be if you are having problems well, too bad you don't understand because I do.

In summary, from a student perspective, grades serve as a ranking in relation to others. This is not a new phenomenon but one they have been a part of since they began their formal education where they have been labeled, sorted, and moved along the educational assembly line. I never heard once a request from students not to be graded but did hear often a desire for different measures of assessment. For students in the cluster, being ranked or referenced against others in your same program provided comfort to those doing well but increased the anxiety for those experiencing difficulties. What was missing was the safety factor of measuring yourself against other students outside the cluster as well as those in other disciplines.

Students came to understand over the course of the semester that grades were a context-dependent phenomena and that their meaning constantly varied. With five courses, each with an instructor assessing them on varying degrees of mastery of information, they soon realized just how arbitrary grades were. I am reminded of Dressel's (1983) definition of a grade, which speaks to the indiscriminate nature of the grading process:

An inadequate report of an inaccurate judgement by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a students has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material.

Throughout these interviews, I kept listening for words or cues that would speak to learning as intellectual adventure, one requiring imagination and creativity and yet within the context that students spoke from, I began to understand why that theme was mute. What I heard were students interpreting their learning as primarily a mechanical process, requiring the rote acquisition of facts and then the application of that information to new or familiar situations. The grade orientation that students worked from not only impacted on what they did as learners but also in how they defined academic success as the highest scores that one could achieve. And yet, I also began to hear a recognition of the need for higher order thinking and analytical skills but a reluctance and an uncertainty to take such a risk. As Kate exclaimed:

Last night the [Calculus exam] was a bit tricky. It reminded me of the Chem exams. They looked familiar but you couldn't quite--the angle was different so you had to really think about it but I don't have time to think about it! The same with the Chemistry--the exam would leave out little bits of information that you were suppose to assume were there. They didn't give us the volume for one question and it was--do they want a general answer? Am I to assume there's equal amounts here? It didn't click. It didn't have--this is the information you're given, this is what you do with the information. It was kind of like maybe they're trying to get some kind of higher level that maybe we should expect that you should all know this and maybe some of you should be able to rise above that.

Grades and Career Aspirations

In the first interviews I was surprised to hear how students were making major and career choices based on the results from their first set of midterms which reflected at most 20 percent of their final grade. This was especially evident in the science cluster where most of the students had entered with hopes of gaining admission to the highly

selective veterinary program at the end of their first year. I was curious to hear how their exam results were now impacting on their career choices, at this time in the semester when they also had to select courses for the Winter. I also wanted to see if the urgency they felt in the beginning of the semester to decide on their future was as evident now.

Through their stories and conversations from the first set of interviews, differences did emerge between students in the arts and the sciences related to grade expectations and goals. In the second interviews these differences remained. The science students continued to be very goal-directed as reiterated by Carol:

I think that everyone in the cluster is really ambitious. Everyone, well mostly everyone knows or is in the process of thinking what they are doing with their lives - some people came in for vet med and now they are realizing that it may not be an option anymore but everyone is striving for something. It's not like for some people who go to university to be there. It seems that everyone in the cluster is going towards a goal.

In her first interview, when I asked Katherine how long she had been interested in becoming a vet, she replied, "Always! Like most kids who'd play house, me and my friends would grab a dog and we'd play vets." Some six weeks later she was now having second thoughts after receiving her midterm grades. "I don't expect to get into vets this year. They are not accepting people next year because they are changing the program."

When I asked if that had forced her to rethink her plans, she responded:

Definitely. There's no sense of being in university for three years and then not getting into the program you want and then not knowing what you're going to do with the one year left. A lot of people have gone to see the program counselor about changing their courses or what they can take, what

their options are. I probably will apply after third year depending on how my marks come out this semester. They seem to be going up which is pretty good. You need at least an 83 to apply at the end of first year. I'll be on the low side of that for sure. Just getting near there will be nice.

A lot of girls on the floor have given up. They are not going to apply for vets any more. They changed their major and they are thinking of changing schools now. There's one girl on the floor who wants to go to McGill now because she can't get in to vets here. Another girl had changed from trying to get into vets to food sciences and then she changed back to microbiology and she has no idea of what she wants to do now... Even if I don't get into vets, I don't know what I'll do-- zoology--but it's something I'm interested in so I might as well stick with it. I wasn't expecting to get into vets the first year anyway so I was thinking after second or third so getting in after third year won't be too bad. My sister had to go for three years to get into optometry. I'm kind of used to that.

Jean, likewise, who entered with the sole desire to be a vet, was also not willing to give up her dream:

My grades aren't what they need to be to do what I want to do but I'm not giving up on it that because it's what I've always wanted to do. Mind you this is something I've always wanted to do and I've never thought about doing anything else so unless I get to the point where I know there's no way, I'm still going to work towards it. I know that a couple of people on the floor said they didn't want to do that.

Those students who had decided not to pursue vets and were now examining other options articulated a range of responses as to why they changed their career focus. Some expressed relief with the discovery that a career in veterinary medicine as they understood it at the time, was not what they wanted after all. Barbara, who was leaving

university at the end of the semester, elaborated on her change of mind:

I came to Guelph because I wanted to be a vet. That's what I always wanted to do and when I got here and realized that maybe that's not what I want to do. I saw the possibility of different fields and if I do go into veterinary medicine I want to do more in the species conservation area and to take my vet degree and put it towards things like that and maybe not have a little small animal clinic which I thought would be the sweetest thing to do and now I want to do something more.

Other students who were also having second thoughts talked about other possibilities that they were only now being made aware of. Kate realized she had a range of options to choose from:

I decided I'm not going to go into the veterinary program just because I've been debating over it. I had been telling everyone that I was serious about it but the past year it was a possibility but I don't know if that's exactly the area I want to go in to. My zoology teacher was saying the other day--I'm actually enrolled in genetics--that's the program I'm in--he was saying that the future of wildlife conservation was probably in genetics and being able to engineer whatever and I thought, hey, that's perfect for me because that's what I'm really interested in. I was thinking maybe veterinarian or maybe. See, I never wanted to be in a practice but thought I'd have to have the vet degree to be able to work with WWF or some kind of wildlife federation where I could do research.

After hearing repeated stories from students about no longer being interested in vets, I heard a different response from Ginny, who earlier had told me she wanted to get into medicine, was now also considering a vet career:

I knew what I wanted to do when I was in high school. I had a clear plan all set out and then I got here and everyone wants to be a vet so I started thinking, vets! I had a cat but

never considered being a vet. It never crossed my mind before. But then I started thinking about it and yeah, I like animals, and I could do it, and this is the school to go to for being a vet. My Mom said if vets is what you want to do then go for it but the more I think about it the more I don't know. I know Kerry is going to get in with her marks. I never co-oped at a vet practice and I never worked with a vet so I really don't have any experience like everyone else does. I liked Microbiology in high school but I haven't taken it here yet so I'll see how it goes. I'm not going to make any decision until after next semester.

She later added that her decision was much more complicated since her roommate who had entered with the goal of becoming a vet may not have the grades to get into the program:

She wants to be a vet and when I was thinking about it and considering vets, I was--it doesn't look like she's going to get in and she really, really wants to and it would just crush her if I got in and I hadn't even considered it before. Terry wanted to be a vet forever. I keep telling her that this is a practice semester and next semester she might get 90's in everything and then it will balance out and she has experience and she'll be in. She wrote a midterm when she had a fever and we kept saying not to and she thought she would write it. I thought she was going to pass out. She had beads of sweat rolling down her head and she had her head down for half of it. She really shouldn't have written it and then she had another bad midterm so she feels the doors are closed to her for vets. She thought that if she doesn't get in this year, by the time she applies again she'll be in her third or fourth year and then she'll have to go through vets and there's four years of that and Kerry will get in for sure and by the time she gets into first year, Kerry will be a qualified vet.

From the arts students I heard a different kind of angst, one more related to their decision about what to major in rather than a specific career plan. Jamie and Mike who

had not changed their plans as to their major, both commented on how others were making the switch based on how well they had done on their midterms. Said Jamie, "I'm pretty set on what I want to do. How I want to get there changes. My final goal is the same while for others they'll pick one midterm and they'll say--it's my major now."

Mike, a Psychology major, repeated this same theme:

There's a couple of people that were like--I didn't do that great in my major midterms so I don't mind this course so if I do well in this course's midterm, maybe I'll switch my major and go to that course.

Meredith introduced the concept of interest in a particular subject as a way of selecting a major but also the importance of a good teacher, readings that she found interesting and positive feedback, which all acted as methods of confirmation in validating her choice:

Some people have changed their major based on their interest in their courses. The test results have a little to do with it but it's more interest. They find something else that they like doing. I find that my Dynamics course is so interesting. I really enjoy it. I have a really good prof and he's fun and very up and then the stuff I read about is interesting and test results have also confirmed it. This is something that I like and I also can do it! It works well.

In contrast to Meredith, Kim, who was most interested in her Psychology courses, her major, was experiencing a more traumatic reality check:

Nancy:

How have your grades influenced your long term goals?

Kim:

It's definitely been one of the things that I have been thinking about. You think that--I'm not going to make it, I can't do it, I'm going to drop out,

they're going to kick me out, I'm going to lose all this money. All those negative facts go through your head. I can't grasp it. Then I think, I can major in something else but nothing else interests me as much as Psych does so I'm really screwed.

Nancy:

Do you feel that you even have to make a decision right now?

Kim:

Yeah, I need to be organized, I need to know what I'm doing to do with my life. I don't know what I'm doing with my life and that really bothers me.

Students in both clusters were very vocation oriented and approached their education from a very instrumental perspective. They spoke of the need to make the appropriate decisions now on confirming their majors so they could get on with their lives. Many were participating in pre-professional clubs related to their career interest areas. But in their talk on their future, I also picked up elements of fear, of not making the right decisions, and of uncertainty. When I followed up with Joan about a comment she had made about fear, she exclaimed, "It's there. If you fail, you'll be kicked out of university. It's fear of not doing well, fear of uncertainty, we talk about it all the time." Barbara also highlighted this theme which for her was made all the more pressing by her decision to leave university:

There's fear of the unknown. This is our first semester. I don't know if it's all going to be--that's another thing about my dilemma, well, maybe next semester is going to be easier. Maybe that will make me happier but I don't know that.

Professors: Still Nameless But Not Guiltless

In my analysis of the first round data, I referred to professors as the “pronouns without antecedents” because students never talked about them by name. This trend continued in the second interviews. Students referred to their instructors as my “Chem prof” or “Calculus teacher” or “Botany professor” but again, they were nameless entities. In rereading their transcripts, I was surprised by how minimal the contact was that students had with their instructors and by the fact that they did not see such interaction as important in this stage of their academic studies. So much of the literature that I work from espouses the importance of such contact for students yet these students were telling me a very different story. Despite repeated messages from their professors to see them after class or at their office hours, few students took advantage of such offers. In this next section I will explore why students continued to ignore their invitations for help and examine how student expectations of their instructors were met in some ways but not in others.

Class size continued to have an impact on student/professor relationships. The anonymity of sitting in large lecture theaters with 200 to 300 other students was an impediment to making contact with course instructors. According to Barbara:

I truly realized how professors are like celebrities. Everyone knows who they are but they don't know who anyone else is. You come up to them and you are a complete stranger to them. There's only one class where I have a small enough class where the professor has gotten to know me. There are 30 people and I'm up in the front row too so every morning I get to speak to him 'cause he's right there. That makes a real difference. I think that I learn more

if I have close contact with the professors. It's a smaller class and more attention can be focused on each student as opposed to some of mine which have about 300 students per class and you're lost somewhere in the shuffle. You care less when the teacher cares less.

Jean also confirmed this sentiment:

For my Philosophy class, it's a pretty small class - usually there are 30 people in the class on a given day, it kind of varies. That's a smaller class and I did go to see him before our midterm to go over a couple of things and there were a few of us there and we went over a couple of things in his office. He's pretty open to that. Mind you that kind of smaller class seems a little different at first, like high school. He knows us all by name in the class too so that's a little different from a big lecture hall of 300 or 400 people where you are just a body.

She revealed even more on this theme in her later comments:

I don't think you have a real connection with any of your profs at this point. I don't think that starts to happen until the later years. At this point the classes are so big and a lot of it is--a lot of people might not still be there in their fourth year. It gets a lot smaller and I think you have the connections then on a personal basis whereas right now none of your profs really know you or who you are and you just kind of go. The first one or two years are a lot of a 'weeding out' process too for people who decide they don't want to be there so there's not really a real connection between you and the profs at this point.

What students told me was that if you had a question related to course material there were safer, more efficient ways to get it answered than making contact with your instructor. They identified other cluster students, their TA's, lab instructors, peer helper or someone who had already taken the course, as individuals who could provide help.

Olivia summed up well the student sentiment about contacting professors:

We have Mike [our peer helper] and we currently have each other too so if there are problems we ask each other. In most cases we are able to help each other out and resolve it. I don't think there's been a huge need so far to go to the profs.

Students knew that if they had questions about content, they could seek out their instructor, but most often they used alternative support which they found as helpful and more readily available, especially at night when they were studying. Time was a factor identified by some students for not making faculty contact since their course instructors would set office hours at specified times for them to come see them. If students had another commitment at that time or if the answer needed was time-sensitive then other people would be sought for help.

Students did not want to appear stupid, ignorant, or unprepared. They did not want to be questioned or grilled on course material and told they should already have known something. They did not want to be seen in a negative way by those individuals who would be grading them, their course instructors. Said Ben:

I think it's an aura that professors have. Even when I go to talk to a professor that I haven't had to before, I get nervous. They know so much more than me and I'm afraid to ask questions. They might look at me like I'm stupid.

Kim offered similar comments when she confided to me, "I'm afraid I'm going to go there and say to him that I think I know the stuff and he's going to ask me a question and I won't be able to answer it." There were safer alternatives to use when seeking help for course content. If, on the other hand, students had questions related to their grades, then

their instructor was the only person they could go to. Authority for grades was vested in their professors. There were no other substitutes.

When discussing faculty contact, the few students who did go talk with their professors, differentiated between the kind of contact made either after class or in during their instructor's formal office hours. Talking to your professors after class was seen as less intimidating than going to meet with them in their offices. Very few students mentioned talking informally with their professors after class, but Ginny related a story about one such encounter:

I really like my zoology prof. He's interesting and he's funny. Jean had a question and she didn't want to ask it in class so she waited around until after the class and asked him this somewhat odd question and we tried to find it ourselves first. We all looked on the Internet. We found certain things, certain pieces of information, so we took it all to him and he didn't know and he thought it was funny and started to laugh and he looked at all the information that we had found and he said, "Oh, I didn't know that was in there," and then afterward in class the next day he said that a student had asked me a question the other day and I found it really interesting so I did some research and he had all these overheads and he even expanded the question.

When I asked Ginny what the questions was, she replied somewhat embarrassingly:

Why is the human male the only one not to have a penis bone? So you can see why she didn't want to ask the question in class. He had all this information on overheads. It was so structured and stuff. He thought it was fun.

What I should note is that Ginny, Laura and two others went together to approach the professor with Jean as the spokesperson. Not only did Jean feel she could not ask this

question in class but she was not prepared to go alone to ask the question after class. Ginny in particular was someone who admitted to being intimidated by her professors. She was quite relieved that up to now she had not been put in a situation where she would have had to go and meet with them. In response to my question of whether she had ever gone, she said:

I never had. I'm a little afraid to. Somebody in the cluster could explain it to me. I don't know when I would go. They are so intimidating. It's kind of like they wouldn't even know if you were in the class or not. I've heard stories from other people from when they went and how rude they were if you didn't know certain things. I'm so afraid that it would happen to me.

Many of the comments made by students about their interactions with professors were often based on negative interactions they either experienced personally or had heard about from other cluster members and these were quickly spread throughout the clusters. Those students reluctant to make initial contact were further scared off by these stories and used them to justify why they would not go. When I inquired of Jean if she had made any personal contact with her instructors, she replied, "To me I find not a lot. I know of the one girl who went to the prof and got a pretty negative response so but on a floor of 26 people she was the only one who has gone."

Expectations of Professors: The Purveyors of Truth and the Dispensers of Grades

Some of the negative stories I heard were related to the expectations that students placed on their professors. Students identified different expectations depending on

whether the professor was instructing in class or meeting with them in his or her offices. In the classroom setting, students told me they wanted their professors to tell them with some degree of certainty what they needed to know for the exam; to make the difficult less challenging; to be less ambiguous and more concrete; and to teach to the test. When I asked Katherine what expectations she had of her professors, without any hesitation she replied, "to teach me what's going to be on the test." Joan, in response to the same question, provided this feedback:

To present the material in an interesting way and to not make it too complicated. Some of them I notice that they explain things too much by going into too much detail and just making things more complicated.

Most students were very positive about their instructors meeting their expectations in the classroom despite being somewhat intimidated and scared by them. Even Jamie, who was not interested in his Psychology and Sociology classes, praised their efforts:

Yeah, in general when I first came I was scared about what my instructors would be like –would they yell at you if you had questions and stuff like that whereas now I find that they are doing everything they can to make the course more interesting for you and make you enjoy it more. My Psychology teacher is really a good teacher. It's me, not him. Same way with Sociology--they put a lot of effort into the course and they do care about their students. They really do.

I learned from students that they did a lot of 'class hopping' which involved switching to a class with a professor who better met their expectations. This was only possible in some of the science courses that were multi-sectioned with different instructors, but still with a common exam. As a result, students could sit in the lecture of their choice but this

option was something they said they were never “officially” told nor was it encouraged by the instructors themselves. Terry, who decided to accompany Ginny to her Chemistry class, was surprised at the difference in number of students attending her session:

Ginny said it was crowded like that since the first midterm and I noticed ours emptying after the first midterm. You never have to rush to our class. There’s a choice of 50 seats per person and I thought where have all these people gone. Did they all drop it or did they give up?

Carol recounted her story on class switching:

With one prof I ended up not going to his lectures. I changed to a different section because his teaching style was completely not what I needed. So I went somewhere else where I was actually learning something. I didn’t feel that the first prof was really covering the material. The other prof lays it out step by step. He tells you at the beginning of the lecture what section you’re in, where you should be up to and doing the work, and he goes through and explains a different topic and does four examples and he does it the same way for every topic so you know exactly the process that he’s going to go through and the other prof just babbles and he goes on and on and I wouldn’t take any notes for the entire hour and a half that I was sitting there. I went to the first professor until the 27th of September and then I didn’t go for a month and then I went to the new one.

Barbara did the same thing but this was for her Calculus class. When I asked her why, she responded, “because he talks down to his students which I didn’t appreciate. I switched to the other Calculus professor’s course and he was a lot easier to deal with.”

Despite some of these negative comments, the general pattern that emerged was one of

satisfaction with their instructors best represented by Jean's statement:

I don't know if I really thought about if they would be like anything in particular. I think for the most part they stand up there and teach the lesson and you take notes on what they are talking about and that's alright.

Learning for Jean was a 'spectator sport' where faculty talk dominated and students sat and reproduced the information provided. What wasn't alright for Jean and others in the cluster though were the interactions that took place when one went to see a professor outside of the class. Jean assumed that if you took the time to seek out-of-class help, professors should be supportive and helpful in such situations. That didn't seem to be the case for one of her professors:

I'd expect that they would take the time to sit down with them and talk with them and work through things with them and not expect that everyone know things automatically. There are people at different levels of learning and sometimes it takes a little more to catch on to things than others. I guess the impressions that I got was that he expected everyone to pick it up like that as he's teaching it to the class and if you didn't know it then you aren't smart enough to be in his class--that was the attitude he was giving.

She further added:

One of the other girls on our floor went to see him after the midterm and actually I know two people who went to see him and he was rude to them. One girl left his office in tears because he basically said she doesn't have the ability to do it and she should drop the class which I didn't think was very appropriate for someone to say when you'd expect the people who didn't do well should be the people going to see him. If you did well on it then you have no reason. Why would you go and see him? So he should be that much more supportive to people who take the effort to get the extra help from him.

Students seeking help seemed to be caught in a bind. On the one hand, they were being told by their instructors to come see them if they were having difficulties but when students did go under such circumstances they felt berated for not knowing things, being confused or unable to articulate why they didn't understand something. Exclaimed Ben:

I think that for a majority of the students, they are afraid that sometimes the profs will be critical and sometimes the profs are. They say in the classes, "Feel comfortable to approach me about any thing, questions, any question is not a stupid question. Although you might think it is because you don't understand it, you must feel comfortable, I'm not going to criticize." But then sometimes they do. If one student says, "I approached prof whoever on this issue to just ask a question and she said you should already know that. I shouldn't have to re-explain it to you." That gets circulated back very quickly.

Ginny further elaborated on this theme:

I think they should make time if people want to see them about something and they should understand that you don't remember things from high school because a lot of it has been forgotten. Some of the stories I've heard is that, "Well you should have known that from high school, you should have known that, you should know this, you should know this, and well, if you don't know it, go and learn it and come and see me later"--and it's like "Couldn't you go over it with a little reminder and then explain the questions?" I know they have a lot of students to deal with but if someone takes the time to go and see them during their office hours then they should be patient enough to work with them. They're making an effort.

Since negative interactions were instructor-specific, students made judgements on who it was safe to visit or seek help from based on information provided in the cluster. Olivia

had already figured out who she could or would not go to:

I've been able to pick out better instructors from worst instructors. I guess that is based on expectations. I think willingness to help is very important. One prof that I have is like "If you are having trouble, just forget it, that's what TA's are for. I won't help you." I don't like that at all. Whereas another prof that I have--he is so great. He's done all but invited us over to his house. He's just so willing to help you.

This following story from Kim highlights the power differential that separated students and faculty and as a result how unsafe many students felt in making such contact:

My Psych prof was very unapproachable. He never smiled. He's very threatening and intimidating. I think it would help a lot if he opened his door to people 'cause I called him and asked to see him and he said, "Why?" I said I wanted to discuss some study methods with you because I didn't do as well on the first exam as I would have liked to and I want to do better on the second one. He said, "Why don't you talk to me now to see if you need to come to talk to me." I said I had a class in 10 minutes and then he said, "Fine, see me after class tomorrow" and then hung up the phone. He didn't say goodbye, or see you then, it was just - bang. It was like what have I gotten myself into? I went to see him after class and I introduced myself as the person who talked to him yesterday and he said, "Tell me again what this is about?" We talked for awhile and I said, did he have an impact on my mark? And he said, "To raise it?" And I said, no. The TA marked my paper and the machine did the rest so you don't really have anything to do with my mark? And he said, "No." So I said, I can say this without hurting myself - do you ever smile? And he goes, "Ha, ha, ha - no!" And I burst out laughing and he burst out laughing so we were laughing for about 10 minutes and it was really funny.

When I asked if she had planned on saying any of this ahead of time, Kim replied:

No. I didn't plan on it. I kind of joked with my friends that at the end of the semester [that] I would say something to him about smiling but then the opportunity came and I thought he doesn't have any say about my mark so he can't hurt me even if he does take it the wrong way. But he was laughing. It worked out okay and it helped a little bit but he still doesn't smile. I think it really hurts the class. More people in his class are failing than the others and I think to some extent that's a reflection on the professor. I really think it does.

I often wondered throughout these interviews how they saw *me* and to what extent were they willing to share with me information about themselves. As an adult staff professional similar in age to many of their instructors, did they view me in the same way? I did not directly ask them this question but I do think they saw me as different. The location of my office in a student services section of the building; the initial presentation I made to their cluster in the beginning of the semester where I hobbled in on crutches (a result of a sprained ankle) wearing informal clothes and a backpack holding bags of cookies; and the interactions I had with their peer helpers who called my by my first name, all contributed to situating me as different. Most important, as Kim stated above, they could tell me things without fear of being evaluated or graded since I had no power or authority over them.

Studying and Learning

Learning as Figuring Out How to Please

Universities establish guidelines regarding how faculty must communicate information to their students about grading and assessment in their courses. Instructors are required to provide students with a written course outline that lets them know the course requirements, methods of evaluation, when they will be tested, and how much each test is worth toward their final grade. Students expect that within these formalized procedures, they will be able to predict with some degree of certainty what they will need to know for the exam. They soon come to realize that the amount of information they are provided in their course outlines is incomplete. It tells them how they will be evaluated, and identifies the topics they will be tested on, but the course outline fails to tell them what specifically will be on the exam. This scenario was very different from what students experienced in high school where teachers structured their learning for them and tested them in very predictable ways. Then there were no surprises, no guessing, and no uncertainties unlike now as Ben discovered:

I think university is a lot different than high school. I think that the course goals or the accomplishments that the professor wants the student to achieve by taking the course need to be clearly defined at the beginning of the semester so you know what you need to learn; you know what you need to know because when you are given such a huge plethora of information, it's hard to know what you really need to know and what's not relevant and what is. Like, I've gone through all of my course outlines and some of them, the professor doesn't tell you really what it is you need to do to do well and to learn and to understand what you are doing. It's new. Every class you take is a new experience and therefore it's different.

As a learning specialist, I have seen first-hand the challenges that first-year students face in their transition from a teacher-dependent setting to a more independent learning environment. There exist a range of compensatory teaching and learning strategies at the high school level that in their attempt to support students, reduce their need to engage in the kind of independent study behaviour required for success at university. Text-based readings supplemented with teacher summaries and a definition of terms put the responsibility for selecting main ideas and integrating information on the teacher and not the student. Test review practices that involve the rehearsing of test items that match the exam questions reinforce rote-type learning strategies. Even the frequency of tests in high school reduce the amount of material students are responsible for and thus ill prepare them for developing skills for managing large amounts of information in their introductory courses. High schools also provide alternative ways for students to improve their grades through multiple opportunities to revise their final product, make-up exams and extra projects to supplement graded assignments. All of these actions continue to emphasize or reinforce the practice of grading on effort rather than on performance. I cite these practices not to critique high school teaching practices or high school teachers but to provide an understanding of why many new students find their academic transition to university so difficult. They have left a high school learning environment where much of their learning activities were structured for them and entered a university setting where they are expected to engage in more self-directed learning endeavours. They also leave having been fully inculcated into a grade culture that does not end in high school but continues and is further perpetuated in university.

The stories that the cluster students told me in these second interviews reflect these struggles and challenges through their repeated references to their high school learning environment and how different university seemed to be. This gap was much more obvious to students by the eighth week of classes, since they had by now taken their first set of university exams and had received their grades. The assumptions they made about what they needed to learn for their midterms or how to prepare for them were now given a reality check. Carol was surprised by her first Chemistry midterm:

In high school you're use to all the questions where the questions on the test were the questions that you had done in your work whereas in that exam you were expected to apply questions and they weren't exactly what you had done.

Jean still found university challenging with its fast pace of learning, large classes, and her inability to alter the speed of delivery of information in her lectures. She was frustrated at the extra time she now had to spend to teach herself course material because it wasn't covered sufficiently for her in lectures:

I think the big difference was when I did my OAC's because the classes were a lot smaller if you had a problem you could just put up you hand and have the teacher explain things in more detail for you. Here I don't think I'd do that. If I had a problem, I'm more apt not to say anything and go back and try to work it through with the homework and the solutions and if I can't figure it out I would ask other people on the floor which for me I don't think is as effective as learning it right when it's being taught and getting it explained in more detail right then to understand it and move on...I still find that I have to self teach it a lot to myself when I get home.

Mike talked about how he never took notes nor did he do the readings in high school because, "what the teacher said was basically what he wanted." He found that

university learning required a similar strategy. “You don’t really have to work hard. Like I said, I got 70 on a paper that I didn’t even read almost. It’s just knowing what your profs want.” He and others realized that in their information-laden courses, not all topics were covered to the same degree. Sometimes the professor covered a particular topic briefly while at other times a particular concept would be expanded upon over multiple sessions. Students came to understand that some things were more important than others in the course, and it was the professor who determined the ranking of such information. As a result, they searched for clues to find out each professor’s hidden idiosyncrasies, looking to find out what the professor wanted and required from them. Their task as learners was to figure out how to please their professors. The following three quotes echo this theme:

Janet:

Here, everything is so different. You have a different format for everything. All of your tests are different formats and what different profs stress and stuff like that. I’m getting better at figuring out what the profs want you to learn but before it was up in the air.

Mike:

It’s like being in a circus. In the circus there’s the animals who like to party and stuff and go crazy and there’s people who run the show like teachers and stuff and you being one of the persons involved, you have to perform to what they want and if you don’t then you obviously are going to get booted out. It’s very hectic. You are always on the go, all over the place, and at the same time you don’t really know people that well, but you’re still trying to please them which is as a performer. You are trying to please the crowds. You are always trying to please everybody but just some times it’s just crazy. You don’t have time to do everything. Something has to let go sooner or later.

Anne:

In my first genetics midterm that we had was my first midterm at university so I think maybe part of it was that I didn't know what to expect. For the second one, I had a better idea of what the teacher was looking for - like what was important and what wasn't.

Teacher pleasing was also reflected in students' placing their instructors authority of voice over theirs or those in their textbooks. According to Mike's rule, "If you are to see something contradicting something that the teacher said and the book said, you go and put what the teacher said 'cause that was his personal opinion." Although there were few differences in how arts and science students engaged in teacher pleasing activities, arts students did identify one area of conflict related to the more subjective nature of their assignments and tests. Anne was confused by the mixed messages she was receiving from her instructor:

My English teacher, she always asks about how in reading you have our own interpretations, everyone has their own but then in class when we go over our own interpretations or when we write essays about certain works, she would criticize them. So I didn't really know what to expect from her.

A number of the arts students complained about how their opinions were not given validity. Ben discovered that there was a risk in offering a personal interpretation of an idea or theory, a risk that could involve a lowering of grades:

Some of the ideas are just so abstract that it's hard. You might interpret it one way and the prof might interpret it a different way so therefore you have conflicting views and that doesn't always lead to good marks.

Students as novices in the discipline found it challenging to prioritize the large amounts of information that was presented to them in their courses. In particular they voiced frustration over trying to decide what was important, significant or relevant given all of

the facts, figures, and data for which they were now responsible. They expected to be provided direction in making these choices, if not having those decision made for them. As well, they also came to realize the importance of staying within the safe boundaries of right answers.

Learning: From Reproduction and Repetition to Understanding

The dominant approach to learning in both of the clusters was that of information gathering. If the Professors controlled what information they were given, and how they were to be evaluated on their understanding of such information, the areas that students had some decision over related to how they gathered information, from whom and what sources, and what to do with it once they had collected it. In these second interviews, I heard great variations in the depth, breadth and structure related to their information gathering strategies. Some relied solely on their lecture notes, discounting their textbook since it seemed to duplicate what their instructor said in lectures. According to Janet, “You don’t have to read the chapter because she says everything in the chapter, her whole lecture.” Students talked about memorizing their lecture notes, sometimes copying them as a way of sustaining concentration, and usually maintained them in the original structure provided by the teacher. They described how they made notes from their readings, summarized and condensed notes and then learned them by rote from their mastery sheet. A few elaborated on how they developed their own frameworks by transforming the information into something that made sense to them, relating ideas and looking for patterns and relationships. There was a degree of congruence in terms of how students responded to how they perceived their learning, how they approached their studying and how they perceived their learning environment. Although these observations reflect the patterns of learning described by students in both of the clusters, I continued to listen to how arts and science students experienced learning within their disciplines, and will explore these themes separately to note similarities and differences.

Learning for the science students was still primarily problem solving, either doing the problems in the text or completing old exams. Said Carol when she described what she did when she studied, "If I can look at an example and do the questions then that's usually good enough for me." Although this approach worked for Carol, it often left other students unprepared for the actual midterm since the problems in the text were not similar to the ones on the exam. Jean, who had done all of the problems in her text as part of her preparing for the midterm, found the exam much more challenging than expected:

I found that a lot of the questions weren't exactly like--not that I expected them to be exactly the same as the homework, but I found they were a lot more advanced than the ones I was doing. I thought they were a lot more complicated.

Katherine had focussed much of her review time on completing old exams, assuming that there would be some similarity between them and the problems on the midterm. She later lamented following this particular strategy after taking her Chemistry exam explaining, "I had done past exams from the past years and I had gotten use to those questions and these didn't even click for me."

Many of the science students expected that completing the problems in the text would prepare them for the midterm, a practice that would have been sufficient for them to do well in high school. When I talked about this "plugging in the formula" approach with Laura, who was doing very well in her courses, she started nodding her head and smiling in recognition of the limitations of this method:

In Chemistry, you have to recognize the problems. Some students when they do the section, then they do the problems. A lot of the problems are the same so they can kind of figure out how to do one and then the next ones are the same so they do them automatically and they don't think about the basic concepts as much. Then they go on to a different section and the problems are pretty similar so you get that kind of question on the exam but if you don't know the basic concepts, you won't know how to do the questions. I focus on the concepts behind the questions. I go through the different sections and go back and forth in

doing them.

I don't like memorizing. I like knowing the basic concepts and then I don't have to memorize as much because things make sense after that and I can try to figure it out. Some people memorize formulas but if you have to switch it around a bit or if the question is asking something in a different way - if you understand the concepts you can see how it all works together but if you just know the formula and that's it, you won't be able to do it. When I study, I see how it all comes together in my head. Things make sense and fit together.

Kerry described her problem solving approaches as one where she would try to figure out "why they did each step and why they thought to do it that way and not some other way." When I asked her if she thought about alternative approaches she responded, "I usually look for the way that makes the most sense to me which isn't always the same way they have but it doesn't break any rules." Laura and Kerry described an approach to learning that involved checking the evidence, examining the logic of the argument, testing, retesting and a focus on personal understanding rather than rote memory. They displayed a confidence that their problem solving strategies would give them the flexibility needed to adapt and apply ideas and information effectively. While they talked about how they had developed these skills prior to coming to university, other science students were only now beginning to recognize the merits of such a strategy. Ginny explained her new insights this way:

I think that if you understood the concepts behind the problems - what they were trying to show you - then the problems would have been enough. But anyone could do the problems because there are examples in the textbook with the correct formula and you stick the numbers in and get your answers kind of thing. It's why did they pick this formula and not this one. I wasn't really clear on that on the first midterm and I had problems with all the acid-base questions and for the second one I said - now why did I do that, why wasn't it right, a whole bunch of things just clicked before finals. I left the final feeling that I had done well. It was easier than the first midterm. The first one I

didn't even finish. I left the last page because I didn't, couldn't even think of how to start the question and I felt so bad after the first midterm. [Before] I just had done the problems from the textbook. You have to get what's behind it.

She later added:

I have to work a lot harder to learn the stuff now to make sure I thoroughly understand it. There's no memorizing it and putting it out on paper. I thought I could do that at first but it didn't work, especially in Math. It doesn't work at all. In Math I would memorize formulas and I would know what each one was and hope that I could pick out from the question what would go in the formula. But here they twist the questions around so much on the exams that you really have to know what you are doing - maybe there's another part to the question that's not just using the formula, on the second Calculus one you had to take the integral and use that formula instead of the one they gave you so I was kind of happy that I was able to figure that out.

One of the questions I asked students in this second round was whether they would change what they did as learners as a result of the grades they received. Not surprisingly, the science students who had done well on their exams, talked about continuing with their same strategies.

Those who did not do as well as expected spoke about the need to make changes from two different perspectives, what to study and how to study. Sometimes they reported making changes in either one area or the other and sometimes both. Katherine told me she wouldn't study from old exams anymore. "I probably won't study past midterms as much just go through my notes and do the questions." Ginny commented that after her first set of midterms, "I know more what to expect now, like what kind of things to know. So every time I have a midterm, it helps me to figure out what to focus on."

Carol continued with this theme:

Yeah, I know now basically what I need to do for the finals to get the grades that I want to. I know I have to know a little more than what I've been putting in. I will need more time--being able to get everything done and being able to do the problems more than once. When studying for the second midterm, I was a lot more thorough I think in what I covered. I knew that I knew it going into it. I couldn't think of anything else that I could have known. Whereas for the first one I wasn't really sure that I knew it.

I heard repeated references to the need to "manage" information by narrowing it down to what they needed to know and the importance of being prepared or more importantly, being in control. A number of students were frightened at the possibility of not knowing something and prepared for their exams in a way that would reduce any element of surprise. Ginny elaborated on this perspective that I would epitomize as purposeful, practical, productive and perfectionistic:

The finals I've taken so far have been very good even though Physics I was so worried about. I looked at the practice tests before I studied and it was, "Uh, oh,". It was not a good feeling. I thought I might remember stuff and then I put the practice test away and I studied everything and I did do the practice exams before 'cause I don't like surprises. I don't like to be surprised when I go in there. Even for the Physics quizzes, I did the questions in the book so many times before I went and took those quizzes so there would be no surprises thrown at me. I was a little over prepared for Physics exam but I felt good. I was ready!

Just as science students within their cluster differed in their learning strategies and approaches, so too did the arts students and while science students spent much of their time solving problems and completing labs, arts students focussed their study efforts on reading and writing papers. Janet talked about her approach to learning that was primarily based on reproduction of information:

I sort of had this system going where for example in Anthropology, you don't have to read the chapter because

she says everything in the chapter, her whole lecture--so what I do instead of my reading, I go back and basically look at all the bold print. I type all that up and then I type up her notes. I type everything so I don't need to do studying after that. So basically I spend my weekends-- I don't do any of it during the week, so during the week all I have to do is type up my lecture notes and on the weekends I go through every chapter and highlight all that stuff and take notes.

Mike, who interspersed throughout his interview talk about learning in terms of what he didn't do but could be doing, also elaborated on a learning approach based on reproduction and regurgitation:

For exams, you do your reading. If you are a quick enough reader, read it over two or three times which is not really hard work, it's just reading. Or if you are not a quick reader, as you are reading it take notes and then read your notes and take notes of your notes, whereas I haven't done any of that. I read it once and then I finish normally the reading just before I have to go to the exam so that's why my exams have been kind of iffy. If I had made the notes, I probably would have done a little better and it's not really hard work. It's not hard work it's just that there is so much of it so you have to organize your time. It's all in your textbook and it's all what the teacher says.

For Mike, Janet, and others, learning was accurately reproducing course content to give back to the instructor; and the necessary skills needed to do well were organizing and memorizing large amounts of information, speed reading and time management. Ben identified an approach to learning that for him was slowly evolving over the semester through trial and error:

First what I did was read the chapter and nothing else, then I highlighted the chapter as I read, not very much and going back and taking notes, and then reviewing before exams. That didn't work very well either. Now I read the chapter and I take notes as I go, I go back over the notes after I've read the chapter and then I discuss it with people on my floor if I don't understand anything. As far as

understanding and absorbing concepts and stuff, because I have people who are doing the same things as me, it's very, very helpful to bounce it off other people.

Like their science student counterparts, arts students were strategic in fine tuning their approaches to match their perceptions of the learning context. A number of the arts students talked about the importance of looking for patterns and relationships, relating ideas and actively seeking conceptual connections with the material they were learning. Meredith demonstrated this particular approach, modified from her earlier efforts:

I spent a lot more time, instead of focussing on definitions, because in high school if it was a multiple choice test it was definitions and you would learn what each thing meant. So after that I started learning to apply it so I would read something and say, okay, I understand what the principle behind this is, now how would I apply it? So I started discussing things with people more, just sort of sitting around and discussing things. The night before the test, I helped some people - we would discuss things so we'd go through the study guide together or just sit and discuss the main concepts or someone would bring something up or someone says something like that was an example of this-- sort of normal everyday life learning how to apply stuff in.

Anne echoed a similar theme:

Now I'm sort of learning to see how things connect and to be able to associate them where before it was just memorization, where now it's teaching me how to realize how things work.. I didn't have to do that in high school. With Psych it's a lot of examples of things so you can't-- you have to know the basic of what it is and how it works. You can't just know the definition of something. You have to know examples. It's a different kind of strategy.

When I asked Jamie about what he did as a learner, he articulated an approach that centred on a completeness to his own understanding and not necessarily to please others:

In the past it was more learning because you had to learn. In high school, you had to learn, you had to learn things for the exam and then you could forget it right after that whereas here I find seeing that it is a higher level of

education, for some reason I just want to learn about some of the stuff and I want to remember it. After the exams are done I'll probably forget a lot but there will be things that will stick because I want them to.

A major area of difference between the arts and science was the requirement for students in arts courses to write papers. Mike found this much more challenging than exams and commented, "Midterms isn't what really bothers me. I could go in and have a bad day even if I know my stuff and still do bad on a midterm kind of thing but it's my papers that really bug me because I have seven papers due in November." Arts students still found it difficult to differentiate between facts and opinion, the importance of supporting evidence, the need to understand context, and the importance of critical reading and writing.

Arts and Science Differences: Science Students "Work" and Arts Students "Think"

Science students taking arts courses continued to describe them as different both in terms of the students in their courses as well as the learning approaches required for success. Barbara, who talked about leaving the cluster to pursue the theater described arts students as "a lot more flamboyant, a lot more, well, science students are a bit more reserved." When I asked her how her cluster would describe her, she replied:

Here I think they do see me as a very open, kind, slightly hyper at times, kind of crazy person. Even though I am a theater lover, I do have a very intellectual side. I guess the two kind of come together. I'm a hyper intellectual!

Laura, who was taking a fine arts course, offered this understanding of how she saw arts students and ways that they were different from those in the sciences:

The students seem--I don't want to say that they are less focussed but I think it's a different kind of focus. Science students work, work, work and arts students seem to think about it. You don't have to do anything right away.

When Olivia explained why she dropped her Psychology course, she voiced some of the differences I highlighted earlier in my first interviews with students in the sciences enrolled in arts courses:

I think it was the content . It was more--I prefer stuff like Math and Chemistry where it's right or wrong or black or white whereas there was so much--it could be this or it could be that. No one's really sure. I didn't like that. I didn't really find that I was learning anything. Reading the textbook was like reading a magazine. It wasn't really facts that I was learning. The other Psych is suppose to be more factual. I do have to take a Psych and I'm going to take that next semester.

As stated before, because so few students in the arts were taking science courses, I did not have as much feedback from them on their learning experiences other than Kim who had identified sciences as a weakness in her first interview. She seemed to believe that innate ability was required to succeed in the sciences and was surprised at how well she was doing in her Genetics course. "We had one midterm in genetics and I got a 75 which is good because I don't have strengths in sciences." I was interested in these comments since she reported that she had done much worse in her major, Psychology. If Kim believed that learning in the sciences required innate ability, she operated under a different assumption for her art courses where correct study strategies or increased effort were necessary for success. When I asked her what she would do differently for her second Psychology midterm, she stated:

I tried using a different study method, the SQ3R⁶ study method. I tried using that and I even talked to the prof and he said that method would be really good for this section. It didn't help. It almost made it worse because I got 10 percent lower than the first one.

These kinds of stereotypes internalized by students affected their perceptions of performance and choice of learning approaches.

⁶Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review, a method for reading texts

Learning With Others in the Cluster: Friendship Learning

There were a number of themes that emerged regarding how students learned within the context of the cluster. These findings built on the shared learning activities identified in the first set of interviews. The cluster was still considered to be practical, efficient, and functional in meeting students' academic needs. Because the learning tasks were different for students in the two clusters, I will present their stories separately. Science students continued to note the convenience of living together with others taking the same courses; and how easy it was to access help when it was needed, most often late at night. Identical schedules also meant that they were often doing the same work at the same time. Katherine described it this way:

In the cluster I would say that when we are doing homework, everyone is basically doing the same homework at the same time so we can get help for that. It's convenient having people you can go to, to ask questions about specific work you are doing.

In addition to the convenience factor, the cluster was also cited for offering a safe, more risk-free arena from which to ask for help. There was a recognition that it was okay to not know some things and an understanding that students brought with them different learning strengths. Jean spoke to this issue:

A lot of the times people will know things you don't know or you will know something they don't know so you can go to them and ask them a question or two and they'll explain it to you. You can sit down and kind of work through it together if you both didn't do it and sometimes someone else will know something you don't so you can work through it.

Kerry talked about the interactive nature of learning with her fellow science students, the recognition that there were many different ways to learning, and the importance of discovering what works out best for you:

We do a lot of discussing. If one person is having a problem you can go in and ask a few people and get different ways to do it and see which way works best for

you and different people explain things in a different way so even if they are explaining the same concepts - just the different wording may make it click.

Although the idea of the cluster as a risk-free environment was identified as a factor in their first interviews, recognizing cluster members as having the ability to provide support better than what the professor could provide was a new phenomenon. According to Olivia who admitted she was still scared to make contact with her professors:

Sometimes a student can almost explain it to you better than a teacher 'cause they might be having the same--they know what you understand and they can relate it to something that you would understand whereas a prof might not be able to. We help each other a lot.

From students in the science cluster, there was a continued emphasis on individual achievement but a recognition that learning with others could be of benefit and improve their chances for academic success. Laura was reluctant to ask others for help if she initially encountered a problem. As someone who admitted that she did not find her courses challenging, she enjoyed learning opportunities that were demanding. Seeking help when first stumped, would further reduce these already limited possibilities:

If I can't get a question I won't ask someone right away, I'll try and figure it out myself. I keep trying it and if I find that I'm getting somewhere I keep going at it but if I'm totally lost then I ask someone.

Kate conveyed an approach that was common with most of the science students interviewed when she stated, "For the initial learning I do it on my own." Autonomy and self-directed performance were still the dominant perspectives from which these students worked from since the academic system only recognized and rewarded individual achievement.

Students in the arts also worked individually and sought help with other cluster members if they were having difficulties. Unlike students in the science cluster, they

sought out each others not only when they needed assistance but also as part of their review and as an opportunity to further reinforce their understanding of course material. In addition they also tried at times to divide up the workload but sometimes this didn't always work as Meredith exclaimed:

When I was writing my History paper, the first one I wrote, there were three of us in that class. We split up the book which was a big mistake. The paper was due on Monday and on Sunday we were all still desperately trying to read our sections and then trying to write the paper - all three of us were up all night long.

Students in the cluster, by living with other students taking the same courses, were able to reference themselves against one another not only in grades but also in work habits and in work to be completed. They were witness to different ways of studying from other members, most often aware of how successful they were in using their particular methods and formulas for learning. Kate explained:

One thing I've really learned is that I can't do it all. I have to try to pace myself. I can't do it all in one night. A lot of us do that. One girl yesterday did seven sections of Calculus for the test. She had never done the homework so it was, okay, I'll learn from her mistake. I've learned study habits from other people. I'm starting to reflect--yeah, I should be more like them both in terms of what and how. I do my homework on my bed. I spread it out on my bed and my head is on the pillow and then I'm zonked for five, 10 minutes. Some people work in the lounge so I started to. I move all my stuff to the lounge and spread all my stuff out so I have lots of room and lots of light and sit up straight.

She later added:

I think it does help to see other people who are working 'cause I get behind other people and I want to catch up. It's like, hey, I guess I better get a move on but you don't want to be one of those eager beavers. They put an overhead up on the Physics board every day saying this is how many quizzes, the average, that so many people have completed. There's one person who has done all of them half way

through the semester and well, you've done four whatever, so you want to figure out where the norm lies. You just want to make sure you're not behind.

If there were negative connotations associated with getting too far ahead and not wanting to be labelled an "eager beaver," there were also concerns expressed for those who were not doing any work. Jamie, an arts student, described how cluster etiquette required that students asked one another about their studying or lack of but the choice to study or not was left to the individual member to decide:

Everyone pretty much takes care of everyone else. If someone isn't studying or people don't see them studying they'll say how come you're not studying and if the person says I don't want to then you say alright but if the person says, "Well, okay" you can kind of get the sense that they want to but that they're just lazy and need to smack them around a bit. I know that if happened to me a couple of weeks ago. It was during midterms and I just thought, --ugh --I just wanted to sleep all day and people said come on, study with us, so it is helpful. Maybe that's just because everyone is in the same courses but it does help.

The Academic and the Intellectual

In these interviews I tried to listen for any kind of intellectual discourse that went beyond the sharing of facts and information between members of the cluster. On the surface I came away with an image of students who saw their academic role as producers of a product for someone else and who viewed each other as suppliers from which to acquisition resources. But every once in awhile I caught a glimpse of a different perspective, a kind of intellectual talk that went beyond information gathering. Ben provided such a glimpse:

I would say that our cluster is intellectual. There are people, because it is diverse, there are people that you can really connect with intellectually and just talk about things that you've never talked to about with other people that really stimulate your mind and your thoughts.

Research suggests that traditional-age university students are not cognitively ready to engage in the kind of intellectual talk that goes beyond the sharing of facts and information. I did not hear many anecdotes of this kind of talk but that may be more a consequence of the timing and location of the interviews. My hunch is that these type of conversations did occur, at night, with friends, in safe environments, free from external judging.

Academic Life

Running on a Treadmill Going Backwards

In the first interviews I was struck by students' descriptions of going to class and the noise that went with those scenarios - the banging and pounding on doors, the yelling to make sure everyone was up, and the morning rush hour chaos that occurred as they went off to their classes together. This time in their stories the noise was absent, but what took its place was a busyness, a frenzied never-ending rush of trying to get caught up in their school work, and a weariness that came from repeated attempts to gain control of their time and their lives. Katherine summed up these feelings in her comments:

It's like running on a treadmill going backwards. Yeah, it's hard 'cause you have so much to do but you have no time to do it in. It's really tough to get everything done and catch up on past work. It feels like you are in a glass ball, running around in circles.

When I asked Ginny if she ever felt there was time in the semester where she was caught up, she replied:

Not once. Every time that you have a midterm, you'd have a relax day after and then you feel that you don't have anything pressing on you for awhile but then you come up

to the next one and think that you shouldn't have taken the day off but you kind of need it. It never ends. If one course slows down another one picks up so you never really have any time when you are finished.

Students continued to tolerate a high degree of academic discomfort; accepting the unpleasant aspects of school work; seldom complaining about the nature of the work itself; but resigning themselves to the fact that it had to get done. They subjected themselves to reduced sleep, eliminated or sharply curtailed their extra-curricular activities, and stopped attending organized social activities in the cluster. They were often amazed at the how much time it took to complete their academic tasks and how little they had to show for their efforts. Said Kate:

It really does require a lot of hard work and a lot of time. Before I could rattle off my homework in high school in front of the tv. I used to spend a lot of my time in front of the tv. I wasted my time. I knew where my time was going back then but now it's just like its 12 o'clock already and I haven't been watching tv, I haven't been doing any frivolous things but I still have so much to do. It's hard work. I have to do Physics quizzes, Chem labs have been really long, Chem homework, Chem quizzes, it doesn't stop. I thought that one week after all the big midterms - I would take the week off but I guess I shouldn't have done that now. We had a big Calculus midterm last night, zoology is next Tuesday, and Chemistry is next Saturday.

Mike described his coping strategies for getting caught up in his work by shifting his sleep patterns to the day instead of the evening:

This is what we're been doing: we try to sleep during the day when it's noisy, and then stay up most of the night and do work or just plain get three to four hours of sleep a night. At first I was sleeping more in the beginning of the semester and now it's like okay, I've got to catch up somehow because I'm so far behind.

Because most midterms did not occur until the sixth week of classes, many students felt no immediate pressure during the first month of school to focus large amounts of their time on their academics. Even though students in both clusters described themselves as serious about their studies in their first interviews and talked about the challenges of trying to stay on top of their work, by this second time around, they expressed a nostalgia for that first month: Explained Mike:

Yeah, it was easy back then because it was more or less just reading and you're thinking--I've got lots of time and then before you know it, you just lose track of time sometimes. "It's what, the fifth? No, it's the 18th! Oh no, my paper is due tomorrow." You just lose track of time or you may think that something is due the week after.

When I asked Katherine about her workload, she talked about how in retrospect, September provided a false sense of complacency:

If there was a slow period, I would say the first month. People weren't really into school yet but since the midterms people have been mainly focussed. There's no down time after midterms, not until Christmas. We have two weeks of midterms and then two weeks without midterms and two weeks of midterms, two weeks without and then finals.

Time Spent Studying

I sought to find out how much time students said they spent studying, not to look for any kind of correlation between time and grades but whether in fact students could give me an actual number. I had a hunch that students living in a cluster would begin to blur the boundaries between studying and socializing, which could make it difficult for members to quantify their study time. Carol found my question difficult to answer. When

I asked her why, she replied:

Because it's so spread out and it's so in pieces and then if you're doing something and you have to ask someone a question, you're not always right back to doing work and stuff like that. It's hard to sit down and do two hours in my room. In the beginning of the semester I didn't even do 10 hours a week whereas when you get into your first midterm you realize, wow- you have to do the work now but then you have another midterm that week so you have to keep up with the work.

Meredith likewise found it difficult to provide me with an answer:

It's difficult because I take breaks and so they may not be scheduled breaks. Some one may drop by to talk or someone will call or I'll go to dinner. Today, I worked in between my classes. Sometimes, I do, and sometimes, I don't. Normally I don't work in between my classes but today I did because I have an assignment that I am working on.

What became apparent in their talk about learning was that students studied harder at some times than others and it was the approaching midterm or paper, not the complexity or difficulty of the material, that determined the how much time they would devote to their studies. Jean operated from within such a perspective:

I definitely think each week varies. I'm taking for my elective Philosophy and for the past three weeks I really did nothing for that class since it was the least of my worries because I had a second midterm in Calculus and a second midterm in Chem and I was concentrating hard in those and didn't have time. But this week I had a term paper due in Philosophy and have been working like mad all weekend on that. My one term paper in Philosophy was the major assignment for that class so there wasn't a whole lot of work for that class compared to my other classes. In Chemistry, we do a lab one week and it's due the next week

so you'd have to find time to work on that during the week to get the lab done where for something like Calculus, you don't have labs or homework or assignments, nothing that's hand in so that's work at your own pace. You don't have to have it done at a certain date. It varies on what's due and if there's nothing due then it's what's been put off the longest that you are trying to catch up on.

Responses from science students who tried to quantify their study time ranged from 15 to 35 hours per week with many saying they studied 20 to 25 hours a week during midterm time. Ginny was most prescriptive in how she scheduled her time:

When we have classes, I don't do much studying during the day because I only have an hour break between my classes which is just enough time to pick up a book and put it back down again. So Terry and I would usually study from 4:00 to 6:30 and then we would stop for supper for an hour and then from 7:00 to 10:00 and then watch tv for an hour and then go to bed so that's about five hours a night. We try to do that every night but you'd have to separate the times we are talking and the times people would come in and interrupt. So it probably wasn't five hours, but we had five hours set aside for it.

Students in the arts cluster identified 10 to 30 hours as the range of time they spent studying. Jamie thought he spent less time than others in his cluster studying but then saw no need to add more:

I don't think I spend near as much as everyone else does. I probably spend about three hours a day maximum while everyone else is just study, study, study. I don't think I could handle that. I can't handle studying for too long. I study in hour stints and that includes essays and projects unless I've pushed an essay off and it's the last night and then I'll work late doing it. It would be about 20 hours a week which is I guess okay. Mind you, they say that you are supposed to spend 10 hours a week per class--that's

what I was told, so I'm about 30 hours a week short of what they say. From what I've heard, I'm getting higher grades than the majority of the people. I'm not saying that to sound egotistical but I know people are scrounging for D's and C's and I've got my three A's up there.

The Sin of Wastefulness: Part 2

Students continued to operate from an efficiency principle where they subjected their academic activities to a cost benefit analysis. Those activities that were too time consuming with too little a payback were eliminated. I did not ask students directly if they went to their classes. Some offered information that they still regularly attended, but going to lectures as a defining component of their academic experience was no longer mentioned by these students. They were now much more discriminating about what classes to attend, depending on other time commitments and what assignments were due or if there was an upcoming exam. Decisions on whether to attend classes at this time of the semester underwent much more scrutiny than at the beginning of the year. As Ben exclaimed, "Sometimes you have to make sacrifices--not go to lecture and maybe go to something else because you have to study for your midterms." Jean was still a regular lecture attender but added, "Even if I don't go and learn a lot from it at least you go to absorb somewhat of what they are saying." Waste was still deplored, especially at this time in the semester when time seemed to be so tight. After staying up late to study for a midterm and then leaving confused from her English lecture the next morning, Kim stated, "I wasted my time going to English. I should have been sleeping." The choices students made were dependent on the values they assigned to their options. By the end of

the semester, an opportunity to sleep in during the morning and thus miss class in order to stay up late at night to study made sense under these circumstances.

Cluster students cited ongoing problems of noise and distractions that came from residence living. As Barbara exclaimed, "In residence, it's so much. You're in your room and it's your home life as well." When I inquired about protocols for studying, there were two general rules that emerged. The first had to do with having your door open while studying. Jamie defined this protocol in the following way:

If your door is open, people are going to come in and don't get mad at them if they come in and you're studying because your door was open. Unless you are really busy you've got to be willing to talk to anyone or listen to anyone because if you don't people will say, "What a jerk!"

If you decide to study with your door closed, and if someone wanted to ask you something, they would knock but this was only supposed to happen if someone had a question related to academic matters. On the other hand, having your door closed too often was also seen as a breach of the social norms of the cluster. Olivia solved this dilemma by going to the library every night. "You can shut the door but then people knock. For me I find it's easier to go to the library. I usually take my books in the morning and don't come back until 9 at night."

Students did not identify the cluster itself as the cause of the noise and instead identified the problem as related to living in residence. Personal space was cited as an issue that impacted on their use of time. The close proximity of living together with other

individuals who were now friends created more tempting alternatives than studying. Ben summarized these concerns:

The noise causing distractions, people knocking on your door every five seconds, the tempting or more interesting things that are going on instead of sitting down at your desk and reading, that just perpetuates my procrastination. It's not unique to me 'cause it's evident wherever you go. I know five or six people who are going home for finals so they can sit and concentrate on work. At home you're not going to say, "Oh, I've got to go socialize with Mom!"

Cluster Life

What became apparent from students' first interviews was the cluster's power in creating social cohesion by helping students to create immediate friendships and providing support in navigating the university environment. Cluster members described how they differentiated themselves from non-clustered students and the special bond or "unmentioned similarity" that came from a union by same program grouping. By the second round of interviews, students continued to experience the cluster as beneficial in meeting their academic, emotional and social needs; friendships progressed but now at different levels; and the intensity of living and learning together was beginning to take its toll.

Making and Maintaining Friends

I still heard from both clusters, words like "family," "closeness," and "comfort" that came from living together and taking classes together. Students described how they

still travelled together to classes; went to dinner together in both small and large groups within the clusters; and the feelings of security that came from seeing familiar faces on campus. Jamie went so far as to describe his arts cluster as too exclusive:

We're almost too close in that we exclude people. It's like a clique and outsiders find it difficult to get in. I don't know if it's intentional or not. It just happens because we are so close. I think that is a defining quality of our cluster.

Building relationships and making friends continued to be major tasks for these students. I was curious to find out to what extent the immediate friendships created by the cluster environment had endured and in these second interviews, heard how students were beginning to differentiate levels of friendship within the cluster. Barbara talked about smaller subgroups forming within the larger cluster. "Everyone has just grown closer together. Within the subgroups are little groups forming. A group of three will hang out a lot more." Ben added:

I'd say there are subgroups just because I think it's hard for 30 people to gather as a group all of the time so I think people create subgroups and that's how you can maintain and you can explore relationships a lot deeper but I don't think they are terribly defined. I know that I can walk in and anybody can walk in to any group of people in my cluster and sit down and be welcomed, pretty much.

In general, cluster students continued to speak to the common bond that came from living within the larger cluster and the more personal, closer relationships that evolved from the smaller subgroup formations. Meredith described the group dynamics that came from

such grouping as similar to what one would find within a family:

It really feels like we're a family and in your family you have your favourite brother and sister and then you have the ones you don't really like that much like the crazy aunts and stuff but it really feels like a family environment. I've been sick and it was really nice that everyone was concerned about me. If people are sick we do that - make sure they have soup or someone will bring them notes to class. Everyone looks out for each other. I have friends who live in South where that would never happen. If you're sick, people don't even know it. They don't come out of their room. No one really knows so I don't know if that is just South or what. I know someone who lives in Lambton as well and she doesn't really get as much interaction. I think being in a cluster has something to do with it. People are always saying that of course we're going to look out for you, we're a cluster!

In this set of interviews I introduced the topic of community. I wanted to examine how important it was for them to feel a sense of community and how this was talked about in the cluster. As I have discussed earlier, "community" was not part of the student lexicon. When I introduced the concept, students found it difficult to figure out what I wanted to understand. When I asked what would be a more appropriate term to use to talk about the process of making university their home, they told me "belonging" or "fitting in" were more of an immediate concern for them. Jamie appropriated my term "community" and used it in his answer to help me understand:

There's the community of you and your roommate and then there's your group of close friends--three to four guys and then there's the cluster or floor and then it's the whole university. It kind of jumps from floor to university which is a big jump. There's no in between. I didn't think that community would be this varied with the different levels and that there would be such a big jump from floor to university because I have minimum friends off the floor and they're not really that close.

Janet also identified her cluster as the locus of her community:

My big community is the cluster and we have a lot of subdivisions. We have subgroups. You're always going to have people that you are closer to do stuff with. Last night we went out and we were joking around about the fact that wherever we go we run into one another but also how we spend so much time together. It's sort of like a joke now. It's like--are you going to be around? Of course, I'm going to be there, we're always there. We all know that we're always together.

Said Olivia who echoed a similar theme in response to my question on defining her community:

I would say mostly my cluster, I think of things that go on within the cluster. When I think of school I think of cluster and our courses. I guess it's kind of small in the whole range of things.

Yes, it was small but that meant that it was also safe, reassuring, comforting and manageable.

Points of Tension

It was not always easy for students to maintain friendships given such a close proximity to one another. I heard stories of roommate switching, squabbles, and gossip within both clusters. I don't think these incidents were necessarily unique to the cluster environment, but I suspect that taking courses together tended to exacerbate problems.

Ginny's story highlights some of these problems. In her case, her two best friends were

roommates who did not get along with each other. She often found herself caught in the middle of their troubles:

I find that it's harder to tip toe around people's feelings than it is to do Calculus or Physics. It seems that you are always together all of the time. It's harder to deal with the people than it is to deal with the work. The other day I was having so much trouble getting comfortable 'cause my desk -- I can't use [it] because my computer takes it up so I usually prop my bed up and my back was sore and I went to the lounge and the table but there were two people at the table and the other lounge was full so I thought what am I going to do? and then it just clicked: Kerry has an extra bed. So I went in there and took my books and two hours later Terry was mad at me and I didn't know why and four hours later she finally said, "Why did you go to Kerry's? I thought you were going to the lounge. I looked for you and you weren't there." I said I just needed to find some space.

There was an implied expectation at the beginning of the semester that members of a cluster were "to all get along and work together" as Joan proclaimed to me. By the middle of the semester, as students became more selective as to whom they wanted to socialize with, this expectation was brought into question. According to Carol:

The cluster is changing in that people are realizing that they are not so much forced to hang out with other people now. People are getting more selective with who they are hanging out with. At the beginning you're kind of forced to --I have to meet everybody, I have to be friends with everybody, I have to like everyone and now everyone is realizing that you don't really have to, so it's becoming a lot different as people get more experienced in it.

Ben further identified some of these expectations:

There's an expectation that you need to socialize and go out to talk to people all of the time and the expectation of that is so high that when you want to have alone time to

yourself, it's hard to do so because everybody comes and asks what's wrong with you or how come you're all by yourself. I say, "I need to have time to myself." There's expectations that you participate and that you show an interest in the cluster and the well being of the cluster.

Janet also described this dilemma when she commented, "In the beginning we spent so much time together but now if you go off on you own, it's like, 'What's wrong? Why aren't you coming out with us?'" She then added with a mocking voice, "It's quality time with the floor!"

One disadvantage identified by a number of cluster students living in double rooms was never having their room to themselves. Taking classes together meant a shared schedule which gave neither roommate time alone in their rooms. Carol described how she and her roommate had different labs which meant the two of them had a three hour time block which was not shared. She said she tended not to study then because "that's the time for yourself." Olivia shared with me that her mother was somewhat worried about her making friends at school, a worry that she expressed when Olivia went home every weekend:

I go home almost every weekend and she says, "Don't you think you should stay at school and be with your friends" 'cause my boyfriend's at home too so I want to see him. She says, "Don't you think you are missing out on school life and doing stuff with your friends?" I say, "I see them-- there in the bathroom when I wake up in the morning, they're there when I brush my teeth, they're there when I eat, they're in my classes, they're there when I go to bed"-- and those are the people you are friends with too so if you go shopping you go with them. You see lots of them.

There were some students who were also critical of the limited exposure they had to those outside the cluster, specifically the science students, who were concerned about only having women on their floor. Explained Kate:

Well, we've been together for so long that we're kind of getting sick of each other, getting in each others' face[s]. I think it would be the same whether we were taking classes together or not but it might also be that we do have the same schedules. We go together, eat together; I guess we spend a lot more time together. We don't have that. If you had an arts person, you could say -what did you do today in class? and you could tell me about your day and it would be something new whereas for us there's not enough variety or change.

She added:

We're all female. It may be sexist I guess but I don't know how guy students are doing in the same program and how they handle the pressures so it's all the same perspective that we're coming from.

Carol also found the cluster confining. "Everyone is always in the same courses and the same program, sometimes you just want to meet other people and see what they are doing and what kind of courses they've taken." These comments were infrequent though. Most of the students found comfort with the status quo, as they had done earlier in the year..

The Academic and the Social

Did the cluster helped to blur the boundaries between the academic and the social worlds of students? What kind of discourse would stem from such a blurring if in fact it did occur? In students' first interviews, I listened for any signs or clues as to whether

they continued their academic conversations beyond the classroom when walking to their next class or back to their residence. I learned that for many of the students, it was at night, back in their residence, when they would continue their classroom conversations, a result they stated that came from shared classes and a shared living arrangement. Now, six weeks later in the semester, I wanted to understand how they perceived the two divides. I had assumed that these divisions--the academic and the social--were viewed as distinct spheres by students and posed my questions in such a way that gave legitimacy to these divisions. "When you think of your social world and your academic world, are they separate?" was one of the questions I asked, or its variation, "Does your social or academic world ever connect?" In the process of analysing their responses, I have begun to question my original assumptions, because their talk throughout the interviews tended to seamlessly shift from the academic to the non-academic, back and forth without any imposed definitions or structures. Their answers to my questions were framed in a way that I would understand, based on the notion of separate boxes from which I worked. The following three excerpts from the transcripts provide an example of this:

Kerry:

I think they connect. We'll be doing something that has nothing to do with schoolwork of any kind and all of a sudden we'll be doing something that applies to what we did and somebody will bring that up, "Hey this is such and such," so it's sort of applies to what we know. It would be less likely to happen if you weren't in a cluster because the people you are with wouldn't necessarily be taking the same courses so they wouldn't have the same background of knowledge. There is some overlap.

Ben:

I think at university people tend to think that academics is something that you do alone which is not. Like being in a cluster has changed my view on that and therefore it helps me learn a lot more because for me I spend a little time each week because I have so many people in the cluster who are in my classes discussing or talking about things that went on in lectures or whatever or even in disagreements with the professor so I think that's the environment which I live. It's evident, I think it exists.

Jamie:

I tend to disagree with the notion of two separate-- it's kind of like where there are two circles and there's that spot in between and yeah, sometimes social life has nothing to do with academics and academics has nothing to do with social life but generally, the whole idea of studying with friends and you'll be studying and you'll just stop and start talking about something completely random. You talk about classes with friends, you go to talk to profs with friends sometimes, you work on projects together--just everything like that--so it's not disconnected but it's very intertwined. I don't think you can do--I couldn't do near as well in my social life without academics or vice versa. I couldn't do as well in my academics if I didn't have the social aspect. I think it would have been very different [if not in a cluster]. In the years to come when we all become more specified, I'll have to find new people that I can link up with and that I can work with. I hadn't imagined that this would have been an important component of my learning. Before in high school, I studied by myself and had nothing to do with my friends and my only social to academic life was sitting beside friends in classes.

Their responses speak to the artificial boundaries I had put on the academic and the social. In making sense of their stories, it is I who have categorized them, sorted them, and labelled them so that their words and their lives would make sense to me. But these students lived their academic lives in ways that made it difficult to label. Their lives were simultaneously focussed and unfocussed, discordant and divergent. It was I who imposed order on them.

CHAPTER 6

A COMMUNITY OF INDIVIDUALS

The stories we tell and the stories we hear, shape the meaning and textures of our lives at every stage and juncture (Wetherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 1).

Introduction

In these final interviews, I wanted to pursue my understanding of how students by second semester had made sense of their university experience through the context of their cluster participation. The stories I heard, rich in meaning and complexity, presented a picture of university life that was at times both familiar and foreign, challenging some of my assumptions and beliefs. The story I tell hopes to enrich the understanding about a group of students, in two particular clusters, as they make their way through first year of university.

Continuing with my format of semi-structured interviews, I was able to access their ideas, thoughts, and stories about what it meant to be a student after having completed one semester. In these third meetings, I noticed subtle differences in their talk and in our relationships. In the first and second interviews, students still saw themselves as newcomers, open to sharing their experiences and the newness of their situation. I, too was also a newcomer in my role as researcher, wanting to understand what university was like for them as new students.

By our third meeting, our roles had evolved and changed. They no longer viewed themselves as novices in this journey nor did I. As well, the gap in time from our second meeting to the third, some 10 weeks later, made it difficult to continue conversations in the manner that had happened from first to second meetings. Interviewing students at three separate times in first year created a snapshot of their experience, but it was less intimate than if I had spent ongoing time with them during both semesters. I had not been able to develop an insider privilege to their more personal lives. Consequently, their stories were limited by what they were willing to share with me, based in what they considered to be safe and appropriate within the relationship we had established. The questions I posed were based on my agenda, not theirs. Therefore what I present is a window on their experience but one whereby they determined how much of that window would opened to me.

Initial Reactions

With the excitement and energy that came through so strongly in their first interviews and a general feeling of weariness in our second meetings, I was uncertain as to what to expect from students this time around. They had changed and I had changed since we first met back in September and October. Neither of us were novices anymore. The participants in both clusters were now more settled, displaying a greater comfort level and an increased degree of confidence in their role as students at university. Their uncertainties about their ability to handle university that produced such fear in the Fall had abated, though there were a few who still expressed some lingering doubts. In their courses, they knew what to expect and what degree of effort would be required to

complete their work. As a result they were more intentional in either doing or not doing work since they knew what the consequences would be. From the science students I heard stories of high achievement in their first semester and a Winter course-load that was described as less demanding than the Fall. Some of these students had purposely limited their participation in non-academic activities in the Fall to focus more of their time on their academics. With the insurance of good grades behind them, they now gave themselves permission to take more risks with their time for non-academic activities. Students in the arts cluster talked about working harder in the Winter and putting more effort into their courses but in listening to their stories I heard contradictions and paradoxes, and tales of tension and conflict on the floor. This left me confused, troubled and unsettled. When I asked Mike about students being more focussed in the Winter semester, he replied:

We all kind of strive--I don't think there's anyone who really wants to do bad or doesn't care about school. Everyone cares about their schooling, but some people care in that they put a lot of effort into it and other people care but are just doing like me, kind of procrastinating and yeah, whatever, I'll get it done kind of thing and all nighters which does bring your marks down a bit.

Their rich narratives provided an understanding of life as a student as they described it, practised it, and lived it. In the stories that follow, I will continue to use students' voices in defining and assigning significance to their experiences; tapping their words to speak to the patterns emerging from their stories.

The Winter Semester

In my professional capacity, I do not have the same kind of opportunity to interact with second semester students as I do with those beginning first year, and so welcomed the chance to hear from students in my study how they were making sense of university. Did they consider themselves still novices? Did their transition extend into the Winter? What were they doing now that was different from the Fall and what did the cluster have to do with any of this? Their stories confirmed some of my hunches, but also left me surprised, dismayed, casting doubts on some of my assumptions about students in their second semester.

In listening to students talk about the Winter semester, I was struck by how their Fall performance so influenced and impacted on what they now were doing. Good grades were viewed as an acknowledgement and confirmation of their hard work and effort. Students continued to see grades as an extrinsic measure of their comprehension, progress and self-worth. Consequently, grades had a major impact on their sense of self, and directed their study activities and career directions. Their grade orientation, so evident in the Fall through their words and stories, had by the Winter time, become a more subtle, implicit yet still very powerful force.

I had thought of student transition to university as a year-long process but in a 12 week semestered system, students were forced to confront more immediately issues of course-load management and self-management. What the Winter semester gave them was a second chance within their first year to fulfill promises made, act on lessons learned, and build upon their initial experiences. For many of these students, second semester was

a time for new beginnings, a clean slate to start with, confirmed by Ginny and echoed by others, she admitted, “ I like having things over with and then starting new again.”

In my opening questions, I invited students to tell me about their Winter semester and how things were going for them. While this question evoked an immediate response in their second interviews to grades received, this time there were more varied reactions and grades did not dominate their opening comments. To highlight my findings and to note some of the differences between the science and arts students, I will present their stories separately.

Science Students' Perspectives: I Know I'm Here Now.

There were a number of common patterns that emerged from students' opening comments but these cannot be easily separated into discrete categories. How science students talked about the Winter semester and how they described their degree of comfort was related to how they performed in the Fall. I heard a general sense of relief from students who now knew what to expect, having been through the pattern of one semester. There was an acknowledged degree of comfort with their role as students. Their initial discomfort and self-doubts had eased. They were now in control of what they did and what they thought they needed to do. Ginny, so conscientious in the Fall with completing her work, proclaimed:

I'm more comfortable with where I am. Now I know what it actually involves and what you have to do to keep up and so far I'm right on top of everything.

Joan agreed with this sentiment, adding, "This semester I have the experience. I know what to expect now." Katherine echoed similar thoughts. "I'm more stable. I know I'm here now. I know what I have to do." The experience gained from their first semester enabled students to enter into the Winter without the baggage of uncertainty regarding the workload and, more important, about their ability to do the work. They were no longer novices but began to see themselves as legitimate members of the undergraduate cohort.

The courses taken by science students in the Winter were extensions of their Fall courses such as Chemistry and Physics and except for an elective, they continued to be registered in the same courses together. In their Fall interviews, they described their courses as a continuation from high school and did not find the material new or necessarily challenging in terms of content. Instead they felt overwhelmed by the pace and quantity of information they needed to know for their courses. It was the sheer volume of the material they had identified as most challenging, not the conceptual difficulties within their courses. I expected them to describe their Winter semester as more difficult than the Fall with courses covering new and more advanced material. I was surprised, then, when they told me that they considered their courses easier now in terms of workload, with fewer number of labs, fewer midterms and content that they still did not find conceptually challenging. From Kate's perspective:

I've gotten into the swing of things, I think the courses are a bit easier this semester especially Physics. I know how the program works and I don't have to hear the spiel again about how to plan my time and everything like that so I get the labs done with sooner. I think Chemistry is easier. They dispensed with the hard stuff in the first semester and now the labs are shorter. I had heard that coming in too, that

you had the first semester that was going to be a lot harder than the second semester.

In meeting with the science students in the Fall, I found that many had expressed criticism of a grading system based on two midterms and a final, and the amount of information they needed to know for midterms based on six weeks worth of material. They lamented not having weekly or biweekly tests like they had in high school. What they were telling me now in the second semester was something very different. They were glad they did not have second midterms in their courses this semester. Since studying for midterms meant that work in their other courses would get put on hold, the fewer the midterms, the less likely they would get behind and the less likely they would lose control of their time. Jean, though, identified some drawbacks to having a reduced number of exams:

I don't have any second midterms this semester whereas last Fall I had all second midterms. The thing with having two sets of midterms is I feel that there's--I don't know if it's a lot more work but it takes a lot to prepare for your midterms and you have to know everything and go in and write a big test like that so not to have a second one takes that pressure off but on the other hand, I didn't do as well as I would have liked to have on the first set but now I don't have the second one to pull my grade up. This semester I only have the one and then the final to determine my marks.

A common theme that I heard repeatedly was the lesson learned in not getting behind in their work. In these third interviews, science students spoke about having become more disciplined and committed to ensure they would not find themselves in that situation again. When I asked Ginny what she was doing now that was different from the

Fall, she replied, “I didn’t have three weeks of work to do right before the midterms. I’ve been keeping up all of the way along so midterms didn’t sneak up on me.” Student uncertainty and worry about being able to succeed had been replaced with a renewed confidence, as Kate explained:

There was the pressure of not knowing how I was going to do in university, ’cause you come from high school and you got good marks and everything but now you’re in a different setting, learning differently, and it’s so much of your own initiative. Now that I know that I can do well, I know that I can succeed in this type of environment, then I think I’ll be okay. I’m not as worried now ’cause I know that it can be done.

Kate, who had entered with a 90 OAC average and had maintained that average in her Fall semester added:

I know what the expectations are. I know how to study for my courses. That’s not to say that people who did badly are not meant to be here. It’s maybe that they haven’t adjusted properly yet but yeah it was nice to know that I can cope here. It’s very relaxing. I find that the days are a lot less stressful now. Studying for tests isn’t that hard. It’s more like, “I’ll be okay, I can do this now.”

Fall Performance and Its Impact on Winter

As mentioned above, a number of science students in the Fall had curtailed involvement in extracurricular activities to focus their time on academics. Especially for those students who had set high grade expectations, class work took precedence over social life and leisure activities. Jenny was one of a number of students who spoke to this theme in response to my question about her level of social involvement in the Fall. She

commented, "Not at the moment. I thought I would spend the first semester getting really focussed." Ginny also had limited her involvement stating, "Not this semester. I had big plans but I wanted to make sure I had enough time for what I needed to do. Maybe second semester." Jenny and Ginny were not willing to take the risk of lower grades that involvement in activities that did not have an academic payback might curtail. This view, though, was not consistent throughout the cluster. Others talked about the importance of taking a more balanced approach. Jean recognized her need to socialize on a regular basis but found it sometimes difficult to do so within a cluster environment where this value was not shared by all:

I find it kind of hard to try and balance 'cause you sit in your room all week and you kind of want to go out and get out for awhile on the weekend and some people don't do that. They spend the whole weekend studying. Being in a cluster is that you get a lot of people that are very, very serious about academics to the point that they don't want to do anything but study, whereas I think you should have a balance between the two.

With these students now in Winter semester, I was curious to understand how they used their grades in making decisions about their involvement in non-academic activities. Would those who had done very well in their Fall semester, put more pressure on themselves to maintain their high grades and continue limiting extra-curricular involvement or would it give them an 'insurance policy' to take more risk with their time? Would those students who did not receive the grades they had hoped for, change how they spent their time in the Winter? Ginny who ended the Fall semester with a 90

and needed a 75 to transfer to the biological science program, commented:

Now I can relax 'cause I applied for biomedical science and the average is 75 to get in so now I have my 90 and just need enough in the next semester to keep me above a 75. Now I can relax, but I know that one of the other girls in biomed--she has a 76 so she has to make sure it stays while for me it's like a cushion. I'd like to get 90 again, but if I don't, it won't be that bad.

Ginny had intentionally limited participation in Fall extra-curricular activities but had expressed hope that she could become more involved in the Winter. By the end of the Winter semester, she had followed through on her intentions:

I like how I am doing now. I'm comfortable and on top of everything and actually doing extra activities now. I'm going out a lot. I'm going out to Fame next Friday and I went to a jazz concert last week - things the university puts on. Now that I know that there is time available, I can go out. I have a better perspective on what it takes. I don't have to feel like, "Oh, I could have done better on that quiz if I hadn't gone to the Celid."

Laura ended her Fall semester with a 92 average. I asked her if that took some pressure off of her in the Winter, remembering that in her first interview she talked about the need to stay above 80 to maintain her scholarship. She responded:

Now I want to see if I can maintain that. I don't feel that I want to do better than that but I'd be happy to keep it there as long as it's the high 80's that's fine 'cause it gives me a little bit of room.

Kerry, who also had a very successful semester with a 93 average, added:

I was thinking, okay, I did it last semester, lets do it again so that the marks will be there for my pre-vet application. I won't be really disappointed if I don't [do as well], but I would like to do as well this semester as last. I think it's

more that I feel more comfortable with what I am doing so I'm willing to do more now. I went and showed a pig at College Royal and spend the whole week looking around there. I think for me, the comfort level is higher now. You are more familiar with the surroundings, more familiar with the type of work that you are doing, the type of workload you have, so I know that I can do this without getting too stressed out about not doing the other stuff.

For Kerry, Laura and Ginny, the opportunity to participate in more social and leisure activities had now been earned, a payback for all of their hard work and effort in the Fall. They could now give themselves permission to have fun.

What about those students who had not done as well as they had hoped in the Fall? Jean, who had found her Fall courses difficult and who had been evasive in telling me her grades, continued to struggle this Winter. In response to my questions about how her Fall semester had gone, she answered:

Not too bad. Not as well as I would have liked to have done. I was in the mid to high 60's for my average. It could have been worse. I feel a little bit better than last semester just because I know what to expect now. When you first start you don't know what kind of workload to expect and what the classes would be like and now you have an idea so that makes it a little bit better. Right now I'm trying to focus on the classes I'm doing and try to get my marks where I want to be. I don't know where I'm going wrong in doing that. I think it can get quite discouraging after awhile. In high school I didn't really do any work at all and scraped through and here I'm doing a lot of work and just over scraping through. It's kind of disappointing to work that hard and put that much effort in whereas when you put that much effort in before you had the marks to show for it but now you are putting that much work and effort in and not doing well at all. You have your days where you feel really down about that.

There was a sense of betrayal that Jean felt as someone who was putting in the time but not getting the marks to recognize such effort. We talked in general about what it meant to be a student in the Winter semester and I tried to get a sense of any pressures she felt from within the cluster about a work ethos. She later added:

I'm serious about getting an education but I also like a break and want to go out on the weekend and have some fun. I think being in the cluster--people who go into the cluster are very serious about their academics and just work, work, work all of the time.

Jean was not willing to concede intellectual merit or ability to these "serious" students, only to the fact that they worked harder at the expense of leading more balanced lives.

Katherine was also someone who had struggled in her transition to university in the Fall. She had failed her first Chemistry midterm, a subject which was her best in high school and when we met for her second interview she was just getting over a case of bronchitis which had forced her to reschedule some of her exams. At that time, she described her Fall performance as one where "basically you're getting use to the idea of midterms and how tough they are and everyone who is here was good in high school so they have the ability. It's just moving away from home for the first time, it's a big adjustment." When we met for the third time, she responded very enthusiastically to my opening question:

The semester has been going great. I've been healthy and my classes are going extremely well. Chemistry last year, I did quite bad and failed the first midterm and this one was--wow--get it back and it was one of the highest grades I've ever gotten....I got a 76 in the Fall and was hoping for at least the low 80's.

When I asked if her confidence had increased as a result of receiving higher marks, she quickly stated:

I wouldn't say that I have more confidence since I had confidence before. I'm just finally seeing the good results that I wanted.

Katherine expressed a perspective on grades that was shared by a number of the science students who saw their lower than expected performance as something not related to personal inadequacy but which arose from factors outside of themselves. These included such issues as their transition to university, being away from home and on their own for the first time, and academic problems related to the nature of the test or difficulty in figuring out what their instructor wanted them to know. Katherine saw herself as good in the sciences based on her high school experience. Not having done well in her first semester Chemistry course was related to a host of reasons, but ability or personal inadequacy was not one of them. She was learning how not to interpret grades as personal criticism, for to do so would question her ability to stay in the program and pursue her goal of becoming a vet.

Confirmation of Academic Plans

Some of the defining characteristics of the science cluster members were their determination, willingness to work hard, their high aspirations, and their single mindedness in pursuit of their goals. Over half of them entered with the intention of getting accepted into the veterinary medicine program by the end of their first year. In a profession that demands stamina and resolve, there was a congruence between the

personal values these students held and the professional values accorded to the study of veterinary medicine. Those plans changed for many of them over the course of the Fall semester, and by the time I interviewed students in March, I had heard of only five to six students who were actually serious about submitting an application. Kerry with her 93 percent average was one of them:

I'm still trying to get into vets. I won't find out until June or July. I'm hoping to get in this year so I don't have to wait the extra year and then write the MCAT's. I figure if I can just do it now it will alleviate a whole lot of stress.

Since students were limited in the number of times they could apply, those students with borderline grades or grades slightly below the cutoff had to assess whether their chances for admission would be better in a later year when they could apply with the possibility of a higher grade point average. Katherine, by our second meeting, had recognized that she wouldn't have the grades to apply in the Winter but still spoke of trying in her third or fourth year. She was unclear as to what she would do if she didn't get into the vet program. When we spoke for the third time, she still expressed some doubts about her options. "I don't know 'cause I know that I want to work with animals so something related to the animal sciences. I'm in zoology right now so that's a good base to start with."

Jean, likewise, had decided to wait in applying and despite her low Fall grades and similar Winter midterm marks, did not identify any other career options. She was still

'buying time' yet was under incredible pressure:

My goal coming here is to get into vets and you have to have a certain average to get into that whereas if I just came in and wanted a degree in wildlife biology which is what I'm enrolled in, it wouldn't bother me as much if I was getting 60's and 70's because it doesn't matter. When you come out with a degree your employer doesn't look at the grade, they just look at the degree so it doesn't matter and I think a lot of the pressure would be off. I feel a lot of pressure right now. I talked to my parents about it because you can only make four applications and you can't apply next year so that only gives you two more years after that until I'm done my undergraduate so I'll see what happens and what happens to my grades this semester.

And what about those students who decided not to pursue vets? Joan was someone who entered with such an intention but by our second meeting had began to express some doubts stating, "I don't want to devote my life to just one thing." Later in the interview she added that she would still apply just in case she changed her mind, wanting to keep all of her options open. I remembered Joan complaining about her Economics class in our first interview:

I have a three hour Economics class which I'm not too fond of because of the subject and I'm a science student. I'm not prepared for that course because I never took OAC Economics where there are a lot of Economic students in that course who plan on going on in that field. I never saw any of that stuff before so I have to work extra hard.

By her second interview, she was feeling more confident in the course, explaining:

At the beginning I didn't really like it because most of the people are in Economics and kind of knew it from high school and I didn't know anything so my first few marks were not very good and I started to get better at understanding it and now I'm doing really well.

In our third meeting, Joan told me she had decided not to become a vet and instead planned to either change her major at Guelph to Economics or to get accepted into the business program at Laurier. I was somewhat surprised at this since she had achieved a 79 percent average in her Fall semester which put her within the cut-off range for vet school admission. The following exchange further highlighted her career and program change:

Joan:

I just found Economics more interesting. Even though my marks weren't super high like they were in my other courses, I knew I could do better in them and I understood it more and enjoyed it more. I came here cause I wanted to be a vet and that's out the window so (pause)

Nancy:

If you had done better academically, would you still have gone on to vets?

Joan:

No, 'cause I made that decision in the middle of the last semester and I knew that if I really wanted I could have gotten my marks a bit higher. It wouldn't have taken that much more to get them up and even for this semester I would need an 85 to balance it out but it's not something that I wanted anymore.

Nancy:

Do you feel a sense of relief now?

Joan :

Yeah, in terms of marks. I don't have to get an 85. If I get an 80 that's just as good.

Joan's story illustrates two points that I want to address. The first is her reference to vets "being out the window now" which would seem to indicate that at some point in her Fall semester she realized she would not do well enough to have a realistic chance of getting accepted to the vet program by the end of her first year. But this statement was contradicted by her insistence that she could have brought her grades up if she needed to. Her midterm grades did have some kind of impact on her desire to change her program. Certainly, making the decision not to go into veterinary medicine took a lot of pressure off her in having to achieve even higher grades. There was a sense of freedom in her talk in releasing herself from having to achieve higher grades, but grades alone were not the sole reason. According to her account, a more influential factor was her exposure to Economics, a field of study she had never even considered in high school but one in which she now felt enjoyment and interest. Whatever initial conceptual difficulties she first experienced, she had overcome them and had developed a sense of competence in the discipline.

Ginny, on the other hand, provided a different story of someone who entered university with the goal to become a doctor but after doing well in her courses, thought she ought to consider the veterinary profession. She provided this rationale in finally deciding not to alter from her initial plans:

It hadn't occurred to me before I got here and then being in a cluster full of vets it entered my mind and I looked into it a little bit but I decided to stick with the original plan. When I started getting such good marks last semester I couldn't believe it and thought there was no way I could get such high marks. I went to the OVC and had a tour and looked around and discussed it with my Mom. I would have had to change my courses for this semester so I had to think hard.

Laura commented in a similar manner, that she too ought to consider vets as an option given how good her grades were:

I still feel like I should be going since I have the marks. I co-oped when I was back in high school and it just didn't seem right for me. My friends are fine with that 'cause they don't want the competition.

Ginny and Laura demonstrated how possible it was for students to confuse their good grades with an interest or aptitude in becoming a vet. Although the nature of my study was not directed at exploring students' career aspirations in high school or how they became initially interested in sciences in high school, from this limited data it would seem that for many of these science students, going into veterinary medicine was a logical extension of having done well in their science courses at the high school level.

Arts Students: "I Feel I Belong Here Now"

My conversations with the Arts students elicited from them various responses as to their Winter experience and grades, but much less information compared to the science students related to their particular thoughts on future career plans or directions. They too expressed words similar to students in the science cluster related to how their semester was going, echoing the themes of now being more in control and knowing more of what to expect in their courses. They likewise saw themselves no longer as novices, having gained the experience of a semester with valuable lessons learned along the way. Kim explained, "I feel more in control. I know what I have to do now." Mike commented on

feeling more comfortable and settled, and Jamie added:

I'm a lot more relaxed when I'm studying than before. I know what it is going to be like and I can deal with it so I will be completely relaxed when I'm studying. There's less tension buried on my shoulders, less not knowing what's going to happen.

Ben summed up his thoughts this way:

It just seems that first semester was understanding how everything worked and now I'm getting a better feel for it. I know what to do now. I feel that I belong here now and that I can make it 'cause it was a huge worry for me. Can I cut it? Can I make it? It's not an issue now. I just know that I can make it. I feel a lot more comfortable with what I am doing and I'm confident that I can handle it now.

Arts students spoke of having attained an increased comfort level by the Winter semester and an increased confidence in their ability to do the work. The uncertainty, fear and self-doubt that was so prevalent in the Fall with these students had greatly lessened.

The stories I heard from the arts students were much more contradictory and full of hidden meanings compared to what the science students told me. All was not what it seemed to be and the more I heard, the more I felt like Alice in Wonderland as things got curiously and curiously. I mention this now but will explain in more detail later in this chapter.

Some of the minor differences between the two clusters had to do with the fact that students in the arts cluster were registered in fewer courses together in the Winter than their science cluster counterparts. This was a result of program degree requirements whereby arts students had more latitude in the sequencing of their courses and thus more

choice. As a result, shared classes were less a common feature in the Winter. I also heard of some differences related to arts students' workload and course difficulty. Most of the science students described their Winter courses as easier, but a few of the arts students expressed opposite thoughts, and commented on taking higher level courses requiring more critical thinking and working harder now than in the Fall. Said Meredith:

There's a lot of assignments I have to do. We're being taught in so many different ways. It's a lot busier this semester. In the Fall, there were all 100 level courses but in 200 they expect a lot and it's not stuff that I've already had. In Psychology last Fall I knew about some of the topics. It was stuff I had picked up in high school but this semester it's a lot more: "Here, read the book to understand this stuff." It's new.

Arts cluster members entered the Winter semester more aware of what to expect and how to hold themselves accountable, having benefited from the lessons learned in the Fall semester as to what they needed to do better this time around. Mike talked about having developed better time management skills compared to the Fall. "Last semester, I got behind two to three weeks, so right off the bat I've been able to keep up and that's why I'm doing a little bit better this semester." For Jamie, the Fall experience gave him increased opportunities to take more risks with his time in ways that were negative, not positive. He seemed to be experiencing symptoms of major inertia and indifference in the Winter semester:

I will get down to do it if I have to but if I don't have to I will put it off. I didn't procrastinate last semester as much as I do this semester unless it comes down to the bone. If I have to do it I can do it. If I don't have to do it I can do it but I won't do it. That's my problem. I can make more

choices now. I know what the consequences will be. Before you did it because you didn't want to find out what the consequences were.

This preference for procrastination will be a theme I will explore later when I examine in more detail student talk about learning and studying in the Winter semester. Somehow for Jamie and some of his fellow arts students, becoming more aware of the consequences gave them permission to take more risks in putting off their work to the last possible moment. It became a competition to see who could wait the longest to complete their work, and they became gamblers in this game.

Fall Performance and Its Impact on Winter

From information gathered in their first interviews, I noted a major difference in grade and goal aspirations between the two clusters. In particular, the arts students in the cluster identified lower grade expectations than their science student counterparts. As a result, I was curious to hear how they had done in the Fall; their reaction to their grades; and how this impacted on their Winter activities. Ben told me he received a 71 in the Fall, close to what he had earlier identified as his goal:

I wasn't especially surprised at that. My goal was to shoot for over 70 for the semester. I didn't know what it would be like and I wanted to get over 70, maybe a bit higher but I worked hard, relatively hard and I was pleased with the results.

This semester he was getting 85 and above on all of his midterms. When I asked him what he was doing different, he replied:

The [Fall semester] went fine. I achieved my goals but I know I'm capable of doing better. I'm applying myself more or using better time management, better organizational skills. It's sitting down and doing it 'cause you really find out that if you do any work first semester then you find out what you do need to do and what works for you. If you apply yourself to actually sit and do it then second semester will be much better.

Jamie seemed to be following a similar pattern. When I asked him how his Fall semester went, he replied:

I did okay, it was a 66 average which is alright. I would have liked to have done better but I've been told you can expect that your first semester grades will go up later-- that's what I'm hoping.

In the Winter his midterm averages were in the B range, up from C's last semester. Later in our meeting, he added:

I know what I'm doing and what I am going into when I go into the class. I know how to study for them. I'm also taking classes that interest me more than I was last semester. I was getting requirements out of the way. I'm enjoying my courses a lot more and that makes a very big difference. I know I could have done better in the Fall. I could have tried a lot harder so that gave me a little push and kick in the butt to almost do better now.

Meredith described herself in our first meeting as "not really an over achiever but I've always achieved a lot." When we met again for the second time, she told me she was receiving midterm grades in the 80's and 90's, similar to high school. In our final meeting,

when I inquired as to how she had done in the Fall, she stated, "I did really well. I had about a 85 percent average which is very good." This time around she too was actually doing better in her midterms which she attributed to her working even harder and being more focussed and disciplined. "I'm more dedicated now. I understand more the need for self-discipline, being able to self-manage yourself."

Kim was someone who had experienced major frustration with her midterm results in the Fall and ended the semester with a 72.6 average, which she told me when we met in the Winter, "Considering everything, I think that is pretty decent for a first semester." For her midterms in the Winter, despite a family tragedy and having mononucleosis, she was receiving high 70's and 80's in her courses which she attributed to working harder. Mike also commented that he was doing better this semester with midterm results in the 60's, 70's and 80's and then added, "I'm putting a little more effort into it, yeah, probably."

On the surface these comments from the arts students about performing better in the Winter would indicate that many of them were more serious about their academics, were putting in more time, and had improved their time management and self-management skills. While this was true for some of them, it was not the case for others despite their higher midterm grades. In fact for a few of them, their higher grades continued to validate inappropriate study patterns and habits. As I reread their transcripts, I heard major contradictions about their commitment to academics and talk and action that indicated otherwise. They were not necessarily more academically focussed this semester but had figured out how to do the minimum amount of work needed to get by.

Mike summed this up approach:

I haven't put any effort out and I'm still getting 70's and I haven't put any effort out just like a couple of the other guys. They haven't put any effort out and we are all getting 70's. Now there are other people--there's one girl on the floor who does tons and tons of work and she's getting 80's but that's because she's putting so much time in to it. Now if we all put that much time into it, I think we'd all be acing it. She puts literally hours in and we will read one page--
"That was good--lets go watch a movie now."

Later, toward the end of the interview, he paused and, in somewhat of a confessional tone, stated:

There are some things that frustrate me 'cause some of my midterms--I did try. I'm putting out the effort I put out in high school and it's not cutting it. It's just frustrating 'cause I had two grades under 75 since grade 10 and this is driving me crazy. I'm not used to these marks. So maybe that pushed me a bit this semester 'cause I really don't like ending up with 70's. I just to have to work a bit better for my finals.

This incongruence between Mike's words and actions were patterns repeated throughout his interview. He portrayed himself as intelligent, bragging about how little work he did and the kind of average grades he received for such a minimum expenditure of effort. His stories implied that if he had in fact put in the work, he too would be receiving high grades but he was not academically motivated to do so. This pattern is an example of the complex relationship between grades, motivation, and students' actions and behaviours.

Confirmation of Academic Plans

I did not hear the same kind of angst from students in the arts cluster that I heard from the science students about future plans or changes in academic majors. The science students I talked with had a more focussed level of vocational identity and a clearer sense of career direction compared to the arts students. Although they too had expressed fear and uncertainty about their future plans and were concerned initially about making decisions about what to major in, arts students were not bound by the same kind of time constraints as the science students related to applying to a professional school after their first year. By the Winter time, most of the students were settled on a particular major with some uncertainty over minors and the impact that it would have on their ability to complete their degree on time. They were more adept with living with uncertainty, at least at this time of their undergraduate career. Attending graduate school was identified by a few of them but these plans were often vague. Kim still saw herself in the future teaching and doing research at a university. Meredith mentioned that due to financial reasons she was thinking of taking a year off prior to graduate school to make some money. What was noticeably absent was any sense of pressure felt by these students to make immediate decisions on their academic and career plans. Only Jamie talked about possibly changing his major and yet he did not seem to be worried or unsettled by the uncertainty he was experiencing:

I'm in an in between stage. I'm not sure. I've been considering for awhile changing my major from Drama to Philosophy because I've been really enjoying Philosophy. I've been talking to my teacher, my Philosophy professor - I mean my Mom has always been telling me that if I major

in Drama and don't go anywhere with it, I can always be a lawyer so it has always been stuck in the back of my head and the past couple of months I've been thinking about it and so I'm keeping my options open by maybe majoring in Philosophy and then minoring in Drama. I think that's what I probably will do.

Grades were no longer brought up as a confirmation of choice of major nor were they used to justify a career option. If anything, the fact that most students were doing better in their Winter set of midterms seemed to provide a confirmation that they were on the right track and a sense that over time they would be bringing their averages up as they went along. The drive or urgency for high grades was less evident within the overall ethos and culture of their cluster. High academic achievement was not a shared value by all members. Consequently there were conflicts between those who pursued such a goal and those who did not, resulting in a clash over values that impacted on cluster dynamics.

Professors: The Need to Develop "Worthiness"

I continued to inquire from students information about the extent of faculty contact they had and to observe how they talked about their instructors. I had been initially surprised at their avoidance of such contact in the Fall but after listening to their stories, I had come to understand that such interactions from their perspective served no useful purpose. In fact, contact with their course instructors had the potential to place them in situations where they would be judged; have to admit ignorance; or be berated for not understanding something. Consequently, students did not consider faculty interactions to be safe especially when peer support was more readily available. I wanted to know if their reluctance to engage in contact with their instructors had lessened in the Winter. I had assumed that once they became more comfortable and had developed more

confidence, they would be more willing to take such a risk and interact more readily with faculty.

Their stories did not support my assumptions, which left me puzzled as to why they would continue to deny themselves opportunities to engage in such encounters. The general pattern that continued in the Winter was still one of limited contacts. Those that did take place, had centred on issues of grading, clarification on writing assignments, or in making rearrangements in taking an exam. Professors continued to be “the pronouns without antecedents,” nameless entities still referred to as ‘he’ or ‘she.’ There were some exceptions to this trend, particularly related to class size, which either encouraged or discouraged a face-to-face encounter. Jamie, an arts student who was extremely reluctant to make contact with his course instructors in the Fall, expressed a change in attitude in the Winter:

My classes are smaller and they actually know your name and you know they know you. So you feel a lot more comfortable approaching them. Some of my teachers like to be called by their first name and stuff like that. I think that's great.

For Ginny, in the sciences, being nameless in a large class continued to limit her involvement with her instructors. When I asked her whether she was missing out on interacting with them, she responded:

I don't think so. I don't need it, not yet. My Spanish class is small, about 30 people that go every day and I think if I needed help I would go and see her because she knows my name. She knows where I sit in the class so I have an identity to her but I don't think I'd ever go and see my Chemistry professor.

Having a professor know your name, though, was not necessarily thought of as an advantage by all. Sometimes having your name known brought disadvantages, as recounted in an episode experienced by Carol:

I've talked with a couple of them. My Geography professor I had last semester so I felt comfortable talking to him. My Chemistry prof, he just one day happened to be walking to his lecture at the same time as me and I was talking to him while walking to class and he is also the kind of prof that if you ever go to him for a question he will ask your name and he will talk to you in class and might use your name in class. He will never forget your name, so there's a lot of people in class who sit in the front row and he will always ask them, "So is that okay with you, Mel?" He knows their name and he will recognize you forever.

When I inquired as to whether this was something desirable for her, she offered this response:

It's kind of weird because I didn't have him last semester and I didn't notice that he did that but me and my friends are like--if I ever go to him for a questions, I'm never telling him my name 'cause I don't want him to ask me a question in lecture. Just because in the middle of a lecture you're kind of on the spot and you kind of want to do it on your own terms.

In asking whether she missed not having the kind of contact that could come with a smaller classes, Carol added:

At this point it doesn't matter that much to me 'cause I know that I can go talk to them if I want to. Most of them are approachable enough so that if I chose to, they would be there, but at this point I chose not to. So when I get up further in my later years and I do have smaller classes that will be more important because that's when I'm learning the stuff that is more directly related to what I want to do.

This idea of having a choice in making or not making contact was reiterated by students in both of the clusters. They would make contact if they needed to but saw no reason at this time in their academic career. That they chose not to may be related more to not wanting to bother their instructors or not wanting to waste their time. This reluctance may also be part of the student culture that saw such contact an admission of lack of effort as explained by Mike:

It's good that it's there so if you really have problems then you can go see them but I've always thought that the problems that I have are my own. If I take the time, I understand it but if I don't then I don't and I'm not going to go and ask him a questions when I know I can understand it and he's going to ask, "Did you do the readings? If you don't do the readings, then you don't deserve to go ask your question." [T]hat's how I see it but it's nice that they are there.

Kate also spoke to the fact that she and others were glad that the option of talking to your professor was available but she, like her cohorts, saw no need for that now. She added an insight that does shed some further light on this issue regarding the nature of such contact. In high school, with smaller classes and teacher supported co-curricular activities, there were more informal opportunities for students and teachers to meet outside of class. Students were able to develop a more personal relationship with them, unlike their professors whom they saw only two to three times for an hour a week. Faculty interactions were not undertaken to establish a personal relationship but to gather information or seek their permission which course instructors alone could only grant.

From Kate's perspective, there was a major difference in the quality of relationships between high school teachers and university instructors:

I was very close with my teachers in high school but it wasn't discussing the course itself, it was more of a social thing but here, I don't think I'm missing out on anything. If I needed to I think I could approach them. They are all fairly nice but I don't need to. There's nothing that important that I have to go directly to them and waste their time.

Students still talked about being afraid and intimidated in talking with their instructors after class. Jean echoed a theme that was prominent in the Fall regarding the impersonal nature of her large science classes and how negative interactions would get spread throughout the cluster. In answer to my question about whether she interacted with any faculty, she said:

Not really at this point just because classes are so big and they don't know you from the next person more or less. The classes are still large and impersonal. I know with last Fall, we had certain profs who were unapproachable and that people had a very negative response when they did go for help and I think that can be very discouraging too, so without knowing the kind of response you're going to get when you approach a prof, I'm a bit apprehensive.

When I asked if she would make contact if in smaller classes, she was still uncertain. "I don't know, not having been in that situation. It's kind of hard to say."

Ben had actually decreased his faculty contacts in the Winter semester. When I sought out why, he reaffirmed the unstated rules as to why one would make contact in the

first place:

It depends on the person. For me, I only go to the prof if I have a problem with content or I approach the TA. I think I approached the profs a lot more in the first semester than I do now, just because a lot of the stuff before was technicalities, stuff that I wasn't familiar with, not necessarily course content but procedures with papers. I'd ask about an assignment or what did I need to do or what are you looking for. I think it's just getting comfortable with and knowing that I was somewhat on the right track by asking profs in first semester to reinforce that. I don't need that now. It just doesn't come up as much. There's no need for that now.

Despite students increased sense of comfort and confidence after having completed the Fall semester, they still saw themselves as novices in their discipline. To be able to engage in discussion with a professor in your area of study required more specialized knowledge than what they were receiving in their introductory courses. As second semester students, they had not proven their worthiness within the context of their discipline of study. This was a very different kind of proving ground than the issue of whether they should be at university. Students in both of the clusters described their first-year courses as very general and not specialized and hence having done well in them did not necessarily confer upon them legitimacy within a specialized program of study. Such specialization would come in later years, at a time when they assumed their courses would be smaller. Only then would it be safe and would they have earned permission to engage in any kind of mentoring role with their instructor. For now, students limited themselves to their grades as a substitute of their teacher's praise and encouragement.

Students' Academic Talk: Winning Grades at the Expense of Learning

When students talked about their academic struggles and challenges in the Fall semester, they often made reference to their high school learning experiences. By Winter, they tended to no longer mention high school and instead referenced their Fall semester. The experience of having completed a semester at university diminished the importance attached to whatever connections or linkages that remained to their pre-university lives. Students' learning talk was still academic in nature and learning was seen as primarily increasing knowledge and acquiring facts. There was still an emphasis on the mechanics of learning and students continued to place their attention on fine tuning their learning approaches to match instructor expectations. They had become more adept at figuring out their instructors' hidden idiosyncrasies, searching for clues in their attempts to predict with some degree of certainty what would be on the exam.

It was what I didn't hear that bothered me and left me unsettled after meeting with them. Students in both of the clusters seemed to express no joy in their learning, nor did I hear any real excitement or enthusiasm about what was happening in their classes. Their efforts seemed to be focussed on winning grades as opposed to learning, transforming their efforts into teacher-pleasing for an appropriate payback of good grades. I expected to hear some degree of passion or enthusiasm and even would have welcomed criticism but their voices were silent. Even the frustration that was so evident in the Fall about their workload was absent. It was as if they had internalized the pressures and challenges in responding to their incessant work demands by no longer complaining or maybe by no longer caring. Maybe the novelty had worn off and they were now tired or bored by their

classes but despite not hearing excitement in their voices about learning, I did hear words of responsibility.

There was an increased awareness of the self-discipline required and that they were the ones responsible for their own learning. By Winter, most students in the two clusters described themselves as more disciplined to get their work done. Meredith was studying more this Winter than the Fall and said this was because “I’m better able to just shut the door and work now. Kim likewise commented on her renewed commitment to academics this Winter stating, “I view it more now as my responsibility, one of the most important responsibilities of my life right now.” Others talked about being more motivated than when they entered university; they also said they had developed a better understanding of what they needed to do to achieve their goals. Mike, on the other hand, despite doing better on his midterms this semester, found it much more challenging to stay focussed given the close bonds of friendship in the cluster that he had established from the Fall:

It takes time to sit down and if your friends are out having fun, am I’m going to stay in my room and read? Every once in awhile, I will go and disappear for a few days and do readings and keep to myself and then I’ll go and do whatever for awhile.

Hard work, effort and self-discipline continued to be values shared by students in the cluster who defined themselves as serious about their academics. Mike’s attitude and that of his friends, was in violation of this ethos and it was this clash in values that led to major tension within the arts cluster.

Strategic Learning: "It Depends"

I again observed a continued degree of congruence in terms of how students perceived their learning, how they approached their studying and how they interpreted their learning environment. There was a general recognition of the need for different learning approaches for different courses, even those within the same discipline. Kate, a science student taking Zoology, described how this course required learning strategies different from what she had been using for her other science courses:

For Zoology, I think I spent most, a lot more time on Zoology because it was actual readings. There were concepts and stuff. It wasn't so much practice and applications or calculations. You actually had to read. I had notes and words and things as opposed to numbers 'cause in numbers you can just follow it through and get the answer and it's simple. It's understandable but with concepts you have the terminology and you have to know how these things flow and how they proceed. It's harder to picture it in a nice, clear, precise way as opposed to numbers that have steps and that you do this or do that but something verbal is more 'iffy' and maybe mysterious in that kind of way.

Joan, who planned to switch from the sciences to Economics or Business also had developed the ability to differentiate strategies and approaches for different courses:

It depends on the course and the demands of the course. It depends how much background information you have on the course too. In Economics, you have to focus on cause and effect, if you have one thing happen how does that affect something else? It is technical but it's a different type, you're just not dealing with numbers. It's the same type of problem solving but not the numbers. It requires good reasoning skills.

Memory work was still found by most students to be a major requirement for learning in their courses. Katherine even went as far as to say that a good memory was the most important skill to have in a science program. Laura, on the other hand, continued her disdain for memorizing. In the Fall, she had told me, "I don't like memorizing. I like knowing the basic concepts and then I don't have to memorize as much because things make sense after that and I can try to figure it out." When I asked Laura how she went about learning in her courses in the Winter, she replied, "It's just focussing on process and I realized that after talking to you that's really what I do. I don't like to memorize." When I inquired as to what she did in those courses that had a lot of detail, she added:

I try to section them into related groups and study one section and try to study it well and see how things go with each other if they can and then go on to a different part. If I can't, then I have to memorize. There's no way around it.

Although Katherine and Laura were in the sciences, memorizing was not restricted to that discipline, as Mike in the arts attested:

The courses I'm taking are the easiest if you can memorize. If you can memorize things, great! You'll do great here but when you go off to work you don't have all the information that you just memorized. You don't know it. I don't learn that way. I need to know how things work. I don't think it's good memorizing because if I asked you in a month what that was, you are not going to know what it was but if I can understand what it was, I'll know what it was and I will know what I'm doing. If you have a photographic memory or take the time to memorize again. There was a girl in my old high school, she had the highest average in her grade every year like 94, 95, yet she was literally stupid. She was in a class and asked her teacher if $m = \text{three}$ was the same thing as $\text{three} = m$?. But because she could memorize everything she was able to get 90's in all of her classes

without understanding what she was doing so you could appear to be smart when you are really not.

Not only did Mike see the limitations of memorizing, he also highlighted the kind of judging that takes place when one asks questions or admits ignorance in a public setting.

I was interested in understanding how students varied their approaches to their studying depending on the format of assessment. Multiple choice exams, so vilified in the Fall, did not come under any kind of criticism this time around and students seemed to have developed their own coping strategies for studying for them. Most of the science students still had not written any essay exams so when I asked them if they had needed to modify their studying for that type of exam, they answered in terms of what they would have done, if presented with such a testing format. Joan was in this category:

Most of my exams have been multiple choice or combination multiple choice and short answers. For an essay exam I think you would need to study in more detail because you might have to explain something but if it's right there, if you understand it and know it, then you can just see it and circle it. You don't have to express it in words or do your own analysis. I do well on multiple choice exams.

Katherine who had taken a course with essay questions in her science program, identified two separate approaches that she practised. These were the "make it up as you go along" strategy for essay exams and for multiple choice exams, "The guess the right answer" approach:

If it was a lot of essay questions, I'd get the general idea of everything - that way you can make it up as you go along and for multiple choice it is pretty easy to read and have a general knowledge and then you can usually guess the right answer.

Arts students tended to have more exposure to both essay and multiple choice tests. Ben, who was taking Zoology, his first science course, discovered that he needed to develop a completely different strategy in studying for exams with short answer questions:

For our Zoology class, it's short answer so you need to know the material a lot more thoroughly so you can regurgitate it. It's not so much understanding it because a lot of it is information and you understand it to an extent but you need to remember all the stuff and identify the terms and stuff whereas if you were writing a multiple choice exam you just need to know it so you can recognize it when you see it. It's much different so for Zoology, I put a lot more time in than I do for a midterm that has multiple choice.

Mike also spoke to ways the students make distinctions in terms of how they study and their method of assessment:

It depends on the class. If it's like my Principles of Psychology kind of thing, it's like, here's the brain and you have to know all the brain parts and what they did so you focus your attention on the brain parts and then if there is another question on the one brain part you can kind of put two and two together. If you know what it does then a lot of questions are applied knowledge so if you know what it does you study more definitions but if it's more of an essay, you need more concepts so you can talk about more stuff and if you are doing essays, it's always good to have references you can use--that's what I did in my Sociology exam. In the two essays, I referred to previous works from other sociologists and different studies that were done so you have to know about different studies and the people that did them.

When I asked him if that meant he preferred essay exams over multiple choice tests, he replied, "Yeah, 'cause I just write everything that I know about it and eventually I should get some points for something. With multiple choice you are either right or wrong."

The Efficiency Principle Perfected

Wasted time, effort and energy were still deplored and students talked about searching for those methods that would give them the biggest 'payback' in terms of good grades for their efforts. Students in both clusters lamented the amount of time they had wasted in the Fall studying material or information that they had not need to know. Ben provided insight on this particular topic:

Before I was doing a lot of extra work. I was wasting so much time before and I was studying everything and everything. I was doing a lot of extra work because there were tons of reading to do. I was highlighting while I was reading and going back and writing it all down and it was too much. I retained it still even if I read it and made a few notes as I went along. There are certain parts in each chapter that are just not important to read, I find. For me I have learned what to read and what not to read. I needed to know maybe a quarter of the stuff on the exam because it was just too much to fit in. You have to filter because there isn't enough time in the day to do everything.

Not only did students continue to deplore wasted time from their own inefficient actions, they likewise showed little tolerance for instructors with whom they felt contributed to such inefficiencies. Meredith described two instances where she felt her learning had been impacted by the misguided and irrelevant use of time by her course instructor:

The other day we watched a video in class and it was a two hour video and the class is 50 min. so to watch the whole thing she put it on fast forward and fast forwarded the whole video and told us what is exactly happening. So she would say, if you were watching this right now you'd see this and that and I'm like, what? We're fast forwarding through a video with no clue and it looked like a really

interesting video. It's something I'd like to watch. She also thought it would be really interesting to show us something related to Marx when she introduced us to Marx so she showed a slide presentation of paintings and played music from that period and number one, she couldn't figure out how to do anything and then she showed us this presentation and it was--great, fantastic (spoken sarcastically). This isn't Art History, this isn't Music History, we're basically wasting time 'cause we're not learning anything about him.

I was fascinated by the paradox in Meredith's tale and tried to picture in my mind, how I would have reacted to seeing a video that was set on fast forward in an attempt to accommodate a two hour tape into a 50 minute class. In this first instance Meredith had wished for more time yet in the second half of her story, additional material used to supplement or create a period context was dismissed as being wasteful or immaterial to her learning. She displayed no tolerance for anything that she deemed irrelevant to achieving her goals.

A different kind of variation to the "sin of wastefulness" theme that emerged was related to the problem of overstudying. According to Mike:

For statistics, there's another guy and we do the reading the night before and maybe a little the morning of and I got 70 in the first one and 90 -something on the second one and he got like 80 something on the first one and 100 on the second one and then there's another girl who does all the numbers for homework. She reads all of the chapters ahead of time, and she does all of the numbers again and she isn't doing as well as us. We're sitting there and going, well that's because you're over studying!

Within the arts cluster, I heard repeated mention of the idea that doing well by working hard counted less than doing well because you were smart. Mike and his friend operated under a prestige system whereby the less effort they put into a course while still achieving a good grade, the smarter they would appear to their peers. This approach to learning is something I have seen on a regular basis in the Winter, what I refer to as the “do what is required but no more, when it is required but no sooner” syndrome. This example also illustrates the difficulties some students had in recognizing that not all material was of equal value and that some information was more important than others. In the following exchange I had with Jean, she talked about her inability to make such distinctions:

Nancy:

How do you know how to approach studying for a particular course?

Jean:

Honestly I think I'm having a problem with that. I worked really hard for my midterms this semester. I knew a little bit more of what to expect and a little bit more of how much time you have and how much work is going to be on them and so on. I spent the whole reading week working and preparing and then the whole week I got back and I put a lot of work in and going in I felt pretty prepared for it and writing it I didn't feel that it went too badly but then like I said my marks weren't near where I expected them to be or even where I wanted them to be.

Nancy:

It sounds like you are still trying to find a better match between how you are preparing and what the exam is asking.

Jean:

When I was over at my boyfriend's [place] last night he said that maybe it was the fact that you are studying a lot and knowing a lot but it's maybe not

what you need to know to do well on them. Maybe that's what the problem is. He said he worked really hard first year but didn't do very well and it was just the fact that he was having a hard time distinguishing between what to concentrate on and what not to concentrate on. So it's a hard thing to figure out.

Within the context of cluster, some students were more novice than others. Jean's limited knowledge structure in Chemistry limited her to approach studying as mastery of facts. This was in contrast to Laura, who explained that in Chemistry, "I think as I keep going along I can see patterns easier and concepts come easier" Jean's inability to differentiate the important from the non-important was in stark contrast to Kerry's cue-seeking awareness skills:

A lot of the profs are really good about saying--make sure you know this, this is a very important point so as I'm taking notes, I put little stars beside them whenever the prof says that just to note - this will probably be on the exam. Make sure I know this really well. I've noticed that a lot of the stuff that is really important--they tend to repeat it several times over a week and so repetition is a clue. They mention things that they want you to know several times to make sure that they are dropping that subtle hint so you should know what I'm talking about now.

Part of the rationale for seeking out clues was to be able to predict with some degree of certainty what would be on the test. By Winter, students, like Meredith, had discovered that personal interest alone was not necessarily an accurate indicator about what she needed to know for the exam:

When I took notes before I'd write down just thoughts about things that I thought were interesting. I'd write down stuff that--no way would that ever be on the test and now

I've gotten better at--okay, this little intro blurb is really not important, it just talks, but when it comes to the next paragraph where it is describing what this process is--that's important.

Students also talked about becoming more efficient with their time by making use of resources or supports provided by the course instructor. Many of these would have been available to them in the Fall but only now did some students recognize how helpful they could be in improving their grades. Meredith readily admitted to having become more resourceful this semester:

I'm taking advantage of the extra things that profs do to help like with modules and learning from those and practice tests and doing extra readings. I don't know why I didn't do that in the past. It makes sense that if the prof is going to give you copies of sample of exams, why not do it 'cause that will be like what will be on the exam.

Not only did students access supports from their course instructors but they also continued to use peer contacts for gathering information about their classes. According to Katherine:

For Botany, the prof gives perfect notes so you only have to study from the notes. I read the textbook for every course and then talk to people who have taken the course the year before or the semester before and get little hints from them. It's easy to find that kind of information especially from our cluster leader--even studying for midterms, he will give us practice midterms.

Thus a dominant theme that emerged from my Winter interviews was the importance of working 'smarter' but not necessarily harder and using your time wisely for the best return of investment. Students who were strategic in their approaches to

learning, whether this meant looking for cues from their instructors or fellow students or in using additional resources to fine-tune their learning strategies demonstrated a kind of heuristic knowledge that cue-deaf or cue-resistant students did not seem to possess. This heuristic knowledge was locally defined, and was passed from one student to another or from instructor to students. It was knowledge gained from experience, outside of the formal curriculum. Related to this kind of heuristic knowledge was the notion of the “hidden curriculum” which Apple (1979, p. 14) defined as:

The tacit teaching to students of norms, values, and dispositions that goes on simply by their living, coping with the institutional expectations and routines of school day in and day out for a number of years.

Despite a learning environment rich with cues, some students were oblivious to the evidence available to them as to what should be learned and what really counted in assessment. Other students were able to develop heuristic hunches, minimizing waste and focussing on those activities that would bring the highest payback for their efforts. Kate worked from this principle:

I don't think that I work that hard because some people do work hard to get their marks, like some people spend all of their time in the library. I use my time appropriately. I know what to skip over. I know what to glance over, that kind of thing so I know what to look at, and what to study whereas other people are all over the place. I pick up cues. The profs will say okay make sure you know how to do this or there's an example of this in the study guide - you can tell that there's the harder problems that nobody can get - there's the middle ones that are complicated and you definitely have to invest some time thinking about the problems 'cause that's the one that will be on the test.

You have to have a good idea of the concepts and you have to understand what you are doing but it's not overly hard so I focus on those. The really easy ones they're not going to ask but if you can do the harder ones then you know how to do the easy ones anyway so there's no point in going over them again. You need to focus on the ones that are harder.

Students adopted learning strategies in part based on their understanding of what they were to do as learners, of what they thought their instructors wanted them to do, and on the level of knowledge they brought to each of their courses. Those students who had the academic knowledge, the heuristic knowledge, and the ability to understand the hidden curriculum tended to be best served in the 12 week semestered system. Within this kind of environment, efficiency became paramount for academic survival.

Going To Class: "Now You Make the Choice"

I learned from their second interviews that by the middle of the Fall semester, going to class was no longer a defining component of students' academic experience. This pattern continued into the Winter as students realized that there were few penalties for not going, in particular if there were other ways to attain the information presented in class. Whether to attend or not to attend classes still underwent the time efficiency analysis as Mike, in the arts demonstrated:

I haven't been to my Sociology class in the last couple of weeks and that's my three hour class for the simple fact that I can take the notes from someone else and I can watch the movie at the library and I just save myself three hours of boring lectures. He's really not--like I don't like going to class. I tell myself if you are going to go to class and Fall

asleep there's no point in going and I have to struggle to stay awake in the class 'cause he's so boring. He doesn't speak well at all and he will take 50 minutes to explain something that he could have just said--well this is this and he'd be done but he takes a whole 50 minutes to do it.

Although Meredith did not identify Mike by name, she was especially upset at members in her cluster who no longer went to class. "I can't stand people who don't go to class and who sleep in late and then complain when they get their mark. Is it any wonder?" When I asked her why she went, she answered:

Because I pay for it--that's sometimes always my common response. I pay for my education so I'm not going to throw it away. I think it comes out to \$30 per class so I wouldn't just throw away \$30 bucks so I'm going to go to class. If I didn't go to class, even in my marketing class even though I don't learn anything and basically they give us just the outline of what the text chapter is all about. I keep on going even though I'm not learning anything because maybe today we'll learn something, maybe today will be the day and it never happens but I stick it in my head.

Joan, in the sciences, also made choices about going to her Physics class, designed to be optional in attendance but she used a different set of criteria in making her decision:

It depends on how well you think you are prepared. If you know the information already then you don't need to go to class. In Physics last semester I went four times and ended up with a 95 so my not being there didn't affect my grade so I didn't feel that I needed to go. I know that a lot of people go all of the time whether they are having problems or not. This semester for Physics I've only gone once so far but it's a course that I don't feel that I need to go to. It also depends if you have friends that can take notes for you. I have so many resources to go to if I don't go to class but for Economics, I don't know any one in that class so I have to go.

In their first interviews, students talked about how easy it was to go to classes when others were going and the social pressure they felt if they did not attend. This pattern seemed to wane over the course of the Fall semester so I was interested to hear how this was played out in the Winter. Carol, in the science cluster commented:

We don't get people up to go to class anymore, Now you make the choice not to go to class and that's your choice. Oh, you're not going to classes? That's fine. At the beginning everyone went to all of the classes and now it just doesn't happen.

When I asked how those decisions about going to class were made, she responded:

You have to prioritize whether or not that lecture is absolutely necessary to your learning. Most people don't just chose--well, I don't feel like going today. There's usually a reason behind for not going.

The breakdown of cluster students into smaller friendship cohorts had more of an impact on whether a student went to class or not, depending on whether their friends were going. This was confirmed by Laura who stated, "There are still some of us who go in groups for certain classes. It's more of a friendship thing. We're used to doing it so if we know if someone else is going to class, then we wait for them." When I asked Jamie what kind of impact the cluster had on his attending class, he provided a different kind of insight:

It kind of helps you to actually go to class if other people are going then you go with them whereas if you are in a class just by yourself I don't think I would be as inclined to go.

But when I then asked if the opposite could also happen, he replied:

Oh, that has happened a couple of times. For some classes, one person will be like, "I'm not going to go," and then someone else will say, "Yeah, I'm not going to go," and then everyone decides not to go and sit down and watches tv or something.

He then shared with me how he made decisions as to whether one goes to class or not:

If it's a lecture generally there aren't any consequences for not going provided that you can get the notes. I don't think I've missed many lectures. The seminars are different or if it is a smaller lecture group it's different because there the teacher notices your absence. You take a bit more caution because you are a bit more accountable. If the information is in the text then you don't have to go. Some profs pretty much read it out of the book, it's as if they are just collecting their check and that's why they are teaching you. It doesn't matter whether you go. If you have the book, you just read it and you will know exactly what he is going to say.

For one particular subgroup of friends in the science cluster, going to class was deemed an essential part of their learning. Ginny, in talking about going to her optional Physics class declared:

Not that many people go to Physics. All of us in the group go. There is a rotation kind of thing that Mike [the peer] has set up where you can sign up to go once a month and take notes and you can photocopy the person's notes who went but I don't want to get into that kind of lazy thing and we don't think it's right. We don't think it's fair that one person goes and gets notes. If that happens once in awhile that's fine but it's not fair for one person to get to sleep in all of the time. It's at 8:30 in the morning.

According to Ginny and her friends, responsibility, a strong work ethic, and fairness were the values strongly ascribed to within her subgroup and going to class was not an option for them. It was no longer the power of the cluster in general but that of a student's peer subgroup within the cluster that now impacted and influenced their academic behaviour.

Being Intellectually Challenged: "Maybe Later"

Getting students to converse about their classes, describe their learning, and talk about academic matters did not happen without some prodding on my part. What did generate more interest were our discussions on whether they found their courses intellectually challenging or stimulating. I wanted to hear how they would describe their courses within the context of their undergraduate program and whether there were differences across the disciplines in such talk. They revealed much about what they thought about university learning and I came to a different understanding of first year as a result.

I was aware from our Fall meetings, how students had described their courses as challenging in terms of workload but not in terms of conceptual complexity. I wasn't too surprised at those findings given the nature of their courses in first semester. I did anticipate that such talk would change by Winter time when they would take sequenced or 200-level courses requiring more complex thinking skills. Students continued to define for themselves what "challenging" meant and used multiple definitions for the term. In the arts cluster, Kim expressed disappointment in the general nature of her courses which

she equated with a lack of challenge:

I don't find them intellectually challenging, I'm not feeling stretched intellectually. I'm disappointed. As you go on they will get more specific but now they are fairly general.

Ben, on the other hand, did define his courses as challenging but not in terms of degree of difficulty or complexity:

I'd say that a majority of my courses are [challenging].. I wouldn't say it's the complexity since I don't find them that overly difficult. It's probably the amount since when you are ingesting so much information you have to remember it and that's probably the biggest challenge. As far as the difficulty, it's not that difficult to comprehend it.

Carol, in the sciences, confirmed Ben's definition of the term:

What for me would make it challenging would be when I get into research and doing research kind of stuff which I don't think is until third year. What's most challenging for first year courses is the amount of information because at the time you think, when am I ever going to use this but you know that these courses now are meant - you have to take them because you are going to build on them later.

Jean was the only one to talk about challenge within the context of ability, individual strengths, and effort:

I guess it depends on how strong you are like in Math and the sciences and stuff like that. They tend to give me quite a few problems so I have that much work to do in it but it makes it that much harder when you don't understand it and have to put that much more time into it to try to get it so there's that aspect of it. I took Philosophy of Medicine this term so that's not necessarily hard. It's challenging in terms of the ideas.

Courses that were new to students in terms of content tended to be labelled challenging as opposed to those which students had taken in high school. From Katherine's perspective:

I've never taken a plant course before so there's all of these new terms but they all relate to biology in a way. Psychology is just common sense to me. Chemistry is--I took almost the exact same stuff in high school and I took it in my last year of high school so it's still fresh. Most courses are just building on the knowledge that you have. It's nothing drastically new.

Kate offered a similar perspective:

I'm really enjoying Microbiology right now because it's pretty much all new for me. It's interesting. Definitely interesting. Challenging--well it's not really hard stuff, the concepts are not difficult. It's just not boring.

In rereading the interview data, I searched for any kind of talk that would indicate whether students found a course, or material in a course intellectually challenging. There was one incident that Ginny described that spoke to what seemed to be missing in their academic talk, the idea of "being made to think." I had noted in the second interviews how a group of science students had approached an instructor after class with a question that they had felt too embarrassed to ask in class and yet were too intimidated to tackle alone. It was the same professor from the Fall semester who Ginny identified in our third meeting as someone who continued to challenge them, despite the fact that they no longer took a course with him in the Winter:

I think it was all professor actually. If I look back through the work that we did it wasn't that difficult but just the questions that he raised in lecture and it was always things to think about. We still email him and he calls us the six

intimidating women. He figured out that our average was 85 percent and so we email him with questions like why do we have pets? the kind of questions that he asks us in lectures that you really don't know the answer to. He takes a while and emails us back.

This was the only incident that I heard that spoke to any kind of intellectual discourse that went beyond the sharing of facts and information. Maybe that happened within their smaller subgroups of friends, at night, in safer environments. It was not shared with me and that may be due more to the nature and limit of the contact I had with them. Still, I was left disheartened by the consequences of a pedagogy designed for large numbers of students and the lack of opportunities for students to become more intellectually challenged or engaged in their courses.

In trying to make sense of their stories, I am mindful of the fact that there exists on many campuses a "conspiracy of lowered expectations" that both faculty and students are engaged in. This is a 'conspiracy' in which neither group dares to ask enough of one another for to do so would require more work and a commitment of more time from both groups. Faculty and students have too much to benefit from their current arrangement because it allows them to stay more engaged in other kinds of activities which they both find more personally rewarding. For students in first year, making friends and establishing social memberships are of primary importance and hence take precedence over their academics.

Learning With Others: A Matter of Convenience

From students' interviews in the Fall, I was able to identify a number of benefits that occurred when students who were living together, also studied together. These included: reinforcement of understanding and skills; deeper learning that came from opportunities to teach or explain something to someone else; the willingness to take risks and make mistakes in their learning; and the generation of new ideas and applications. These collaborative learning activities spoke to the power of the cluster as a natural inducement for helping students to become more actively engaged in their learning. By Winter time, students in both clusters still spoke about the advantages that came from living with students taking the same courses together. They continued to describe the cluster as practical, efficient, and functional for getting immediate help or support related to their courses. These findings build on the theme of friendship learning that I identified in their second interviews but now their friends were no longer the cluster in general but subgroups in particular. But there was also other differences this time around. Their stories provided me with fewer examples of how they supported one another in their learning or how they studied together. To make sense of these differences, I will examine their learning talk from the perspective of each cluster.

Collaborative Learning in the Sciences

Science students continued to talk about doing labs together, seeking out help if someone had a particular problem or sharing homework problems. When I asked Carol how she used other students within the cluster for support she answered:

It's still there for Chemistry labs and getting stuff done like that. It's still there for everyone who is studying at the same time and everyone who needs clarification on something or anything like that.

For students working under the efficiency principle, the cluster provided immediate support when they needed it. Living in a cluster also increased the likelihood for sharing information on courses that others had already taken. Kerry identified this as an added benefit:

It's still handy having people around because if they are not taking it this semester, a lot of them took the course last semester so you can--well, what did you think of this midterm? How did you do this assignment? So it's still handy to have people around that you can talk to.

The difference in the Winter was that students tended to access support within their smaller friendship groups although it was still considered appropriate to approach anyone on the floor for help. As Kate stated:

I think there's smaller group involvement now but you could always approach anyone else. It's just that you're more comfortable with your own group so you go to them but if you want to share something with other people, you can.

This change in group affiliation from the larger cluster cohort to smaller friendship groups will be examined in more detail in the next section on cluster living but it is important to note here that change in cluster dynamics. Students no longer felt the need to be part of the larger cluster and instead wanted to be with those who shared their goals, values and beliefs.

Another more subtle difference in students' third round stories was how few students identified the cluster as a necessary component for doing well in their courses. While some of the science students were now taking more risks with how they were spending their time, so too were some taking more risks in becoming more autonomous and self-directed in their learning. They didn't need the support of their cluster friends to sit in class together. The presence of other cluster members was no longer required. If there was any kind of a dependency, it was related not to the cluster as a whole but to the smaller friendship group. It was in these small groups that students continued to help one another, encourage one another and provide more intimate, personal support. Ginny was the most vocal in identifying the support of her small group of friends in helping her to do as well as she had done:

I think I need other people to help me. If I didn't have Kerry next door, I mean even with a study guide, we wrote a Physics quiz this morning, just when you come across a little snag in the study guide that are really simple problems but you are missing something and you can say - what am I missing and it's usually something really small that I didn't notice and as soon as she points it out then I get over the bumps.

The science students were not a monolithic entity and their stories presented different perspectives on their experiences over the course of the two semesters. Laura's story that emerged over our three meetings pointed to a particular change in her understanding achieved through helping others within the cluster. Laura, who said she had joined the cluster for the social aspects instead of the academic support, had been reluctant in the Fall to seek out the support of others in the cluster. In her first interview,

in describing how she learns, she stated, "I learn independently. I like to learn by myself."

In our second meeting, she told me that she took it as a personal challenge to try to work out problems on her own.

If I can't get a question I won't ask someone right away. I'll try and figure it out myself. I keep trying and if I find that I'm getting somewhere I keep going at it but if I'm totally lost, then I ask someone.

By the Winter when we met for the third time, I heard a change in attitude on accessing others for support:

I ask people a lot more for help now than I use to. Just with everyone there and we're all living together, if I have a problem I'll work on it for awhile but then go ask for help. Before I would focus on it more and for longer time. It saves time now. I don't mind helping other people so I figured they probably wouldn't mind helping me.

Laura had not conceded her desire for individual challenge but it was now tempered by the efficiency principle. As well she had rationalized that it was okay to seek out help since she herself had helped others.

The science students, through their words and actions, saw the cluster as an 'insurance policy,' a handy resource to use if needed. Students told me they no longer needed the cluster and from this talk I initially inferred that they no longer needed the support of others to do well. But on closer examination, they were caught in up in two different worlds, the competitive culture of the classroom and the collaborative opportunities that came from living within the cluster.

Collaborative Learning in the Arts

There was much less talk about collaborative learning activities from students in the arts cluster. Because they took fewer courses together, there was less of a common schedule which in turn led to fewer opportunities to come together and study. Given the variation in their courses, they were usually able to tap the experiences of members who had taken a particular course the previous semester to seek out information on course demands, instructor preferences, and exams.

Jamie identified a few positive spin-offs that still came from taking courses together. "We could do projects together 'cause that was easier because we could just meet there. If there was a test we would gather around the table and study for it or help each other out." Mike reiterated the benefits that came from living with others in the same program. "If you do have questions, there are other people there who have taken the course or someone is in your class so you just walk out your door and there's someone there." Like their science student counterparts, members of the arts cluster continued to highlight the convenience and efficiency that came with living together and taking classes together. Most of their talk on learning with others though tended to be focussed on this kind of sharing of information, deemed vital in assigning one's time and effort, rather than on discussing subject matter within their courses.

They also identified as no longer important, the need for security that came from knowing others in their classes. This was certainly important at the beginning of the Fall semester, but by Winter time was not considered a necessity, as verified by Meredith:

Knowing all of those people were in the same program as me and in the same classes gave me a sense of security knowing that there were this group of people where I won't be alone in class 'cause that's a bid deal when you first come--"Oh, I don't want to be alone in all of my classes" so I don't think the benefits are as pronounced now because now it's okay, I don't want to be with these people 24 hours a day all of the time and you run out of things to say. I'm more on my own in a lot of my classes but I like that because I'm forced to talk to other people. It's not just, "Okay, I'm in my little cluster group" and no need to talk to anyone else because you've got each other.

It was what I didn't hear that caused me some concern. Except for the above comments from Jamie and Mike, I heard no mention of any kind of engagement between cluster members related to studying or learning nor was there any mention of dividing up their workload like they did in the Fall. Ben actually was spending more time at the library away from the cluster for his studying because he found there were fewer distractions there. With the little information that I have, I am limited as to how I can make sense of the data. There are three assumptions that I will explore for possible explanations. The first is that there were few if any collaborative learning opportunities occurring in the arts cluster and thus the reason why I did not hear students allude to any of them was the fact that they did not occur. Learning with others ceased to be a defining component in the arts cluster in the Winter.

The second possibility is that informal learning activities did occur with others but these were hidden from me or not made explicit to me. It was one thing to share with me activities that occurred within the context of general cluster living, but I was not provided information in any great detail as to their subgroup interactions. Their talk about their

more personal, intimate friendships and interactions required a more privileged point of access which I did not have.

A final reason for their lack of talk about collaborative learning activities outside of the classroom might be that there were none occurring inside their classes. Similar to the science students, they were part of an educational system based on individual competition that valued and rewarded individual achievement. Because there had been no change or modification of the curriculum to promote formal collaborative learning opportunities either inside or outside the class, what limited collaboration that did occur in the clusters came from the initiatives of the students themselves.

Cluster Life

What had it meant for students to have been part of a cluster? I had understood from listening to their talk in the Fall, that most, if not all, had found membership beneficial in creating immediate friendships and in navigating their university environment. Through their words and stories, the clusters emerged as a powerful vehicle in meeting their academic, emotional and social needs. They used terms like “family,” “closeness” and “comfort” to describe the sense of security that came from living together and taking classes together. But I was also worried by some of their other talk, in particular as it related to the more insular, inclusive nature of the cluster as possibly being too safe and too limiting. For some students, the appeal of the cluster was that it would surround them with other like-minded or similar goal-directed students. It was this fear of difference or diversity that I found troubling and was anxious to find out if this remained

a feature or byproduct of cluster participation.

According to Baxter Magolda, "Peer interaction is significant in students' lives by virtue of its placement in everyday experience" (1992, p. 380). It was through their everyday lives that I too wanted to examine cluster life, in particular as it impacted on students' studies. From their first interviews, I noted how the cluster provided students with a primary reference group through which they could relate to and interact in the larger institutional setting. Students cited the cluster a major catalyst in helping them to create immediate friendships and academic support networks. Building relationships and making friends from within the cluster continued to be major tasks for them based on their talk from the second interviews. What I had wanted to find out in these final meetings was whether the cluster continued to maintain such a presence in students' lives. How had their sense of identity or affiliation within the cluster and to other members changed over the course of the two semesters? To what extent had living in a cluster continued to assist them in their transition to university? In seeking answers to these questions, I found students very open to talking about the cluster, citing both positive and negative incidents to support their statements. At the beginning of these interviews, I reiterated to each of the students that I was not evaluating the cluster but instead wanted to gain an understanding of what it was like to be a participant inside of one. Thus my questions focussed on what was happening in the cluster, the kinds of customs, or unspoken rules that existed, and what living in a cluster had meant for them. The questions I posed were both descriptive as well as reflective in nature and gave students the opportunity to think back to the Fall about how it had felt to be a newcomer to

university. Many of them became quite animated in response to this question, either laughing or smiling as they remembered how fearful yet excited, novice yet confident they felt when they first entered as new students.

In providing insight into the cluster experience and its impact on student learning, I had initially considered exploring the cluster dynamics of each group separately starting with the science cluster. Since I had found the arts cluster dynamics so problematic, I thought such an approach would 'buy me more time.' I had hoped by examining the experience of the science students first, I would become more attuned to ways that the peer environment supported, sustained, distracted, and distorted students' sense of membership in the cluster. I abandoned that approach half way through my writing because I found it too difficult to separate their stories. Despite some of the differences between the clusters, there were more similarities in their stories and what emerged as different was the degree of variation within the patterns, not necessarily the themes themselves. Consequently I will weave narratives from both of the clusters in those instances where there is some degree of congruence in their stories but will also identify those concerns unique to each of the clusters. This approach will expose the reader to some degree of 'messiness', ambiguity, and even contradiction but such were their stories on life as they experienced it.

The Cluster as Locus of Support

The Science Cluster: "I'm Less Dependent On It."

There was a general consistency in response to my question about what was happening in the cluster from the science students. "Not a lot at all lately" or "Not much" were the typical answers. I was initially surprised at how limited a presence the cluster had in their lives but came to understand that students differentiated formal cluster activities from their day-to-day living experience. This was a marked change in how they perceived the role the cluster had in their lives in the Winter. Much of this difference can be related to their change in status as a second semester student as well as the result of living with the same group of students for an extended period of time in a student residence setting. Jean talked about this change:

When we first got here we didn't know what to expect and you hadn't made any friends, no one knew anybody so it was just a big group of us finding our own place. Now everyone is settled in. You've made your friends. You kind of know where you're at. You've developed who you're close to and who you get along with and those are the kind of people you stick with. A lot of times for events that have been planned, you only get certain people coming out and the other people stick with their friends. No one really goes out all together. You don't really do any events as a cluster.

This theme was further supported by Joan who added, "Last semester we kind of established ourselves and now we do what we want and if we need help, we can go to each other. In the beginning they are telling you where things are, how to do things and now you kind of know those things and so now it's more of a general resource."

Katherine also echoed these sentiments, citing the importance in the Fall semester for large group programming yet still recognizing the ongoing benefits that came from being with others taking the same courses:

I think more in the first semester in getting you use to the campus and having people you know in your classes and going to eat with 30 people and not being segregated from everyone and now it's more academic. Everyone has gone off and made their own friends out of the cluster. It's just nice and convenient to come back to and if you have any questions; you can go to anyone on the floor.

Ginny's assessment of the cluster's role in the Winter provided further validity to its lessened importance and the change in affiliation patterns from the cluster as a whole to smaller subgroups within the cluster:

I'm less dependent on it. Like what the cluster had is put me with people who are in my classes and now that I know people in my classes and I have the seven of us [in the cluster] that work together then I don't really need the cluster. It's not important anymore.

By the Winter, students had 'outgrown' the cluster as it was designed to support them in their first semester.

The Arts Cluster: "You Don't Need It Now"

When I asked students in the arts cluster what was happening, I was initially met with responses that identified planned social activities such as bowling and rock climbing interspersed with the phrase, "not much" which was similar to the science students' responses. As Ben exclaimed:

We had a bowling night the other night and that was fun. It was kind of a weird night 'cause a whole bunch of people didn't have a lot to do so I think they just came out and ended up having a good time. It was outside of the setting. There were about 14 people. As far as regular events, people's motivation or concern with anything in the cluster has completely gone down.

When I asked why he thought that, he responded:

They don't need it as a part of their lives. Most people gained what they needed from it in their first semester. In my mind the cluster served best in the first semester and second semester, your cluster leader is there for support but it's not really--you don't need it. You're on your own and most people can gauge what they need and what they don't need. For me I don't know if the cluster is useful second semester like the first. It wasn't for me actually.

Throughout both first and second interviews, I had been impressed by their talk that seemed to indicate a high degree of solidarity and commitment to the cluster and a strong sense of caring and concern for the members within. When Meredith and I met for the first time in the Fall, she described on repeated occasions, the cluster as her "family" and explained how she and others in the cluster operated under an ethic of care. "We all look out for one another. We make sure everyone is safe and happy." In our second meeting, this theme continued. "People are always saying, 'Of course we're going to look out for you, we're a cluster!'" Mike also reiterated this notion in our first meeting telling me, "We're like a family. We all look out for one another." And this theme was further reinforced by Kim who said in late October:

On the way over here I was thinking that my first choice in residence was in Johnston and I'm really glad that I'm not

there because I really love where I am. I feel really at home here.

It was in the follow up questions related to differences between the Fall and Winter, that I heard stories of major disenchantment that challenged my assumptions and understandings of their cluster dynamics. By Winter, Kim, who in the Fall had declared her cluster as “home,” could now hardly wait to escape from it:

I think we are all getting sick of each other. It’s like enough already. There’s little tiffs going on. We’re spending too much time with each other. I know that’s normal and to be expected but there’s a lot of tiffs going on. We’re fighting like siblings and I just want to go home.

Ben’s comments about living in the cluster in the Winter were much more succinct:

Ben:

It’s awful. When I look back to the Fall and first semester I really benefited from being in the cluster. I think it really served its purpose that way as far as academic support went and the good living community and stuff. But I think, I don’t know. I’ve talked to different clusters and I think we just got a weird pick of people. Seriously! Someone was saying the other day that each person represents a different aspect of society whether that be sexism or racism or whatever, and we’ve got them all.

Nancy:

Was that not apparent in the Fall?

Ben:

I guess as you get to know people you get to know their true colours a little bit more and I think also that with the cluster because everybody was together and got to know everyone so quickly maybe people started to get tired of each other quicker. People started to get on your nerves a lot quicker.

Nancy:

Is that intensified in a cluster?

Ben:

I think that carries through because you see them quite a lot, even in second semester where you courses diversify a bit more you still see each other because you are still in the same program. Yeah, it does. You wake up in the morning and see them in the bathroom, see them in class, and when someone is really annoying you or if you are sick of that person and you have to see them all of the time it makes you all the more frustrated and angry.

Not only had the cluster achieved what it was intended to do in the Fall but maybe it had been too successful in creating such intentional community. By Winter time some students had not only outgrown the cluster but were suffocating within it.

The Social Dynamics

What became apparent from students' first interviews, was that first and foremost, they defined themselves as members of a cluster. This identity permeated how they talked about being a student at university and how they differentiated themselves from non-cluster students. Cluster membership provided them with a group cohesiveness and uniqueness, creating a subculture for these students that set them apart from the larger cohort of first-year students. By our second meetings later in the Fall semester, a change in group affiliation had already started to occur. Although they continued to speak to the common bond that came from living within the cluster, they had established different levels of friendship within the cluster and described more personal, closer friendships that

had evolved into smaller subgroup formations. By Winter, students' strong sense of affiliation and solidarity to the cluster had dissipated. I heard little talk about 'working together to be part of a larger whole' as students instead spoke to a lessened desire to be with those who had different or competing goals, values and beliefs. Jean, in the sciences, expressed this sentiment felt by students in both of the clusters:

You pick your friends based on people you have a lot in common with and you want to do things with. You can't force people to be friendly with someone that you don't have a lot in common with. You're not going to spend time with the whole group. There isn't any kind of resentment there between people at least not from my point of view. It's just the fact that you don't have a lot in common. You don't interact with one another. We really don't do anything as a unit. Even if we did plan something I don't think it would work just because everyone just does their own thing now and has their own friends so it really doesn't feel much like a whole.

One of the assumptions I held before I began the study was that membership in the cluster would provide students with some kind of 'melting pot' identity by bringing together those, who by virtue of joining, brought with them common aspirations, attitudes and expectations. This was confirmed to some degree after my meetings with students within the first month of classes. My interpretations of their stories implied the existence of a dominant cluster culture that influenced what students did academically and socially. Students had talked about how there existed a "special bond" or as Jamie stated, an "unmentioned similarity" shared with those in the cluster. In our second interactions, I was exposed to narratives which began to highlight more variation in their goals and interests but I still failed to grasp the full meaning of this emerging trend. By the third

interviews, I could no longer ignore the power or influence of the different student subgroups within each of the clusters with alternative or competing values and goals.

Students felt an initial sense of affiliation and cohesion based on age, program of study, and the fact that most came to university directly from high school. This similarity in background characteristics provided the initial group cohesiveness but over time, students sought out others, first within and then outside the cluster, who more closely matched how they studied, partied or socialized. Van Maanen's (1987, p. 5) definition of student culture speaks to this range of influence:

...the take-for-granted patterns of eating, sleeping, socializing; the embraced and disgraced habits of study; the rules of thumb about what activities on campus count as status enhancing or status degrading; the norms surrounding what is proper demeanor in and out of the classroom.... [I]n brief, student cultures offer their members thick and thin guidelines for how to get an education and thus define for students just what an education means.

Their "similarity in situation" which I identified as a defining characteristic from the first set of interview data was no longer enough to sustain their allegiance to the cluster by the Winter semester. By the end of our third meetings, I had come to understand that cluster membership was comprised of multiple and distinct subcultures, each with their own agendas, each with their different values, goals, work ethic and career aspirations. It is these kind of differences that led to the various tensions within each of the clusters.

Becoming Too Insular

I was concerned about the cluster providing too safe a haven for students and wanted to find out if this was at all a shared concern with the participants. I heard varied responses, depending on how each student had defined their small group affiliation and the opportunities they had to “escape” from their living environment. When I posed the question to Kate, someone who had developed a number of friends outside the cluster, as to whether the cluster could be too insular, she responded:

Yeah, I think so. It's like you go to classes with these people and you eat with these people and you do everything with them and it's just--I have the opportunity of getting home every two weeks or so. You just feel the need to get away and experience something else, to get out of the building, to get away from the same people, to get away from talking about classes and whatever.

Jean was able to find some space for herself because she had a boyfriend who lived off campus and was there two nights a week. But even that failed to diminish her sense of “cluster phobia,” a term used by both students and program officials to describe the intense nature of residential living within a cluster:

I think a lot of us are a bit fed up, if that's the right word. We have such a small room and you don't have a lot of space and you're on that same floor with a lot of people that you maybe don't have a lot in common with. People who had friends who had gone to this university in other residences who aren't in clusters have made more friends and met a lot more people just because they're not in a cluster and I guess there was more of a mix of people, not just the ones serious about their academics.

The issue of making friends outside of the cluster was important to some students but not necessarily to others. Joan talked about her new friendships outside the cluster by referencing her comments to a subgroup within her cluster that did not seem to be concerned with making such outside contact:

There's a group in our cluster and I don't see them with other people other than themselves whereas I have a lot of other friends, probably more friends outside the cluster than inside it.

I heard repeated mention of a subgroup within the cluster that tended to stick together and made the assumption that it was the "group of seven," a small group of students who were described by themselves and others as introverts. They were very academically focussed, and most had achieved A averages in their first semester. By the middle of the Fall semester they had self-selected one another as learning partners through a recognition of shared goals and a shared work ethic. Three of them -- Ginny, Laura and Kerry--were in my final interview cohort. This was not an intentional selection on my part other than the fact that they initially responded to the study, were able to speak well to their cluster experience and were available to meet when I tried to set up second and third interviews. It was only after the final meeting with Ginny when she recalled a particular incident and identified students by name in her group of seven that I realized that Laura was another member. When I asked Ginny whether the closeness of her group inhibited contact outside the cluster, she responded:

Probably. I think--I don't know. I think if you don't have friends you make friends where ever you go. Since we have each other and all go places together we don't really - each one of us has other people that we know, like my lab

partner lives in the same building and I see her everywhere and we'll chat and I've introduced her to everybody but it must be intimidating for her.

When I asked if she thought it was too safe or too comfortable she answered, "I'd rather it be too comfortable."

If the cluster was seen at all as insular, students recognized this as a consequence of the intentional design and function of the cluster. Bringing together students taking the same courses into a common residence setting helped students to create immediate friendships but it was this convenience factor that Carol cited as an impediment to further contacts:

You don't have to go out and meet friends because there's people there on your floor and those are the people who you spend the most time with at the beginning because they are in all of your classes and you spend a lot of time with them. I've seen people where they don't make an effort to even talk to anyone else.

By their second semester, Jean, Kate and Joan were ready to engage a larger community beyond their cluster. All had expressed the importance in a balanced approach to university life, one that focussed on both their academic and social needs. They were critical toward those who were more academically oriented and who, whether intentionally or not, tended to limit their socializing. They failed to understand how Ginny, Laura and Kerry, in learning and studying together, were also able to have their friendship needs met. This trio did not need two separate group of friends to do this with.

This was in contrast to Joan who valued the importance of having friends outside the cluster:

It provides a healthy balance. I wouldn't want it to be too monotonous seeing the same people every day. Different crowds are good for different things. You can study with one group and go out with the other.

From Jean's perspective, it was the academic nature of the cluster and the fact that this attracted more academically committed students who she saw as more willing to curtail their socializing which limited friendship creation outside of the cluster:

People who had friends who had gone to this university in other residences who aren't in clusters have made more friends and met a lot more people just because they're not in a cluster and I guess there was more of a mix of people, not just the ones serious about their academics.

Other students did not seem to be bothered by the choices one made about making friends either inside or outside the cluster. According to Katherine:

It's up to each person. If you're not that much of an outgoing person it's nice to have friends there but I find it's simple to go to class and sit beside strangers and start up a conversation. It's not a problem for me.

The concerns regarding the insular nature of the cluster were not specific to those in the science cluster. Arts students also criticized the confinement that came from interacting with the same people all of the time and the limited contacts made with those outside of the cluster. As Meredith exclaimed:

I don't want to be with these people 24 hours a day all of the time and you run out of things to talk about because you get together all of the time. I couldn't say, "The funniest thing happened to me today" because they were right there.

But she was also quick to point out that it was not difficult making connections outside of the cluster. She had mentioned repeatedly in earlier meetings that the cluster was a safe and secure environment. Now she seemed to be more willing to take the risk of venturing outside the cluster for contacts, still able to return to the safety of the cluster, to return “home”:

It’s not so much anymore where the only people you talk to are our cluster people. All of us are getting friends outside the cluster. Now it’s like I can go make my friends and have my family to come home to sort of thing.

Jamie readily admitted to the insular nature of the cluster and preferred it that way:

I think we’re a lot more closed off than any other cluster but I think we’re a lot more closer than any other floor in a cluster. So you trade one for the other. I think our bonds are much closer which has its advantages and disadvantages. Obviously I’d rather not be closed off from everyone. I think in the long run I’d rather have a smaller group of closer friends rather than just to know everybody but not really knowing them. I do believe I made better friends being in a cluster.

When I asked whether his opportunities to meet other people outside of the cluster had been limited, he replied, “Yeah. Our floor is very ‘cliquey.’ Some people don’t like outsiders coming in.” When I further inquired about whether he had made many connections to other students outside of the cluster, his answer reflected some degree of concern about his situation:

Not really. In classes I’ve met a couple, like in seminars and that is one of my big worries for next year ’cause we are living off campus and the only people I will really know will be the people that lived on my floor.

Kim's comments undermined my assumptions of community in the arts cluster. When I inquired as to whether there was a small cohort within the cluster that she had connected with she responded, "No. I'm trying at this point to locate my friends outside the cluster." When I further asked whether she felt she had any kind of support network within the cluster, she was just as abrupt. "No. I see it as a natural thing that happens. It just happened now instead of last semester." As someone who had initially described the cluster as home, she had now come to the point of writing it off.

A Community of Individuals

In listening to their cluster talk, I heard stories of 'cultural clashes' that occurred between students' affiliation to the cluster, to membership in the wider university and to meeting their own individual needs. Because students shared the common goal of survival in the Fall, there was a strong group affiliation to the cluster. They needed one another, even if only to be with familiar faces in their large classes. By Winter, survival was no longer deemed an issue and as a result, the cluster had a much lessened presence in their lives. It had become peripheral, nothing more than a community of convenience for many of students. In my final meetings with the arts students, I heard stories that emphasised individualism, self-expression and self-actualization. Some saw themselves no longer as members of a community within the cluster but as members of a community

of individuals. Ben framed his perspective on arts cluster membership within this context of individualism:

Everyone does whatever they want to do--that's why it's weird because usually there are common rules, different things that you do that are the same but this group is weird. Everybody does whatever they want to do, they act however they want to act. There's nothing uniform. I don't think there's anything uniform in the cluster. Some people do work, some people are just total slackers now. They've turned the exact opposite from first semester. People are obnoxious when they shouldn't be. That whole sense of unity in the first semester is gone now because nobody cares anymore. There's a lack of respect now and everybody does not think of everybody else. They think of primarily themselves.

There are strong cultural traditions of individualism in the university. Although most of the students valued the cluster experience over all, it was not the reason they entered university. Their primary quest was their individualist pursuit of a degree and the cluster played an instrumental role in the Fall semester in moving them towards fulfilment of that goal. In belonging to the cluster, they were not required to attend cluster events. They were not mandated to participate in any floor activities nor did they have to sign any kind of letter of intent about their commitment to the cluster and its goals. That they did in fact participate so enthusiastically in the Fall, spoke to the power of the community that was originally created and to the importance of making social connections on the part of students. But by Winter, the power and influence that came from group membership no longer had much impact on the individuals who resided within it.

Ben, elaborated on this theme:

It's really weird but now people look at other people doing studying and usually you would say, "Well people are studying, maybe I should be doing some studying too" but now nobody cares. They just have thrown all cares out the window. Everybody is easy going, playing Nintendo, doing nothing, just sitting around doing nothing. It is so much individual now. If you do work, you do work. You're not read either way by the group. There's no pressure at all either way. People are feeding off of each other's laziness. One perpetuates the other to be more lazy.

Mike also spoke about the laissez-faire attitude and range of activities, both legal and illegal, that seemed to be a common occurrence in his cluster:

I think anything goes on our floor. We have a crazy floor. Pretty much anything goes. Everything has pretty much happened so far this year. It went from people buying porn magazines and watching porn movies to people throwing up all over the place. We had the police there a couple of weeks ago 'cause of someone smoking drugs on the floor. Last semester we weren't so bad but this semester is a big problem floor. We had the police there 'cause of the drug smoking. We're continuously getting pounded with noise complaints when we're not even being that loud. We've had three or four incident reports which are noise complaints after three in the morning.

When I inquired as to whether the complaints were coming from within the cluster, he responded:

I think there's two people on the floor who call a lot of them and it aggravates us 'cause they go to bed at 10 most of the time but if they stay up past quiet hours or if they stay up, they can be as loud as they want and no one can say anything to them and these two people are quite loud. Other floors have been calling them on us. I don't know if they are being jerks or what's wrong with them. We're not destructive so it's not too bad. We normally contain it to

the rooms. It may get a little loud but we're generally in a room. We don't trash the floor.

Liz saw the problem as that of accountability:

If you're going to be in a cluster, you should be willing to be accountable to be supportive to your fellow students. Instead, everyone is just looking out for themselves.

The impression of 'not caring' which Ben had previously identified, was also cited by

Meredith as a defining characteristic of her arts cluster members:

No one cares any more. I used to say you need to get up and now I'm just--we're all nearly 20 years old, I'm not going to get you up. I can't be bothered. I think that people have to learn how to take care of themselves and that's the big problem within our cluster - no one knows how to take care of themselves. I'm not like that. I wouldn't run to somebody else to get them to fix this problem or I feel that they don't know how to care for themselves. I don't care if you don't get up in the morning. If you don't get up in the morning and don't go to classes then don't expect me to be waking you up and don't expect me to be pulling you out of bed.

Meredith was especially exasperated by students' inability to take responsibility for their own actions. It was okay in the Fall semester to support, encourage and commiserate with one another, but she had no tolerance for the kind of dependency that had developed by Winter. It was now time for everyone to pull their own weight, to take individual responsibility for their actions and accept the consequences for their choices:

Some people don't grasp that concept that if you don't do your work and if you don't go to class you're not going to get as good a mark than someone who does go to class. It's unbelievable. I do well in school and people know I do well but they say, "I don't understand why you got 90 on that exam and I only got a 50." I would say, "Number one, I've been to class, number two, I've done the reading and

number three, I've studied." I don't understand why they can't grasp that. You hear that a lot, "That test was so unfair!" I just get so frustrated by it all. A lot of times, people expect others to bail them out. Oh, I need your notes for that! Or I need you to explain this to me!

When I asked if the cluster attracted a certain kind of student, she responded:

I think it attracts those who thought they were smart in high school and so thought that would just be the way it continued at university and it's not. I don't know why people chose the cluster. Maybe they thought somehow, some way, being in a cluster, if you were serious about school and you were really smart so you should automatically get extra points. I don't know. I think the idea of knowing people in your classes had something to do with it as well.

Within all of their talk was a glorification of autonomy, an elevation of individual needs over the collective interests of the cluster. These students entered university with multiple selves. They brought with them membership from multiple communities, based on family, church, community, music, hobbies and interests, each requiring a different set of roles to be negotiated. The cluster required at least in first semester, a particular kind of commitment and participation from students who needed the support of a larger group in helping them negotiate their way through university. Group needs were given a higher priority over individual needs. Having completed their first semester, students no longer needed such support from the whole, so by Winter the clusters had evolved into communities of individuals who acted on meeting their own personal needs and desires.

Competition

These clashes between the individual and the community were more pronounced in the arts cluster. I heard no talk from the science students about not caring or giving up on their academics. Although they too had clashes over values and expectations related to socializing and academics, there was little mention of individualism at the expense of their smaller group cohorts. The power of their subgroups reigned. Science students identified different kinds of issues that impacted on relationships within their all female cluster. They spoke to the fact that the cluster seemed to attract a certain kind of student, creating some degree of similarity as it related to grades and academic achievement and yet Kate described how this similarity was somewhat deceiving:

I know that quite a few of the people in my cluster would have scholarships coming into university. Everyone in our cluster did extremely well in high school and that's the kind of way that other people on campus see it as that way-- being extremely academic people but not everyone in the cluster is like that. Everyone came out with pretty high averages but it's not necessarily who they are.

Kerry also saw the cluster as different from others but from her perspective this was influenced by the nature of their program of study:

Looking at our floor compared to the floor above us, we're a whole lot quieter than they are so we can hear them partying every second night and we're all sitting down and studying away. I think it's a combination of the program we are in and us as individuals. We take our academics very seriously. A lot of it is, if you don't start into your major now, then you've got to do a lot of catch up later because a lot of the programs don't overlap all that much except for first year and maybe first semester next year so you have to really think about what you want to do and where you want to go.

This kind of homogeneity of academic goals, grades and career aspiration created its own kind of tensions, unique to the science cluster and related to competition. Throughout their second interviews, I was exposed to instances of members of the group engaging in constant referencing with one another in terms of grades and study activities. Students tended to describe this not as 'competition' but as a way of 'referencing' or putting themselves onto some kind of continuum with others. They were reluctant to use the term "competition" and when they did, they often contradicted themselves in describing competitive and non-competitive activities. I was curious to find out what role competition played by the Winter and if it had lessened to any degree, especially given the number of students who had decided not to apply to the vet program at the end of the year.

Laura still found her cluster competitive as did Katherine, but both of them saw it as something that they could take advantage of in terms of motivating themselves to get their work done. As Katherine explained, "At first it was intimidating but you have to take advantage of it. You can get help from each other. It actually pushes you." Students also spoke at various lengths as to how the culture of their cluster supported a commitment to studying and learning. Explained Kate:

No one wants to do worse. If everyone keeps up that standard of doing well, you want to do well too because you're a member of a group and you don't want to fall behind so yeah, you want to keep up and keep working. We all value studying and working hard at something.

I wanted to find out from her whether that was a shared goal within her smaller cohort or whether this was something the whole cluster had bought into:

I think our own group has a higher standard of it. I think it does exist in the cluster as a whole but I think to a higher degree in our group because a lot of them have scholarships and they are worried about keeping up their grades. They have to in order to get the money. Whereas other people will be, "I need a 70." For me a 70 wouldn't be good enough just because I've set my own standards. But they are happy and that's still a good mark if that's what they're happy with. They work hard. Maybe it doesn't come as easy to them but they also divide their time more favourably towards doing other things as well.

Within Ginny's small "group of seven," there tended to be constant comparison and referencing with one another:

I find it more competitive because we're all in the same thing. We're all doing the same kind of thing. I find myself comparing what I got on my midterms to what other people got. We are at all different levels. April is the one who got a 76 percent average and having her makes me feel better-- that didn't come out right at all. It does make me feel better 'cause I'm probably the next one up even though I got a 90 last semester so the two of us are at the bottom and then Mary is probably at the middle and then Kerry and Laura are at the very top. But even when we went to look up our midterm marks with Micro, standing at the wall we know every one's number so we can look and Kerry got 98, Mary got 97, April got 83 and I got 80 so if April hadn't been there then I wouldn't have felt as good about my 80 even though that was my goal. It would be like Kerry got a 98, what am I doing wrong?

When I asked if the fact that everyone does so well, whether it pushed her to do better, she answered:

Yes, it would make my day to get what Kerry gets. On one Calculus test last semester I got 27 and Kerry got 26 and that just made my day. We know each others numbers so when we look at the wall we can see everyone else did.

Outside of students' immediate peer group, there was less sharing of grades in the Winter.

This occurred in both of the clusters. Mike, in the arts, found it especially exasperating to not know others grades:

I don't like people who say, "Oh, I don't talk about my grades." Does it matter? I saw how much work you put in, just tell me what you got! I've never cared about my grades. I know there is one girl on the floor who says she doesn't talk about grades and it drives me crazy. I think, come on, tell me what you got. I saw you put lots of effort into it and I know you did well and then there's us who say, "Look what we got and we didn't even try."

Mike enjoyed bragging about the minimal effort he put into his studying and the average grades he received in return. Although he could see how much time others were studying, not knowing how they did limited his 'bragging rights.' On the other hand, Kate, in the science cluster, wanted to get beyond grades as defining an individual. She wanted to break away from the kind of petty comparison of grades that occurred to her and her friends in high school:

We don't talk about marks that much. It's like, I did well. It's like, you did well on your own terms but no one will say exactly what they did. You haven't really compared with others but I'm curious. Every once in awhile I will think--I wonder how that person did and if they say well,

does that mean 80 or what? I had a lot of that in high school where it was nothing but marks. I got 92, what did you get? I guess that reduces some of the pressure since even though people who did better than I did - they are not flaunting it or anything but there is still that competition especially amongst the people who are trying to get into the vet program because marks are very important.

I think there's a fear amongst the people about getting into that competitiveness. Everyone wants to--I think a lot of them did well in high school and they know they are pretty good but they always knew that everyone else knew that they were good too so it's like they always got the good marks. I think they want to say that marks are marks and then we can discuss courses and stuff but lets not pry into each others marks, let's not look or interact with each other as smart people or smarter than everybody else. Let's just be friends and not talk about "Well you got he 98, what am I doing wrong" or "Gee, that's not fair."

For me coming out of high school it was always--everyone was like--"You're going to get a scholarship, don't worry about it. Why do you work so hard? Why do you worry about that stuff? Why are you worried about your marks, they are fine." It was really important to me but there was always that: "She's so snooty." I wasn't snooty. I didn't look down on people who got bad marks but it was always, "Yeah, she's a smart girl," and that can create animosity.

Anti-Intellectualism

In my conversation with Kate and other high achieving science students, I heard repeated reference to their high school experiences as anti-intellectual, that being smart in high school and doing well were not values positively recognized by their peers. When I pursued this with Kate, she responded:

It was not cool to be smart. Here, it's nice to know that, while we don't talk about marks, if somebody did badly it would not be looked down upon. We all expect to do well

but we don't nitpick about how well. We all know that we are in the top half or something or in that area but we don't --there's always the little things like a percent here and a percent there. In high school, it was why worry about it? Why are you worried about that extra mark? or why do you study so much or whatever. It was such detail. The competition was fierce. Here we're just going to do our best and keep our marks high but we're not going to fight over it.

This theme of anti-intellectualism played itself out differently in the arts cluster where there was a major clash between those students serious about their academics and those who valued more extensive socializing. Despite an environment of "anything goes" in her cluster, Kim, who was recovering from mononucleosis and had a close cousin die over the Christmas break from drinking, found there was a definite bias against those who chose to spend more time on their academic work:

I've been limiting my socializing since I got back for various reasons, money and the fact that socializing here involves drinking and sometimes drugs and my cousin died as a result of drinking... I feel so much pressure from other people. Before I got mono they were saying, "It's not healthy to stay in and do my work and you need to go out." And I would say "I do go out! I'm not a hermit. I just don't go out every night."

Asked if that kind of pressure was coming from within the cluster, the following exchange occurred:

Kim:

Yeah. I don't like it at all. I figure it's my choice and I'm choosing to do this and I'm happy with my choice and then I got mono and they were all like- ha, ha, told you so! They said I got mono because I was doing too much work.

Nancy:

So what does this say about the unwritten rules about socializing and school work?

Kim:

If you do too much school work, you're unsociable.

In the arts cluster, I tried to uncover these kind of hidden rules about the amount of time one should spend socializing and if the cluster placed a greater value on socializing given the kinds of immediate friendships and large group socializing that were a hallmark of their Fall semester. Jamie, who valued the cluster for the friends that he had made, expressed a view supported by a number of his friends:

Some people study a lot and you rarely see them and you'd like to see them more but they are always studying. They will still come out with you sometimes but they never will hang out with you in your room and talk. Other people and I'm probably closer to this group, don't study as much as they could and they socialize a lot. They go talk to friends and they get into creative procrastination.

In response to my follow-up questions about whether one is valued more than the other, Jamie responded:

The less studying, the more socializing is more valued because the cluster members have been friends for so long. Maybe at the beginning at the Fall semester I didn't know anyone and I would have studied 'cause I had nothing better to do but now that I know people I'll just go out and start a conversation with someone.

In Jamie's story, there was no animosity, no sense of conflict with others over his different values, just a recognition that his priorities this semester were more focussed on maintaining friendships at the expense of his academic work. But for those who did value

academic work, there was tension. Meredith, who used the word “family” in all three of her interviews to positively describe her cluster environment, in a later segment of her third interview, expressed more negative feelings:

We don't go for big groups, it's just four or five--hey, I'm hungry, want to grab a bite to eat? It's not like a big family anymore.

When I asked if that was necessarily negative or positive, she replied:

I think it's probably more positive for us because when it comes to the people I hang out with, they're more serious about school. I can't stand people who don't go to class and who sleep in late and then complain when they get their mark. Is it any wonder? I'd much rather associate with people who go to class and who care. People who are like me, not those who drink all night.

Liz was also disappointed with those in the cluster who seemed to no longer care about their academic work.. She found this especially contradictory in terms of what the program brochure had said about students who had participated in the cluster previously:

People on the floor just seem to have given up and that's not what I expected. The brochure said that people in the cluster have higher academic averages than non-cluster students by something like five percent so I thought that everyone would be serious about school.

Putting their Cluster Experience into Perspective

Anger, disappointment, tension, betrayal, convenience, support, safety - these were the kind of descriptions and reactions from students in the arts and sciences when they talked about living and learning in the cluster. Despite their criticisms, almost all of the students I met with thought the cluster was beneficial, something that they would

recommend to others, and something that they would participate in if given the choice over again. For despite its drawbacks and limitations, the alternative to not have been in a cluster was imagined to have been worse. In the arts cluster, Kim appreciated the fact that she did not have to attend classes alone:

I do think it's a good idea for people to be in the same program as you. It's good initially because you have someone to go to class with and just little things like that.

Ben found that it helped him overall in his transition to university:

I've enjoyed it overall. I think the last month has not been totally enjoyable but I have enjoyed it. I definitely met a lot of interesting people. The transition from high school to university was really smooth.

Meredith benefited from the security it provided, commenting, "It really made us definitely a unit so it gave me a lot of security."

In the sciences, Jean valued the immediate creation of a social support network that came from shared classes and living together:

If I had not been in it, like looking at the way classes are set up, I think it would be really hard to meet people in your classes because when you are in class you're there to learn and you are paying money for the course, you're not going to sit and talk through it. So you don't really meet anyone in your class. You just go and sit in the lecture and leave. So, if you had been put in a residence and not in a cluster, sure you would have met a lot of people but not necessarily people in your classes that can help with your homework. You can help each other and work together and go to classes together and I think that's where the cluster played a role but I think that's really it.

For Carol, it provided encouragement and motivation:

It's more of an academic environment which fuels you to do stuff, to get the work done because if you are on a regular floor with mixed programs, you're not necessarily willing to do work.

And Joan welcomed the ongoing availability of help and support:

I think it was a good thing. It got people in the same program together to be able to use each other as resources.

Conclusion:

The cluster provided students with opportunities for creating immediate friendships with students who were their classmates; it offered them a safe rehearsal space for ideas when the classroom seemed too large and intimidating; it encouraged some students to stay more focused on their studies; and it gave students opportunities to participate in collaborative learning ventures in which they could teach one another and share what they knew about their courses even though these practices were themselves not modeled in the classroom.

In analysing my interview data, I sought to understand how students experienced university within the context of their cluster participation. By using their words and stories, I hope that I have provided the reader with a 'different kind of lens' from which to view students' day-to-day experiences and academic activities. Student life as I thought I knew it and am only now beginning to fully appreciate and understand.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

We must continually interrogate our perspective in order to avoid recreating the “imperial gaze” – the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize (bell hooks, 1992, p. 7).

Introduction

Through students’ words and stories, I examined their university experiences within the context of their cluster participation. I analyzed their academic talk in which winning grades took place at the expense of learning, and teacher pleasing was the dominant learning strategy. I came to understand why interactions with faculty were intentionally minimized; ways that the cluster reduced academic and social risk for students; and how, by Winter, students had become less dependent on the cluster, evolving into communities of individuals. In this final chapter, I want to focus discussion on the meaning and implications of these themes from three particular perspectives. First, I will look within a broader context at the inherent political dimensions of students’ actions, words and the institutional environment. Second, I will critique at a more personal level, my role as researcher, ways this impacted on how students saw me, what they told and withheld from me. Finally, I will address what the findings mean in terms of a more critical engagement with the discourse of community as it relates to the cluster project.

The Political Dimensions of Students' Academic Actions and Experience

According to Tierney, "Power, knowledge, ideology and culture are inextricably linked to one another in constantly changing patterns and relationships" (1989, p. 21).

Students in the cluster were social actors playing out roles that were multiple and negotiated within the broader political, ideological, and cultural framework of the university. Their particular patterns of accommodation, resistance, silence, and submission in negotiating their roles as learners will be what I will directly address.

Patterns of Accommodation and Resistance

By the time cluster students reached university they had become well practiced in acts of sabotage, silence, and submission in the classroom. They had learned that to be successful they had to be able to mimic teacher talk and teacher values or in their own words, to give teachers "what they wanted" and to tell them "what they wanted to hear." A few had perfected the art of "just getting by," doing minimal work at the beginning of a term and then working madly at the end so that their improvement could be duly recognized and rewarded. These habits of resistance and accommodation continued for cluster students in their roles as learners at university, especially in response to their large lecture classes. Traveling to classes together or saving seats for one another was a defining pattern for many cluster participants in the beginning of the Fall semester. Attending classes together provided cluster members with a sense of security and a safe haven since classmates were not trusted friends, but strangers with whom they had no relationship. But despite the safety that came from sitting with friends, this alone could

not reduce students' feelings of anonymity, intimidation, detachment and distance.

During the first few weeks of the semester, most students went to their lectures but by the fourth or fifth week of classes, they soon discovered that attendance was not necessary, especially if the information presented was provided elsewhere either through their texts, web sites or through other students. Not attending class was also a deliberate action in response to instructors who left them confused or frustrated. In instances where students' need for structure and a linear approach to learning clashed with their instructor's abstract and conceptual approach, students reacted by not returning to the classroom. Those students who continued to attend classes on a regular basis, cited their strong work ethic, not wanting to waste their tuition dollars, and guilt as reasons for going even though a few admitted they might not be learning anything while there.

Where they sat in the lecture hall was also an example of how students could distance themselves from the instructor. Sitting in the back of the class offered the safety of anonymity where one could come late, leave early, or even sleep without being noticed. Shor (1996, p. 12) referred to this as the "Siberian Syndrome," the "learned habit of automatically filling the distant corners first, representing their subordinate and alienated positions." These students were 'academic exiles' who sought the back rows of seats beyond the gaze of their professors who themselves tended to never venture beyond the front of the classroom or even leave the podium.

The large lecture settings and the kind of instruction that occurred within them shaped students' behaviors and expectations regarding their role, purpose, and responsibilities as learners. The traditional patterns of university teaching found in these

large lectures were based on the assumption that an expert (the instructor) would present to students information that had been objectively and rationally defined. Within this one way discourse, students came to an understanding that their role as learners was to memorize these objective “truths” with little need to interact with their instructors.

Silence as a Political Stance

Silence was another defining behavior from students in response to attending large classes. Most identified fear and intimidation as factors in not asking or responding to questions that came from their professor. No one wanted to be singled out for not knowing something in front of their peers or to appear to be ignorant by asking questions. There were other, more safe ways, to get their questions answered. But students’ bouts of silence were not only acts in response to their fear but also a means of subversion. They had the choice not to speak as well as the choice not to attend class. Their silence was a kind of revolt against the impersonal lecture setting that so much defined their education.

This silence was also played out in students’ reluctance to have contact with their instructors outside of class. Students spoke in conflicting tones, admitting the fact that despite their professors appearing approachable and inviting, most said they would not talk to them. In my analysis of their first interview data, I described their instructors as the “pronouns without antecedents” since students never referred to them by name and this pattern continued through their second interviews. This was another way of distancing themselves from professors. Students, through their informal networks, talked about who would be safe to visit, and who would be willing to provide help in a way that

did not denigrate them for not understanding a particular concept or term. For most students, seeking help from an instructor was not a “safe” activity, for to do so was to place themselves in situations where they would be judged, have to admit ignorance, or be berated for their lack of understanding with the very person who would be grading them.

By Winter time, a different rationale had emerged from students about the appropriateness of making faculty contact, or what I termed, ‘the need to develop worthiness.’ Operating from this perspective, students saw themselves as novices in their program, unworthy to take the time of their professor, who was seen as having superior knowledge of the academic discipline. They did not feel that they had earned permission yet to engage in any meaningful way with their instructors. Such worthiness would be achieved by completing more courses within their specialized program of study. This hierarchical relationship of expert to novice further enhanced the power differential that already existed because of professorial power to assign grades.

I had been confused by students’ unwillingness to seek out help from their professors, who seemed so ready and available to offer support. I had heard repeatedly over the years through anecdotal information from a number of faculty discouraged at how few students take advantage of their help during their scheduled office hours or make use of help labs, staffed by these instructors. It seems so painfully obvious now why students did not take them up on their offers of support. The size of their large classes, the impersonal nature of sitting nameless with that environment, a view of faculty as the “purveyors of truth and the dispensers of grades,” together with students’ sense of

being novices within their discipline, perpetuated patterns of limited faculty contact. These were the consequences of a pedagogy designed to serve a large number of students. Students could not hope to duplicate the kind of mentoring relationships many had established with their high school teachers. As a result, not making contact became a political act, especially when understood within the relationship of power between students and their instructors that marked the social and political structure within the classroom.

Performers in the Circus

The political and social structure of the classroom were part of a much broader cultural and ideological context reflecting the dominant societal values of individual achievement and competition. We live in a quantitatively oriented and highly competitive society where sorting and ranking is very prominent. As Kohn (1986, p. 2) states:

Life for us has become an endless success of contests. From the moment the alarm clock rings until sleep overtakes us again, from the time we are toddlers until the day we die, we are busy struggling to outdo others. This is our posture at work and at school, on the playing field and back home. It is the common denominator of American life.

For students in a cluster, grades at university, as in high school and in grade school, continued to sort and rank them, bestowing privilege and position for some but not for others. Grades defined how they felt about their role as learner, their competence, career aspirations, and sense of self. Students viewed them as a 'currency' to be cashed in at the end of their undergraduate years for employment, or entrance into professional schools or

graduate programs.

Universities, through their emphasis on grades and grade point averages, perpetuate and legitimize competition through their ranking and sorting. Most of the students I talked to found it difficult to assess how they were doing without referring to their grades or referencing themselves with one another in their cluster. Even those who expressed an interest in learning for its own sake, talked about the importance of grades as a marker of reassurance that they were doing okay.

In listening to their stories, I was struck by how powerless students felt when evaluated. They had virtually no say in how they were tested or, for that matter, had very little voice related to their academic program. The university establishes various programs of study for students to take over a set number of years and decides the rules regarding grade standards, minimum grade averages for continuation of study, when grades are to be submitted, and the conditions under which grades may be appealed. Program committees decide on the number and sequencing of courses students must take, and the general content to be covered in a particular course. Instructors, responsible for teaching the course content, assess how well students have learned what they are supposed to learn and assign grades based on their level of performance.

The cluster students had no voice in negotiating their assessment. What they could control was the amount of time and effort they put forth when it came to studying. Time became synonymous with effort which most students thought should be rewarded fairly and equitably. They wanted value for their efforts. They wanted to be paid a 'fair wage' for their work. Many students believed that time spent engaged in an academic activity

assumes that something has been learned or achievement attained. They made little distinction between the quantity of time and the quality of effort. Difficulties and frustrations arose when what they had learned did not get recognized in a particular method of assessment or when what they had studied was not what the instructor intended for them to learn. When this happened they felt like victims, performers in the circus trying to figure out how to please their ringmasters.

Abiding by the Status Quo

These first- year students entered as cultural novices and over the course of the two semesters were slowly inculcated into the status quo or established order of the university. By winter time, many of them had become more fluent, more secure and more settled in the language and practices of the dominant student culture. Some students studied hard out of anxiety and parental pressure, others brought with them a strong desire to succeed, and others did as little as possible to just get by. Some of these attitudinal differences were related to students' academic programs: the urgency for good grades was felt most strongly by those in the sciences who aspired to gain admission to the veterinary medicine program. These students brought with them determination, ability and self- discipline, and in a profession that demanded stamina and resolve, there was a congruence between their personal values and the professional values accorded to the study of veterinary medicine. They were obedient to the dominant culture which rewarded their studious behavior, work ethic, and shared values with the grades necessary to enter into a very competitive professional program. There were also students who

were uncertain about their major or future goals, and some whose academic plans did not require an immediate commitment to high grades in their first semester. Many of these students were in the arts. They did not have to commit so single mindedly to the academic culture and some became very adept in discovering the minimum amount of work to do to maintain acceptable averages to continue their studies.

Despite the variation in students' attitudes toward their academic goals, none of them spoke in ways that were a direct threat to the authority of the university. None were unwilling to abide by the status quo for the consequences would result in failure in their courses and the inability to continue their studies. They could be silent and resistant but only to the extent that it did not jeopardize their stay at university.

Student Autonomy and Institutional Authority

Much of the research literature speaks to the importance for undergraduates to have deliberate faculty contact, yet this was not something that students initially desired nor wanted under the circumstances of how such contact would be provided. In addition to their limited faculty contact, I heard no other talk from students that spoke to other kinds of interactions they had with adults on campus. They and their peer groups reigned. Other than me as researcher, none of the students I interviewed mentioned a non-student within the university community they had interacted with in any kind of meaningful way. Moffatt (1989) identified three zones of autonomy experienced by undergraduate students in his study on campus life. Students were most autonomous in their daily, personal lives, many for the first time living outside the control of parents. When to sleep, where, and

with whom; what and when to eat; how often to go out to socialize, their day-to-day kinds of activities were now decisions that students made unfettered by adult interference.

Students were least autonomous in the academic arena. Many had little if any choice in their selection of courses, instructors, and methods of evaluation. They had to submit to certain forms of adult and institutional authority as it related to assignments and grades.

But between the zones of student autonomy and institutional authority, there also existed a grey zone where students made decisions regarding whether to go to class, how much time to devote to studying, or whether to make contact with their instructors. This was an area where neither autonomy nor authority fully reigned.

Border Zones

This bifurcation between student autonomy and institutional authority parallels the split between the academic and the social. Each area has its own culture, language and practices and students spend their days traversing between the two, living among and between the edges. This notion of borderlands or zones has been used by Anzaldua (1987), Giroux (1991), and Tierney (1993), among others, to describe the space between two separate boundaries where individuals live between two spaces, two cultures and two languages. It is the space in between, the crossroads of these different and often competing cultures, the borderlands, which become an alternative space, or as Tierney states, "cultural zones infused with difference" (p. 7). For cluster students, these border zones existed at the crossroads of the social and the academic, and it was in this grey area that the cluster had the potential to be most effective in helping students negotiate their

paths between the two divides.

Learning communities, as curriculum reform movements, seek to redefine the role of students, faculty and the kinds of interactions that take place between them. They strive to create seamless learning environments (Kuh, 1995) where the two separate spheres of the academic and the social become blurred and more integrated. Within more formalized learning community models such as the coordinated studies program, such a seamless web can occur because both the academic and the social have been reconstructed and redefined. But in the cluster program, all that was coordinated were students' course load attendance patterns. The academic arena, with its various rules, regulations, traditional pedagogical practices and ways of doing business remained unchanged. The social realm continued to exert pressure on students in terms of how they spent their time and on ways to meet their personal needs and pleasures. These two competing divides lessened the role that the cluster played in the lives of students but that is not to say that it did not have an impact on many of its participants. The cluster was most powerful in the Fall semester when it helped students to negotiate the university, to traverse between the two zones and become effective border crossers.

Telling Tales

When I started my research over two years ago, I sought to utilize the power of stories as research tools in which to place students in a particular context; to visualize their setting, their community and their lives within it. Their stories revealed complexities, paradoxes, and contradictions, and I attempted to reconstruct their world as

implied from their narratives. But this has also been a story of a shared journey, mine, and that of the students in my study, and as such has become a story within a story. Like these first-year students, I also began as a novice, uncertain and full of doubt about my ability to make sense of their stories, fearful of not being able to recognize and confront my own pre-conceptions and beliefs. Each set of interviews was a snapshot of student life in the cluster, and my writing at each of these stages has brought me closer to understanding how students made meaning of their first-year university experience.

Over time, I have become more cognizant of the limitations of this approach. For example, I recognized that these stories have been co-constructed, that I was the one asking questions, directing students' stories in ways that otherwise might not have been chosen. My points of access to their daily lives was limited and my sense-making of their experiences has been retrospective in nature. Story telling as a research tool no longer provides me with an adequate framework from which to discuss my findings. If I want my study to be more than a sequence of events, with a story teller and an audience, then I need to reconceptualize my role from that of "story telling" to that of "telling tales" to open up different possibilities for understanding and meaning.

Telling tales conjures up a number of nuances and meanings, positive and negative that are different from story telling. At one level, telling tales is no different than telling a story, recounting events and incidents to explain, enchant or to help make the abstract concrete and accessible. And in fact the stories I have presented from students' interviews give shape and expression to their experiences. But telling tales also has other implications that are more derogatory, involving talking about others in negative or

exaggerated ways. We admonish young children not to “tell tales” that spread falsehoods or innuendo. And yet, the “telling of tall tales” which requires embellishing and adding elements of fiction is considered appropriate to make a story more interesting or to meet the expectations of the audience.

There are other more hidden meanings of the phrase that I want to address. Telling tales suggests that some stories are more ‘tellable’, more important and more powerful than others. As narrator, I yield considerable influence in deciding how to make stories more or less telling, more or less powerful. My evolution from that of a “story teller” to “telling tales” has helped me to more clearly understand the implications that stories are embedded within particular cultures and life histories. These tales are forms of expression that represent symbols, images, vocabulary and particular frames of reference. They involve particular discourses that impact on how tales get told; what can be said; who does the telling and with what authority; and whose tale has been suppressed. The voices used and the words chosen become very powerful in conveying images of others to someone else.

Avoiding the Imperial Gaze

I once spent two years as a Peace Corps volunteer working with village women in the mountains of Nepal. None of the women I met had ever seen someone with white skin and blonde hair before. I was the foreigner, trying to communicate in their language, to learn their customs and to work respectfully within their social norms. In my second year, when I had gained increased fluency in the language, I found myself on several

occasions engaged in lengthy conversations in Nepalese with women who would tell me that they could not make sense of my talk because I was not one of them. I'd ask them to tell me what it was that they couldn't understand. They would answer back with questions of their own; I would respond; and this would continue for another five minutes or so until the women realized that we in fact had been able to converse. They had seen me as 'other' and this greatly influenced their ability to hear what I was saying.

As the researcher in this study, I was not in a foreign or unknown territory but still was concerned that I would not be able to hear what students were telling me. Yes, we shared the same geographic location and shared in the similarity of a first-year experience for I, too, had once been an undergraduate student, living in residence, away from home for the first time. But we also inhabited very different worlds, spheres of activity, cultures and norms. I brought a particular kind of status that came from membership within the university community and with the cluster project itself. Students knew I worked on campus and were also aware that I was responsible for initiating the cluster program. Even my role as a graduate student seemed to have had little impact on imparting any kind of affinity that could have come from a shared student status. Besides, the graduate students to whom they had been exposed on campus or as teaching assistants in their classes were younger. My social status, largely determined by my personal characteristics, was that of white, female, middle aged, middle class and academically successful. Age and status-wise, I could have been their mother. Consequently, my role as researcher elicited a certain kind of discourse from the students, allowing only certain possibilities for what they could say and divulge. As well, there were other factors

beyond my status that effected their talk. The location of the interviews took place in my work arena, not in their rooms, or in a place in their residence or even in more neutral territory such as a coffee shop or cafeteria. Although my office may have been an inviting space that afforded privacy, it was still a professional office that confirmed my status within the university. The number of interviews I conducted also had an impact on what was said or not said. I designed the case study so that I would interview students at three time periods in their academic year, thus limiting my exposure to their lives on a day-to-day basis. As a result, I was not able to develop an insider privilege to their more personal lives. This influenced what they were willing to share with me, based on what they considered to be safe and appropriate within the relationship we had established.

We both entered into these interviews with different if not competing discourses. I wanted to understand what the academic side of university life looked like and so asked questions related to studying, learning, assessment and community. Even when I asked them to take me through a typical day, they answered in ways in which they thought I wanted to hear. Students translated their every day talk, the 'discourse of the dorm' to respond to my academic and professional discourse in order to make themselves heard and understood. I did not ask them if they ever got drunk, stayed up all night, took drugs or had active sex lives. They in turn did not offer this information. I did not inquire into their more private, non-academic lives, for to pursue such talk strayed from the discourse I worked from and students came to realize that anything too personal would not be considered legitimate. Consequently much was not voiced or expressed. This would help to explain why students in telling their tales presented me with such a sanitized version of

their experience for me to hear.

As a “teller of tales,” I have tried to be very conscious of the role that I have played, the voices I have used and the representations that I have offered. It has been a constant challenge not to impose a definition of their academic and social world that reinforced my beliefs and interests and I’m certain there have been times when this did in fact occur. My role as researcher has been that of a tight rope walker, trying to critically expose what students revealed about themselves and at the same time trying to avoid the “imperial gaze.” Despite such filtering of information, students’ stories were rich, and varied, but they were also filled with paradox and contradiction for these students had appropriated a discourse which was not theirs, and one they did not fully understand in terms of how it shaped and determined their everyday experiences.

The Discourse of Community

The theme of community has been woven within my professional life, through my educational background, in the design of the cluster project and in this study. As noted in the beginning of this study, my conceptions of community have changed over time as I have moved away from the more nostalgic, romanticizing metaphors of academic community and beyond the “melting pot” scenarios which envisioned higher education as an assembly of multiple voices assimilated into some kind of common identity. I have come to understand how these kinds of discourses continue to silence and exclude those who are different from the norm, situating ‘others’ in the margins. Much of this re-conceptualizing is related to my developing a more critical set of eyes from which to

analyze the concept. But taking a more critical stance has been difficult because it has meant continually questioning my own values, beliefs and the institutional structures I work within.

The clusters were conceptualized to be supportive learning environments, designed to assist first-year students in their social and academic transition to university. They were one of a number of programs that were part of broader institutional initiatives which recognized the importance of helping students to become successfully integrated into the university's mores and cultures. By providing entering students with opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes to function effectively in the academic environment, the university hoped to minimize the likelihood that students might not complete their first year, resulting in loss of revenue and prestige. This discourse speaks to education as a socializing process in which first-year students, as cultural novices, need to become inculcated into the status quo. The clusters were designed to support students in their academic and social transition into the mainstream organization by helping them to appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture necessary for academic success. In this context, the clusters became an institutional management tool to help with retention and transition, and "community" became a management strategy, a way of institutionalizing quality of student life to both attract and keep students.

This message was reinforced in the promotion materials sent to students about the program. In various pamphlets and university publications, students were told that living in these academic discipline-based learning groups would provide them with opportunities to attend lectures together, review course material, participate in

collaborative learning opportunities, meet informally with faculty in co-curricular events, all under the mentoring of a senior student. Such an emphasis on participation by program of study implied notions of shared characteristics, goals and pursuits. This was consistent with my assumptions that membership in a cluster would provide students with some kind of melting pot identity by bringing together those who by virtue of joining, came with common aspirations, attitudes and expectations.

The discourse of community that operated within the cluster program placed high value on cooperation, compliance, and communal norms, and assumed students would enter the program with similar backgrounds, goals, and culture by virtue of their “shared” status. Institutional profile data indicated that these first-year students would be 19 years of age, primarily white, coming directly from high schools in Ontario, with parental income at the middle to high levels, and high grades in their final year in high school. There was little recognition of students entering with multiple tribal identities and allegiances or if they did exist, it was assumed that such differences could be assimilated into some kind of unified whole.

The Discourse of Collective Harmony

Students in the cluster operated from different and often competing discourses which very much impacted on how they experienced the cluster. I realized from my meetings with them, that the word “community” was not part of their lexicon. It was seen as too earnest a term to use in describing their living/learning environment. Instead they talked about the cluster as a place to be friendly, and where everyone would get

along with one another. They lived within a discourse of “collective harmony” or “friendliness,” different from the discourse of community which assumed common goals and values and the expectations that those in the cluster would develop strong bonds of friendship and support to all who were members. Over time, many of the students came to realize that they did not have to like everyone in their cluster, that they did not have to socialize with them, and that it was okay to be with smaller subgroups as long as everyone remained “friendly.” This etiquette of friendliness required only a general level of courtesy, allowing students to form tribal subcultures with loyalties to one another which were stronger than their commitment to broader communal cluster norms. Some of the cluster students were critical of these tribal loyalties which they thought undermined commitment to the cluster as a whole, longing for the communal activities in the beginning of the Fall semester when no one was excluded. Many others found their tribal subgroups provided them with friends with whom they had more common, recognizing individual differences in members’ values, goals, and interests. It did not bother them that such smaller groups would exclude others as long as the discourse of collective friendliness was practiced.

The community values of the cluster, though never fully made explicit to the students, by Winter time, were seen as coercive. In their second semester, most of the students did not want the responsibility of having to look out for one another nor did they want to have to get along with everyone. Instead, they wanted to be like everyone else in residence, free to spend their time with close friends, even if it meant having to breach the

cluster's social norms by limiting or even eliminating contact with the rest of the members in the cluster.

The clusters, in the process of building allegiance to the institution and inculcating students to its customs and mores, socialized students into the institution's values where individualism and autonomy were recognized and rewarded. In doing so, the value "community" became muffled, drowned out by these more powerful forces.

The Discourse of the Marketplace

The discourse of community spoke to the notion of the common good and a common unity; the discourse of collective harmony required minimal cooperation, and instead advanced the creation of tribal subgroups; but there was another discourse that exerted tremendous influence on how and what students did within the cluster--the discourse of the marketplace. This discourse placed value on efficiency and productivity where time was a valued commodity, and wasted effort and energy were deplored. Many students operated from an "efficiency principle" by which they subjected their academic activities to a cost-benefit analysis, limiting those activities which gave them the least payback in terms of grades for their efforts. Students in both of the clusters seemed to be in a hurry to get on with their lives, and showed little tolerance for activities, courses, and professors who contributed to inefficient practices. Within this discourse, students viewed university as preparation for an outcome oriented world which rewarded production with minimal costs. Likewise, students saw the cluster as a means to maximize their learning while reducing waste and inefficiencies in their studying. They valued the cluster for

giving them easy access to others in their program who could answer questions, explain material, and divide the workload through some kind of distribution of tasks. These activities were performed not out of a discourse of community which valued collaboration but out of a discourse of efficiency and the cluster gave sanction to these values by virtue of its design.

Doing the Cluster 'Properly'

Many students were attracted to the cluster program because it situated them with other students who were in their same degree program. By bringing together other like-minded individuals, the cluster was seen as a safe haven, limiting exposure to those whom they considered 'other' by virtue of their discipline of study. In appealing to students' initial fears of anonymity and large classes, the cluster offered safety and security but in doing so reinforced disciplinary differences. In traditional discourses of community, such divisions would be viewed as divisive, creating fragmentation and subverting allegiance away from the common good. But in an institution that operated under such academic divisions, the cluster helped students become inculcated into a system that valued such patterns of practice, and some were more successfully than others.

For the "Group of Seven" women in the science cluster, such separation limited outside distractions and enabled them to stay focused on their school work. They studied together, explained and clarified concepts to one another, solved problem sets together, often ate together, and made the collective decision to limit their involvement in extra

curricular events in the Fall semester to focus more time on their academics. In many ways this group epitomized the 'correct' or 'proper' way the whole cluster was originally envisioned, with shared goals, interests, collaboration, and a strong commitment to academics. The three members I met with individually spoke about an ethos of hard work, and a willingness to make academics their priority. They were very successful high school students who entered with high grades and professional and graduate school aspirations and had strong family support. They brought with them a set of values, beliefs and high ability congruent with academic success, having been enculturated into this knowledge by virtue of their background. Their words and stories indicated that they were less novice at being novices than others in the cluster. But in spite of their success, others in the cluster downplayed their achievements which they saw coming at the cost of limited socializing, and limited involvement in co-curricular activities. They may have done the cluster 'correctly' from a program design perspective, but other cluster students were critical of such "keenness" in terms of the high costs of how it was achieved. Such acquiescence to institutional norms of academic success were at odds with peer norms which highly valued socializing or at least a balance between the two.

Conclusion

In this study, I sought to analyze patterns of students' experiences within two learning clusters to understand how university appeared to them, within the context of differing and competing discourses of community. By telling tales from their perspectives, I hope I have honoured their words in providing readers, particularly those

who interact with entering year students and policy makers, with a “different kind of lens,” to help them place students’ day-to-day experiences and their actions as learners within the broader political, social and cultural framework of the university and Canadian society. As I come to the end of this story, I realize that much has still been left untold. I have come to realize that the discourses that have shaped the cluster program and in particular my role as narrator means that some questions have still been excluded, in particular questions about power and knowledge. This study is then just one slice of students’ world from one set of tales and I encourage others to follow with their own stories, to tell tales that give voice to the powerless whose stories seldom get told.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter to Cluster Peer Helpers

July 23, 1997

Dear

Katherine Elliott suggested you would be a good person to contact regarding my request to conduct research with the University College Connection program. I am currently a student at the University of Toronto where I am completing my doctoral thesis on learning clusters. The purpose of my research is to understand how students place their cluster participation within the context of their university experience. In particular I want to focus on how first year students in a learning cluster interpret their learning environment; the patterns of collective action, if any, that students in a cluster develop in their academic work; and the set of beliefs, perspectives and coping strategies these students acquired related to their educational experience.

To answer these kinds of questions, I would like to study 2 clusters that are part of UCC, one in the BA program and one in the BSc program. The kind of data I will need will require me to get to know you and your cluster students. This might include attending the Orientation meeting you have with your cluster, attending regular cluster meetings, walking to class with cluster students, attending class with them and through their invitation, attending other cluster related events. My role in these activities will be that of participant observer. My means of data collection would be through field notes.

I will also need to conduct both semi-structured and open-ended interviews with cluster students as well as informal conversations with the participants, you, the program coordinator and faculty. Many of these interviews will be taped. I will seek individual permission before such taping occurred. These recordings and the transcripts of the interviews will only be heard by me and will be destroyed upon completion of my thesis. This study will not be an evaluation of the program. It will not judge the effectiveness of UCC, you as peer or the cluster itself. Instead, the emphasis will be on understanding from a student perspective, what it is like to be part of a cluster and how this impacts on a student's educational experience. I'd also like to emphasize the fact that as the UCC Peer responsible for your particular cluster, there may be times when it may not be appropriate for me to attend certain activities. I will respect your decisions on these matters.

Would you be interested in participating in this project? Please let Katherine know as soon as possible if this is something you would be willing to be part of. If you have questions about the study or would like more information, please contact Katherine. I can follow up with more information, if you decide to participate.

To provide a bit of background information on me, I work at the University of Guelph in Learning & Writing Services and was one of the founders of the UCC program. As a result, I have a very strong commitment to the program and am most excited about the opportunity to find out from students what being in a cluster is all about.

Thank you for considering this request. Do think seriously about your involvement and if you decide that this is something you want to participate in, call Katherine at (519) 824-4120, ext. 2365 or email her at kelliott@oyfs.uoguelph.ca

Nancy Schmidt

Appendix B: Letter of Consent

Dear University College Connection Participant:

I am a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto where I am completing my doctoral studies on learning clusters in higher education. The purpose of my study is to understand how students place their cluster participation within the context of their learning experience. In particular, I want to focus on: how first year students in a learning cluster interpret their learning environment; the patterns of collective action, if any, that cluster students develop in their academic work; and the beliefs and coping strategies cluster students acquire related to their university experience.

Through your participation, I hope to better understand how students in a learning cluster make sense of their university experience. Such information would be helpful in the design of academic support programs for entering students in their transition to university.

The interview(s) I will have with you will be audio taped. The recordings and transcripts of the interviews will only be heard and seen by me and will be destroyed upon completion of my thesis and all related work. No participants will be identified by name in the thesis document or in any documents produced as a result of this research.

Written feedback of the results produced from the research will be provided to the participants at the completion of my research study.

If you have any questions or concerns in regards to this research, please contact me at (519) 763-2406 or through email at nschmidt@uoguelph.ca or contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Jamie-Lynn Magnusson at (416) 923-6641, x2216 or Katherine Elliott, the Coordinator of UCC at 824-4120, x2365.

Thank you for your time.

Nancy Schmidt

I _____ agree to participate in the above described research. I have been given adequate information regarding the nature of the research and I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time, even after I have signed the written consent form and the study has commenced. I permit the researcher to use verbatim quotations in the thesis document, but understand that I will not be identified by name in these quotations nor will the quotes be used in such a way to reveal my identity. I also give permission to allow Dr. Magnusson, the thesis supervisor, consent to view the transcripts for supervisory purposes.

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C: Science Cluster Participants in the Study, Dates of Interviews, and Number of Interviews

Science Students	Date of 1st Interviews	Date of 2nd Interviews	Date of 3rd Interviews
Olivia	Sept. 19, 1997	Nov.13, 1997	left the cluster
Katherine	Sept. 21, 1997	Nov. 17, 1997	March 3, 1998
Brenda	Sept. 26, 1997		
Barbara	Sept. 26, 1997	Dec. 8, 1997	left university
Kate	Sept. 26, 1997	Nov. 17, 1997	March 12, 1998
Jean	Sept. 27, 1997	Nov. 25, 1997	March 5, 1998
Joan	Oct. 15, 1997	Dec. 8, 1997	March 17, 1998
Miriam	Oct. 16, 1997		
Ginny	Oct. 16, 1997	Dec. 8, 1997	March 10, 1998
Laura	Oct. 17, 1997	Nov. 28, 1997	March 9, 1998
Carol	Oct. 17, 1997	Nov. 28, 1997	March 9, 1998
Kerry	Oct. 17, 1997	Dec. 8, 1997	March 18, 1998
Sandy	Oct. 28, 1997		
Susan	Oct. 31, 1997		
Rebecca	Oct. 31, 1997		
Peer	Oct. 27, 1997	Feb. 12, 1998	April 23, 1998
RA	Oct. 17, 1997		
Total # Interviews	17	11	9

Appendix D: Arts Cluster Participants, Dates of Interviews, and Number of Interviews

Arts Students	Date of 1st Interviews	Date of 2nd Interviews	Date of 3rd Interviews
Ben	Oct. 1, 1997	Nov. 25, 1997	March 17, 1998
Jamie	Oct. 2, 1997	Nov. 26, 1997	March 23, 1998
Mike	Oct. 2, 1997	Nov. 6, 1997	March 12, 1998
Ryan	Oct. 2, 1997		
Meredith	Oct. 3, 1997	Nov. 10, 1997	March 5, 1998
Kim	Oct. 3, 1997	Nov. 12, 1997	March 6, 1998
Ann	Oct. 3, 1997	Dec. 4, 1997	
Janet	Oct. 6, 1997	Nov. 26, 1997	left university
Liz	Oct. 6, 1997		March 23, 1998
Tom	Oct. 9, 1997		
Peer	Nov. 27, 1997	Feb. 12, 1998	April 22, 1998
RA	Nov. 28, 1997		
Total # of Interviews	12	9	7