



## Researching Up: Triangulating Qualitative Research To Influence the Public Debate of “On-Time” College Graduation

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**Background:** The field of higher education abounds with qualitative research aimed at highlighting the needs, struggles, strengths, and motivations of academically struggling students. However, because of the small-scale nature of these studies, they rarely enter the public debate or impact institutional policy concerning access, remediation, academic standards, and student literacy. Recently, educational researchers have called for qualitative researchers to “power up” their data by conducting meta-analyses that compare, combine, and aggregate findings across individual qualitative studies.

**Purpose/Objectives:** This study pilots a qualitative meta-analysis of three existing, small-scale qualitative studies in education to illustrate the potential of cross-case analyses to build a more influential knowledge base. The findings of the meta-analysis contest the notion that “time-to-degree” is a valid marker of a student’s success in college. The article also offers a critique of the meta-analysis process and points to possibilities and challenges for other researchers to carry out similar cross-case studies.

**Research Design:** This qualitative meta-analysis of academically at-risk college students from three campuses of the City University of New York (CUNY) employs a form of cross-case research based in the constructionist approach, which generates data-based evidence in a narrative form and forges connections among different disciplines and data collected using a variety of ethnographic methodologies (interviewing, observation, textual analysis). Following a thematic analysis of each individual study, this meta-analysis follows the general tenets of grounded theory to code for the most frequent, emergent themes, or organizing principles across the studies. The researchers further focused on a single overarching theme (contesting “on time” graduation as a marker of academic success) to pilot in the cross-case analysis.

**Conclusions/Recommendations:** This meta-analysis study contests time-to-degree as a valid criterion for evaluating students’ academic success in college. The findings emphasize the importance of evaluating the progress of academically at-risk students within a demographic, social-cultural and institutional context. Factors such as work and class status, parenting and family issues, as well as mental and social health challenges can significantly impede students’ capacity to graduate within traditional two-year or four-year time frames. The pilot meta-analysis provides a model for other small-scale qualitative researchers to engage in coordinated cross-case analyses as a means of making their research more robust and generalizable. Ultimately, the authors claim that qualitative researchers within higher education can use meta-analyses to power up small-scale studies to impact institutional policies and academic practice. They conclude that researchers should find ways to “go public” with their data, so that they may have a greater impact on the policies affecting students and institutions.

After years sweating through the happy toil of designing research projects, collecting field data, and writing and revising separate qualitative studies, our finished products landed with a whisper rather than a drum roll. Though our small, methodologically different, qualitative research studies about academically at-risk college students made strong claims about student literacy, classroom culture, institutional neglect, and the complexity of student lives, taken separately each study lacked resonance and breadth, and failed to spark institutional or public conversation about these issues. Sitting with completed projects, we wondered if it was possible to “power up” our research by triangulating the data from our studies into a more far-reaching study that could meet our original goal: to impact the educational debates over academic standards, testing, and access to higher education that continually rage within our public university and throughout the nation.

Our intentions were boosted when we turned to the methodological claims of Ruthellen Josselson (2006) and Michelle Fine (2006), who call upon small-scale qualitative researchers to attempt integration of their work and, in so doing, create “a joint multilayered jigsaw puzzle” that both retains the detail and richness of the original studies and builds a more robust and powerful knowledge base (Josselson, 2006, p. 4). The project that follows answers Josselson’s query: What would a meta-analysis of qualitative<sup>1</sup> studies look like? A question we expand further: Could the triangulation of qualitative studies develop new knowledge as well as increase the resonance and persuasiveness of small-scale educational research?

Though the methodologies of research synthesis have long been used successfully for combining quantitative studies in education (Ahn, Ames, & Myers, 2012), less has been written about cross-case analysis of qualitative research. Noblit and Hare (1988) proposed meta-analysis of ethnographic case studies in order to enhance initial findings without losing the richness and site-based focus of the original primary studies. Schofield (2002) presents a “case study method” that argues that it is possible to achieve greater generalizability and applicability of qualitative studies through the “aggregation” or “comparison” of individual qualitative studies. Like us, her “hope is that ... meta-ethnography (meta-analysis) may be able to produce new, more inclusive concepts that work better than those from any particular study” (p. 198). Major and Savin-Baden (2011) detail how meta-analysis of qualitative research has been successful in the health and professional fields, but fail to point to effective meta-analysis in educational research. Similarly, our literature review yielded a dearth of research that attempted this powering up of qualitative, ethnographic studies. While a few methodology-based articles offer small examples of meta-ethnography (Doyle, 2003; Purcell-Gates, Perry, & Briseno, 2011; Rice, 2002), all of the existing studies focus on cross-case analysis of other researchers’ data, not a collaborative

meta-analysis of researchers' own completed studies, such as we propose here. Through this project, we hope to demonstrate how small-scale qualitative researchers can collaborate on their own work, within and across disciplines, to power up data, and thereby gain a greater audience and impact for their work.

Thus, this article has three distinct but overlapping purposes: to pilot an exemplar of a cross-case methodology that demonstrates how existing small-scale qualitative studies can be combined to develop stronger data claims; to show how triangulating these small-scale studies produced a specific data claim (in this case that "on time" graduation rates are a faulty criterion for evaluating college student success) that helped us respond to policy decisions made at our public university; and to show the potential of triangulation of small-scale studies to help teachers and academic researchers more forcefully and effectively enter the public debate over literacy, standards, and educational access.

## METHODOLOGY

In completing this project we have employed a form of cross-case analysis that Major and Savin-Baden (2011, p. 656) call the constructionist approach, which favors the "presentation of higher order themes" in a narrative form and takes into account connections among different disciplines. To show how this sort of higher-order triangulation can work, we used our three completed studies, which were conducted independently at three campuses of the City University of New York (CUNY), and were developed out of three different disciplines: urban education, psychology, and composition. As we read one another's studies in preparation for a panel presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, we realized that though we had not collaborated previously, each study presented similar fluid, context-rich data on students' lives and educational experiences. We were struck by the substantial intersections among our findings and realized that our studies had both the strong overlap and necessary differences to make the kind of meta-analysis Josselson (2006) calls for worthy and possible.<sup>2</sup> (See Appendix A for a description of each individual study.) Though the participants in our studies varied in age, race, ethnicity, and other demographic factors, the cohorts all shared one important trait: They were academically struggling students who would all be considered "remedial" or "developmental" students under CUNY's current admission standards.

Our methodologies varied, yet they still had plenty in common: We used similar ethnographic data-collection approaches (interviewing, analysis of student writing, and observation), as well as similar methods of thematic data analysis and a narrative writing style. We also realized that though there was some overlap in our conclusions, our studies did not paint a singular "line of argument," offering complexity and nuance, rather than replication (Major & Savin-Baden, 2011, p. 656). Combined, our three studies tell a fuller, more complex and therefore stronger and more powerful story of academically underprepared students and the substantial obstacles they face in attaining a college degree. Thus, through the process of cross-study integration described below, we enhanced our overlapping findings, adding texture and nuance to the singular perspective of our original studies.

To complete our meta-analysis, we used the general tenets of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to recursively work through the data without setting a hypothesis for what we were going to find. Our initial step was to read, code, discuss, and compare our findings, looking for emergent themes, or organizing principles, across the three studies. As themes surfaced, we categorized them and revisited each study looking for instances of each. After further comparison, we documented the most important themes that appeared with the greatest frequency (Charmaz, 2005; Dey, 1999). This process of emergent coding led us to a number of convergent themes related to challenges to students' academic success: the significance of pedagogy and programmatic structures; the importance of relationships (faculty/staff-student, student-student, student-family); the role of high expectations and academic rigor (or lack thereof); physical and mental health concerns of students; and the impact of race, ethnicity, and class. These organizing principles were then further categorized, as we sought to highlight the interconnections among the studies and confirm which themes had sufficient evidence of support (Charmaz, 2005).

As we completed this phase of integrating our studies, one "overarching theme" emerged more clearly: Every student in our study had outside-the-classroom challenges and roadblocks to their academic success (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In all three studies, from a variety of institutional contexts and student cohorts with striking differences, we began to recognize how difficult it was for our participants to succeed in college in a timely way. In their interviews and written memoirs, the students told stories of mental health crises, dependent-care issues, financial troubles, and inconsistent housing that prevented them from progressing toward degree on a "typical" timeline. Not one of the students in our cohort was on a traditional trajectory toward college graduation (defined as a BA or BS degree in four years). Even accounting for the national trend that today's students take longer to graduate than students from past decades, the students in our study were off the "common chart."

Simultaneous to our process of data triangulation, the latest round of media-hyped, local and national controversy over student success and academic standards hit our university. A key component to this latest call for accountability outcomes in schools focused on equating academic success with speed, in direct contrast to the story our data told, where slow, recursive progress indicated educational achievement. In particular, writers in the popular press, politicians, and educational administrators throughout the U.S. seemed overly focused on time-to-degree as a crucial criterion by which to judge student and institutional success. Yet the students in our studies, many of whom we considered to be "successful," were creeping their way through the educational system in good standing. Through triangulating our data, we could show *why* students were not meeting the traditional timeline for attaining a two-year associate's degree and four-year baccalaureate, what is often termed the "on time" graduation rate.

Having identified an emergent theme that conflicted with the current emphasis of on-time graduation as an academic success marker, we returned to our data to look for the most important factors impeding students' timely progress toward a college degree.<sup>3</sup> We began this more directed process of triangulation by tracing each of our core findings across the other two studies through a thematically driven content analysis. After coding each of our studies for issues that profoundly influenced time-to-

degree for the participants, we wrote the multimodal discourse that follows. Though one of us wrote an initial version of each section, we all edited and reinforced one another's work during the revision process. At the end of the article we critique not only the overall worthiness of this kind of meta-analysis of qualitative studies, but also the specific methodological decisions we made along the way.

#### EMERGENT THEME 1: TRIANGULATING CLASS STATUS

The financial stability of the student cohort in our studies limited student success in college in a variety of ways, none more profound than the ability of members of the lower class to even start a college career. Low-wage earners often face an economic conundrum: They cannot advance in their jobs because of their lack of education, yet working full time prevents them from enrolling in and completing college courses. In all three studies, there were a number of students whose academic progress had been delayed by economic factors and the need to earn a full-time living before earning a college degree. For instance, April Chambers spent years working as a "domestic" before going back for her GED and then more years before she applied to college. Similarly, it took 14 years from the time Carmen Martinez finished high school to set foot inside a college classroom despite her self-described "hunger" for learning; as a high school student, she was counseled away from college and into the world of work. It took her 10 years to get a college degree. Similarly, Rosa Santana earned her AA and BA degrees 20 years apart, the latter just prior to retirement. Sandra Victor completed a BA and an MA in eight years, the former after many failed attempts to restart. Florence White, a secretary for a civil service agency, returned to college 26 years after first attending.

Once they are in college, work hours and academic hours are in constant competition for students' time. Based on student questionnaire data, of 21 freshmen in one cohort, nine students were holding down jobs, working from four to 25 hours per week, even though all but three of the students in this study had just graduated from high school and were under 20 years of age. All 14 of the participants in another study were working 40 hours per week at city agency jobs. Because the third study did not specifically uncover working hours, we could tell who was working only by those who mentioned it unprompted during interviews. At minimum, of our 44 student participants across three institutions in the CUNY system, 26 (or 59%) reported working full or part time.<sup>4</sup> This sample matches quantitative data provided by the university. According to the 2006 CUNY Student Experience Survey (City University of New York Office of Institutional Research), 65% of CUNY full-time students work, with 34% working more than 20 hours per week. Of course, the number of hours students work limits the number of hours they can spend on schoolwork outside the classroom. Hence, there is an established statistical relationship between hours worked and time-to-degree (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2007). Academic progress is slowed by excessive work schedules in a number of ways: the inability to take required courses at the time they are offered (this is especially detrimental when it disrupts a required course sequence); lack of time to do homework, leading to low grades and failed courses; lack of time to make use of supporting academic services like writing centers or academic advising; and the difficulty of participating in group projects or extracurricular activities (Lehman, 2002).

Looking closely at the financial situations of the individual students in our studies supports the quantitative data above and tells much more of the story of how educational progress and work are in conflict. Eduardo, a student in one of our studies, is older than a traditional college student (30 years of age) and works more than half time at a restaurant. He is motivated, attends all of his classes, and makes great progress in his writing during his first semester. Still, Eduardo reported that he was often tired in class because he was working until 2 a.m. at the restaurant. At the start of the academic year, Eduardo cut back his working hours to fit school in, but clearly, the amount he worked meant he was going to proceed through the requirements of his BA degree at much less than full pace. Even in his first semester, Eduardo was already feeling the pressure of both exhaustion and tight finances. By his midterm interview, he had upped his work hours to 24 from 20. He was hopeful that he could make it to the end of the fall semester and then double-up on hours during winter break. For Eduardo, the pressure to earn money while attending school will always be a conflict. He was able to succeed in his basic writing course, passing the university-required writing exam and the class (the course was graded pass/fail). But as school work intensifies, requiring more out-of-classroom hours (and possibly more demanding, college-level assignments), a student like Eduardo is going to experience increased conflict between short-term financial needs and long-term educational goals. Eduardo's story is indicative of the financial dilemma faced by many students in our study.

Other students further demonstrate this conflict. Sandy works as an administrative assistant on Long Island; Wilma and Ana work as college assistants in the department of African American Studies; and Parminder works as a security guard. Such students reported that their work posed logistical difficulties in arranging an academic schedule. Because there are so few remedial classes offered at the college they attend, and they are offered during daytime hours only, many students struggle to fit classes around their work schedules. This challenge diminished both their desires and abilities to persist. One student laments that the only way to maintain full-time status was to adopt a schedule that kept her at the college six days per week, a schedule that is not tenable in the long run.

Beyond the need to work, many in the cohort have financially tenuous support for their education. Dell is supported by his "off the books" housecleaning mother; Jeannie is a single mother supported by family members; Giovanni is living with his family in "the projects"; Jarrod lives in transitional housing after losing both his parents and spending time in jail; and Lelania lives in a group home for young persons who have spent most of their lives in foster care. Clearly, students without stable incomes have compromised living situations, which hinder their focus on academic progress. Christina describes losing her home, friends, educational opportunities, and health to heroin addiction. Happily, after nine months in a women's sober house program, she was living her "second chance" in a subsidized apartment. It is only when she has a stable living environment that Christina is able to make progress toward her degree.

Of course, the stable income that leads to stable housing is generated from stable employment, a conundrum for the participants

in our studies since full-time employment also had a negative impact on time-to-degree. All the participants in one study had steady incomes because this cohort was enrolled in a worker education program (WEP) that required students to be over 25 years of age and members of a labor union. The students in this cohort were all full-time civil servants employed as clerical and secretarial workers by a variety of New York City agencies. Thus, they had stable jobs with working-class to lower-middle-class salaries. In addition, these participants benefitted from tuition assistance provided by their unions to students who attend WEP. This assistance was a crucial factor in enabling these students to attend college. As one student says:

My union local was sponsoring an adult education program that offered 24 tuition-free credits toward an undergraduate degree. It was a chance of a lifetime and right on time. At this point, it did not matter what the majors were. Free was free.

For all of the students in the worker education program, their jobs helped provide access to college, even covering some of the costs. And certainly their stable income provided a degree of security that students in the other two studies did not have. However, working full-time jobs in order to maintain access to free tuition impacted students' ability to progress in a timely manner toward a college degree, despite the fact that the WEP was designed with students' work schedules and careers in mind. One student says:

First and foremost I think this is a program that is catered, or designed, for the adult learner and it tries to make it easier for adults to participate. . . . Here in this program you can take one class one night a week, and that makes it very appealing.

WEP provided students more flexible schedules than the other two colleges studied, enabling students to work full time and fulfill their financial obligations. Because the program was designed to accommodate students' work schedules and time constraints, rather than a traditional but arbitrary need to graduate quickly, students are better able to persist. However, average time to graduation in the WEP was six years—and this included the many students who entered with transfer credits. While the WEP program provides a model for how to offer students access to and support in college that can lead to success, even with this support students still struggle to progress speedily toward a degree. Though the WEP understood that students' need to juggle work and college slowed their progress through the program, it relied upon its poor time-to-degree statistics being overlooked by the university because of the tiny size of the program. In fact, one instructor in this study commented:

There is a shift away from funding precisely that kind of student in the CUNY system and going for these undergraduates at the day level who graduate in four years. So, [WEP is] already under fire in that way. The vision of the ideal CUNY student is not the WEP student, so the whole system is skewed against them. That's the big overarching system.

In short, our qualitative data reveal the deep connections between the precarious financial status of students and their success in college as judged by their ability to attain a college degree in the traditional four years. With rising tuition and associated school expenditures (books, technology costs, public transportation) the amount of students' economic resources devoted to college has increased exponentially in the post GI-bill, post baby-boom era of college education. Thus, students' socio-economic background plays an increasingly crucial role in time-to-degree. In terms of class status, the CUNY student cohort differs strikingly from the national college student cohort. The 2002<sup>5</sup> Student Experience Survey from the CUNY Office of Institutional Research reveals that 38% of CUNY students had a family income of less than \$20,000 per year. For community college students, the number rises to 50%. Furthermore, 22% of CUNY students support at least one child, while 13% are single parents, making child support a significant factor in CUNY students' financial picture. Forty-six percent of CUNY students are the first in their families to attend college, indicating that close to half of the students come from working-class backgrounds, where money spent on education is not the norm. The low household income and general economic instability of this cohort of CUNY students plays a significant role in their ability to achieve academic goals within traditional time frames.

Despite differences in students' ages, hours worked, type of job, or college attended, the evidence shows that the need to work and the troubled financial status of the students—even with the income earned from work—had a direct impact on the age at which our participants attended college, their ability to take classes, satisfactorily complete the work in their classes, maintain passing grades, and accumulate credits. Financial life factors contributed mightily to complicating the logistics of college: scheduling conflicts, time to study, ability to meet with professors and work collaboratively with other students outside the classroom, as well as ability to pay tuition. Students' lack of financial resources and the hours they work to create some degree of financial stability substantially increased their time-to-degree. Though economic class factors and time-to-degree were not primary focal points of any of our original studies, the strength of this finding, and the deep implications for university policy, emerged as we viewed our studies in concert.

## EMERGENT THEME 2: TRIANGULATING FAMILY AND PARENTAL CONSTRAINTS

Though none of our three studies asked explicitly about them, children and family emerged as significant obstacles to "on-time" degree completion in a variety of complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Across the three studies, many of the students who were parents expressed the passionate belief that children were a crucial motivation to attend college. Rosa speaks for many of our participants when she explains why she went back to school: "I felt I needed to be an example to my children. They needed to know that higher education was an attainable goal." Jeannie, a single parent who describes herself as "both father and mother" to her young adult son, also decided to attend college in order to be a role model and motivation for him as he flounders post-high school, unsure of what to do with his life. Jeannie quite consciously connects her college learning (specifically from psychology and child development classes) with her parenting and argues that being a student has made her a better parent while being a parent reinforces her desire to be in school, despite her academic struggles. Jeannie wants her son to do what she did not do—get a

degree at a more “traditional” age—and she desperately hopes to vicariously travel that road with him while also acting as a role model. Dell expresses this theme of family as motivation even more broadly. He sees his college degree as a vehicle to improve the lives of the women who raised him.

At the same time, children (especially though not exclusively young children) presented a substantial obstacle to timely degree completion for the parents in our studies. Ana, the single mother of an 18-month-old child, expresses most simply and clearly the stresses of her dual role as mom and college student and the challenges of sustaining this momentum over the course of her studies.

I have so many things to do. I am literally going crazy. I'm taking 5 classes and I'm here [in college] from Monday to Saturday. And when I get home . . . then I have to feed my daughter, then make dinner, then clean up, go upstairs, pick up the mess she's made, and then start on my homework. It's too much but I have to do it.

Similarly, Carmen is a clear example of how motherhood can impact the earning of degree credits in the traditional four-year time frame. Carmen never took more than two classes per semester and often only enrolled in one course. She also stopped attending college for a couple of semesters in order to care for her own mother when she was diagnosed with cancer. Sandwiched between two generations with immediate needs greater than her own long-term educational goals, college completion was a decade-long proposition for Carmen. In a section of her memoir entitled, “Mommy’s in College Now,” she writes of the daily challenges and guilt associated with pursuing a college degree.

Sometimes I'd feel selfish for depriving them of their regular routine on the night I was in class. The sitter preferred to watch them in her own apartment, but luckily we lived in the same building. . . . Up we would go in the elevator, me trying to catch up on their day because I knew once we got home, it was straight to bed, they had school in the morning. However, this was a lot easier said than done. Imagine trying to listen and respond to the complaint of one sister doing this to another; or being informed by one child that she does not eat what the sitter served and was still hungry; or that tomorrow was a class trip, or that she wasn't able to finish her assignment, because she needed my help, or etc., etc., etc.

Phyllis, another adult student, also left school when problems with her adolescent children became too overwhelming to manage along with her studies. Fortunately, when things stabilized with her sons, she made her way back to college. Reading her student record without knowing her life, one would assume that Phyllis was not dedicated. But again, the immediate needs of children supplanted the educational goals of the primary caregiver.

In Deborah’s case, when her son faced a serious mental health crisis she was on the verge of leaving school—less than a semester away from receiving her BA. But Deborah was convinced to stay and finish by Caroline, a beloved academic advisor in the Worker Education Program. Without this kind of personalized support, Deborah is convinced that her family troubles would have derailed her from completing her degree. She says:

I am grateful to Caroline who is the only person with whom I shared some of that which I was experiencing [around my son]. Caroline encouraged me when I was about to leave school because the stress seemed to be too much.

In great contrast to Deborah’s experience, other students in the cohort experienced the more typical anonymity of CUNY campuses where students are hard pressed to find this kind of personal support needed to overcome emotional, time-consuming family and life situations that can hinder academic success and even cause students to leave school. Linda leans on her adjunct-faculty writing teacher for support, as she tries to make her way in school as a young single parent. She completes the course while meeting regularly with her instructor during office hours, yet makes a poor decision not to take the university-required writing exam, a choice that will delay her degree completion later on. In an interview, the adjunct faculty member questions her own training and knowledge of institutional rules, rhetorically asking, “It’s my first semester, how would I know that if she did not take the exam her registration would be stopped?” Though the instructor tries to support her students in ways that are far beyond the academic requirements of the course, her lack of institutional knowledge leads to a delay in this young mother’s progress to degree.

Across the three studies, parents also played a significant role in students’ journeys to degree completion, even for those who were now parents themselves. However, parents’ roles were frequently ambivalent. Sometimes parents fostered educational ambition in their children; sometimes they couldn’t. While many parents wanted their children to succeed academically, they very often had no idea how to realistically support the attainment of their children’s educational goals.

Examples of parents with low educational levels who fought for better educational opportunities for their children—getting them bussed to desegregated schools, bringing home discarded books from a job as a porter at a private university for the kids to read, instilling in their kids the idea that “an education is something that cannot be taken from you”—sat side by side with stories of parents whose educational aspirations for their children were constrained by what they believed was possible given the raced, classed, and gendered nature of educational opportunity for working-class students of color (the majority in all three studies).

Carmen is very clear about this tension:

Although Mami had a sense that a college degree could better one’s financial situation, living the life of a poor, working class woman, college was not at the top of her priorities—survival was. And that is why I believe she told us *if you go to college. . . .*

Carmen's mom feared creating aspirations in her daughters that could not be met. Lisa, an African American adult student, confirms this sense that parents communicated societal constraints to their children.

I also grew up in an era where women, especially Black women, you weren't prepared for an education that was going to lead you to college. You were prepared for an education that would get you a high school diploma and then you would probably get married and have children.

Rosa affirms this sense that parental aspirations were held back by the very real limits they saw imposed in a racist society. "Our greatest educational goal was to finish high school and get a white-collar job."

While these parents valued education in the abstract, they were often unable to translate this lofty ideal into concrete support for their children's education. As parents, they had no idea how to intercede in schools on their children's behalf. Ivy, the child of Chinese immigrant parents, writes:

My parents didn't know anything about the educational system here. We went to Catholic school because it was safe. I have a set of older cousins, so we basically did what the Chungs did. . . . I think the most glaring thing was when my cousin's daughter was applying to high school and they went on tour after tour and she asked a lot of questions and they had family discussions and in just one hour they had more discussions [about education] than I've had all my life with my parents. . . . When I went for a tour of my high school, we walked around, she had no questions, my mom. What did we look at? The bathroom. That's it.

This sense of parental disconnect from her educational experiences led Ivy to attend and drop out of no less than three colleges before enrolling in the Worker Education Program as an adult.

Gillian explains her own delayed college attendance underscoring her sense that "my whole educational process was one where I feel like everything just happened by default, there was no planning ... my parents were not really involved." April is succinct in summing up the reasons for her parents' lack of support for her educational aspirations: "My parents did not attend high school, so I think they parented from their limited experience; they couldn't give what they did not have."

Many of the traditional-age freshmen in the cohort were less understanding of their parents' limitations. Sandy, in particular, defined college success as "leav[ing] family behind." Sandy's central compromise is grounded in her decision to distance herself from friends and family members that do not understand the college experience. Sandy worries that these previous connections will impede her capacity to grow as a student and scholar. Although Sandy's academic journey is in its initial stages, she already feels the need to meet new people with whom she will share an intellectual connection. For her, separation from family becomes a survival strategy when she finds that relatives are unable to support her pursuit of a college degree. Wilma, too, feels rejected by a family that has been denied the opportunity of higher education and, in turn, rebuffs her desire to complete a college degree. She articulates the sense that college separates students from their families. "It's not that they're not proud, because they are. But, because they're proud, they don't like me. . . . They think I'm better than them." Other students, in two of the studies, affirmed Sandy's and Wilma's sense that lack of family support could be an obstacle to college success and that distancing oneself from family was a necessary, albeit painful and potentially risky, strategy that could leave them without emotional or material support while pursuing their degrees. Hence, this bid for independence from family in the interest of obtaining a degree could easily become an obstacle to timely degree completion because of the emotional and financial isolation it implies.

Both the children and parents of the participants in our studies presented complex emotional and material challenges to students' academic success. Our participants' lived experiences of family were quite far from those of the (stereo) typical childless college student with ample parental financial and emotional support. Families were both a crucial factor in these students' educational ambition and at times a very real burden that slowed their progress to degree.

### EMERGENT THEME 3: TRIANGULATING MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL FACTORS

Students across the three studies described the dissociative educational experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. Ivy, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, stated that she "never felt comfortable and [was] always an outsider [in high school]." Upon graduation, she felt like "an inmate being released after serving his prison term." Another adult student, Deborah, discusses the impact of racism on her experiences within a recently desegregated high school. As Deborah reflects, "I was attending a high school under racial stress ... [the poor Black and Hispanic students] were left to fend for themselves." She affirms that her parents' commitments to academic success for their children helped her persist despite the obstacles, while others "might feel inferior and withdraw." Similarly, Florence, a student in the WEP wrote in her memoir:

My days at my new school were not good. I met discrimination and other people's prejudices for the first time. . . . I was the only black student in my new class. . . . The teacher was the one who chose for whatever reason to separate me from the other students.

Florence's memoir also reveals an instance in which she qualified for acceptance into a private school, but was passed over for a white student whose credentials and admissions test scores were not better than her own. Florence affirms:

I received a notice that another student and I had received the same highest score. A decision was made to accept the other student who was a white male. . . . That one incident left a scar that reminds me every time injustice is shown

towards me.

Outsider status and prejudice continued as a factor in the college years, which some attribute to heightening their “fears of failure” within higher education. Sandra reflects on taking three psychology classes and feeling “at odds” with professors who often conveyed “[negative] research findings on black people . . . that I did not accept.” Sandra affirms that she also felt alienated from the other students at this primarily white institution. She affirms, “I can’t remember making one white friend [at college]. There was hardly any interaction between them. I didn’t feel like I really belonged there; it was like being on borrowed time. . . . Before long I was placed on academic probation.” Consistent and pervasive messages that students of color would not succeed in higher education caused many students to delay the start of college and to postpone the completion of difficult writing assignments. For example, Parminder acknowledges failing to submit essays on time in his English class and repeatedly failing despite his instructors’ efforts to work with him and grant him extensions. Yet students’ awareness that earlier failure can (and should) be attributed to discriminatory practices (within and beyond the college classroom) does not totally assuage their anxieties. Reflecting on her inability to complete her college applications, April writes: “I made an important discovery about my procrastination. It stems from my fear of failure. . . . Fear of failure is a powerful obstacle. Deep down inside I did not believe I had what it took to complete a college degree.” The trauma of racism and discrimination can lead to doubts about self worth and academic ability that plays into students’ delay in attending school and in their full commitment to college once they are in the classroom.

Our cohort of academically at-risk college students also faced significant traumatic home-life experiences, often associated with lower class status. One member of the cohort, Christine, framed her narrative around her addiction to heroin and the loss of her capacity to earn a living, maintain an apartment, and make healthy choices for herself. She recalls her parents’ alcoholism and emotional abuse in early childhood as well as falling into her own serious addiction.

I was twenty . . . and I went out to [live with] my mom, and I tried college, and it didn’t really work out, ‘cause I couldn’t really get off the couch, ‘cause I was like smoking pot and just, you know, existing. I wasn’t doing what I was supposed to be. . . . So then, Jesus, I don’t know, just a bunch of crap, and the next thing you know I was using drugs. Hard drugs. And I lived that way for about 6 years. I picked up heroin at 26, and then, you know . . . I couldn’t function.

Christine’s narrative provides evidence of the ways that growing up in a troubled household can delay an attempt at higher education. By her own estimation, Christine was behind in her reading and writing skills from a very early age. Her subsequent trouble with addiction kept her from enrolling in college for 10 years. When she did enroll, she began her higher education work in developmental education, a correct placement, but one that would further delay her “on-time” progress toward a college degree. Although Christine affirms that she has remained sober for a number of years now, her capacity to abstain requires regular attendance at 12-step meetings, daily communication with her sponsor, and maintaining a variety of service commitments to her recovery program. Although these obligations hinder Christine’s ability to maintain a full course load, they also are inextricably linked, for Christine, with her commitment to progress, albeit slowly and steadily, toward her degree.

Wilma and Ana narrate even more violent and traumatic abusive experiences that impeded their ability to develop essential academic abilities before enrolling in college and have led to emotional struggles that make it difficult for them to move expeditiously through their current academic programs. Wilma relates one of the most striking examples of childhood abuse and hardship. Her narrative begins with the abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother, and culminates with Wilma’s acknowledgment that she finds herself perpetuating the cycle of violence with her daughter.

One day my mother came home. I tried to surprise her so I cleaned the whole house. I believe my mother was trying to go to school at the time. So, I took all her papers and she came home and beat me very bad, to the point I looked like the boy from [the movie] ‘The Mask.’ . . . When I woke up, I couldn’t lift my head. My face looked awful. My mother didn’t take me to the hospital. What she did was apply butter to my face—it’s a home remedy—and covered up the mirrors in the house.

For the duration of Wilma’s childhood, she attempted to survive a series of tragic and painful events including continued physical abuse, eviction from numerous apartments, sleeping on floors within the homes of her mother’s friends, and when her mother remarried, being molested by her stepfather.

My step-father molested me. . . . And I didn’t tell my mother. . . . I thought it would happen one time and that’s it. . . . But after a while it started happening again. I was scared to tell my mother because she was very abusive.

Ana’s story, like Wilma’s, includes instances of abuse that preclude her capacity to raise her 18-month-old daughter and focus her energies on earning her college degree. Upon immigrating to the United States from the Caribbean, Ana struggled with her father’s apparently excessive concerns for her safety. According to Ana, her father refused to allow her to explore her new community and befriend the children in her classes. She says, “Because of the way my father was, I grew up to be the type of person who never went out. I was so housebound, I didn’t go anywhere except school and home.” A couple of years ago Ana met a young man for whom she developed strong feelings and initiated a sexual relationship. Shortly thereafter Ana became pregnant and remains overwhelmed with the gravity of her new responsibilities. She also discovered that her current boyfriend sought to control her in ways similar to her father and thus would not make her happy in the long term.

Ana: Once I started seeing him, I got pregnant, right off the bat. So, I could either get an abortion or stay with him and get to know him, and I was encouraged to do that. So, I had the baby, but things did not work out because we did not get along. Now, I've found out that he's crazy.

Interviewer: How did you discover that?

Ana: Just little things. I was not allowed to have any friends—male or female. ... Last time he showed up and my cousin showed him in. My new boyfriend was there so [my ex] got upset. He said to me, "I want to see my daughter." I went upstairs and he choked me, and said, "Who's that?" Well, I didn't want to make a scene. Then he kept talking about marriage.

The sorts of struggles with violence and abuse narrated by Wilma and Ana preclude them from feeling safe and secure throughout the course of their everyday lives and undoubtedly thwart their attempts to carry full course loads and develop the skills needed to place out of developmental classes in their first two years of college.

The theme of a troubled and insecure home life carries through other members of the cohort. One of the most poignant and painful life-stories reported was by Jarrod, who describes losing both parents within the first seven years of his life through drug overdoses and being taken to live with his grandparents. Shortly thereafter, Jarrod's grandmother had a stroke and became incapacitated, rendering Jarrod almost exclusively within the care of his elderly grandfather. Jarrod's narrative, although recounted stoically, depicts stark images of a childhood overtaken by drugs, aging, illness, and death. When asked about one of the greatest challenges he has faced thus far, Jarrod reflects on being sentenced to a four-month stint in prison for engaging in a physical altercation and injuring another person. The pain and deprivation of these four months remain with Jarrod, ensuring that he does not partake in the sorts of behaviors that could lead to another prison sentence. Moreover, it endowed Jarrod with a unique acumen concerning the everyday freedoms many people take for granted, as well as what is required to survive a prison term.

Well, I have to say, the day I went to jail [was the most difficult]. I got arrested when I was 18. I did four months in Rikers. That, that whole experience like changed my life around. It made me see, realize like, how important life is and if, jail is not the place for anybody, and going to jail you have no type of freedom. You have to eat when they tell you, you have to use the bathroom, you have to shower when they tell you. And then you can be in a small room, or you're in a dormitory with fifty or forty other guys, and that's not, that's not how I like to be. Jail is not for me.

Jarrod's narrative conveys a slice of what it feels like to be incarcerated as a young person who has not yet completed high school, but has hopes to earn his high school diploma and attend college. Moreover, Jarrod illuminates the ways that severe loss and isolation in early childhood can lead to the sort of frustrations and "anger problems" that Jarrod acknowledges in his story. As a current resident in a subsidized living facility for youth with "conduct and violence disorders" he is required to comply with a number of treatment and community-oriented programs, many of which interfere with his capacity to attend classes and move forward with his college degree. For this cohort of students, dealing with traumatic home lives (past and present), practicing the skills needed to manage emotions successfully, and reconciling various struggles (loss, prejudice, discrimination, incarceration) delay matriculation and completion of college credits. Though their academic aspirations may match those of traditional college students, their unstable home lives prevent them from reaching educational benchmarks within time frames set for full-time, continuously enrolled, economically secure college students.

#### CONCLUSION 1: TIME-TO-DEGREE AS AN EDUCATIONAL MARKER

By triangulating our three small studies, we demonstrate that, given CUNY students' complicated, nontraditional lives, time-to-degree is an unreasonable and inaccurate lens through which to judge students' success in college. As indicated by our larger cohort, work and class status, parenting and family issues, as well as mental and social health challenges clearly impede these students' capacity to graduate within traditional two-year or four-year time frames. Conducting this cross-case analysis did not simply affirm findings from our original studies. In fact, the question of time-to-degree as a marker of success was not a conclusion made by any of the original studies. The triangulation process generated a new knowledge base from which we could draw a different, stronger conclusion. (See Conclusion 3 below for a discussion of this "methodological finding.")

Our cross-case analysis confirms previous research conducted in public, urban higher education about how the complex, multiple-demand lives of students interfere with the speed at which they can complete coursework (Richardson, 2005; Roberts & Rosenwald, 2001; Tannock & Flocks, 2003; Tierney, 2000; Tinto, 1997). Our findings corroborate evidence that college progress and student learning is improved by the length of time spent in college and via the completion of developmental classes (Bettinger & Long, 2009; Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Rose, 2012; Stern glass, 1997). Our data show that students (and institutions) should not be held to a "normalizing standard" of degree completion. Speed to graduation, or completion rates, are an extremely reductive understanding of successful learning and achievement (Bound, Lovenheim & Turner, 2007). A recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Do College-Completion Rates Really Measure Quality?" features a series of educational administrators and policy consultants commenting on the contentious use of time-to-degree as a measure of educational quality (Ramaley, 2012). In his section, Thomas Bailey, a professor of economics and education at Teachers College and director of the Community College Research Center, states, "This measure [the on-time graduation rate] may make sense for selective four-year colleges, where most students attend full time immediately after high school. But it is much less meaningful for community colleges, where many students attend part time, return to college after an absence, or transfer from another institution" (2012, p. A18). Bailey touches on the obvious flaws in applying a degree completion marker as a way to discredit institutional success. Our study goes further by detailing the other complex reasons for slow progress: the economic, social-emotional, and dependent-care burdens disproportionately faced by students who attend public two- and four-year colleges. Though in some cases the time-to-degree

statistic has been expanded to four years for the community college degree, and six years for the bachelor's degree, these students represent the outer fringes of even that arbitrary marker. In a blistering critique of a Center for an Urban Future report, Jeffrey Lax concurs that the idea that "low graduation rates demonstrate a failure of the system (and therefore a disservice to the students) profoundly oversimplifies—and misstates—the true goals of a community college and its students" (2012, p. 119).

Our triangulated study underscores the limitations of applying a measure of success based on an incoming first-year student population of homogenous 18-year-olds moving to college campuses for four years of liberal arts study. Instead, the expanded student cohort represents a diverse cross section of CUNY students in terms of age, race, ethnicity, language ability, and academic standing. This cross section of academically at-risk students included traditional-age students who have just graduated from city high schools; adult single parents who are returning to or starting college after years of employment in various city agencies; recently immigrated students arriving with some academic skills, but large language barriers; and a hodgepodge of students with unique stories of life stress and strife that include homelessness, addiction, foster care, illness, jail, and domestic violence. (See Appendix B for a listing of each study participant.) In addition, our findings can be generalized across a wider institutional context, including four- and two-year colleges, a variety of departments, and different points in the students' progress toward a degree.

For these students, a longer-than-average time-to-degree should not be construed as failure on their part, but rather as a distinctive, but acceptable, trajectory for those whose lives have been fraught with academic, home-life, and economic struggles. Judith Ramaley, president of Winona State University, explains the conundrum of on-time graduation for open-access institutions:

Many institutions that serve a broad range of students have reason to worry that data on degree completion will become dashboard indicators of institutional quality. It is too easy for institutions that serve exceptionally well-prepared students to look good and for institutions that serve a significant proportion of nontraditional and underrepresented students to look bad. (2012, p. A16)

Our triangulated findings support the idea that the "faster is better" marker is a simplistic view of what success at an open-access university with a diverse and academically underprepared student cohort should mean. Reductive statistical measures, so commonly used in public debates over educational issues, need to be judged within a demographic and institutional context. An over-emphasis on completion rates fails to take into account the educational mission of our university, and other public open-admission institutions, where the goal is access and opportunity, not selectivity. By looking across our studies at students' experiences of financial, familial, and emotional struggle, we show, more powerfully than we could with one study alone, the need for alternative indicators of academic success for a considerable proportion of students, especially those at the developmental level who are at the greatest risk of leaving college (Adelman, 1996). The students in our study do succeed, precisely because they continue to persist in college. Their success should be judged not by how long it takes, but by whether they remain in good standing during their studies and eventually attain the degree that provides the chance for social and economic mobility.

## CONCLUSION 2: INFLUENCING ACADEMIC POLICY

With the power of cross-case analysis to produce more robust and generalizable results we are on a stronger footing to influence debate over educational policy at our home institution, where our findings dramatically conflict with the university administration's public portrayal of academically struggling students. Specifically, our project speaks back to the false depiction of this student cohort as academic failures simply because they do not graduate within traditional time frames. This argument played a crucial role in a major policy change at our university—one that continues to have repercussions today. A decade ago, the Board of Trustees of the City University of New York voted to dramatically scale back its 30-year-old policy of open admissions by moving all remedial coursework to community college campuses, thus denying access to senior colleges to thousands of students each year. Conservative politicians and critics, who claimed that the university's academic standards had been sacrificed to a wide-open door of admissions, articulated the main arguments in support of this decision. Specifically, critics of open admissions chastised the university because of the number of students requiring remedial coursework,<sup>6</sup> the length of time it took for students to finish the remedial course work, and ultimately the low on-time graduation rates of its students. Though the figures for on-time graduation were technically accurate, they were cited without accounting for the range of students and programs involved, nor did they compare the statistics to those of similar institutions or cohorts of students nationally. On-time graduation figures were used to mislead the media and university board into thinking that CUNY students' low graduation rates were indicative of under-achieving students and poorly designed programs. Rather than take into account the life factors that can increase time-to-degree, critics of CUNY, like then mayor of New York City Rudolph Giuliani, called the lack of on-time graduation for CUNY students "really sad" and dismissed any attempt to explain the student life factors and socio-demographic or programmatic influences on graduation rates as a "defense of failure ... and some of the silliest things I've ever heard" (Giuliani, 1999).

At the time, the academic community attempted to fight back, arguing that sending remedial students to community college radically reduced their chances of attaining a baccalaureate (Lavin & Weininger, 1999).<sup>7</sup> We held rallies. We distributed hastily written resolutions. We went to board meetings to offer testimony. We believed our experience, our knowledge of literacy education, and our understanding of the complexities of the classroom and our students' lives would be heard. But in the end we lost the battle against reductive statistics and terse sound bites made by politicians and board members who had never taught college classes or run academic programs. We lost because we fought back with classroom stories, syllogisms, and gut-level claims, rather than a body of local, consistent, longitudinal, cross-cohort research. The two large-scale studies, Marilyn Sternglass' qualitative, longitudinal study of developmental students *Time to Know Them* (1995) and David Lavin and David Hyllegard's quantitative analysis *Changing the Odds: Open Admissions and the Life Chances of the Disadvantaged* (1996), were barely mentioned in the debate. Though the cohorts in these two studies overlapped a great deal, no meta-analysis of their data or conclusions was developed to push back against the decision of the CUNY Board to move all remedial students to community colleges, a judgment which would be based on a one-time, impromptu essay exam.

Move the clock a decade forward, and faculty at CUNY still have little influence on debates about access, academic standards, and student literacy, which continue to influence who, what, and how we teach despite a recent flurry of other small-scale educational studies whose findings are consistent with our own (Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Colyar & Stich, 2011; Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Osterholt & Barratt, 2010). In August 2011, a CUNY committee consisting of 10 university administrators and academic officers released an internal CUNY report titled “Proposals to Improve Success Rates for Students in Developmental Education at CUNY” (Crook et al. 2011). Without a single faculty member on the committee (and certainly not any who teach remedial courses), it was not surprising that the report recommends “speed” at every turn. The report advises scaling up the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for developmental students and the streamlining of remedial course sequences. It encourages intersession immersions over full-semester courses and the implementation of “brush-up” modules and online tutorials as alternatives to course-based remediation programs wherever possible. Underlying all the recommendations is “the assumption that remedial students can benefit by beginning and completing developmental coursework as quickly as possible” (p. 3). The report offers no evidence that this assumption is supported by any data on student success or improved learning outcomes. Clearly, the report sits in direct contradiction to our study: Not only does it laud the idea of speedy, steady completion of coursework as a marker of academic success—it enforces that idea. The report recommends the following:

Require students who have remedial needs at the beginning of their first semester to take remedial instruction that term and to progress through their remedial course sequence continuously until they exit, with the goal of completing all reading, writing, and mathematics remediation in the first year. Enforce this policy with registration stops. Require students who fail a remedial course to retake it in winter/summer immersion. (p. 14)

Though the CUNY ESL Discipline Counsel wrote a resolution decrying the report’s emphasis on speed, and the CUNY Composition and Rhetoric Community (CCRC), an ad hoc group of writing faculty from all CUNY campuses, condemned the report as well, neither group was able to provide the outcomes assessment or research-based evidence that could contest the emphasis of the report: that speed is the best marker of learning. In the year since, the report’s recommendations have been slowly and steadily implemented at campuses throughout the university, reducing access in the name of a false marker of student success. The report sits in direct contradiction to much of the national research on learning and student achievement in our three disciplines of psychology, urban education, and composition.<sup>8</sup> Providing the national research in tandem with our localized, powered-up study on a CUNY cohort could have a much greater impact.

Currently, our university administration continues to ignore the national research and laud the success of the policy that eliminated remediation from senior colleges by boasting in a 2011 report about a 4.3% rise in on-time graduation for baccalaureate students (City University of New York Office of Institutional Research, 2011). The statistics include a 12% increase in six-year graduation rate for African-Americans and 16% for Hispanic students. However, the two-year graduation rate for an associate’s degree for full-time, first-time freshmen has remained stagnant, at 0%, over the same time span, and the four-year graduation rate for an Associate’s degree has barely risen from .4% to .7%. Even if the rise in bachelor’s degree completion overall, and in certain minority categories, is something to applaud, this completion rate is achieved only by removing a large group of students from the statistical pool. When completion rates, rather than attainment rates, are the marker of success, it pushes administrative policy in the direction of limiting access, so as to ensure that a higher percentage of students graduate. A greater marker of success for a public university that prides itself on access for the poor and educationally underserved would be attainment rates for college degrees, or the percent of all eligible students that complete a college degree, regardless of how long it takes. Given the interruptions to educational progress represented in our triangulated study, time-to-degree seems an especially specious criterion on which to base a major policy change. Other measures, even statistical ones, would better represent true student success. In “Many Two-year Students Are Counted as Failures,” Eric Reno, president, Northeast Lakeview College in Texas, suggests that “the only legitimate measure of student success” should be if a student remains “in good academic standing whether or not she was currently enrolled” (2012). Using good academic standing as a measure would show the students in our study to be high achievers and success stories not just when they finish their degrees years later, but during the long time “learning their way” toward a college degree.

### CONCLUSION 3: CRITIQUE AND POSSIBILITIES FOR CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

In this final section, we reflect on the process of cross-case analysis and review some critical decisions we made as we moved through this pilot project. We also point to the possibilities of cross-case analysis as a way for researchers to “go public” with their data in order to influence policy at their institutions and/or become more active in public debates about education, standards, and literacy.

Though plenty of methodology texts detail the steps and considerations of qualitative research, there is too little attention to the next wave: how to integrate studies. Therefore, the methodology for our triangulation project developed out of the processes we followed in our individual studies. For example, we followed an “open-net” process of evidence accumulation, comparison, and narration. We accounted for differences in point-of-view and admitted the flaws in our process, while extracting the solid evidence. In this way, we follow Major and Savin-Baden’s (2011) advice to construct new knowledge, “creating and critiquing new interpretations” while retaining “epistemological integrity” (p. 655).

One crucial decision for any group of researchers who attempt cross-case analysis is whether to return to raw data or to work from finished studies. We considered both approaches and determined that we would use our completed studies. Returning to our mounds of raw data would both prove unwieldy and violate the confidentiality we had guaranteed our participants through the informed consent process.<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, we felt returning to transcripts and primary evidence would destroy the generative

flow of our work. The raw data had already been culled and moved forward through our writing, and the most important findings surfaced through our individual, theme-based analytical methods. The goal now was to continue this generative flow, to look deeply across the three studies to see the connections, contradictions, and nuances in our findings—to write our way into a new whole out of three already completed parts. This decision proved fortuitous when we realized that our existing “written up” research already provided us with more intersections and shared data points than we could ever cover.

In addition, though we describe it in the methodology section above, our overarching theme of on-time graduation rates deserves further scrutiny here. Why not look at academic achievement or writing skills or many other confluences in our initial studies? As we read and wrote about one another’s research, some of the things we hoped to find were simply not there or emerged strongly in only one study and weakly in the others. In Tim McCormack’s study of a single classroom, a whole chapter is spent on analysis of student writing, revealing the language issues that prevented students from making meaning. But a close linguistic reading of the students in Jason VanOra’s study would not be possible, as samples of writing were not collected; and in Emily Schnee’s study, a re-reading of all of the students’ literacy narratives for linguistic features would have been necessary. Similarly, VanOra’s findings about students’ multiple selves and their impact on self-efficacy within the classroom would not have been possible in the McCormack and Schnee studies since they did not include in their protocol the sorts of life-history questions aimed at revealing personal and social identity (McAdams, 1995). In addition, the finding that students’ mobility aspirations were not, in fact, a primary motivation behind the academic persistence of the working adult students in Schnee’s cohort would not have been relevant to the much younger, un- and underemployed students in both the McCormack and VanOra studies. As is always the case in ethnographic research, more is left out than included; that is the nature of the beast. Though we cast a wide net over all of the studies at the start of the project, as we worked through our cross-case analysis, much of the catch was returned to the sea.

Since our initial motivation to experiment with cross-case analysis came from our desire to boost the power of our research, it was crucial to focus on strongly substantiating only the most compelling findings. Simply put, as you would with raw data, we were looking for the strongest support for the most crucial claim. Cross-case analysis, like all good research, requires telling the story that the data provide, and our data led us most convincingly to contest the significance of on-time graduation to student success.

However, we had to be careful of our own bias in relation to this overarching theme. As faculty members on different CUNY campuses, our experience told us that the on-time graduation rate was a faulty metric for judging our students’ success. In our classrooms and offices, often amid tears and fist pounding, we had seen the life factors and academic challenges that limited our students’ timely completion of our own coursework. There was a sense that we needed to be sure we had certain evidence for our experiential knowledge of barriers to student success. Still, in discussions and through our writing, this focus on time-to-degree repeatedly emerged. It seemed clear that though these were individual student stories within individual studies designed for different purposes, all of the evidence pointed conclusively to why students’ progress toward degree is slow. Thus, we resisted this theme, until way into the process when the “evidence weight” overcame our worries about bias. This thorough investigation of stance and bias is a necessary stage in any research project, of course. Such rigor gains importance in cross-case analysis because it is easy to succumb to the “egging each other on” feeling that can occur when like-minded researchers work together on existing research with similar conclusions.

We feel it is important to reiterate that time-to-degree only emerged as a strong theme during the integration process. Some of our triangulated findings supported claims we made in our original studies, but we chose to focus on time-to-degree because it showed the ability of cross-case analysis to generate new, more powerful knowledge, and because the obsession with time-to-degree had been so emphasized as a justification for ending remedial courses at the senior colleges at our university. By focusing our new work on this finding, we were able to directly counter the opinion that slow time-to-degree represented a failure of the students and the institution.

Lastly, we have to question if the success of cross-case analysis is partly dependent on choice of studies to triangulate. Why triangulate these particular studies? As mentioned in Conclusion 1, our studies made good candidates because they enabled us to provide a larger context and cohort size for contesting time-to-degree. Though there were plenty of differences between our student cohorts and their institutional settings, these students were all academically at-risk, and all part of one urban, public university. In addition, since the students were all at different points in their academic careers, it again allowed us to expand the breadth of what we could claim about academic progress.

Further, our three studies made worthwhile candidates for cross-case analysis because of the interdisciplinary backgrounds of the researchers, the variety of methodologies we applied, and our distinct units of analysis. This variability is viewed as a strength by Doyle (2003), who lauds the capacity of meta-ethnographic research to bring together a vast array of purposes, agendas, backgrounds, and questions. McCormack, trained in composition and rhetoric, utilized traditional field notes, interviews, artifact analysis (of student writing), and historical sequencing. VanOra, a social psychologist, used Dan McAdam’s (1995) life-history interview methodology combined with a semi-structured interview about educational experiences and an additional paired-interview, in which five participants were interviewed with a significant other who was identified as a positive contributor to their academic endeavors. Schnee, trained in urban education, used semi-structured interviews as well as the composing and analysis of literacy narratives. These different disciplinary perspectives and methodologies offered multiple research lenses through which to view the student cohort, their academic achievement, and the context of their academic and home lives. All of these distinctions enabled us to feel secure in the generalizability of the claims we could make and the support we could offer for those claims. Thus, while we benefitted from the commonalities in our studies, in a crucial, seemingly contradictory way, we also benefitted from our differences.

However, as Josselson (2006) acknowledges, our different methodological approaches, disciplinary backgrounds, research questions, and units of analysis are both an asset and a challenge in attempting to power up our studies through meta-analysis.

While we found many rich and compelling points of convergence in our research, any post-facto attempt at triangulating data derived through non-coordinated studies invariably reveals moments of disjunction as well as coordination. Often, we found ourselves wishing we had known to pursue one another's research questions, to try out one another's methods, and to expand (or contract) our units of analysis to fill in the gaps that inevitably emerged from retrospective triangulation. The idea that we found "the same thing" (Fine, 2006) in our different contexts points to the need for researchers to seek out collaboration across disciplines, universities, and institutions more often. This pilot study affirms the need for small-scale qualitative researchers to coordinate efforts during the development and data collection phases of research projects in order to increase the generalizability and impact of the work we do.

We hope this pilot inspires our readers to struggle with us in figuring out how to make small-scale qualitative educational research more resonant, to enhance what Michelle Fine calls the "provocative generalizability" of our studies, and to help us "rethink and reimagine [the] current arrangements" of our field and the policies and politics that dominate our lives as educators (2006, p. 33). Of course, to more deeply influence debates over education, standards, and student literacy on our campuses and beyond, we aspire to do more than produce robust research results through cross-case integration and publish them in scholarly journals. Though a worthy goal in its own right, developing a valid methodology for triangulating studies is only the first step in "going public" with what we know. We hope researchers such as ourselves will not only triangulate their studies, but find ways to present their combined results in public forums and outlets: rewriting our academic work into institutional policy statements, press releases and editorials for public media venues; developing talking points and presenting ourselves as experts in our fields; and carrying our data with us in digestible sound-bite form as we attend institutional and public forums on education. As Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington suggest:

It's time to move beyond academic discussion. We need to take our perspectives and our programs public: it's time to take data in hand, with rhetorical fierceness. We need to assess, and frame, this information for audiences outside of our programs, as well. (2006, p. 44)

Developing new knowledge by integrating existing studies offers small-scale educational researchers an immediate, profoundly rich, cost-effective, and powerful research tool that can have greater impact than the original studies achieve on their own. The more powerful claims that we are able to make through cross-case integration enable us to enter the public debate and push back against the reductive rhetoric that so often dominates public discourse of education and too often destroys valuable programs and initiatives based on inconclusive data or faulty logic. We imagine countless newly minted, small-scale qualitative research projects like our own sitting on shelves and hidden in hard drives at colleges and universities throughout the country. These worthy, smart, expert projects can be raised up as part of the next wave of qualitative research in education, research that must be robust enough to push back against the decision makers who too often control who, what, and how we teach.

#### Notes

1. Josselson uses the term "narrative" studies. Our studies, which are ethnographic, interview-based, and use memoir writing by research participants, rely heavily on narrative structures and analysis.
2. In the methodology discussion section at the end of this article, we discuss how the cohort, context and design of our original studies both helped and hindered our meta-analysis project.
3. Kotamraju and Blackman (2011) offer a list of "inherent risk factors that prevent students from graduating" that is fairly typical in the literature.
4. Since our studies were not primarily focused on this issue, we do not have specific data on the working lives of every student, and it is quite possible that more than 22 were working, but they did not mention their jobs during interviews.
5. We use the 2002 study because it is roughly in the middle year of when our studies were completed. The statistics reported here are relatively stable in subsequent years. The survey was not conducted prior to 2002.
6. According to CUNY's Office of Institutional Research, 43% of first-time freshmen entering the senior colleges needed at least one remedial class (1998 CUNY Office of Institutional Research). Though this number sounded deplorable to the general public, the figure was actually not far off the national average. According to Adelman (2002), 41% of college students in the United States had to take one or more remedial courses.
7. Research indicates that students who begin their college careers at community colleges are significantly less likely to complete a BA or BS degree. See Lavin and Weininger (1999).
8. Fowler and Boylan (2010) show that college students in developmental classes face many challenges that supersede their lack of academic abilities, and ultimately, instructors need to learn about and develop strategies for confronting those "nonacademic and personal issues that create barriers to success" (p. 2). Bevan, Slate, and Moore (2012) examine students' negative perceptions of their assignment to developmental classes in community college. Colyar and Stich (2011) show how students' economic and social class impact their confidence and educational success. Osterholt and Barratt (2010) detail the variety of developmental students and the faultiness of a one-size-fits-all educational model. Callahan and Chumney (2009) examine the experiences and academic outcomes of basic writing students at a community college and a four-year research university and find that institutions play a significant role in developmental students' opportunities to succeed by controlling access to support resources and the "cultural capital" of the institution.
9. This process would require returning to the IRB for all three original studies.

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### Appendix A

THREE QUALITATIVE STUDIES
OF ACADEMICALLY AT-RISK STUDENTS, 1999-2006
<p>Researcher Tim McCormack, a composition and rhetoric scholar, conducted a semester-long ethnography of a basic writing classroom at City College. <i>Literacy scape: The History, Politics and Practice of Basic Writing</i> details the lived experience of one instructor and her students as they “reinvent the university” in various writing and reading tasks as the students prepare for a high-stakes writing exam. Findings of the study showed how students’ academic success was limited by how basic writing courses are linked to the college admissions process, the program’s inability to account for language differences, the nonexistent teacher training, the lack of a cohesive curriculum, and an overemphasis on the outside-the-classroom exam. By revealing the daunting complexity of the basic writing classroom, this study ultimately claims that the proposal to end remediation at CUNY senior colleges was unfounded because the practice of remediation was not examined within educational parameters.</p>
<p>Researcher Emily Schnee, a scholar of urban education, conducted a study on the impact of college on adult students enrolled in a union-supported worker education program at CUNY. Using the writing of educational memoirs by research participants as well as open-ended interviews, <i>Teetering at the Fulcrum: Possibilities and Constraints in a College Worker Education Program</i> examined the impact of students’ educational backgrounds on their college experiences and explored the ways in which the worker education program worked to produce successful college outcomes for nontraditional students.</p>
<p>Researcher Jason VanOra, a social personality psychologist, studied “remedial” writers at one of CUNY’s comprehensive colleges. Through a series of narrative, thematically oriented analyses, <i>“I Just Wanna Be Successful in Life”: Revealing Struggles, Strategies, Selves, and Wisdom in a Narrative Study of Students Assigned to Remedial Classes</i> explored the phenomenological experiences of students assigned to basic writing classes. The findings emphasized that students’ struggles centered primarily around writing, institutional constraints, and feelings of failure and powerlessness within the classroom. This project revealed students’ creative re-imaginings of the college classroom as a site of academic success and re-framings of failure as a component of a larger, successful academic trajectory. The study provides strength-based perspectives on basic writers within CUNY and proposes curricular changes that would enable “remedial” students to feel more empowered and connected to the larger college community.</p>

### Appendix B

<i>Literacy scape: The History, Politics, and Practice of Basic Writing. An Ethnographic Study of a Basic Writing Classroom at a Four-Year College</i>	<i>“I Just Wanna Be Successful in Life”: Revealing Struggles, Strategies, Selves, and Wisdom in a Narrative Study of Students Assigned to Remedial Classes</i>	<i>Teetering at the Fulcrum: Possibilities and Constraints in a College Worker Education Program. A Qualitative Study of Adult Worker Education Program Students at a CUNY Four-Year College</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Abeni, male, 19, Africa</li> <li>2. Begum, female, 20, Bangladesh</li> <li>3. Ben, male, 18, Vietnam</li> <li>4. Carver, male, 18, Haiti</li> <li>5. Charity, female, 18, Ghana</li> <li>6. Geeta, female, 20, Guyana</li> <li>7. Ghazi, male, 18, Saudi Arabia</li> <li>8. Eduardo, male, 30, Mexico</li> <li>9. Homer, male, 47, U.S. (Black)</li> <li>10. James, male, 19, Great Britain (Black)</li> <li>11. Juanita, female, 21, El Salvador/Puerto Rico</li> <li>12. LaToya, female, 18, Jamaica</li> <li>13. Lawrence, male, 19, U.S. (Black)</li> <li>14. Leanna, female, 20,</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sandy, female, 19, Latina</li> <li>2. Wilma, female, 31, Latina</li> <li>3. Ana, female, 26, Caribbean</li> <li>4. Dell, male, 19, African American</li> <li>5. Christine, female, 34, White</li> <li>6. Jeannie, female, 47, Caribbean</li> <li>7. Givoanni, male, 20, Latino</li> <li>8. Ramon, male, 19, Latino</li> <li>9. Jarrod, male, 21, African American</li> <li>10. Parminder, male, 25, Middle Eastern</li> <li>11. Lelania, female, 19, Jamaican</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Brenda, female, 50s, Caribbean, mother</li> <li>2. Ivy, female, early 30s, Chinese American</li> <li>3. Carmen, female, 30s, Puerto Rican, mother</li> <li>4. Deborah, female, 50s, African American, mother</li> <li>5. April, female, 40s, Caribbean, mother</li> <li>6. Florence, female, 40s, African American, mother</li> <li>7. Phyllis, female, 40s, African American, mother</li> <li>8. Sandra, female, 40s, African American, mother</li> <li>9. Rosa, female, 50s, Puerto Rican, mother</li> <li>10. Gillian, female, early 30s, Caribbean</li> <li>11. Lisa, female, 40s, African American, mother</li> </ol>

Ecuador	12. Nelly, female, 40s, African American, mother
15. Lewis, male, 21, China	13. Samuel, male, 30s, Latino, father
16. Pierre, male, 19, Haiti	14. William, male, 40s, African American, father
17. Roberto, male, 19, Dominican Republic	
18. Rosa, female, 19, Mexico	
19. Shafiqul, male, 19, Bangladesh	
20. Saleem, male, 19, U.S. (Black)	
21. Tsegu, male, 23 Japan	
22. Vladislav, male, 20, Russia	

*Note.* All participant names in all studies are pseudonyms.

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