

**ARE WE REALLY WHO THEY  
SAY WE ARE?  
THE SECOND “C”: FIRST-  
YEAR COMPOSITION  
COMMUTING STUDENTS  
REFLECT ON MEMBERSHIP AND  
COMMUNITY**

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Teaching at an urban commuter campus presents unique challenges to any instructor but particularly to writing instructors, whose strategies for success in the classroom are often based on assuming that students can and will work closely together. Writing instructors ask students to work together when we discuss issues in class (we want all students to participate and to feel as if their ideas will be accepted/acceptable to everyone listening), conduct peer evaluation workshops (we rely on their willingness to do the kind of hard work this involves, and to do it without offending anyone), and to be good citizens in the classroom by reading assigned work, paying attention, participating in class, working conscientiously on essays—to try to learn what we are teaching them about writing effectively. But when students commute to campus and are, as a result, often rushed, harried, and thinking about all their other responsibilities (other classes, jobs, and families), they do not automatically identify themselves as members of the university community. This situation can result in students who do not buy class texts because they cannot afford

them or do not think they are important enough to spend hard-earned money on; do not read assigned work because they do not have time to stay current in every subject, so they keep up in the classes that most interest them and/or seem most relevant (which is not often first-year writing); or cannot participate in class for one or a combination of these reasons, making work on essays quite difficult. Establishing a first-year writing course as valuable work and perhaps even as a priority or as relevant to their lives both inside and outside of the university community becomes quite important for both students and instructors. Commuting students, as a group, tend to feel not a part of the university community because they come onto campus long enough to take classes and go. Recognizing this, and also endeavoring to have the sort of unified class/class environment that I find critical to engaging students in their writing, I decided to bring the ideas of “membership” and “community” into the classroom in hopes of building a kind of class community through discussions of their responses.

### **“Bombingham”**

In “The Idea of an Urban University: A History and Rhetoric of Ambivalence and Ambiguity,” Carol Severino questions the ambiguous manner in which urban universities sometimes define themselves:

The postwar growth and expansion of universities in urban areas raised many town/gown questions about how the university would define itself in relation to its city environment, or if it would even include the city in its conception of itself, usually articulated in a mission statement, a focus statement, or a statement of institutional purpose, or role and scope. (300)

My urban university defines itself as “a city within a city” where “the future is here” (*UAB*) in an apparent attempt to distance itself from historically negative representations of Birmingham

("Bombingham"), whose past is dominated by segregation, racial hatred, and images of water hoses, vicious dogs, and police brutality (see Baker, Jolly, McComiskey, Ryan). Forty years later, these images from the 60's are still familiar because we often see them referenced if Birmingham is portrayed in the national media. Whether the story is positive or negative, these negative representations are frequently used as a backdrop to orient the audience. In a campaign to market our university as a national and international research institution, recruitment materials "disavow UAB's urban context, since, first, urban universities are often associated with serving local, working populations, and second, urban environments are often associated with violence and xenophobia" (Baker, Jolly, McComiskey, Ryan 27). Photographs of students at athletic events, in classes, and in the student center keep out the cityscapes in which these spaces exist. Such material shows a race-friendly place with a diverse student body playing, studying, and working together. The city itself is shown only infrequently:

a dusk cityscape with lit offices contrasted against a mauve background; a daytime cityscape tinted with calming shades of pale blue and sepia, more closely invoking memory than reality. "Change Your Mind. Change Your World." "The future is here." These slogans are central to UAB's most recent recruitment materials because they provide potential students with positive images (counter-myths) of the school, and they emphasize..."world," not city; "future" not present. (28)

In using phrases common to the civil rights movement, recruitment materials recall and dispel the city's past: "After 'waiting years,' now is the time for students to make 'the decision' for a 'better tomorrow' and 'realize [their] dreams,' all language evoking the ideals of Martin Luther King Jr" (28). Focusing on quotes from alumni who live out of Alabama and

out of the country, as well as on faculty engaged in research projects “with NASA ‘on other planets,’ ‘across Europe,’ and in Ethiopia, Russia, Thailand, Antarctica, and Costa Rica” (28), UAB sends the message that it identifies itself as not-Deep South, not-Alabama, not-Birmingham, not-Bombingham).

Recruitment materials notwithstanding, a majority of the students at my urban university (about 94%) come from Alabama (only 3% from other states and 3% from other countries), most from the immediate Birmingham area, and are predominantly first-generation college students who are, as Severino puts it, “placebound in urban areas because of work or family obligations” (307). I wondered what it would mean to be “placebound” in a university whose ambivalence about its location implies it is separate from the problems (real or perceived, past or present) of the community and in a city that is so consistently represented negatively. I sought the reflections of 64 first-year writing students enrolled in 4 classes of English Composition II (Writing Researched Arguments).

## **Description of the Study**

I distributed a questionnaire asking students to identify what community/communities they are members of within their neighborhoods, the city in which we live, and the university (see Appendices I, II, and III for questions and responses). In the process, students also reflected on such issues as what impressions outsiders of their neighborhoods, the city, and the university might have of those places and why; whether the people who live in our city seem unique to those living in different parts of the state, region, country, and why; what it means that our university describes itself as a “city within a city”; and to what extent students feel that they are and are not members of their communities, the city, and the university. Moreover, they reflected on their awareness of outsiders’ representations of their city, their awareness of the university’s attempt to distance itself from the community, their personal impressions of the city, their conceptions of what it means to be

a native of Birmingham, and whether perceptions about their city are still true.

As is characteristic for universities such as UAB with heavy commuter populations, 40 of the 64 students in these classes grew up within city limits and have been, as one student put it, “city kids forever.” 18 of the students come from various rural parts of Alabama, and of the 6 remaining students, 4 come from the neighboring states of Florida and Georgia, 1 from Missouri, and 1 from Mexico.

## **Pedagogical Implications**

Conducting a survey such as this gives the instructor valuable information about the class which allows him or her to set student groups and to determine the intellectual level at which the course can begin. The majority of students in this study, for example, defined “membership” and “community” as simply dependent upon physical location. They believe that if a person lives somewhere, he/she is a member of that community. Although some students suggest that membership involves becoming a part of a group whose members work together, share beliefs, and respect and listen to each other, many focused on surface issues such as accent and dress. This meant that the course needed to begin simply so that students could have some time to discover the complications of such apparently simple terms (to them) and to try to learn to think beyond the surface. Having such information about students helps instructors determine how best to do this within the context of a writing class. In this case, we began a series of class discussions aimed at delineating between physical location and the sorts of categories, such as cultural, social, and self-identification, some students used to define “membership” and “community.” Then we discussed what it all means to them as they reflected on their own responses, including the contradictions that show up in the data (52 feel a member of the UAB community, indicating insider status, but 35 and 39 students identify physical location as the only criterion for membership; Birmingham is perceived as

both diverse and not diverse at the same time). Noting contradictory responses, in particular, allowed me to introduce the idea that consensus is not necessarily a goal when defining these terms but that discussion of/thinking from different perspectives to broaden definitions is. In “The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing,” Joseph Harris frames such an approach in this way:

Rather than doing much the same, romanticizing academic discourse as occurring in a kind of single cohesive community, I would urge, instead, that we think of it as taking place in something more like a city. That is, instead of presenting academic discourse as coherent and well-defined, we might be better off viewing it as polyglot, as a sort of space in which competing beliefs and practices intersect with and confront one another. One does not need consensus to have community. (20)

Beginning the term by having students note similar and different notions of community and membership—particularly when differences were emphasized—encouraged inclusion, even for those students who identified themselves in the survey as disinterested and disengaged, and opened up the class discussions to promote a kind of class unity—yet another kind of membership.

Asking students to write reflectively on the survey and then to discuss issues in class offers yet another way—along with keeping journals, writing multiple drafts that both instructors and classmates respond to in class, conducting interviews within the various communities of which they are a part, and so on—to try to engage first-year writing students and, perhaps, to help them identify their personal and community connections, no matter how that community is portrayed nationally (39 of the students characterize portrayals of Birmingham as negative, with the word “redneck” predominating their responses). Writing topics that grow out of this sort of reflection can center on

whatever issues interest students (see Appendix IV for sample writing topics). For those who are not natives of the city, for instance, a topic that asks them to consider the city/university/community from the view of an outsider can also lead to their discovery that they can either imagine themselves as insiders or establish themselves as insiders who are new, in effect, to the “inside,” which could then lead to a discussion about being both an insider and an outsider. The purpose of such topics is to increase both audience awareness and analysis and students’ awareness of their membership in two or more communities. Another possible writing topic involves students writing about what they think the “true” image is of the place they live, contrasting positive or negative outsiders’ images with positive and negative insiders’ views.

## **Student Responses and Reflections**

When students think about these issues, they sometimes write about conflicts surfacing between themselves, college students “staying” away from home, and parents who do not understand what this is like because they, themselves, never attended. One student, for instance, wrote about how he identifies now more with the university community than he does with his father. He writes about the night that his father called him, asking him to drop out of college so that together they could help hurricane victims on the Gulf Coast—a response to the hurricane of that fall:

My father called me Tuesday morning around 2 or 3 a.m. He was going on and on about how people were losing their homes and how they would be in desperate need of help repairing damages. He went on telling of how he intended to go down to help people and how I should consider it also. Before long, he was devising an argument on how helping people rebuild homes would teach me more in life than college ever could. When I was younger, these suggestions by my father had to be accepted because of his status, but

now that I am grown, I am able to make my own decisions. I intend to help people in the future, but knowing when to let things go, I said nothing.

This student's difficulty with his father led to discussion in class among other students who could identify with the conflicts: being awakened early in the morning by a phone call from a parent (something the students would be punished for if they did the same thing to their parents); hearing a parent express the idea that college is a luxury, not "real" and not as important as "real life"; recognizing one's independence from a parent; asserting that independence; dealing with feelings of uncertainty, guilt, and loneliness as a result of all of this. The student talked about how surprised he was at his own decision—that he had not realized how much a part of the university community he felt until this challenge from his dad materialized. This led to a discussion of how he might try to convince his father (one, specific audience) how important his decision to get a college degree is to him, and how and why he could make the point that he believes he will be in a better position to help others once he has completed the degree. In a class of mostly first-generation college students, these ideas resonated, beginning fruitful discussion, and students thought about and talked about how they would approach their own parents—their own audiences—on these issues, noting differences in what would work in one family and not others and why.

This is an extreme example of a sudden recognition of identifying oneself with the university, as most students do not receive such "wake-up" calls during which their desire to go to college is questioned and threatened. But most students do, at least in some sense, recognize that life changes—such as beginning college—signify membership changes, membership negotiations, or new membership affiliations. At the other extreme are students for whom college is a natural progression: "College was always something that my parents drilled in me. When I was growing up, I automatically knew that college was the next step



after high school. I really had no other choice. I always knew that attending college would be an experience that I needed in life.” Even though this student says that she “automatically” became a member of the university community as soon as she stepped onto campus, she learned that not everyone feels the same way. To research how people felt when they began college, she interviewed her roommates and learned that “The word ‘membership’ has its own set meaning, but it does not mean the same thing to everyone.” Thinking about the difficulties her roommates gave her as reasons for not feeling as if they “fit in” (the classes are too hard, the people are unfriendly, they miss home), she considered ideas to add to her essay that would address these concerns—ones she, herself, was not aware of because she had not experienced them.

A student wrote about the positive image of her community: “I live in a mostly black neighborhood with friendly people. Every day you can walk outside and see children playing, people sitting on their porches and walking the streets, and they all feel safe while doing this. There is rarely any violence in my community.” The student was surprised when she interviewed a person who had recently moved onto her street. The new neighbor explains how she felt when she first moved:

All the people were very nice, but I began to let the things I had seen on television take over my mind. Whenever I saw a boy walking down the street with his pants hanging, I automatically thought he was a drug dealer or gangster. I thought all the girls with different colored hair weaves and long nails would have nothing in common with me. But when I finally got to know them I realized I was being racist by assuming those things about people I didn’t even know.

In class, this student talked about how much she respects this neighbor, both for her honesty and for her ability to change her opinion. When she concluded by saying “Believe it or not, even those who live in the less fortunate communities think negatively

of where they live, either because they don't know much about their community, or they are closed-minded," she began a discussion about students' perceptions (and stereotypes) of different neighborhoods in town and how different (and also alike) people/audiences from these different neighborhoods would be/are.

Another student made distinctions among audiences based on race. He (a male African-American) wrote about two best friends, one white and one black. His white friend "identifies himself as part of the black community. 'All my friends are black except one.'... 'I always got along better with black people. I grew up hanging around that type of crowd, so that is what I'm used to.'" When discussing his ideas in class, this student said of his white friend: "He feels that he can relate to a black crowd better but also knows his limits." Tying this to the idea of audience, he related this example:

My friend and I were relaxing at the dorm one day with some friends of mine. A rap song came on that we all liked and we all knew the words. As we were rapping with the artist on the song, the word "nigga" was said frequently, but every time my friend would pause and then continue after the word was said. The rest of us could keep on rapping and say the word because we are black. The one thing that doesn't allow him to be completely part of that community is his skin color.

The student's conclusions began a long discussion about how race does and does not affect friendships, how we all often have to make adjustments accordingly, whether or not race is a part of the equation, and what accommodations we make in different settings and/or for different audiences.

## Some Final Thoughts

The importance of helping students establish membership both within the community of the classroom and the university is critical for many reasons, retention being the most obvious. Perhaps less obvious is the extent to which students in first-year writing classes, especially commuting students, stay engaged with the material so that they can learn what we are trying to teach them about writing. Administrators may define retention (both within the university community and within classes) primarily as whether students achieve insider status by feeling a contributing part of classes and/or the university community (while 81% of the students surveyed do feel a part of UAB, a significant number, 19% feel alienated and/or disengaged). To achieve such status, they must have extended to them the possibility of becoming an insider, of becoming a contributor. If students are to participate at all in the classroom, much less to the greater extent most writing instructors are trying to encourage in their classes, they must feel they are a part, and an important part at that, of the class. One way to engage students is to distribute the sort of questionnaire described here. It immediately demonstrates that their presence, their membership in the class, is important. Their participation in the survey conveys a kind of immediate membership for them. By expressing opinions about the issues, they become participating members, the insiders, of that particular classroom. Thus, what membership means to our students and how their definitions help them position themselves as people who write for various audiences gain a certain level of importance in the composition classroom.

Using such a survey and discussing notions of membership can both help students create writing topics and understand and refine the concept of audience. Audience, often defined by first-year writers as a generic, amorphous “thing,” can become a relevant issue for students who research and then write about similarities and differences in views about the same spaces, places, ideas, definitions, keeping in mind that audience quite

concretely signifies fellow students, those whom they've interviewed, and even themselves as they recognize their own shifting opinions about the topics they write about and/or how they relate to/feel about notions of membership and of community. Audience, in this sense, can often signify some sort of conflict—not necessarily a resolution of conflict, but an acknowledgment of it. In a later evaluation of his essay on community, Harris says this: “I am instead thinking of a public space as a place where differences are made visible, and thus where the threat of conflict or even violence is always present. This means that we need to resist moves to romanticize conflict in order to argue for something more like *civility*, a willingness to live with difference” (*A Teaching Subject* 109). Conflict and violence, civility and living with difference—these are the issues that can help students form a notion of membership within a class. Even more so than other kinds of university inhabitants, commuting students need a reason to care enough about a course to learn what we are trying to teach. Figuring out how and where they “fit in” and allowing them to probe issues without insisting that they have to come to class consensus—and then using this model to approach all of the issues and readings covered during the semester--provide one way to keep them engaged and writing. The value of having students engaged enough to consider first-year writing relevant is obvious for administrators, for instructors and, ultimately, for students.

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## Appendix I: Definitions of Community

1. What does "member of a community" mean to you?

<u># of student responses</u>	<u>response</u>
3	"nothing"
35	geography (living in a community = member status)
26	communities actively involved in : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-school</li> <li>-church</li> <li>-family</li> <li>-work</li> <li>-other- "chemically dependent women across the city"</li> <li>-"youth group"</li> <li>-"high school friends"</li> <li>-"Muslim community"</li> <li>-"Indo/Pak community"</li> <li>-"volunteer fire department"</li> <li>-"softball team"</li> <li>-"PTA"</li> <li>-"neighborhood association"</li> <li>-"boy scouts"</li> </ul>
	***3 students recognize they maintain several memberships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-"country, state, county, city"</li> <li>-"African-American, Christian, female, student, family"</li> <li>-"UAB, each one of my classes, B'ham, where I work"</li> </ul>

2. What makes you part of this community/communities?

#of student responses

39

response

geography (living in a community = member status)

25

reasons other than geography:

-“involvement in the community”

-“pride”

-“my job”

-“who I am physically and spiritually”

-“everyone sticks together”

-“I am either a friend or a family member everyone who lives in this community”

-“we learn to put up with each other for long periods of time”

-“I like to be around people who share my beliefs”

-“I speak my mind and it is heard”

-“I fit in and help out and feel that I am a part”

3. If you meet someone new, can you tell whether that person has grown up in your community?

#of student responses

31

response

focus on surface features:

-“how they talk”

-“dress”

-“they are somewhat slow”

## Appendix II:

### Membership in Community—Birmingham, Alabama

1. Do you feel that you are a “member” of the B’ham community?

#of student responses

44

response

yes—reasons generally fall into the following two categories:

-“I am a ‘member’ because I have the same opportunities as everyone else. I cooperate with the city by respecting the law taking care of the city, and volunteering my time whenever I can.”

20

-“I live here and go to school and work among other people who are ‘members.’”

no—some of the reasons follow:

- grew up somewhere else
- “young people get no respect”
- “I just pass through like a number”
- “I’m just another face in the crowd”
- “I do not approve of some of the things that go on in B’ham”
- “I hate it here”
- “I feel like a ‘member’ of B’ham, but there are times when other people don’t accept any strangers into the community, and then I feel like I’m never going to ‘really’ belong.”

2. Is B’ham unique from other paces in Alabama?

<u>#of student responses</u>	<u>response</u>
5	“I don’t know”
24	no
35	yes—some reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-more diverse</li> <li>-more experiences possible</li> <li>-faster pace</li> <li>-“we share a common bond of community and have more resources”</li> </ul>

3. Is B’ham unique from other places in the Southeast?

<u>#of student responses</u>	<u>response</u>
12	“I don’t know”
13	no
39	yes—some reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-less diverse</li> <li>-more diverse</li> <li>-more traditional</li> <li>-strong values</li> <li>-accents and gestures</li> <li>-love of football</li> <li>-“we act a little more southern”</li> </ul>

4. Is B'ham unique from other parts of the country?

<u>#of student responses</u>	<u>response</u>
9	"I don't know"
6	no
49	yes--some reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-accents</li><li>-beliefs</li><li>-traditions</li><li>-friendlier/more caring</li><li>-"other parts are more liberal and open-minded"</li><li>-"we have a city type attitude with a country type attitude"</li><li>-"we all have the same background in the couth"</li><li>-"we have good home cooking"</li><li>-"other states have a sense of pride"</li><li>-"we are more polite--maybe we just sugar coat everything"</li><li>-"Alabama is so far behind in education, technology, and business"</li></ul>

5. What images or impressions do you have of B'ham?

<u># of student responses</u>	<u>response</u>
4	"nothing"
14	negative: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-race relations/civil rights</li><li>-violence/crime</li><li>-traffic and pollution</li></ul>
39	positive: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-entertainment</li><li>-The Magic City (Birmingham's nickname)</li><li>-historic buildings</li><li>-steel factories</li><li>-medical breakthroughs</li><li>-Vulcan (a statue that is a Birmingham landmark)</li></ul>



6. How is B'ham portrayed on the national news?

<u># of student responses</u>	<u>response</u>
11	"I don't know"
14	positively: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-UAB</li><li>-good hospitals</li><li>-football</li><li>-beauty of the city</li><li>-diversity</li><li>-improving race relations</li><li>-medical breakthroughs</li></ul>
39	negatively: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-racism/civil rights</li><li>-abortion clinic bombing</li><li>-failed education lottery</li><li>-poor standardized test scores</li><li>-tornado damage</li><li>-"rednecks"</li><li>-"the news portrays only bad things, never anything good"</li></ul>

### **Appendix III:**

#### Membership in Community--UAB

1. UAB calls itself a "city within a city." Do you think it's true?

<u>#of student responses</u>	<u>response</u>
52	yes--as one student puts it: "UAB is a community with 'families' throughout
12	no--some reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-"treats students as numbers"</li><li>-"not much of a campus life"</li><li>-"I have no reason other than class to come to UAB"</li></ul>

2. Do you feel that you are a "member" of the UAB community?

<u>#of student responses</u>	<u>response</u>
52	yes--some reasons: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-"it's like one big family"</li><li>-"I have a common link to the other students and feel they are in the same position as I am"</li></ul>

- “I am accepted by a lot of people that want me to be here”
- “I strive to make a good name for myself as I do in my own community”
- “UAB is my home away from home”
- no—some reasons:
  - “I feel like a number not a person”
  - “we are all just here for one thing: to learn”
  - “I feel older than everybody else”
  - “I don’t know many people”
  - “I go to school and leave to go to work. The only time I’m here is when I have to go to class”
  - “I commute”
  - “I’m married”

#### **Appendix IV:** Sample Writing Topics

These topics are based on students’ responses to the questionnaire. I hand them out after we’ve discussed in class the ideas they expressed in writing. In this discussion, I also introduce them to the notions of “insider” and “outsider” status, as well as to the fact that they need not come to any kind of consensus about any of the issues we discuss and/or they write about. The purpose of this is to introduce a basic intellectual stance that will ultimately help them as they analyze and synthesize course materials: there is no right answer; there is no wrong answer; answers can change, based on such factors as time and perspective; *the* right answer at any moment in time can (and will be and should be) challenged; *the* right answer is subject to change at any point. Students choose just one of the topics and write a reflective essay, eventually expanding their definition(s) of community and community membership. The interview question is selected most often and works especially well (for all races) because of the place we live—oral history is a tradition in the South and, of course, a critical component of the civil rights movement. My students live in communities where they know people (or have family members) who were excluded, participated in marches, were jailed, and have seen dramatic changes in the city over the course of their lives.

1. When you wrote responses to the questionnaire, you constructed definitions for the words “membership” and “community.” You also identified at least one community of which you are a member. I’d like you to pick just one of these communities you belong to and interview someone else who is also a member. Ask this person to tell you why he/she is a member (some reasons might include shared values, goals, history, age, race, gender, hopes, random circumstances, and so on), how he/she became a member (was it by choice, by circumstance, or by something else?), and how he/she both “fits in” and doesn’t “fit in.” Based on these answers, see if you can define the word “community” through this person’s eyes. Then, look at the ideas you presented in your questionnaire (and feel free to add other ideas you have thought of since), and write about ways that you and this person are alike and not alike in your definitions.
2. How long have you lived in Birmingham? Where did you live before coming to UAB? If they are different places, what is similar about the two? What is different? Do you like one place more than the other? Why? Have your feelings about one or both places changed over time? How and why?
3. How long have you been a student at UAB? What was your initial reaction to beginning college? Do you feel differently about it today? Why?
4. Think of a place you know well. What sort of image does it have for you? Positive? Negative? Both? Why? Think of how someone new to this place would react to it. Positively? Negatively? Both? Why? Do you think this other person’s image would be different from or similar to (or both) your own? How and why?

