Are College Faculty and First-Generation, Low-Income Students Ready for Each Other?

Alfred R. Schademan1 and Maris R. Thompson1

Abstract
Utilizing current research on college readiness as well as the role of cultural agents as a conceptual framework, this qualitative study investigates student and faculty beliefs about readiness and the pedagogical practices that allow instructors to effectively serve as cultural agents for first-generation, low-income students. Three major findings that emerged from the study are as follows: (a) faculty beliefs about student readiness impact the degree to which faculty serve as cultural agents for FGLI students, (b) faculty who serve as cultural agents enact particular practices and dispositions that enable students to become more academically prepared, and (c) FGLI students arrive at college with diverse forms of readiness that require varying forms of nurturing and support. A key implication of the study is that colleges should bear a greater responsibility in supporting faculty and other campus cultural agents in nurturing the success of FGLI students.

Keywords
first-generation college students, low-income, persistence, college readiness, discourse, cultural agents

First-generation, low-income (FGLI) students currently make up 24% of the total undergraduate population attending college in the United States (Engle & Tinto, 2008). As the wealth gap between rich and poor reaches the highest levels in U.S. history (Congressional Budget Office, 2011), the number of FGLI students attending college will continue to increase. Although FGLI students make...
up a significant percentage of college students, they have much lower retention rates in comparison to other demographic groups (Moore & Shulock, 2010). In a longitudinal study using a national data set, Engle and Tinto (2008) found that “after six years, only 11 percent of low-income, first-generation students has earned bachelors degrees, compared to 55% of their more advantaged peers” (p. 2). Further, Tinto (2004) found that 50% of low-income students earned a degree after 6 years and only 26% earned a bachelor’s degree, whereas, 65% of students from high-income families earned a degree with 56% earning their bachelor’s degree. The consequences of low FGLI student retention rates include reduced annual incomes, increased student loan debt, decrease in potential tax revenues, higher incarceration rates, decreased civic involvement, and decreased levels of academic preparedness for children of FGLI students (Museus & Quaye, 2009). In order to mitigate these long-term individual and societal consequences, U.S. colleges and universities have a responsibility to increase the success rates of FGLI students and better position them for career opportunities.

As indicated by a surge in research over the past decade (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006), a major barrier to FGLI student success is a lack of college readiness. College readiness is defined as the level of preparation required to be successful in college without the need for remedial coursework (Baker, Clay, & Gratama, 2005). Cabrera, LaNasa, and Burkum (2001) found that only 25% of students from low-income families in their study had high school grade point averages high enough to demonstrate that they were ready for the academic rigors of college. Consequently, many low-income students attend 2-year colleges and require remedial coursework. Less than 30% of African American and Hispanic students who enter college with a requirement to take remedial coursework persist in college and earn a degree (Von Secker, 2009). Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) argued that the “differential college preparedness of advantaged and disadvantaged young people is the major determinant of differences in educational attainment” between these two groups (p. 224). However, Engle and Tinto (2008) demonstrated that even when differences in academic preparation are taken into consideration, FGLI students are still at an increased risk of failure. This research “suggests that the lower performance and persistence rates of low-income, first-generation students are as likely the result of the experiences they have during college as they are attributable to the experiences they have before they enroll” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 29).

At colleges and universities, faculty can have a major impact on how FGLI students experience college. Engle and Tinto (2008) noted that faculty effective at working with FGLI students create interactive and engaging classroom environments, help students develop strong peer relationships, and mentor students both inside and outside the classroom. The role faculty play in affirming students’ cultural identities and helping them to navigate the academic demands of
the classroom is also critical. Tierney (1999) and Stanton-Salazar (1997) have long argued for the importance of institutional agents who help students navigate the culture of higher education contexts and feel a sense of belonging on campuses. Others have argued for the role of cultural agents who connect students to campus resources, validate students’ cultural and racial identities, and provide smaller more supportive learning environments (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Despite recent empirical research that clearly identifies faculty as critical to the success of FGLI students (Engle & Tinto, 2008), less is known about the classroom practices that engage these students and help them become more academically prepared for college.

In order to gain deeper insight into classroom-based practices that support FGLI student success, this study focused on two central aspects of faculty and student experiences: their beliefs about their levels of college readiness and the pedagogies and practices that enable instructors to serve as cultural agents for their students. The researchers asked the following questions: (a) What are the views of readiness held by FGLI students and their community college instructors and (b) What pedagogical practices and dispositions do community college instructors enact that facilitate their cultural agency when working with FGLI students?

Models of College Readiness

Low success rates for college students from FGLI backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008) have encouraged researchers to better understand the complexities of college readiness. Once viewed from the perspective of academic preparation only, recent models of college readiness have become complex and multifaceted (Baker et al., 2005; Conley, 2008). Baker et al. (2005) have held that college readiness involves three related aspects: college awareness, eligibility, and preparation. College awareness concerns knowledge of admission, financial aid, course taking, and negotiating career pathways; college eligibility focuses upon knowing the correct courses to take for college admission. Preparation for college refers to adequate academic readiness to avoid remedial classes, to persist until graduation, and to enter the job market. Conley’s (2008) comprehensive conception of college readiness involved four facets: (a) key cognitive strategies, (b) key content knowledge across a number of subject areas, (c) academic behaviors like time management and study skills, and (d) contextual skills and knowledge that relate closely to Baker et al.’s college awareness. Both of these concepts have moved beyond a limited focus on academic preparation, only.

Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong’s (2012) ecological model of college readiness has been the most complex and comprehensive model proposed to date. By combining a number of research studies and models of readiness, Arnold et al.’s model has identified five key aspects of academic preparation: college
knowledge, self-efficacy, motivation, academic skills and discipline, and aspirations. To further contextualize readiness, Arnold et al. have placed these key elements within a larger ecological framework based upon Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological theory of human development. Placing the individual in the center, the model has highlighted the influences of the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems upon college readiness. In short, “the ecology of the individual student determines whether that student acquires the constellation of aspirations, dispositions, and academic and practical knowledge that constitute college readiness” (p. 94). Human ecologies differ from individual to individual, thus accounting for differences in student readiness between high- and low-income students, for instance. In order to provide a longitudinal and temporal dimension to development, Arnold et al. have embedded their model within the Bronfenbrenner’s concept of the chronosystem. The chronosystem conceptualizes the developmental change that individuals, as well as the sociopolitical systems and institutions involved in readiness, undergo over time.

Like Arnold et al. (2012) a number of researchers have viewed college readiness as an interplay between the individual and collective efforts of multiple stakeholders (Baker et al., 2005; Yamamura, Martinez, & Saenz, 2010). Such views have, therefore, connoted a shared responsibility for the adequate preparation of school-aged youth for college. Yamamura et al. included “teachers, counselors, parents, students, and superintendents” (p. 126) as principal stakeholders. As a stakeholder, the principal role that colleges have played in student readiness has been largely in the form of defining for K–12 schools the knowledge and skills required to be successful in college (Conley, 2008).

Current views of readiness have also made an attempt to move past purely deficit notions by focusing upon the collective cultural assets of communities (Yamamura et al., 2010). Although FGLI students may arrive at college with deficits in their readiness, they also bring rich social, linguistic, and cultural forms of wealth (Yosso, 2005). Such asset-based views of individuals and their communities highlight strengths that often go unrecognized by teachers, instructors, and professors.

This literature review highlighted one salient theme: College readiness is complex and multifaceted, an interplay between individual and collective efforts between multiple stakeholders, and takes place longitudinally throughout the K–16 years. The success of college students, therefore, depends at least in part on how colleges nurture and support students who enter college at varying levels of preparation and with complex forms of readiness. Multifaceted and longitudinal views of readiness thus include the college not simply as a consultant who informs K–12 stakeholders in how to better prepare students for college, but as a principal and active agent in the ongoing and complex process of student development and success.
Faculty as Cultural Agents

Our conceptualization of faculty as cultural agents draws from a growing body of research on minority student persistence in higher education, specifically research that argues cultural frameworks are needed in understanding the experiences of first-generation students (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1999). The interplay of a student’s home culture of origin with the academic, often distantly related culture of colleges and universities plays a critical role in student success (Tierney 1999; Tinto, 1993). First-generation students, especially those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, often describe themselves as unprepared for the alienation they feel upon entering college (Richardson & Skinner, 1992) and are more likely than non-first-generation students to view the campus environment, particularly the faculty, as less supportive and less concerned about them (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

The importance of first-generation students establishing connections with campus cultural agents who help them navigate home and academic worlds has increasingly become a focus of research (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Cultural agents act at both collective and individual levels. Collective agents include peer groups, campus organizations, and cultural centers that provide students with smaller, more personalized learning environments; opportunities to network; and an ability to express their own racial, ethnic, and class identities (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Individual agents often refer to faculty, staff, and administrators who help minority students simultaneously navigate their home and campus cultures (Kuh & Love, 2000). College faculty serve as one of the key cultural agents in helping FGLI students navigate home and campus cultures. Given FGLI students often live and work off campus, the time they spend in the classroom may be the only time they spend on campus engaging with faculty and peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Faculty serve as cultural agents in multiple ways both inside and outside the classroom. Engle and Tinto (2008) highlighted instructional practices that positively impact FGLI student achievement. These practices include fostering increased interaction and engagement in the classroom; helping students to develop study groups that provide an academic and social support system; reinforcing to students that they are capable of succeeding and belong on campus; and providing advising, mentoring, and tutoring opportunities outside the classroom. A report issued by the Institute of Higher Education Policy (2012) echoes many of these ideas and adds the following classroom-based practices: the importance of using culturally relevant materials, redesigning courses to increase student engagement with the campus and community, taking students out of the classroom and into the field to apply new concepts, and engaging students in research projects that relate to the principles taught in class.
The teachers interviewed for this study acted as cultural agents in a variety of important ways for FGLI students. In addition to employing particular instructional practices, teachers also utilized specific discourses when talking about student readiness and capacity for success in college. Discourse, here, refers to spoken language as a form of social practice that assumes a dialectical relationship between specific discourse practices and fields of social action (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). For the teachers in our study, discourses of readiness included beliefs about students' capabilities to succeed in college, beliefs in their own backgrounds as a resource in serving students, and the ways in which these beliefs influenced the specific pedagogies they utilized in the classroom. Similarly, interviews with students also revealed particular discourses of their own readiness that pointed toward a more dynamic picture of their college preparedness as well as their ability to identify instructional practices from these teachers that ultimately helped them to be successful.

Methods

Given Kuh and Love's (2000) invitation to validate cultural perspectives on minority student persistence through qualitative inquiry, this study utilized qualitative methods to understand how these college instructors and FGLI students made sense of their experiences and the nature of the talk they used to do so. The study is situated within the Teacher Pathway Program (TPP) at North Community College (both pseudonyms) because the first author is the director of this program thus providing ready access to study participants. The TPP involves four primary practices to support FGLI student success: (a) a student support specialist who provides and connects students to wraparound support services, (b) cohorted classes, (c) jobs in after-school programs to provide clinical teaching experiences, and (d) preservice teacher professional development opportunities. TPP students are all FGLI students, most of whom come from homes with an average annual income of $12,500. The TPP included 58 students, 10 instructors, 3 student support specialists, and 1 director.

Data analyzed for this study included eight North Community College instructor meetings, face-to-face interviews with 6 instructors and 17 TPP students, and one focal interview with 4 TPP students. We employed convenient sampling by soliciting volunteers among TPP students and instructors. The student sample was representative of the larger TPP population and included 12 females and 5 males. Among these 17 students, 9 were Latino, 6 White, 1 African American, and 1 Hmong. The instructors interviewed included four White females, one male originally from India, and one White male. The instructor meetings lasted approximately 2 hrs and were audio recorded. Interviews with students and instructors were face-to-face and lasted roughly 1 hr. All were audio recorded. We used a semistructured approach to the interview questions.
that allowed us to focus on gaining deeper insight and understandings into participant beliefs and practices (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

**Data Analysis and Trustworthiness**

Following transcription of the instructor and student interviews and Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, we used constant comparative analysis methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze the data. We began with open coding procedures to identify salient codes across participants, clustering these into major themes. We then used continually more selective codes to draw comparisons across the data and further refine our major themes. In order to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researchers triangulated the evidence from PLC meetings with results of instructor and student interviews as well as field notes to confirm developing themes. Member checks were then conducted with both instructors and students. Each was given a copy of the paper and asked to provide written and oral feedback to ensure accuracy of researcher analyses.

**Results**

**Instructor Views of Readiness**

During instructor PLC meetings, talk about TPP student readiness emerged as a central theme. One instructor’s response to a question about the challenges in working with TPP students illustrated his view of student readiness:

> I really feel like some of them really need remedial classes before they are ready to be in a college class, because they do not have the reading abilities, because they do not have the reading comprehension. And there is nothing I can do to change that. That is not what I can spend the class time on. So, it is a little frustrating instructing those classes. I almost feel like we are doing them a disservice, and the college a disservice because they are taking up spots that would be for other students.

When told that the program was designed to support students who otherwise would not have the opportunity to attend college, the instructor reacted: “Well, that’s my point. Maybe they should not be in college, unfortunately. I hate to say that, but that is the situation that I am having in the class, that they are not ready to be in this class.”

In his talk about student readiness, this instructor identified many of the academic skills his students lack in order to be successful in college. He also noted that there was little that could be done about this situation. In fact, throughout four meetings over one semester, the instructor did not articulate any adaptations or changes in practice in order to meet the needs of
TPP students. He relied almost entirely upon lectures with PowerPoint and made few attempts to get to know the students or engage them in class. As highlighted later in this article, this instructor’s actions and inactions did not go unnoticed by the students. The problem of student preparedness was located only with students and in no way implicated the instructor’s teaching practices. The instructor’s comments reflected a real frustration that all TPP instructors faced and one that they dealt with in different ways.

Further, the instructor’s comments represented an important belief about readiness that we found salient: When students came to them unprepared for college, some felt that they could offer little support to students, either inside or outside of the classroom. This perspective indicated an unwillingness on the part of some faculty to nurture or support FGLI students or identify more nuanced forms of readiness that FGLI students bring with them to college. However, as we interviewed instructors who were successful with TPP students, we found their definitions of readiness and their beliefs in their own agency as practitioners contrasted significantly with this point of view.

A longitudinal view of success. When asked about the main challenges she faced in working with TPP students, one teacher responded that academic preparation (Baker et al., 2005) is not something she assumes her students will bring with them to class:

The lack of preparation there’s not much I can do about the lack of, what they come in with. It’s a matter of time. It just keeps coming back to time. The summer has been really great in some ways because I can work with those students and those that need help… It’s been going up slowly as they’ve started to realize that oh, this is useful. One of the problems with preparation is caused by issues with going to the teacher for help, because it’s [seen as] a sign of weakness. Whereas in college we try to encourage them to come see the teacher to get them past, that it’s a sign of weakness. And I think they’re just starting to see that this is just part of the process.

Another instructor commented on the longitudinal nature of readiness for many of his students:

I’ve had the benefit of the longitudinal approach—having taught them for over two years. I’ve seen students mature from a point where they would shy away from their work or not come to class or come late so as to appear tardy—to a point where they were sitting in the front of the class all the time, taking copious notes, turning in all of their assignments, and also acting as student mentors for others.

Both of these instructors expressed a view of readiness that had strong developmental dimensions and was longitudinal in nature. For these teachers, academic readiness was not something they assumed students would bring
with them to college. Rather, readiness was something that occurred over time in
the course of classroom instruction, with opportunities for consistent feedback
from instructors. Also, readiness was not limited to academic preparedness but
included aspects of general college awareness such as visiting college professors
during office hours and acting as student mentors for their peers in class.

Willingness to persist. When asked about their teaching philosophy when working
with TPP students, instructors expressed a personal willingness to persist, con-
tinually finding ways to assist them academically, connect with them personally,
and encourage their success. One instructor expressed it this way:

To the best of my ability, I would never want to insult their intelligence. I would
ask them a question and really want to know. Initially, they would be like, no don’t
even ask me, I don’t want to know or tell you anything. But I would actually stay
and persist and now some of those students have actually become leaders in their
classes. I would stay on that student but give them more follow up questions and
eventually get something meaningful out of them. So that they know that they have
something meaningful to say because for so long they’ve been told that they don’t.

Another instructor added this:

I think my overall approach is something I tell the students on the first day, which
is I’m here to help you succeed. If you’re willing to work hard, I’m willing to work
hard. I’m willing to put in whatever time they need so they can succeed. I think
that’s helpful because a lot of these students are not necessarily well prepared for
[college] classes.

Instructors also noted that part of their willingness to persist was related to
holding students accountable for their own work, what they referred to as the
50/50 approach. Two instructors shared the following:

I think it’s important to recognize that we all need help with something. So I try to
key in to what people need from me as an instructor. And this is every class from
my 400 level courses here at [State] to my classes at [North Community College].
What do you need as a human being and also as a student? But also how can I meet
you halfway? My thing is fifty percent, because I think everyone needs to put in
some work.

And I know that’s hard for students, some coming from night jobs and have a hard
time staying awake. It’s whatever I can do to help them succeed…. On the other
hand, you have to do the work and let me know what you need. I found that
students really respect that. They don’t want to be coddled, they know they’re
adults. They [are] like, “here’s the bar and I’ll help you get over the bar.”
When these instructors shared their philosophies of teaching, they highlighted their willingness to persist with students in specific ways. This included encouraging students to take risks and value their own perspectives in class, despite efforts by students to deflect their initial attempts at doing so. It also involved holding students accountable and being explicit about expectations. Most importantly, it included communicating that they cared about their students and that they acknowledged the complex realities of poverty that students were bringing with them daily.

**Enacting readiness.** Many of the faculty talked about ways they structured their instructional practices to help students become ready for college. This included a range of strategies that broadly connected to making explicit more tacit forms of cultural knowledge needed for college success. In a question about the expectations and ground rules that she communicated to students in her class, one instructor shared the following:

So I tell my students you’re in college. This isn’t high school, this isn’t a friend’s house, a picnic or a barbecue, to put their minds in a place of thinking at a higher level, obtaining higher goals. They have to think about their language, their attitude, their physical appearance. I want them to sit up and present themselves as professionals! I’ll even let a curse word slip now and then to make a point or to let them know how strong the norm is to not use this [informal language]. But they were using language where I felt like I was at a barbecue. So I told them in here, you have to use your best language to describe the point you are making.

In addition to strategies that included an explicit focus on academic discourse, instructors talked about the importance of devoting classroom time to fostering peer relationships in the classroom. In the TPP program model, students attended classes as a cohort so instructors could tailor classes to their needs and students could support one another. They also attended weekly study sessions and intensive teacher workshops together. As much as the continual contact meant opportunities to develop strong peer relationships, it also meant opportunities to develop disagreements. At times, students would bring these interpersonal issues with them into the classroom. These instructors talked about frequent opportunities to build student–student relationships and confront tensions between them:

One other thing that I did that was unorthodox was I was able to stop instruction and have a collegial moment with them where I expressed my concerns using I statements and requested they did the same. Sometimes I would even take them outside the class to give them a different feeling for the classroom and ask
them to address their animosities toward each other. And they did, they were extremely passionate, but at the same time, the ill feeling was put away. So there was dealing with their interpersonal worries...

These collegial moments, termed one instructor, were important opportunities to help students adopt college-level dispositions, such as interacting across difference or solving miscommunication issues productively. The impact of these efforts strengthened the peer cohort, allowing students to serve as mentors for one another. One instructor commented on the importance of the peer network in her class:

[One student] has stepped up in a fabulous way... At the beginning of class she was not engaged and by the end, she is not only engaged, she has brought the rest of her group with her. And so to have brought [them up], I couldn’t bring them, I tried. And she did! She’s keeping them on point, explaining answers, definitely a success. I don’t think I had anything to do with it, it’s just this beautiful thing that happened.

Teachers also talked about developing authentic relationships with students, noting how relating to them was foundational to their ability to relay content. Here, the instructor is asked about specific strategies she used to relate to students and relate content to student’s lives:

I think relatability would be the biggest... To students’ lives but also to them as people. Because they put up the wall of you don’t get me. You’ll never understand where I come from. I think acknowledging where they come from but then reminding them they’re in college to do the work.

Another instructor also commented on the importance of developing authentic relationships with his students:

So there was dealing with their interpersonal worries but most important developing a very important one-to-one bond with each student, which was hard to do, given the numbers. But through structured office hours and through understanding of personal background and personal challenges and most importantly to speak their language. To make jokes, to use common speak, to use popular culture references as often as possible as working methods.

Finally, in addition to making language explicit and fostering close teacher and peer relationships, each of these instructors mentioned adapting or modifying course content in ways that mattered to student achievement. One instructor noted that specific modifications in her class, such as focusing on
the big ideas of the unit, allowed students to make important connection to their lives:

I actually think the curriculum does well with that. This is what I love about it. It gets rid of the jargon that they don’t need. Like stages of mitosis—you don’t need to know all that. So what’s nice about this that helps these students is—that I think is the thing that turns them off in high school from science is the rote memorization of words that don’t mean anything—So by getting rid of this, frees them to think about science that’s less threatening, that really get to the deeper thinking, but by getting the important bits of the foundation without all of the fluff. Actually one of the students, just today, we got totally sidetracked, and she just got really into the idea about evolution and what it means to our society and our changing world. She was a student that wasn’t that engaged before but I think this curriculum got her there because it’s asking those questions.

At first I trimmed them [lectures] down because they take such copious notes, so I trimmed some things down because it was taking forever. They are a little slower at note-taking and that’s okay, it’s an adjustment I’ve made. Also they really need me to give lots of examples in order to clarify the concepts.

These instructors saw their own instrumentality in helping to prepare FGLI students for college. As they spoke about their practice, they expressed key dimensions of their cultural agency in helping students become ready for college. This included making students aware of the academic discourse of college classrooms, facilitating strong peer and teacher relationships, adapting and modifying content to better engage students, and helping them relate the material to their own lives. These teachers were keenly aware of the structural challenges that FGLI students faced in their lives outside of school. Yet, these instructors did not see them as insurmountable barriers. Instead, they saw the classroom as the primary locus of control for enacting the kind of readiness practices students need to be successful in college. They located the problem of college preparedness as something they are responsible for; something they could directly influence. Helping students become more academically prepared was central to their instructional practice and beliefs about students, therefore a part of their praxis (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). These instructors were ultimately ready to teach these FGLI college students.

**Student Views of Readiness**

**Readiness as Academic Preparation and Levels of College Awareness**

When asked about their perceptions of their preparation for college, student responses demonstrated variation in how they saw their readiness. Ten of the 17 students interviewed spoke about their readiness in terms of academic
preparation. Three of the students felt academically prepared while the other seven did not. Those who felt unprepared academically pointed to a lack of content preparation, mostly in regard to English and mathematical skills. Five of the students also referred to a lack of time management and pointed to their high school as not adequately preparing them for the workload demands of college coursework. Three students from the same high school stated that while the school supported them emotionally, it did not adequately prepare them academically in regard to content preparation, time management, or study skills. One of the three students spoke about her experience in high school as follows:

Um socially I felt I was good. I felt like I could talk to anybody. I felt like I can relate to anybody, a good people person. As in education, application wise-I feel like the school I came from, we didn’t have homework and you didn’t have consistent, day-to-day responsibilities outside the classroom. So it was kind of culture shock to go from no homework, to really no responsibilities to tons of homework and hours of responsibilities, so I feel for that part it was a setback because I was not used to setting aside time to dedicate to my studies and education. It was a learning curve.

Eight of the students spoke about a general lack of college awareness or “how to do college.” For the most part, these students emphasized that they did not know how to sign up for classes: “I felt alright, but once I realized that I was taking all the wrong classes, then I realized that I was not prepared, cause I did not know what I was taking.” One student who felt academically prepared stated her level of preparation in terms of lacking an understanding of course sequences that lead to a career goal or specific degree:

I felt very prepared, but I did not know what I needed to do. You know, the classes that I needed and what were the steps. I felt academically prepared, but did not know how to achieve my goal to become a teacher.

**Readiness in Relation to Forms of Support**

A significant theme that arose from these data was that several students spoke about their preparation for college, or lack thereof, in terms of the relationship between readiness and the existence or nonexistence of forms of support. Further, they spoke about this relationship as it differed longitudinally from home, to high school, to college. Several students spoke about unsupportive home lives but how later support systems helped to mitigate this issue. One student stated her thoughts this way:

Well for me, growing up, not really having like a support system, not having parents who, were involved in my education, just seeing the family that I came from,
what I saw a lot of growing up, my siblings dropping out of high school and going back, so I saw a lot of that growing up which made me follow the same path as them, but as I met people getting older, I met people that wanted me to succeed. That support system just helped me to gain that self-confidence, which has always been really hard for me, that’s what I want to do.

Students also spoke about the relationship between college preparation and forms of support in regard to the TPP. When asked how well she felt prepared for college, one student responded as follows:

Well having [the student support specialist] there and letting us know she is there for us. Especially telling me its okay to drop the class. Having that made me know if I need paper or books I knew you guys wanted us to succeed and that is why this is put together for us.

Another student talked about this relationship in this way:

Mentally I was definitely ready. I had already taken college courses before I was in the TPP program. I wanted to go to school, I just did not know how to balance my home life and school and knowing that I was going to be in a small learning community. Okay this is what I need. I could get a little extra support with HW and with help from people who want me to succeed.

The support system provided by the TPP clearly mediated these students’ views of their own readiness for college demonstrating the intimate relationship between readiness and forms of FGLI student support. Finally, three students spoke about their preparation in relation to instructor dispositions and pedagogy, which students expressed as either supportive or nonsupportive of their academic success. Two students voiced their thoughts and feelings about this relationship in the following ways:

When I went to school my first two semesters I failed miserably because the teachers didn’t care who I was or what was happening at home. You know, even if I talked to them, they didn’t care. You know, and coming into this program I think that it has made it just so much easier.

I think that the classes that are more a personal based, like psychology, anthropology, or even the public speaking class, it was more relational. I feel like I learn better that way because I feel like they’re interested in me because they took the time to understand how I function. For those classes, I felt prepared and able to contribute in the class setting. For other teachers, like political science or history or math, I feel like because these weren’t my strongest subjects.
These students felt prepared for certain classes due in large part to the relational pedagogy (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Boyd, MacNeill, & Sullivan, 2006) used by the instructors. As analyzed closely in the next section, instructors who developed a certain level of competence with their own relational pedagogies appear to students to be better prepared to meet their academic needs.

In summary, student responses demonstrated variation in their views of readiness. They spoke of readiness for college in terms of academic preparation, and levels of college awareness concerning knowledge of course taking and course sequences, in relation to the forms of support they have experienced across contexts over time or in relation to instructor dispositions and pedagogies. TPP student views of readiness were thus complex and tied to other contextual factors. They also saw readiness as something that develops over time, especially during college. Their readiness was something that can be nurtured by adequate support systems and relational and engaging instructor pedagogies.

**Student Views of Instructor Pedagogy and Dispositions**

When asked about their community college instructors, students expressed a clear understanding of specific actions that effective teachers took to engage them in the classroom. It should be noted that all of the students interviewed have been in the TPP for 2 to 3 years, have logged hundreds of hours working with youth in after-school programs, and have attended numerous workshops on teaching methods and approaches. TPP students have therefore gained a level of expertise in teaching far beyond most sophomores in college, adding further credibility to their insights on instructor pedagogy.

From the perspectives of TPP students, effective instructors built supportive relationships with students by making efforts to learn about their lives. Here was how one student spoke about one of her instructors:

> You could teach that class and never have a connection with your students and I felt like she had a major connection with us. Not only was she connecting with us, about our background and our struggles, our successes, but I feel like she shared who she was and what she’s about, too. I feel like the more an instructor is willing to be open about who they are, the more we are willing to be open about who we are. It just causes this mutual respect inside the classroom.

In addition, students spoke about teachers having faith in them or believing in their abilities to succeed. “He knew what he was doing. Made sure that we were all keeping up. He was not ever anywhere close to giving up on anybody, as
opposed to [another] teacher where we just take notes every day.” Another student talked about her instructors in this way:

I think for me he had a lot of faith in me. The ones that are more distant, I don’t really want to see them, I don’t want to go. I think it helps because they know our situation because they can see our weaknesses and they work with you and this makes things easier because they try to work with us because if they try to work against us, it only makes it harder, pushing us down not up.

TPP students’ awareness of the importance of interpersonal connections between teacher and student as a foundation of effective teaching practice was clearly evident in the student data. These FGLI students face many challenges in their daily lives. Students commented repeatedly that instructors who took the time to get to know them personally, were flexible when students faced difficulties, and also held them accountable for their work, were instructors whom students recognized as supportive of their success. These same instructors also demonstrated a willingness to help students, especially when they were struggling with the content or demands of the course. Other aspects of effective instructor pedagogy that students identified were appropriate pacing, attending to student needs, monitoring and communicating student progress, giving clear explanations, and providing positive feedback and encouragement.

Although students were clear about teaching practices and teacher dispositions they found to be effective, several students commented on those that were ineffective:

He would just teach. He did not interact with us. He came in, did his job... He would go on and on the entire class and lecture, and that what the class was about, but he did not take the time to stop the class and ask are there any questions or do you guys understand what’s going on. He just went on and on the entire semester. That interaction would have helped. I did not gain anything from that class. I did not learn much.

Another student referred to a different instructor as follows:

As soon as he starts teaching, he starts his lecture, its like a switch flipped and he was boring, not the same person. He went into his Powerpoint and just didn’t really get into it, like he wasn’t excited about it, with the whole class, as with an individual. And I know that a lot of the other students have that issue, too. I don’t want to learn from a Powerpoint, I want to learn from my teacher.

From these student perspectives, an unwillingness or inability to connect personally with students, the absence of adequately monitoring student progress, and an overreliance on lecture-based pedagogy contributed to disengagement in
the classroom and a growing critique of pedagogies that fostered this disengagement.

One interesting anomaly in the data was that two students actually preferred lecture-based classes. One student commented that in these classes, he or she could focus on the content of the class because the instructor remained on topic. It was also the subject area in which the student wants to teach in a middle or high school. This subject matter investment or interest may help explain this preference. Interestingly, the student’s other favorite instructor used very little lecture in his classes, and the student described the instructor in the following way: “s/he really tried to understand us and get to know us. Not just a teacher that was like here is your assignment, now go do it.” The balance between lecture-based and more relational teaching strategies seemed to work for this student.

What was particularly salient about TPP student perspectives was their ability to assess to what degree they felt their instructors were actually ready to teach them. At one point, a student summed up teacher effectiveness like this: “[its] how they instructed, motivated me to learn and to become a better teacher. Now I look at teachers as ‘how are they teaching? Do I want to teach like that?’” This student viewed instructor pedagogy through the developing lens of what it means to be an effective teacher.

Discussion
Beliefs About Readiness Impact Degrees of Cultural Agency

Beliefs about readiness impacted the degree to which faculty served as cultural agents for FGLI students. Faculty who talked about readiness as fixed and primarily academic in nature focused mostly on what students could not do and what they should have learned prior to coming to college. These faculty were continually frustrated with student abilities and seemed unwilling to make changes in their practice. Similarly, TPP students identified these instructors as either unwilling or unable to connect with them in the classroom, engage them in learning, or offer other forms of structured support.

When faculty conceptualized student readiness as multifaceted and longitudinal in nature, they were more likely to recognize forms of student readiness, such as social, cultural, and linguistic forms of wealth (Yosso, 2005) that students brought with them to the classroom. Longitudinal perspectives also allowed them to better recognize the importance of time and their own willingness to persist with students, providing repeated opportunities to practice forms of readiness in and outside their classroom. These discourses of readiness were part of a larger repertoire of pedagogical beliefs that allowed these instructors to serve as cultural agents for students. Discourses here extended beyond purely linguistic arenas. As Wodak and Reisigl (2001) have argued, “discourse” can be
understood as a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifest themselves within and across social fields of action (p. 383). These discourses of readiness were more than just talk about students and teaching practices. Discourses of readiness worked to socially construct students as dynamic and willing participants in their learning and to create interactional spaces in the classroom where there was a sense of shared learning and mutual agency. Discourses of readiness were closely implicated in the ability of these instructors to serve as cultural agents for TPP students.

**Faculty Pedagogical Practices Enact Readiness**

Faculty who worked as cultural agents for TPP students also enacted specific pedagogies of readiness within the course of classroom instruction. This included a range of instructional approaches that broadly connected to making explicit more tacit forms of cultural knowledge needed for college success (Dee & Daly, 2012) such as using appropriate forms of academic discourse, facilitating strong peer and teacher relationships, and adapting and modifying content to better engage students, helping them to relate course material to their own lives. Students identified effective pedagogical practices of these instructors that impacted their success such as being flexible while still holding them accountable, attending to student needs, monitoring and communicating student progress, giving clear explanations, and providing positive feedback and encouragement. For these teachers, the classroom served as the primary sphere for influencing the readiness practices students needed to be successful in college. In so doing, they saw college preparedness as something for which they were primarily responsible.

Instructors in this study who served as cultural agents for FGLI students enacted pedagogical practices that align closely with theories of relational pedagogy (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Boyd et al., 2006). Relational pedagogy fosters positive and supportive teacher–student relationships while recognizing that “education takes place in the interactions between the teacher and the learner” (Biesta, 2004, p. 21). Although building positive relationships was foundational for these cultural agents, they also enacted specific teaching strategies that promoted student academic achievement. As identified by the students, the instructors monitored student progress, took the time to understand student challenges outside of the classroom, and reached out to help students even when they struggled with content or the demands of school, work, and family. As a result, TPP students felt connected to these instructors and their classes. These classrooms thus became supportive enclaves that helped to decrease feelings of alienation and marginalization often experienced by FGLI students (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tierney, 1999). These cultural agents created a space in their classrooms that promoted a sense of connection and belonging to the larger campus community.
Another finding from these data was that college readiness is ongoing, longitudinal, and continues throughout college. While previous research and models of college readiness tend to focus on the years prior to college, our data show that readiness does not stop at the entrance to higher education. Instead, students arrive with diverse forms of readiness that require varying forms of nurturing and support during college. Interviews with instructors who acted as cultural agents demonstrated that they felt it was their job to work with students to help them develop new forms of readiness. Students saw both their strengths and limitations as college students and spoke about their readiness as developing over time, especially when working with instructors who were willing to work with them. This bidirectional and developmental view of readiness opened up interpersonal and pedagogical spaces in which students could utilize alternate forms of readiness in classrooms and instructors could enact pedagogies that contributed to student academic preparedness.

This finding relates well to Arnold et al.’s (2012) Ecological Model of College Readiness, as the model embeds the development of individuals and the institutions responsible for preparing students for college success within the chronosystem. Following this model, not only does the individual develop forms of readiness over time but also the institutions change and adapt in order to better support student development. As the development of the skills and knowledge necessary for success in higher education does not stop at the entrance to college, Arnold et al.’s model highlights how institutions of higher learning can change in order to better support the success of FGLI students throughout college.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study focused primarily upon instructors who served as cultural agents, had nuanced views of college readiness, and enacted relational pedagogy in their classrooms. A potentially productive area of future study could focus upon better understanding the developmental trajectories of instructors who begin with more static views of readiness, who enact mostly traditional pedagogies, and who tend to have deficit-based views of FGLI students. Identifying successful interventions that help such instructors move toward more relational and responsive pedagogies would be a significant contribution to the field of study that concerns itself with FGLI student success, persistence, and retention.

A promising example of a college initiative to support faculty toward this end is targeted professional development for part-time and full-time faculty. A Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012) report suggests a sequence of faculty workshops designed to encourage professional development in the following key areas that support FGLI students: deepening student engagement both in class and on campus, enacting active learning strategies, enhancing presentation techniques, and increasing knowledge of campus and
student support systems. Additional efforts to support faculty could also include peer mentorship programs along with regular peer observations from experienced faculty. The effectiveness of faculty professional development efforts could be measured through faculty participation numbers, program evaluations completed by faculty, course completion rates, and student achievement data from classes taught by faculty who have gone through training programs in comparison to historical data from the same classes.

Another promising approach is linking faculty professional development to effective first-year experience programs (ACT, 2010; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Gulf Coast Community College, 2011). First-year experience programs found to increase FGLI student retention include freshman orientation, early registration, cohorted classes, mandatory study sessions, connecting students to campus agents in areas such as advising and financial aid, and the employment of peer and faculty mentors to work in small advising groups with FGLI students (ACT, 2010; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012). The effectiveness of these practices is currently measured by coursework completion rates, student grade point average, and fall-to-spring and fall-to-fall student retention (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Kuh et al., 2006). In order to connect faculty professional development to first-year experience programs, faculty mentors experienced in working with FGLI students could collaborate with those who teach the cohorted classes in which the FGLI students attend. These collaborative sessions could include sharing effective practices such as nuanced views of student readiness, relational pedagogy, and active learning strategies.

Further, a sustained national conversation about the departure rate for FGLI students at colleges and universities needs to take place. The goals of these conversations would be to increase the achievement and retention of FGLI students and to continually assess the needs of FGLI students over time. More research and attention must be paid to documenting the successful structures and practices that foster FGLI student retention. The model of the TPP highlighted in this study provides insights into one such institutional structure that works effectively, as it involves a defined career pathway, cohorted classes, employment, and structured opportunities for professional development. Such career pathways provide campus cultural agents with a space to mediate students’ home and school lives, as well as help connect student learning to their career trajectories. These concrete and feasible practices could go a long way toward increasing FGLI student retention and transfer rates to 4-year colleges.

A final implication concerns changing the question that frames both research and practice around college student readiness. In addition to asking, “Are FGLI students ready for the demands of college?” We propose asking “Are FGLI students and the colleges they attend ready for each other?” This question creates a productive framework for guiding both research and practice, as it promotes K–16 responsibility for fostering FGLI student retention while taking into...
account the complexity of college student readiness and the vital role that cultural agents play in promoting FGLI student success.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**
The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**
Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success (a first look)*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program.


**Author Biographies**

**Alfred R. Schademan**, is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at California State University, Chico. His research interests focus upon issues of FGLI student retention and mentorship, the learning and development of scientific forms of reasoning as youth engage in cultural practices, and the professional development of science teachers and teacher candidates as they engage in new standards and innovative pedagogies. He teaches coursework in elementary and secondary science methods and the fundamentals of teaching practice. He is currently serving as coordinator of the Single Subject Program for CSU, Chico.

**Maris R. Thompson**, is an Associate Professor of Education in the School of Education at California State University, Chico. Her research interests focus on understanding the contexts of schooling for language minority youth in current and historical contexts as well as the role of adolescent literacy in identity making processes in home and school based contexts. Her newest research interests include the persistence of first generation college students and international students in higher education. Dr. Thompson teaches courses in the Single Subject Credential Program and the MA in Curriculum and Instruction option at CSU, Chico.