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# Why Inquiry Matters: An Argument and Model for Inquiry-Based Writing Courses

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## Why Inquiry Matters: An Argument and Model for Inquiry-Based Writing Courses

*The authors consider the value and implications of inquiry-driven learning for secondary and postsecondary education.*

Inquiry is a research practice, habit of mind, and pedagogical value that many, perhaps most, educators hold dear. As English educators, we may especially value inquiry for its role in helping students develop the habits of mind advocated by the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (WPA, NCTE, & NWP, 2011): curiosity, openness, engagement, creativity, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. Or, we may value its role in practitioner inquiry (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2008) for helping us to link theory and practice and to question everyday teaching experiences. Appreciation of inquiry may have to do with its ability to help students read texts or engage in language study more critically (NCTE Commission on Reading, 2004). Or appreciation may stem from the various ways in which inquiry is essential for observing, making sense of, taking action, and learning to intervene in the world. In short, inquiry

can help us to rethink inherited ways of knowing, to refashion ourselves, and to disrupt unjust systems.

For these and many other reasons, inquiry and inquiry-based learning have earned a central place in English education. We tend to write and think quite a bit about inquiry in education, as illustrated, for example, through the journals *Education Inquiry*, *The Journal of Inquiry & Action in Education*, i.e.: *inquiry in education*, and *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*. And this focus on inquiry aligns with project-based learning, which similarly allows for a more student-driven and experiential approach to learning (see, e.g., foundational writing by John Dewey). As Preston (2015) argues in a recent article in *College Composition and Communication*, project-based writing classrooms engage students in a topic of particular interest, invite student initiative, necessitate a range of writing and research

activities, allow students to build on previous knowledge and skill, and offer the possibility for work to extend beyond a single course or instructor (p. 42-43). Often used as synonymous terms (at least in their uptake), *project-based* and *inquiry-driven* offer alternatives to schooling as rote memorization or rehearsed performance. These alternatives include cross-disciplinary and original research, long-term and scaffolded projects, and student agency and ownership of learning.

Yet, despite inquiry's continued and prominent role in education, too many courses still limit student inquiry or treat it as an excess. We see the limited role of inquiry as linked with the traditional notion of "banking education" (to use Freire's term), that is, the still-powerful conception of teachers as experts, students as sponges, and schools as places of sitting quietly in one's seat. It often seems that the structure of classrooms and curricula leave little room for students to explore original questions or to construct new knowledge. In her recent ethnographic study *"I Love Learning; I Hate School,"* anthropologist Blum (2016) characterizes the problem as industrial education with pre-determined curriculum and high-stakes testing:

I believe that before too long there will be widespread recognition of

the ineffectiveness and inhumanity of universal compulsory schooling guided by an industrial model of predetermined, teacher-centered curriculum, measured by time-in-seat and assessed by high-stakes testing, with sorting (evident in grades and scores) as the principal goal. This dominant educational paradigm replicates race and class inequalities and distorts the natural human need to move around and have varied experiences. A new paradigm must come; the current one clearly works only for a few. (p. 4)

As readers, we are likely familiar with these problems, from measuring educational success through high-stakes tests to replicating race, class, and other social inequities. Still, these problems persist, so we face the immediate need to seek a different way of doing education. One way is through prioritizing inquiry. Even though we value inquiry, we often don't act on this value, or we act on it in limited ways. We argue, therefore, for embracing inquiry, as it can counter critical problems with schooling. We call for inquiry-driven writing instruction both to recognize our ongoing interest in inquiry and the change-making potential inherent in this alternative approach to traditional education.

In order to take up this call for prioritizing inquiry in writing classrooms, we need models for inquiry-based learning. There is no perfect or single model for prioritizing inquiry, but we offer one that has been consequential for us in undergraduate education. This course model, “Ethnography of the University” (e.g., eUI, 2016; Godbee, Bazan, Glise, Gonzalez, Quigley, & White, 2015; Davis-Kahl, 2012; Hunter, 2011), invites students to conduct semester-long inquiries into their lives as students. This writing-intensive course asks students to become authors of their own educations; to identify problems facing the campus community; to conduct semester-long, original research projects; and to make proposals for change. Through carrying out these inquiry projects, students see themselves as writers with real audiences beyond a single instructor or class of students, learn the processes of problem-posing and question-asking, personalize an often impersonal education, and connect academic with human/lived/everyday concerns. Further, students develop *agency* and *ownership* when they make writing and learning truly their own. In turn, when students become agents, they can more easily write their way beyond a semester, course, or single project—and into the stance of *writer*.

In what follows, we share the course model of “Ethnography of the University” for inquiry-driven, project-based learning in secondary and postsecondary English education. Two undergraduate researchers (Katie and Megan) describe their projects on student life—projects that emerged from the course and have continued beyond the semester. By providing glimpses into their research, these undergraduate researchers also illustrate how writing courses can do more than teach writing: they can help to mold a generation of people who feel responsible for and *want* to make change.

### **About the Course: “Ethnography of the University” (Beth’s Story)**

At Marquette University, I offer “Ethnography of the University” as an upper-division, writing-intensive course. Over the fifteen-week semester, students design, conduct, and share mixed-method research projects. They begin by identifying a community or issue that matters to them deeply and that impacts the university. These matters are local, contextual, and immediately important. Students then ask open-ended questions that can be answered through qualitative research and conduct ethnographic projects to find answers. Their findings lead to proposals for change that can be made at our institution. Students share

their projects and proposals through three final products: (1) an oral presentation to the class community; (2) a campus-wide research poster fair, which attracts students, faculty members, staff, librarians, and administrators from across campus; and (3) an article-length paper, which some students choose to publish in an e-publication housed in [Marquette's Institutional Repository](#).

To help students develop rhetorical flexibility, social awareness, and a sense of their own agency with writing, the course involves students in consistent writing: students write in a variety of genres, in response to different assignments, and for multiple readers. The assignments follow a trajectory, as students begin by looking *inward* to their own experiences; then *outward* to a particular location, community, and issue on campus; and finally *forward* with a large-scale research project and proposal for change in response to questions and problems identified through earlier research. This trajectory moves through five primary assignments:

- 1. Narrative inquiry**, a creative piece of writing (e.g., story, poem, or multimodal essay) reflecting on students' experiences as undergraduates at Marquette;
- 2. Methodological projects**, observation fieldnotes and a coded

interview transcript, both reporting initial data collected and analyzed as the project takes shape;

**3. Qualitative sketch**, an analytical essay drawing from fieldnotes, interviews, and other data gathered by midterm that shares initial findings;

**4. Research proposal**, a grant proposal that outlines the project's need, research questions, methodological design, intended contributions, and larger implications, along with an annotated bibliography and relevant appendixes;

**5. Research project**, which takes three final forms: an in-class presentation, a research poster, and an article-length paper (15+ page exploration), all of which address the initial question or problem, describe the project's design, share findings, offer implications, and propose local changes based on the findings/conclusions.

These assignments provide scaffolding and support so students don't feel lost as they conduct what is typically their first semester-long research experience. Katie and Megan, for instance, say that the frequent due dates were important for keeping them accountable and for clarifying expectations. Yet, the assignments are also

open enough to provide flexibility and room to shape a project truly their own.

Students begin shaping their projects through the questions they ask. As qualitative researchers recommend, we practice asking genuine, open-ended research questions, or those that lead to descriptive findings (e.g., Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As a class, we spend time formulating “what” and “how” questions; asking related sub-questions; and refining primary and sub-questions as the project’s focus comes into clarity. Rothstein and Santana (2011) suggest a similar process that moves from producing to improving, prioritizing, and reflecting on questions. They suggest a step-by-step protocol for teaching students to develop genuine questions, so their book *Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions* could serve as a good starting point for teachers interested in inquiry-based writing courses.

Continuing the instruction and support around research questions, we discuss genre conventions, review past student work, read an ethnographic study, and conduct regular peer reviews. To balance structure with openness and student-directed learning, we also talk about the specifics of each student’s project in frequent in-class workshops and one-with-one

conferences—times in which I learn about and give tailored feedback. In contrast to many writing assignments submitted and seldom revisited, the sequenced assignments with frequent conferences allow students to express concerns, receive feedback, and revise as their projects develop. Through regular peer and instructor feedback, multiple researchers are reviewing each other’s data, questioning findings, and helping arrive at fair and trustworthy conclusions before settling on answers.

Though students’ findings are certainly limited by scale (a 15-week semester and short-term studies) and sample size (typically only a few interviews, observations, and other data collected), acknowledging and speaking to these limitations teaches us about research and writing. We learn that research writing furthers conversations and opens, rather than closes by concluding, new knowledge. Undergraduate researchers lay the groundwork for future projects to take up related lines of inquiry and for future students to build on past research. At Marquette, we now have multiple published projects conducted over several semesters that draw on and extend earlier research. Among the lines of inquiry that persist semester to semester are matters of the insulated “Marquette Bubble” and campus-community relations, the transfer student

experience, preparation for study abroad, and inequities and microaggressions facing students of color. Research limitations offer opportunities, therefore, for experiencing and contributing to small but sustained knowledge building and change making.

Because this course model emphasizes researcher agency throughout the inquiry process, it also invites students to continue developing their projects after the semester ends. And many students do. Former students and I have written about the ways in which these projects evolve in often-unexpected, but meaningful, ways (Godbee, Bazan, Glise, Gonzalez, Quigley, & White, 2015). As we write in that article, “When students seek publication and act on their proposed changes, their projects also stretch beyond a single semester: though they begin in the course, projects often develop into extracurricular pursuits, independent studies, or advocacy work.” This continuation of work indicates that projects become more than course requirements. Yet, the inquiry projects also help students appreciate what coursework can offer. That is, English courses can offer instruction in writing processes, literacy practices, question-asking, research methodology, project design, publication, and other areas needed to explore and share what matters in the world.

From talking with secondary educators (and as one former and two future high school teachers ourselves), we believe this model can be adapted in various ways for middle and high school classrooms. The semester timeline could be modified into a unit timeline or, alternatively, into a year-long exploration. Students might ask about their experiences as students or, more broadly, as members of their families or home communities. And they might share their findings and proposals through diverse genres beyond the more typical, research-based genres of higher education. We imagine, for instance, students creating websites, blogs, videos, flyers, or other written, oral, or multi-modal presentations.

Next, we hear from Katie and Megan, two undergraduate researchers who include their research posters both to give overviews of their projects and to show how multimodal composition can be naturally woven with inquiry projects.

### **Defining and Developing the Project:**

#### **“Will You Look Me in the Eye?**

#### **The Embrace and Denial of Human Dignity” (Katie’s Story)**

When I entered “Ethnography of the University,” I knew I wanted to continue an inquiry into human dignity that began the previous semester in a philosophy course.

While learning about different philosophical theories, I became more purposely observant of the world around me. I made it a point to keep my headphones off on the bus and keep my cell phone pocketed in elevators because of my newfound interest in observing and respecting human interaction. As an area of study, philosophy intrigued me, but the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas grabbed me the most. Levinas applies Kant's theory of transcendental idealism to consider how our interactions with others impact their dignity as human beings (dignity being especially important in his context of witnessing dehumanization in concentration camps during the Holocaust).

Influenced by Levinas's conception of human dignity as a foundation for justice, I began to notice different loaves of stale bread left near a church community and a homeless shelter around the eastern side of campus. I wondered who left the bread in bushes and on church steps—and why. I wondered if people were leaving bread carelessly or if someone was trying to do a favor by leaving food, not considering how they might be robbing others of dignity.

As I enrolled in "Ethnography of the University," my vision for the future and my intended career path were changing. During the semester I shifted from being a Writing-Intensive English major in the Pre-Law

Scholars Program to pursuing a double major in English Language Arts and Secondary Education. In this context, "Ethnography of the University" provided a new and useful framework for thinking about education. This experience mattered to me because I could truly engage in interdisciplinary learning and pursue the questions that began in my philosophy course. As a future teacher, I hope to provide students with similar opportunities to ask their own questions and act on their own creativity.

When it came time for our first assignment (the narrative inquiry), I was unsure about my research question, but I let my mind wander and created a poem about the mystery and irony of the bread. Levinas's theory remained fresh in my mind, and I was excited to consider his work outside simple classroom discussion. After allowing my thoughts to stew for a while, one came into focus. I wanted to look into how the Marquette community acknowledges human dignity. In other words, I wanted to know whether people are aware that human dignity is a part of everyday interactions.

To answer this question, I conducted an online survey, two interviews, and multiple field observations. I also sought scholarly literature about everyday interactions and human dignity in general and on college campuses in particular. I



found many articles on dignity in relation to global race issues and disability rights, but I found a gap in the research on everyday interactions. This gap motivated me to seek IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval because I hoped I could contribute new knowledge. If I could collect information about everyday interactions, I wanted to be able to share it to raise awareness, which I was able to do by publishing [my final paper and poster](#) through Marquette University's ePub (see Appendix A).

Before the semester-long project, I had not fully realized my research question. But once it grew, it propelled my excitement about the project in a way that a predetermined question would not. This process brought to the forefront inquiries that had been lingering and unattended to in the back of my mind. I began to live my research: instead of allotting time to think about this school project, it became part of me. This internalization may be, in part, due to the nature of my research question. The proximity of the research question to my life experiences and to my own interests pushed me to do more than I would have done otherwise. Furthermore, this project allowed me to take the reins on my semester's work, to shape my final paper and poster, and to walk away with a project that was truly my own. As I look ahead to a future career in

English education, I hope to provide similar experiences in my own writing classroom.

**Writing and Researching beyond the Semester: “Higher Education: Obligation or Opportunity?”  
(Megan’s Story)**

As a Writing-Intensive English major, I found that this opportunity for semester-long research helped me both to develop my skills as a writer and researcher and to determine the direction of my career. I am interested in graduate studies, and the subject of my research has allowed me to consider a career in education and to reflect on how students view their own educations, whether as obligations or opportunities. Further, the intensive research experience has prepared me for the independent, original research expected in graduate school. As I continue to pursue my study in the semesters since “Ethnography of the University,” I have come to understand what self-directed, long-term research feels like. This is the kind of work I didn’t believe to be achievable in undergraduate education before this course, and it’s also the kind of work I’d like to continue doing after graduation.

Specifically, my study seeks to understand student attitudes toward higher education, focusing on student participation in the classroom. Like Katie, I was motivated

by initial observations—in my case, seeing fellow classmates’ frequent disengagement from learning. Throughout my first semesters, I observed a lack of verbal participation in classrooms across the disciplines. Additionally, after listening to my classmates complain about learning course material, I began to wonder whether students felt that a college education was a sort of duty they were obligated to complete as opposed to an opportunity for intellectual and personal growth. When beginning this research, I filled the role of participant-observer, approaching my own undergraduate education as the source of data and determining what aspects of university life have contributed to a sense of apathy toward learning.

As a result of my observations, I found that students are more engaged in smaller classes, when professors require participation and attendance, and when professors promote discussion over lecture. The inquiry-driven nature of the course allowed me to explore an issue that has interested me since I started college, and it gave me a concrete methodology for finding answers. The course also helped to lay the groundwork for continuing this project after the semester, beyond the [initial paper and poster](#) I published in the e-Pub (see Appendix B).

During the semester, I applied for IRB approval and received an undergraduate research grant awarded by Marquette’s Klingler College of Arts and Sciences. The grant provided summer funding to continue the research, and Beth continued to serve as my mentor. Throughout the summer, I built on my initial mixed-method study (involving observations and interviews) by conducting a thorough literature review, composing and distributing a survey, and conducting a focus group of undergraduates at Marquette. This research design allowed me to tap into and use my personal experience, plus document a range of student perspectives and situate them alongside published scholarship. The more I have learned from these various sources, the more I have understood the problem of student disengagement as multifaceted and largely dependent on who’s speaking.

As a result of continuing the project, I sought opportunities to present my work beyond Marquette. With my interest in graduate education, I wanted a broader sense of the field of writing studies. Beth introduced me to Jenn Fishman, another faculty mentor in Marquette’s English Department, who shared information about the Naylor Workshop for Undergraduate Research in Writing Studies held at York College in Pennsylvania. I submitted a

proposal, which was accepted, and I attended the workshop in the fall. Throughout the workshop, I learned about qualitative and quantitative research methods and publication venues for undergraduate research in writing studies. I also received feedback during meetings with faculty mentors, discussing what I had written so far and brainstorming different ways to analyze the data I collected. This feedback led me to both a more solid understanding of qualitative research and to another opportunity—to present an updated version of my research poster to an audience of Marquette faculty and students later that fall.

Based on additional insight and excitement around the project, I felt prepared to submit a proposal to the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Undergraduate Research Poster Showcase, which took place last spring. Presenting my research at a national conference allowed me to acquire new perspectives on research and to meet faculty in writing studies. After attending the conference, I have a clearer direction on where I would like to submit a research article and further interest in pursuing a career in English education.

Above all, completing “Ethnography of the University” has helped me to identify myself more confidently as a developing

researcher and writer capable of producing and communicating original thoughts and ideas. I now know that my ideas are of interest to others at my university and beyond.

### **Implications:**

#### **Learning to Teach Differently**

Cultivating inquiry-based learning in writing classrooms can help to change how teachers think about teaching and how students view themselves as participants in their own learning. We hope that our three stories attest to this fact. By promoting original research, educators can foster an environment where students have agency in their educations, take ownership over their writing, and see themselves as capable researchers who have questions worthy of answers. Additionally, students can become more actively engaged in seeking answers to issues that matter to them, utilizing inquiry-based courses to develop independent projects.

Through inquiry, teaching becomes more than the sharing of information. Rather, it involves discussions that go beyond typical academic texts, invites students to connect with and contribute to their own communities, and encourages us to think critically about lived experiences. In the case of “Ethnography of the University,” we look

at undergraduate education by homing in on where we live, learn, work, and relate with others. This course has made me (Katie) think about how teachers don't need to guide every step in the writing process; instead, students need room to shape their own work. And I (Megan) came to appreciate the mentoring of one-with-one conferences and the role critical feedback plays in developing an interesting and meaningful project.

Inquiry opens the opportunities for mentoring, peer response, ambitious writing, and public writing. Certainly, inquiry-based learning is not limited to the model of "Ethnography of the University." In other inquiry courses, students might look *outward* to communities in which they have grown up, *backward* to trace personal or family histories, or even *forward* to locations or positions in which they hope to find themselves. What is critical, we believe, is that we in English education do not just embrace inquiry as a value that we appreciate. We need to act on and enact this value. We need to build inquiry actively into our writing classrooms.

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# Appendix A: Katie Ellington Poster



## Will You Look Me in the Eye? The Embrace and Denial of Human Dignity

Katie Ellington

### Research Question

Does the Marquette community acknowledge human dignity in everyday interactions?

### Introduction

This project was inspired by phenomenology and *stale bread*. The philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, changed the way I perceive the world altogether with his pseudo-ethical theory: the *Phenomena of the Face*. Levinas' theory inspired me to further consider a person's humanity and human dignity in everyday interactions, such as passing someone on the street. While learning about Levinas, I saw mysterious bread scattered across campus. With my new philosophical mindset, I saw this plethora of bread, unwrapped, lining the streets and flower boxes of Marquette's campus as some sort of statement against dignity rather than for it. I was compelled to ask the question: **does the Marquette community consider Human Dignity on an everyday level?**

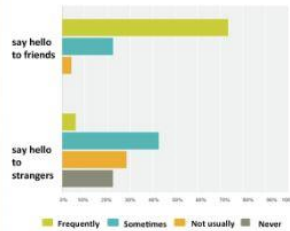


Above Left: Outside the US Bank Building downtown  
Above Right: Outside Gesu Catholic Church on Campus

### Results

#### Reaching Out

- Common to reach out to friend
- Much less likely to reach out to a stranger
- Notice the difference in frequencies on the chart below:



#### Reciprocity

- Common when interacting with strangers
- A person will only do as much as is done to them
  - A smile elicits a smile back, but one only says "good morning" if the stranger says "good morning" first.
  - The other person elicits a response
- if they did not elicit a response, there would be no need to reciprocate.
- When actions not reciprocated, noted sense of unease
  - As if a duty has been neglected

#### Conclusion

Participants indicate that they wait until interaction is initiated with strangers. Since someone has to initiate in order for an interaction to occur at all, it must be the Milwaukee community which reaches out to the Marquette community more than the other way around in these situations. Marquette needs to do a better job reaching out to strangers and making them feel welcome on our campus.

“I think a lot of people don't know how to act in those situations. Maybe it's not necessarily that they think those people don't deserve human dignity, but maybe that they don't necessarily know how to interact with people in that way.”  
— Interview respondent

### Proposals for Change

#### Immediate

- Raise awareness by posting posters up around campus.
- Begin with simple statement posters about human dignity issues in the Milwaukee area.

#### Long Term

- Coordinate a week long series of events and speakers to raise awareness about the many different issues concerning Human Dignity.
- Highlight ways we can affect our own Marquette and Milwaukee communities while also acknowledging a few international issues.
- Present everyday interactions on the same platform as global issues.



### Methods

- Interviews
  - Convenience Sampling
  - Approximately 30 minute duration
- Observation Notes
  - Observed Bus Stop on 12<sup>th</sup> and Wisconsin Ave.
  - Common place for both Marquette community members and Milwaukee members
- Online Survey
  - Voluntary involvement
  - Snowball sampling
- The combination of these methods provided for a more comprehensive view of human dignity on campus – each plays a vital role for insight.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Transcendental Idealism (Kant)

- We (*the ego pole*) provide an *intuition* about an object or the other (*the object pole*) which presents itself to us through givenness
- The two together create the *appearance*



#### Levinas & the Phenomena of the Face

- Levinas uses Transcendental Idealism to build his theory
- The face is infinite; it cannot be completely grasped
- We perceive the face as an *ethical alterity*
  - a visual representation of a person's humanity
- The infinity of the face is special because of its overwhelming factor
  - undermining our own intuition of the object MUCH more than any other object
- Levinas argues that we "annihilate" the person when we ignore their humanity
- My Argument for Social Importance**
  - The face calls out to us to react to it
  - We have a responsibility to uphold a person's human

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Appendix B: Megan Knowles Poster

## Higher Education: Obligation or Opportunity?

Megan Knowles

BE THE DIFFERENCE.

### Introduction

From the beginning of my experience at Marquette, I continually observed students that appeared to demonstrate no enthusiasm for getting an education, reflected in a noticeable lack of participation in class discussions. I felt my expectations of academia being crushed as students boasted about skipping lectures and passively sat in class, seemingly disinterested in the professor and the material. If college was truly regarded as an opportunity for intellectual growth, why did students treat education as nothing more than an obligation?

**Q: What changes can be made in the college classroom to combat apathy and promote student engagement?**

### Methods

**Research Design:**  
This project is a mixed-method qualitative study relying on **observations, interviews, and scholarly literature.**

**Data Collection:**  
•4 sets of **observation field notes** from different types of undergraduate classes.  
•2 **interviews**—1 with a faculty member, one with a sophomore in the College of Business.  
• Excerpts from Rebekah Nathan's **ethnographic study** of undergraduate life, *My Freshman Year*.

### Results

**Students appear more engaged when:**

- Classes have **fewer students.**
- Professors **require attendance and participation** as part of the final grade.
- Professors encourage **discussion over lecture.**

Class Type	Number of Students Enrolled	Major/Non-Major Course	Attendance/Participation Graded	Technology Allowed	Discussion Time During Lecture
Introductory Level Biology	~100	Non-Major	No	Yes	Minimal
Upper-Division French	14	Major	Yes	No	Majority of class time
Upper-Division English	16	Major	Yes	No	Minimal
Upper-Division Psychology	~50	Major	No	Yes	Minimal

*When observing undergraduate classrooms, I examined aspects of the learning environment that could potentially impact student engagement, including class size and whether or not participation counted as part of the grade for the course.*

### Proposals for Change

- Promote **discussion-based** lectures.
- Increase **dialogue** between students and professor.
- Encourage **graded participation** in smaller courses.
- Create more opportunities for students to **suggest improvements to lecture style.**

*"It's just that I think we've pushed too many kids who don't, not deserve, but they don't want to go to college."*  
—Sophomore in Marquette's College of Business

*"The teacher-student interaction focused less on what students said than on getting them to say something."*  
-Rebekah Nathan, *My Freshman Year*

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