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# 250 Words of I don't Understand: Reading Struggles for Freshmen College Students

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250 Pages of I don't understand:  
Reading Struggles for Freshmen College Students

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### **Abstract**

The focus of this Capstone project is on the reading struggles of first year college students. This is important because reading is a fundamental need in secondary education and in our society. If people are challenged in this area, they will struggle both in higher education, as well as certain aspects of daily living. The three primary stakeholder perspectives examined were college teachers and tutors, because of their relevant expertise, as well as their roles and responsibilities. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, action was taken to help first-year college students overcome their reading challenges and thus, hopefully be able to move toward graduation and not become an added statistic to the dropout rate.

*Keywords:* reading, literacy, education, freshmen college students

## 250 Pages of I don't understand:

### Reading Struggles for Freshmen College Students

Have you ever been so discouraged over something that you are ready to quit? Have you ever come to the end of your rope and said “enough is enough?” I am sure that there is not one person who does not know what I am talking about. We have all been there in one situation or another. With a splitting headache, and burning eyes, the bed always has more appeal than the chapter needing to be read for the exam the following day. But think of how much worse it would be to have to stay up to read that academic text if it was going to take you several hours to get through those pages, and once you did put that effort in, wondered if you really understood it.

Due to my own personal struggles, the lack of reading ability is close to my heart. Personally speaking, I am legally blind, and this disability makes reading difficult for me. Growing up, this impacted many areas of my life, but especially reading, regardless if I was reading in school or simply for pleasure. I can only see the individual word I am looking at; I can only see one word at a time. This means that I read slower than the average person. Beyond reading at a snail's pace, reading gives me headaches if I do not use aids to help me. When I was in grade school and high school, I had no help in these areas. I suffered with headaches and seeing black spots on a weekly basis. Pain was just an ongoing part of my life.

When I entered college many years after my high school graduation, I was reunited with those headaches and black floaters in my vision. There was so much reading to accomplish--I was working every waking moment. Computer screens and the florescent lighting in the classrooms only enlarged my troubles. The pressure in my head was growing every day. The black spots, the pain--I questioned from the very first few weeks of community college if I would be able to complete any degree. Due to my reading rate, when I took the English placement test, I was placed in multiple remedial classes. Not because I did not understand what I was reading, but simply because I was too slow. While I did receive help and reading aids early on in my college education, deadlines did not move and education as a whole has just been rough all the way through. My homework takes me so long, I have had almost no social time. I missed the birthday party of a very good friend. Everyone else was there, but I was not. All because I was still working on my homework due the following week; all because of the amount of reading

that needed to be done. Procrastination has rarely come into the picture; it is all due to the difficulties I have with the amount of reading required in every class. Over the seven years it has taken me to get just a bachelor's degree, (and that being a full time student throughout) I have come so close to quitting multiple times. I have become so discouraged and depressed that if it were not for family and friends, I would have been one more person in the college dropout statistics. Even just a short time ago, being only two months away from graduation, I was absolutely done. I really did not care to keep going, and, every day is still a challenge to want to continue.

Once I did receive the appropriate aid needed to continue college, I began to look around and notice many other students who had problems reading for reasons that did not appear to be physically related like my own. College students struggled to actually understand the meaning of the text and some could not distinguish between a subject and a verb. While this was not my issue, I understood clearly that when someone has a problem in any way with reading, not just college, but life in general is harder to live. I began to wonder how these college students actually passed high school.

I remember sitting with a personal friend of mine in my early days in college trying to help her understand her homework. She was taking one of those remedial college courses to help prepare her for college level academics. She literally could not distinguish the difference between a subject and a verb. I marveled at someone so dedicated in getting a degree and yet who struggled so much with the basics of her own language. I understood that just getting a degree was hard enough, but to be set back by not understanding the reading and writing process--this made life so much more challenging. How was she also going to take the time to support herself and her family if she needed more time on homework that was as simple as identifying the subject and action in a sentence? Unfortunately, my friend has become a part of the dropout statistics. I sometimes ask myself, why have I made it this far, but my friend did not? Why did I not become another statistic with all the pain and frustration over the last seven years, but my friend made the statistics go up within her first year or two of college?

It is with a heart full, then, that I am researching about freshmen college students and their struggles to make it through college with reading difficulties. What are those difficulties

and is there anything which can be done to eliminate, or at the very least minimize these issues for struggling readers?

### **Literature Synthesis and Integration**

While personal reasons vary, the statistics stand. It is reported that around “30% of college freshmen drop out after their first year of college” (“College Atlas,” 2017). The same statistics say that more than half “drop out by year 6 of their college career” (“College Atlas,” 2017). While everyone has their own story as to why they do not finish the degree they began, some research points to personal preparedness for such outcomes (Gross & Latham, 2012). The national Center for Education Statistics reports that many freshmen are “encouraged or required” to take remedial classes which will prepare them for college level work (Sparks & Malkus, 2013). Norman Stahl and Hunter Boylan in their book *Teaching Developmental Reading: Historical, Theoretical, and Practical Background Readings* (2003), state that “in 1996...29 percent of students entering American colleges and universities placed into one or more remedial courses” (p. 3). Thus, colleges are not only teaching academics, they are concentrating on preparing the incoming students for those higher classes so that they may be better equipped and enabled to make it all the way to graduation.

### **What Is The Issue?**

According to research, when students enter college for the first time, be it community college or a university, for a variety of reasons, they are not ready for the type of reading which will be required of them. Manno (1996) claims that “[c]olleges in the United States regularly enroll students who are not academically equipped or motivated to do college-level work” (p. 78). Consolidating in his brief the work of many researchers, Lauren Capotosto EdM (2017), explains that “many of these students exhibit insufficient word recognition, limited phonics skills, and laborious reading rates whether or not they have reading disabilities” (para. 1). Within the college environment where reading is one major homework expectation, these specific reading limitations will affect first year college students. If students do not understand certain academic vocabulary, they will either have to take the time to look it up, or, they may misunderstand the author's message.

While the above research shows that many freshmen struggle with the mechanics of being able to read, other investigation shows that students also lack the knowledge of how to access information. Gross & Latham (2012) share that other researchers have shown that freshmen students come to college lacking information literacy skills (p. 574). Information literacy skill, which is needed to acquire facts, “involves recognizing when information is needed, and being able to efficiently locate, accurately evaluate, effectively use, and clearly communicate information in various formats” (“Information Literacy” 2017). The Attaining Information Literacy Project, known as AIL, was a three year study of freshmen college students who tested poorly on an information literacy skills test. According to the findings of Melissa Gross and Don Latham (2013), the project known as *Attaining Information Literacy*, showed that many students not only lacked the chance to enhance their information literacy abilities, but neither did they realize how much they could gain by them. It would appear, then, that not being able to find, nor correctly assess information they do read will exacerbate the difficulties these readers face.

Based on all these findings, researchers claim that many first year college students are not ready for college, which, they say, is at least in part due to some form of reading difficulties. While some researchers say that motivation and lack of skill play a role, others claim the issue is word and phonemic awareness.

### **Why Are Reading Struggles For Freshmen College Students An Issue?**

Research results indicate that reading struggles are an issue because they impede academic success and employment (Colon & Sanders, 2011). According to the findings of Elizabeth Conlon and Mary Sanders (2011) “[f]ast effortless word decoding and good comprehension...are critical for academic success and later employment” (p. 193). This research is saying then, that the energy one must put into reading, as well as the rate at which one reads plays into how successful one is in their education and their occupation.

**Academic success.** Academically, reasons for lack of success show up in multiple ways. Conlon and Sanders (2011) reported that “[o]n measures of word decoding, spelling, phonological and orthographic processing, the impaired reader group had poorer accuracy than is expected of university students” (p. 208). Comprehension, according to other research was also

another issue for lack of success in that students may “either misread or skip unfamiliar words [and thus] are at risk of failing to accurately comprehend a text” (Capotosto, 2017). That being said, Kitz & Tarver (1989) highly recommend that instructors should never presume to think that student’s reading has developed beyond the point of more education, regardless their academic grade level (para. 3).

Additionally, the rate at which one reads impacts them negatively. Ronald Carver (1990) notes that normal reading speed for undergraduates, known as the “rauding process... typically takes about...300 Wpm” (p. 16). But the research of Elkind, Black & Murray (1996); and Sabatini, (2002), informs us “that poor readers are able to tackle only 133 to 156 words per minute” (Capotosto, 2017). As noted by Capotosto (2017) the general expectation for college students is to read about 250 pages each week. Mathematically speaking, this would seem to double the workload in some way for those who struggle with the speed of reading.

**Future employment.** Reading struggles also affect the employment opportunities for individuals. According to Canadian reports on their national website *Literacy Foundations: Words of Hope* (2017), “unemployment rate is 2-4 times higher among those with little schooling than among those with Bachelor’s degrees.” Canada also reports that other impacts on the individual with some sort of illiteracy issue is that they generally have “lower income [and] lower quality jobs” (Literacy Foundations). The graph below indicates this connection of low literacy to low wage jobs and higher literacy to higher paid positions.



*Figure 1.* Literacy level compared with earnings per week. This graph shows the connection between the education level attained and the earnings one tends to receive with that level of education. [www.thevoiceofjobseekers.com](http://www.thevoiceofjobseekers.com)



### **What should be done?**

The subject of what should be done about the struggles of college freshmen, has been an ongoing subject for years. All parties want success for future graduates. Researchers have suggested a variety of options to help those struggling with reading.

**Mechanical strategies.** Colon and Sanders (2011) have proposed the idea of Fink, (1998) that “[s]tudents with impaired reading skills should be encouraged to employ strategies such as learning the terms common to an academic area and undertake additional phonics training to improve reading skills” (p. 209). Apel & Swank (1999), “determined that the students word recognition and word analysis skills improved through individualized phonics instruction” (Capotosto (2017), para. 17). Some researchers suggest that students (those particularly with eyesight issues) should be tested using resources which correspond to their level of reading and not beyond. This, they believe, would help the individual have less eye strain and boost achievement (Colon & Sanders, 2011). Nancy Martino and Paul Hoffman (2002) go further stating that an “integrated approach to reading comprehension” is necessary, explaining that instruction in phonology needs to be taught alongside syntax, semantics, and recognition of various words (p. 316). The main idea then, by these who have researched the area of reading difficulties, is that teachers need to help students with various specific individual strategies all working together to help students succeed.

While these suggestions have been made, the California State University system has other ideas about helping freshmen college students through their universities. Executive Order 1110 has eliminated, among other things, reading placement tests as well as some English remedial classes originally set up to prepare college students for college level reading. According to the memorandum signed by Chancellor Timothy P. White, rather than the usual remedial courses, “[f]reshmen in need of additional academic development are supported in the Early Start Program and in enhanced college-level baccalaureate credit-bearing courses” (Memorandum, 2017). According to reporter Vu Chau from the *Statehornet*, all students entering college will gain entrance via their “high school grade-point average, grades earned in math and English; ACT, SAT and Advanced Placement scores...” (Chau, 2017). All students will make it into

college no matter their ability, and, according to these reports, those who need help along the way will receive it.

**Nonmechanical strategies.** Paulo Freire, a teacher and philosopher from Brazil, known for his critical pedagogy, had much to say on the subject of literacy and how it might be dealt with. In his book *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987), which he co-authored with Donaldo Macedo, he implied that reading is more than just understanding the mechanics, syntax, and word recognition. For readers to understand a text Freire states “that before learners attempt to learn how to read and write they need to read and write the world” (p. 50). In other words, this strategic philosophy says that comprehensive literacy does not take place apart from the context surrounding a person. Reading is not an isolated practice from the world one lives in, and, according to this philosopher, students must already have background knowledge before they can read and understand effectively.

Henry A. Giroux, in his introduction to Freire and Macedo’s above-mentioned book informs us of his belief that for people to make progress in literacy, teachers need more freedom to make change. He writes; “the approach to literacy developed by Freire and Macedo in these pages is not simply about empowering students, it also speaks to the empowerment of teachers as part of the wider project of social and political reconstruction” (p. 24). In this view, the change must come from the efforts of teachers free to make changes that trickle down to students.

## **Conclusion**

The dropout rate of freshmen college students, is of concern to many people. As researchers and theorists attempt to determine the struggles of these students which leads them to such an outcome, reading issues appears to be at least one possible reason. While there is debate as to how to promote success, for these students, one thing appears to be very clear in the research: college students who have struggles with reading, will struggle more in school and overall do not appear to be as successful either in college or in the workforce.

## **Method**

The purpose of this data collection is to use what I have learned to evaluate and inform others about reading issues for first year college students. With this data, I am seeking to find a possible appropriate action for the benefit of these students. This is important because reading is a

fundamental need in secondary education and in our society. If people are challenged in this area, they will struggle both in higher education as well as certain aspects of daily living.

### **Context**

Sunbelt Academic Community College<sup>1</sup> is surrounded by impressive tall trees and located just off the Central Coast of California. Began in the 1900s, this college is comprised of both older and newer buildings. The landscape is beautifully kept, and occasionally wild birds can be observed walking freely through the property of its main campus. It has three separate campuses serving at least seven different local cities.

Sunbelt Academics enrolls a diverse array of students. It reportedly serves eight known ethnicities as well as a large number of unidentified ethnic groups. Some enter not yet having achieved a high school diploma, while others are enrolled already having received a Master's Degree. Every bit as diverse is the age range of individuals who attend the college. Sitting within a single class one might observe a teenager and a person in mid to late life, as well as all who fall between.

GradCap University is also located on the Central Coast of California. Nearly a flat open plain, this higher institution of learning stands in solitude with fewer trees, nearby agricultural land, and cities. Buildings and technology are mostly up to date, with a few scattered classroom structures around which are older both in style as well as technological advances. However, all classrooms are well-lit and functioning. Both old and new dorms tower high in the open clear night sky. A large library is the focal point for study while other areas of the campus support social life, fitness and entertainment.

A growing campus with nearly 8,000 people, the students there are from all walks of life and range in age from teenagers to middle age; more than half of whom are the first generation to receive higher education in their families. While there are more than eight ethnic groups represented in the undergraduate programs, almost 40% are low-income students. While many students come from only a day's drive away, this campus also attracts others from around the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

## **Participants and Participant Selection**

Three participants willingly and eagerly agreed to be interviewed for this project. All adult instructors, they are associated with either one or both institutions of higher education described above. The percentage of male to female participants is 33% male to 67% female. Participants are described below:

Dr. Gregory: A professor and tutor working at Gradcap University. This Caucasian male holds a PhD in English Composition and has had many years of teaching experience having worked four years as a highschool teacher and 17 years as a college professor.

Miss Kayla. An instructor and tutor in both reading and writing, she currently is working at Sunbelt Academics as well as teaching through online classes. This Caucasian woman has worked at multiple schools and with hundreds of students.

Mrs. Natalie. A woman of mixed Mexican-American and European-American descent who currently is employed by GradCap University, but has worked in education around the country as well as outside of the United States. Since 1998, Mrs. Natalie has worked as both a teacher and tutor in multiple reading and writing classes including ESL classes for immigrants. She has developed and revised curriculum and has held supervising positions, responsible for teachers and instructional support.

## **Researcher**

As noted in my introduction, I have struggled in the area of reading for as long as I have been able to decode a word--at the age of five. While I am blessed to have been able to make it this far, it has been, and will continue to be, an uphill battle. While help has come to me in the form of glasses with green colored lenses as well as other reading aids, I still struggle from the front of the classroom to read my teachers' writing on the marker board. I still struggle to turn my assignments in by their due date because of the time commitment involved for me to read all the material. Even after seven years of higher education and soon to hold a bachelor's degree, there is no effectual practice that will magically allow me to see better in order to read more quickly.

But my interest in reading struggles goes beyond my own experiences. While doing

service learning at multiple schools, I saw many children who read below their grade level and my heart went out to them, knowing that if they did not catch up, college and their whole life will be more difficult than it needs to be.

I believe I am qualified to do this project because I have an insider perspective of the multiple challenges which come from difficulties in reading. Many people may not think about the fact that if they cannot read, or have some difficulty in this area, they may not be able to read street signs and thus, may be directionally challenged. Perhaps, as in my case, they may be dependent upon public transportation.

Many people take reading for granted and may not consider how many ways in which they might be restricted in their daily lives. But for myself, I have a frequent reminder. And that reminder is pain. When I have an “eye headache” I am reminded of the effort it takes on my eyes to be physically engaged with the daily routine of reading. When I have to read an assignment in small print, and it takes me three times the length of other students to get through it, I am reminded that while others have time to relax after a long day of homework, I must keep going or I will not make it through. I have first hand experience with how hard life can be when reading is difficult, and for this reason, I believe I am qualified to take on this project.

We all have our own biases, and I am sure that I carry some with me as well. But I am different from others who may research this project because I fall within the group of those whom I am researching. I have always struggled with reading. I am not out to gain money, nor do I think that I am above this group of individuals--I am one of them. I myself struggle daily with reading. And while I may have ideas of why reading challenges exist, I realize that there are multiple reasons which are individual to all students and I am willing to listen to them all.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions**

- What do you see as the challenges for college students who struggle with reading?
- What are you concerned about when it comes to first year college students who are struggling with reading issues?
- What is currently being done to help students with reading challenges? By whom is this being done?
- What do you think about those efforts? Why?

- What do you think should be done to help students with reading challenges?
- What do you think are the obstacles to improving these reading challenges for first year college students?
- Is there anything else that you would like to say about college students with reading challenges?

### **Procedure<sup>2</sup>**

Participants were recruited by request through word of mouth followed by email. Hearing or knowing that specific participants might be willing to take part, an email was sent requesting interviews. Consent to be interviewed was first given through email with specific location and time scheduled at the convenience of both the interviewer and interviewee. Before the interview began, a second form of consent was given via signature, both to be interviewed as well as to have the interview recorded. The interview consisted of answering seven specific questions as well as other questions which may have come up from the conversation for clarification or in depth purposes. Each of the three interviews were conducted separately, lasting anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes per interview. Compensation for each and every participant was both verbal and written thanks through email communication. Participants freely took part and no payments of any kind were requested or offered in return.

### **Data Analysis**

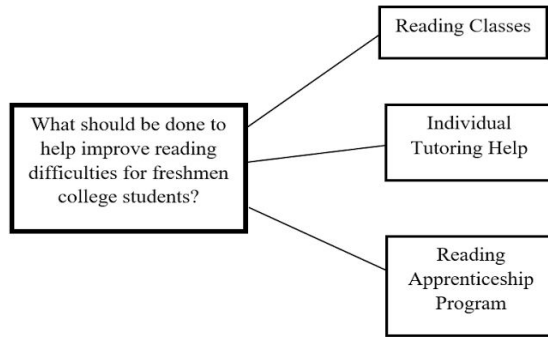
Transcribed interviews will be coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

### **Results**

For this Capstone Project, college professionals were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve college freshmen students' reading difficulties. This is important because reading is a fundamental need in both higher education as well as life in general. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Figure 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: reach, buy-in, community college support and university support. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://my.ilstu.edu/~jkhahn/>



*Figure 1.* Three options proposed by professionals to help freshmen college students.

### **Reading Classes**

One option proposed to address reading difficulties was direct instruction through reading classes. Miss Kayla (personal communication, October 19, 2017) from Sunbelt Academic Community College believes that “[r]eading is a skill that is learned...[it] can be taught, but it just actually has to be taught.” This belief aligns with advice given to teachers that they should never take for granted a student’s ability to read well and thus never need help in this area (Capotosto, (2017), para. 3). The implication is that at least some students will require ongoing instruction in this area.

Not everyone, however, agrees with this premise. A local high school professor stated that one of his co-workers claims that “to create good American citizens...[students] need to be able to listen to news, gather information from the Internet, YouTube videos, [and] news broadcasts, and does not need to know how to read at grade level” (S. D., personal communication, November 4, 2017). According to this belief, the expert use of technology and listening skills is what is needed to make good citizens. Reading ability past Internet decoding is not a necessity in this context. While Ms. Kayla and this high school professor hold opposing beliefs, as shown in Table 1, reading classes are a diminishing option for students who struggle, especially those at Sunbelt Academic Community College. With the combination of the lack of local administrator support and Executive Order 1110, remedial reading classes are vanishing, reaching a smaller population of students. While GradCap University has many support systems, there are no specific classes geared toward reading. If however, reading classes were to be

offered and taken, with a focus solely dedicated to reading instruction as the content, the already struggling student would be postponing graduation to take this extra reading course or courses.

### **Individualized Tutoring Help**

A second option to help struggling freshmen with improving their reading is individualized tutoring. The reading center located at Sunbelt Academic Community College is a place where students are able to go and receive individual one-on-one help. Kayla (personal communication, October 19, 2017), says that the “reading center has courses that deal with as low as low [sic] but in the very basics with phonetic teaching.” She emphasized that these low reading level students include those who come in having been found to have only up to a fifth grade reading level (Kayla, personal communication, October 19, 2017). Kayla is not the only professional educator who thinks highly of this type of help. Mrs. Natalie, from GradCap University (personal communication, October 24, 2017) believes that “more direct service and support” is needed for students. In the interview she went on to say that “...it would be great if there was an accommodation that you could have a one-on-one tutor once a week to work on reading your class assignments” (Natalie, personal communication, October 24, 2017). The importance of having this one-on-one help is highlighted in the literature, as it is noted that having the ability to know and study vocabulary is enhanced by professional one-on-one support in the area of phonetics (Capotosto, (2017), para. 17). Ms. Kayla (personal communication, October 19, 2017) agreed with this sentiment when she reported in her interview that many students had been helped through the support of the lab and one-on-one tutoring, including those who entered the college with a grade-school reading level, and in one case, a kindergarten reading level.

While many agree the need is great, reaching these students is very challenging. (See Table 1.) According to both teachers interviewed, individualized tutoring for the subject of reading is not popular with students. While they come in for help with writing their papers and with their APA formatting, rarely if ever, do they come in and acknowledge their need for understanding their reading assignments (Kayla & Natalie, personal communication, 2017). While tutors do take some pressure off teachers so that they are free to teach content rather than the art of reading, some students do not have the time, and others do not take the time to seek out



help in this specific area. While training and support of writing tutors to help with reading takes place at the University, the Community College has decreasing support.

### **Reading Apprenticeship**

A third option to support struggling readers is called Reading Apprenticeship, a pilot program at GradCap University which is still in its research stage. According to Dr. Gregory, a faculty member at the University and also heavily involved in the program, (personal communication, October 3, 2017), the Reading Apprenticeship is “a system of teaching oriented around something called meta-cognitive conversation...in which there is constant talk about the strategies used to problem solve.” He went on to say that in this program, it is “routine for students to be asked about the strategies they use to solve reading problems...and to share those strategies, and build additional strategies” (Dr. Gregory, personal communication, October 3, 2017). Using strategies to improve reading is not a new concept, as all learners ought to be using reading strategies to build on their academic abilities (Scholarsh, Colon, & Sanders, 2011). One example Mrs. Natalie (personal communication, October 24, 2017) gave of how she uses Reading Apprenticeship with her students is to create “a running list of reading strategies...that they [the students] learn from each other or from me if I model something.” Mrs. Natalie’s practice in her classroom coincides with the literature which emphasizes that if specific approaches to reading are not taught, other teaching such as phonology is not as effective as it could be (Nancy Martino and Paul Hoffman, 2002). The Reading Apprenticeship Program focuses on these reading strategies in hopes to effectively help freshmen college students.

Reading Apprenticeship is still in the research stage and financial support is high. Dr. Gregory (personal communication, November 5, 2017) mentioned that they were being funded from sources both inside and outside the University. In this stage of the research, hands-on investment by faculty is a choice, and not required across the campus as a whole. The hope, according to this professor, is that at some point, it will be available to all GradCap students in their classes (Dr. Gregory, personal communication, October 3, 2017). Reaching students for now though, is a hit and miss situation. Some are involved in the program by default regardless of if they want to be, if their professor is a participant, while others do not have this opportunity if their professor is not involved. Unlike a dedicated reading teacher, involved instructors are

short on time, as their classroom hours are divided up in teaching both content and strategies. This research is only available at GradCap University, and is not applicable to the Sunbelt Academic Community College. See Table 1 for the break down.

Table 1

*Evaluation of Action Options*

	Reach	Buy-in	Community College Support	University Support
Reading Classes	Low	High	Low	N/A
Individualized Tutoring Help	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low
Reading Apprenticeship Program	Neutral	Low	N/A	Medium

**Conclusion**

Based on the evidence from the scholarly literature, as well as the information I received through the interviews with college professionals who work closely with freshmen students who struggle with reading, I recommend separate reading classes. The other two options considered in this paper though, are not without validity. There is ample evidence that individual tutoring is very effective for college students. In many cases, one-on-one help and two-way face-to-face communication with a specific focus has the high potential of clearing up misunderstandings. Likewise, Reading Apprenticeship has great potential in helping students discover reading strategies they might not think about on their own. With this program, reading challenges are solved as a group effort.

While I have chosen reading classes as a route worthy to pursue, I concede to the fact it is not the cure-all, end-all, and it has some serious limitations. While direct reading instruction is to be had through this method, with a large class, students may still continue to struggle because they have not been helped with their specific individual need, and thus may be left behind. My research on the subject of struggling freshmen college students is by no means complete, as, there is not enough time in one semester to perform a thorough in-depth research. To add to this, I myself struggle with the rate of reading, and even with aids to help, I am still much slower than the average person who may research this same subject. Therefore, others may find research which counters the belief that reading classes are the better option due to the direct instruction a student receives from them.

There are pros and cons to all outcomes, and every decision made has the high potential of unintended repercussions. Because whole semesters are needed to take these classes, it not only prolongs the amount of years it takes to get a degree, it also has the potential of accidentally involving students who do not need to take these classes. The outcome of such situations may include massive student discouragement when the opposite effect was intended. That being said, reading classes can be extremely beneficial. As Ms. Kayla (personal communication, October 19, 2017) emphasised, reading, and all which that entails, is something which must be specifically taught. As noted above, not every high school teacher believes this is a necessity. But with the high statistics of college dropout rates and illiteracy, this belief should be called into question. Beyond this, within a reading class, lacking background knowledge can be learned and put into good use in later education and life itself. If a student is directly taught how to read, later and harder classes may become easier because a student will be better equipped for having practiced those strategies previously learned as well as sufficient back ground understanding. This, it would seem, would make life less challenging for students than if they learned both content and strategies together.

If students struggle and do not get adequate and timely assistance, they will continue to struggle and perhaps fail classes. Their educational path may then take as long or longer than if they had simply taken a reading class or two. Worse yet, they may simply quit and struggle through life more than they needed too, simply for lack of taking one or two classes focused on

directly instructing them in the area of reading. Reading should be made a priority because it is fundamental to life. Simply stated, the better a person can read, the farther they will go in life. Reading classes show that reading is important enough to actually spend some time on. It should never be an added thought or an “elective.” The ability to read can alter a person’s life.

### **Action Documentation and Reflection**

The focus issue of this paper addressed the reading struggles for many first year college students. In order to understand the problem and learn what is currently being done to ameliorate the issue, I interviewed three people who are currently teachers and tutors at the college level. From these interviews, three options emerged; reading classes, individualized tutoring help, and a current project being tested, called Reading Apprenticeship. After consideration, I chose reading classes.

I chose this action option for several reasons. Stakeholders believe that teaching reading strategies are a must, and that direct instruction, not only of reading in general, but also the teaching of these strategies must take place. While stakeholders differed in thought as to the implementation of instruction (see action options in Table 1) there was no denial that help needed to be given. As indicated earlier, most students do not actively attend tutoring sessions to be helped in their reading. While they actively seek out help for a variety of other problems in college, asking assistance for reading issues is not usually one of them. It is rare that college students even think they have issues in this area. Thus, I believe the better option is to have direct instruction through reading classes with trained reading teachers. While in many cases this will delay graduation, who is to say that an extra reading class or two will not be of greater help in the long haul. Ideally, this may enable unprepared students to be better equipped to make it all the way to graduation and not become a dropout statistic because they could not handle the more difficult reading as they progressed through each semester. To reach this goal then, my action was to write a letter to inform and request both the community college and the University presidents to keep available all reading classes. (See Appendix A.) These letters were emailed directly to the presidents from my school email account to ensure they received them. While I trust each email made it to the intended recipient, at the time of the close of this project and paper I have received no response.

As the subject of reading instruction does not always have the support of the administration, I cannot say I am necessarily surprised that I had no response. It does, however, sadden me. I would love to know directly, what these presidents think about the issue, and, if they do not agree, what is it that they would instead put in place to help these struggling students.

For now, I believe some valuable next steps would be to find a way to inform freshmen students that difficulties in reading at the academic level are not unusual, but in fact, very common. If students understand that they are not alone in their thinking--that the reading is hard--perhaps they will be more willing to admit it and seek out help. They may feel empowered to raise their voice and advocate for themselves in the help they need to make it all the way to graduation day.

### **Critical Reflection**

Through this project, I learned a lot about myself. I learned more about why I have struggled so much in college. I have learned that though I can put so much effort into getting all my homework finished, when my work is neither done to my satisfaction nor my teacher's, there is an actual physical reason for it which I cannot control. I have done my best, and it is my disability, not my lack of effort that is the issue. But I have learned so much more. I have grown to understand in a fuller way, that despite my struggles, my faithful God can and has seen me through these years of hardship.

Through this long process, I have learned that, just as much as it has relieved me to learn the facts about reading struggles in this paper, I want to help alleviate the struggles of others who have reading issues and pave the way for them to have a smoother path. I know I would like to make a difference before students reach the point of depression and drop out of school.

The themes of the Liberal Studies department at California State University of Monterey Bay, known as the Major Learning Outcomes, have impacted me greatly in my development as an educator (MLO 1.) I may not at present be headed toward being a credentialed elementary teacher, but as a current preschool teacher, I have now a greater understanding of where my students are headed. Because of this expanded knowledge I have received in these classes about what is required of students in later grades, I can more effectively and knowledgeably teach

them. I have the capacity now to expose them to age-appropriate background knowledge and reading skills they will benefit from as they grow.

Classes centered around diversity and multiculturalism (MLO 2), have had a profound effect on me and I believe will make me a better educator to our diverse population. Having my mind broadened to such aspects of other cultures helps me to think before I speak or do something, regarding how my actions might affect others. Everyone is different and we ought always to love others and care for them. Working in this area, I will be working with a diverse population, and the way I relate to my student's cultural backgrounds will have a profound and lasting effect on their own outlook in life.

Overall, my time in the Liberal Studies Department has been a growing experience. I have learned much more about the world around me as I have come face-to-face with reality while working in the community and reflecting on social justice--or the lack thereof for certain ethnic groups (MLO 4.). I have been exposed to the large world outside the life I have always known.

To become the professional I would like to be, I believe what I need most is more practice and hands-on experience. The next step is consistent hands-on work, applying what I have learned in the classroom and through this research project. One way to learn is simply by doing. Sometimes you can read all the excellent books on an issue, but this never replaces experience in the specific situations in which you will find yourself in the end.

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## Appendix A

December 6, 2017

Dear President:

My name is Alicia Bushey, and I will be graduating from CSUMB this December. I am currently working on my Capstone Project: “250 Words of I don’t Understand: Reading Struggles for Freshmen College Students.” This is a project that is very meaningful and personal to me, as I have struggled with reading my entire life, but especially these last seven years of college. Due to my poor vision, when I read, I can only see one word at a time. Consequently, I read slower than the average person. But aside from this, reading gives me headaches. If, in my grade school and high school years I was going to learn, pain was just a part of my life. When I began college and was reunited with those headaches, I did not think I was going to be able to take on the college workload required. Thankfully, I received help which eliminated most of my headaches, but I still struggle with the rate of reading and thus keeping up with homework.

Because I read so slowly, when I took the placement tests, I was placed in a couple of remedial reading classes. At the time, I was not pleased and thought they were a waste of my time. But looking back, and also studying the issue of reading struggles for freshmen students this semester, I am thankful I did. Please bear with me as I explain. Researchers say that some freshmen college students are not prepared for college. Background knowledge, vocabulary, and phonics skills are lacking for many. Reading rates are much slower for some of these students than is expected and required for college level work. In my research, I learned that while college professionals claim that reading, like everything else, must “actually be taught,” not all high school teachers agree. One particular highschool teacher did not think that reading at grade level was necessary. A college professor I interviewed told me her department has seen students enter college at a fourth and fifth grade reading level—and one at a kindergarten reading level.

As I look back, those first couple of reading classes were beneficial to me. If I had not taken them and become better prepared, I am not sure I could have just jumped into college level

reading and done as well as I have. As it was, I did consider dropping out on more than one occasion. For these reasons, I am requesting that reading classes with a trained reading teacher be kept available for incoming college students. I know you, as well as I, want to see students succeed and graduate. If taught properly and given the practice, college students have a higher chance of making it to graduation rather than seeing themselves defeated and dropping out. I invite you to attend my presentation on December 14<sup>th</sup> and also read my paper which will be archived on the CSUMB website for more details about my topic.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Respectfully yours,

Alicia Bushey