Exploratory Essay: Barriers to Student Success

The Assignment:
Your task is to write an exploratory essay (1750-2250 words) that describes chronologically your own exploration of a problem or issue relevant to student experiences within the US educational system (K-college). Pick a problem or issue that came up in at least one text we examined as a class—an issue that some consider a key barrier to student success and a contributing factor to the student “achievement gap.” The research question or problem you choose should be something in which you’re genuinely interested, and it should be one that your readers will agree is worth looking at. Possible topics include: implicit bias among educators, attitudes toward non-standard forms of English, financial need, self-efficacy, fixed mindset, and other institutional barriers (e.g. flawed assessment tools or inadequate student support services).

Audience:
Your peers and me—we are somewhat familiar with the topic or problem based on the class readings and discussions, but we don’t know a whole lot yet. Like you, we’re curious but naïve about your research topic, and we’re anxious to learn more about both the process and your sources.

Purpose:
To convince your readers that you have chosen an interesting and worthy research question and to help your readers understand your research process and how it helped you to expand your understanding, but perhaps not yet answer, your research question.

Specifics:
Length: 1750-2250 words (about 7-9 pages)
Formatting: double-spaced, 12 pt font (Arial or Times New Roman), following MLA guidelines
Sources: 6 sources total, one of which may be from the assigned course texts (see list below). The rest must come from your own research.

Tips for Success:
1. Read the back side of this handout, which explains how this assignment differs from traditional essay assignments
2. Read the sample essay (distributed in class and available on Canvas).
3. Review your notes before choosing a topic!
4. Don’t be afraid to use the word “I”; begin your paper with a first-person (I, my, me) narrative about your issue, how and why you became interested in it, how it’s significant, and then why it is problematic for you (that is, why you can’t yet answer it).
5. Apply lessons from They Say/I Say.
6. Start early on your rough draft! Go to WAC for help and revise, revise, revise.
7. Pick an issue that you genuinely don’t know much about and want to further understand.
How to Organize Your Exploratory Essay

Exploratory essays are very different from argumentative essays. In fact, an exploratory essay is likely different from any other essay you’ve written. Instead of writing to convince an audience of the validity of a thesis, you will be writing to find out about a problem and perhaps to form some preliminary conclusions about how it might be solved.

But there is another aspect the exploratory genre that is equally important. An exploratory essay is, in essence, a retrospective of your writing and thinking process as you work through a problem. It describes when, how, and why you completed certain types of research. This kind of writing is about how you work through problems that require writing and research. You will have to be introspective and think about your thinking process in order for your essay to turn out well. Very roughly, then, your exploratory essay may follow this sort of structure:

**Introduction**
The introduction should provide context about the problem you explored and why it’s important—why the readers should care and keep reading. In addition, you should briefly discuss 1) some of the problem’s possible causes and other contributing factors; 2) the institutions and people involved with the problem; 3) your research question(s) that clearly communicates what you hoped to discover and why you are interested in this issue. Then, provide a brief overview of the types of sources your researched during your inquiry.

**Body Paragraphs**
Body paragraphs should discuss the inquiry process you followed to research your issue. These paragraphs should include the following:

1. Introduction of source (title, author, type of media, publisher, pub date, etc.) and why you chose to use it.
2. Important information you found in the source regarding your problem
3. Why the information is important and dependable in relation to the problem
4. Some personal introspection on how the source helped you, allowed you to think differently about the problem, or even fell short of your expectations and led you in a new direction in your research, which forms a transition into your next source.

Throughout your paper, describe your intellectual wrestling with the articles’ ideas—what you were thinking about as you read the articles, how your ideas evolved, the impact of discussions you had with your others as you reformulated the problem, changed your mind, and likely experienced confusion versus “aha!” moments.

**Conclusion**
By the end of your essay, you’ll need to sum up how your ideas evolved during your process of research and reflection. Your conclusion should also restate the problem you explored, outline some of its possible causes, review the institutions and people involved, and explain the preliminary conclusions (if any) you have reached, having done some research. If you still have any questions about the problem (and it’s
perfectly fine to have some), you will discuss them here. Talk about why you think you still have questions regarding the problem you explored, where you might look to answer these questions, and what other forms of research you would have to do.

Again, you do not have to argue for a solution to the problem at this point. The point of the exploratory essay is to ask an inquiry question and find out as much as you can to try to answer your question. Then write about your inquiry and findings.

Make your exploratory essay an interesting intellectual detective story—something your readers will enjoy.

*Adapted from Purdue University OWL and Prof Corcoran’s assignment*