



The Newsletter of the Writing Lab at Bristol Community College

The Calderwood Study of First-Semester Community College Writers (Part Two): What Students Told Us

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The Survey of Student Expectations and Practices

To lay a foundation for our study of first semester student writers and to provide much needed context against which to read cohort writing, we gathered information about student attitudes toward writing and about their writing practices through surveys. A survey was administered to first-time students at four two-year colleges from different regions of the country, including our own, Bristol. While our focus was on the local population at Bristol, we sought to ascertain whether Bristol students responded in a manner consistent with other two-year college students. New, first-semester students were surveyed at Bristol Community College, Santa Barbara City College, Illinois Central College, and Whatcom Community College. In total, over 1,350 surveys were collected.

The survey aimed to ascertain a range of student perceptions, but emphasized three in particular: students' attitudes about writing in general, perceptions of their own writing processes, and experiences in high school relative to writing instruction. We hoped to gain a better

idea of student writing behaviors as well as what they'd learned about the nature of writing. We also hoped, and were pleased to note, that Bristol's students were comparable to their counterparts in the targeted colleges for all three areas.

Cohort students (a subset of students here at Bristol who were the focus of our research study) were also surveyed and the results compared to surveys administered to non-cohort Bristol students. **Results indicate that cohort students felt more confident as writers than non-cohort students.** Cohort students, not surprisingly then, looked forward in greater numbers to challenging writing assignments and would be more likely than non-cohort students to seek out courses that require writing. **Cohort students also reported less experience than non-cohort Bristol students with working in groups while in high school.** That fact may explain the independence displayed by many of our cohort students. As so many shuttle from work to class and back, working well on one's own would seem to be an advantage.

The Results

Of the students surveyed at Bristol, Santa Barbara, Illinois Central, and Whatcom, 90% expected to write regularly in college. **Only about a third of students surveyed considered themselves strong writers (and just**

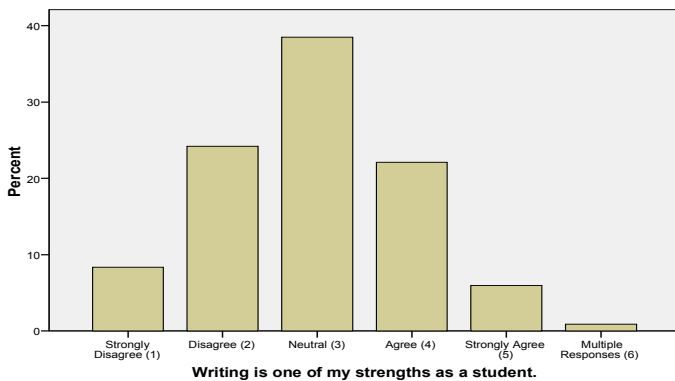
WRITING MATTERS

Several questions asked students to think about teacher feedback on their writing in high school. A solid 94% reported finding the feedback to be helpful. Interestingly,

28% of students at Bristol), suggesting they may have had some less than affirming experiences with writing in the past. Despite their lack of confidence, students were hopeful that improvement was possible, as 84% thought they could develop their writing skills. What

avoidance. About 26% of respondents indicated that they look forward to challenging writing assignments. It seems that, while 84% of students thought they could develop their writing skills, a smaller number was actually eager to do so. **Fifty-eight percent thought their high school writing instruction had prepared them to write papers in college.** This feeling of readiness was dependent on whether they'd done work in groups (N=710, $p < .001$), written research

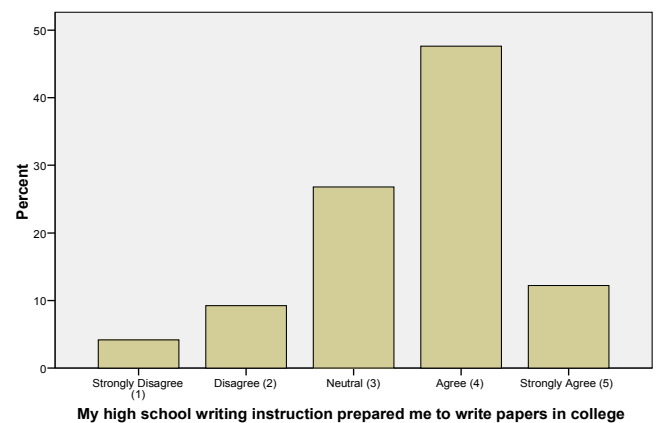
Writing is one of my strengths as a student.



we didn't ask is what students thought would need to happen in order for that improvement to occur. While nearly all, **95%, of respondents, thought that writing was an important skill for college students**, many considered writing a temporary evil; about half, **48%, didn't think writing would be important in their chosen careers.** Nearly all faculty, a solid 95%, thought writing would be important in those same fields. Clearly faculty will need to do some persuading here, although it makes sense that students wouldn't have made firm career choices by this point, much less thoroughly investigated the duties and responsibilities involved.

Do students actively seek to develop their writing skills? While a significant majority of survey respondents thought it was possible, only 19% reported actually seeking out courses that required writing. On the other hand, they didn't seem to avoid writing intensive courses either, despite 58% of Bristol faculty believing they did so, with only 9% admitting to

My high school writing instruction prepared me to write papers in college



papers (N=824, $p < .001$), and used classmates' feedback to revise drafts (N=768, $p < .001$) while in high school. Coincidentally, there were also strong correlations among involvement in these activities and students' feeling confident about their writing skills. Despite 58% of respondents' feeling prepared for the demands of college writing, **only 34% believed the writing they would do in college would be similar to that they'd done in high school.** These figures suggest students may not anticipate any difference between high school and college writing—or any elevation in challenge.