

The Newsletter of the Writing Lab at Bristol Community College

The Calderwood Study of First-Semester Community College Writers (Part One): What the Faculty Expect

Howard Tinberg
JP Nadeau

In the spring semester of 2007, as part of a systematic study of first semester student writers at Bristol, we administered a survey of our college faculty—in both online and hard copy versions—to determine faculty expectations regarding student writing and preferred modes of response to student work.

The Survey

Seventy faculty members responded in total, twenty-five through the online form and forty-five via hard copy. Of the forty-five who filled out the hard copy, forty identified themselves as full-time. The following departments were represented: accounting, biology, computer information, criminal justice, culinary arts, engineering, English, history, management, office science, math, nursing, psychology, and sociology.

Faculty were asked to respond to thirty-one questions, using a five point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Several statements focused on faculty perceptions of the role of writing for students, how students perceive themselves as writers, the potential for writing skill development on the part of students, and students' motivation toward developing as writers. Related statements got at whether writing is discussed during class meeting time.

A significant number of statements in the survey focused on faculty perceptions of their students' writing habits. Some statements were included to indicate whether

there were some writing practices faculty thought were important for students, such as brainstorming, seeking feedback, and re-reading the paper. Other statements got at just the opposite: those practices of students that faculty thought were not helpful, such as focusing too much on grammatical issues during the revision process.



Another key set of statements required respondents to reflect upon their response practice. We wanted to know whether faculty thought the process led to stronger writing—whether the precious time invested was productive, educational—and whether faculty offered feedback on drafts-in-progress. Several statements focused on the form such response takes. Here we hoped to gain some insight into the rationale behind response methods.

Finally, we asked faculty to consider their expectations for student writing. Among the statements in this vein were several that asked about level of challenge. One statement asked whether students were well-prepared for challenging writing assignments at the start of the course, and one asked whether students were well-prepared at the end of the course. Here we hoped to understand whether faculty thought they were helping students develop their writing skills.

The Results

A review of the survey results indicated a number of areas where faculty seemed to

WRITING MATTERS

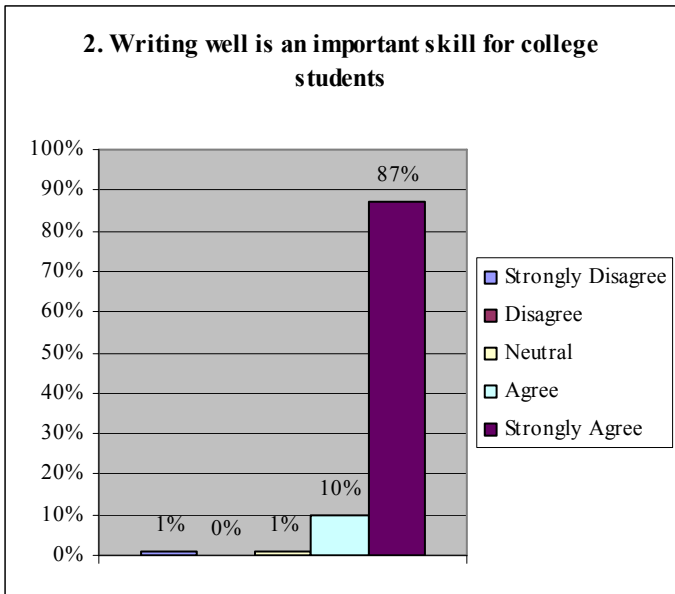
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generally be in agreement. For one, **80% thought that effective writing skills are important for student success in college and the workplace**, but nearly the same number, 78%, thought that students didn't consider themselves to be strong writers. An even greater number, 89%, felt that students weren't ready to handle challenging writing assignments.

helpful to students. Such a conclusion was likely drawn from perceived progress from one draft to another or from a student's response from one assignment to another. Other data supports this logic: 85% reported seeing improvements in student writing as a result of faculty feedback. Also interesting to note here is that 19% didn't see their feedback as helpful to students, and 15% failed to see improvement in student writing.

Though a significant number of faculty require students to produce multiple drafts of their work, only 13% believe students are accustomed to doing so. **When asked whether they expect students to produce multiple drafts, only 40% had this expectation.** Though this seems to contradict earlier data, namely the 66% that reported offering feedback on student writing before assigning a grade, this response might get at something interesting. Perhaps faculty are suggesting that, despite requiring drafts, they don't expect all students to follow through—or perhaps the “drafts” wouldn't, in the professor's mind, be significantly different.

2. Writing well is an important skill for college students

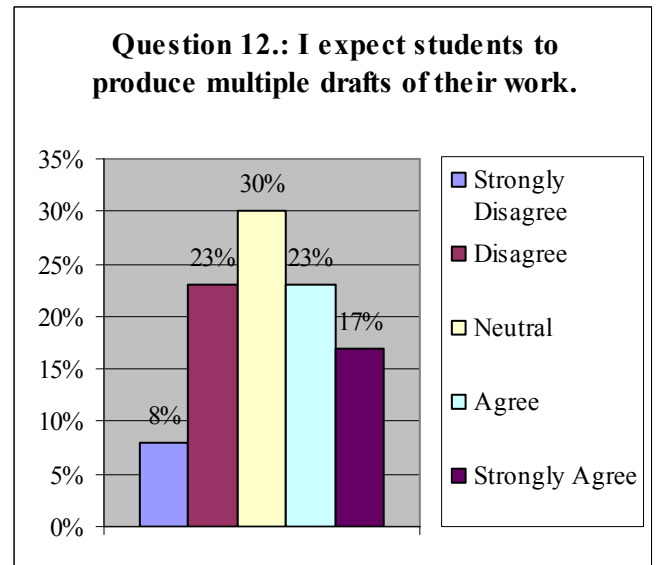


Not surprisingly, faculty who ask students to write in their courses do so in a variety of ways. **Forty-three per cent prefer essay exams to objective exams. Sixty-nine per cent require writing that draws upon research;** such writing would likely be done by students outside of the classroom. The majority, 74%, reported that they attempted to help students with these assignments by discussing one or more elements of the writing process with students individually or as a class.

Approximately two-thirds of respondents reported that they offered feedback on student writing before assigning a grade. When asked about the form such feedback took, 43% reported offering such feedback through one-on-one conferencing with students, and **53% reported responding to student writing electronically.** Of those who offer feedback, 97% identify errors in grammar, diction, and mechanics.

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Question 12.: I expect students to produce multiple drafts of their work.



Next Installment: What Students Told Us