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Capstone Project –  
Postsecondary Writing: First-Year Students' Perceptions of  
College Writing Preparedness

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Merrimack College

4/25/2014

### Abstract

As access to higher education continues to grow it is important to consider the way students are prepared for college level work. This is especially true in the area of writing, which is considered to be the academic skill most linked to success at the college level (Conley, 2008). This qualitative study investigates college writing preparedness through the perspectives of ten first-year students at a small, liberal arts institution in Massachusetts. The study sought to explore how K-12 institutions and postsecondary schools can work to better prepare students for college writing. Participants described the differences between secondary and postsecondary writing and expressed that there was a gap between the way they were prepared in high school and what was expected of them when they arrived at college. This study recommends ways K-12 and postsecondary institutions can improve upon college writing preparation to create a better transition for students between high school and college level writing. These recommendations include creating stronger K-16 partnerships, improving first-year writing courses, encouraging student use of faculty support and writing centers, helping students to see themselves as novices, and continuing to critically assess the education system in the United States.

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## Introduction

According to a report published by the College Board, fewer than half of the students who took the SAT in 2013 are prepared to succeed in college (Doubleday, 2013). One area where students are specifically struggling is being prepared for writing at the college level (Conley, 2008). It is not surprising that there is a difference between high school and college writing. As Sommers and Saltz (2004) explained, “To be asked to write in college is to be asked to see farther, wider, and deeper, and ultimately to develop one’s own lenses through which to see the world” (p. 147). College writing expects more from students and requires students to be more prepared, but it is hard to understand how students are prepared without involving them in the conversation. Sommers and Saltz (2004) stated, “What is missing from so many discussions about college writing is the experience of students” (p. 125). If we aren’t involving students in discussions on how to better prepare them, how are we expected to create standards for college preparedness that will work effectively?

Discussing college writing preparedness with students will help them become involved in the conversation and be able to share insights that will inform change. By conducting this research study, I was able to obtain information that helps to explain the experiences of students from their point of view and that information was used to make recommendations for improving how to best prepare students for college level writing. By coupling qualitative research with recommendations for better practice, I present information that will be useful in better understanding what can be done to help students as they make the transition from high school to college writing. This is important to both the K-12 field and the postsecondary field, as it is important to see what can be improved at both levels to help students be prepared for success.

## **Literature Review**

To better understand how to improve students' preparation for college writing, it is important to explore literature that has been previously written on the topic. The five main areas of literature that I explored were college readiness, the transition from high school to college writing, the role of self-efficacy in writing, the Common Core State Standards, and K-16 partnerships. These topics helped me to consider my research question: How can K-12 institutions and postsecondary schools work to better prepare students for college writing? By reading these materials, I was able to gain a deeper perspective on the topic of college writing preparedness.

### **College Readiness**

David Conley (2008) defined college readiness as “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program”(p. 4). According to statistics, many students are not prepared to the degree required for college readiness by Conley's definition. Porter and Polikoff (2012) stated that 70% of American high school students attend college, but many are not well-prepared to face the level of academics that college requires. They also explained that many students take one or more remedial courses, which happens when an institution feels that the student is not adequately prepared for college-level work. Rothman (2012) noted that 40% of students entering college need to take at least one remedial course, based on National Center for Education statistics. The fact that so many students are having to take remedial courses may be linked to the gap present between students who are eligible for college and those who are actually ready for college, which Conley (2008) and Barnes, Slate, and Rojas-LeBouef (2010) explained are not the

same. Conley (2008) stated that high school completion is vastly different from college readiness, as college students must adapt to new learning strategies and coping skills in order to succeed in an educational setting where the expectations are higher. According to Barnes, Slate, and Rojas-LeBouef (2010), the federal government has been raising the level of academic expectation in the high school curriculum for over twenty years, but college-readiness rates of high school graduates are still low.

One organization that assessed the level of college preparation is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) who assessed 52,000 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from 1,670 private and public schools in 2009. They found that only 38% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students attained the proficient level on the NAEP reading assessment, which is indicative of college preparedness (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Additionally Venezia and Jaeger (2013) reported that only 25% of students who took the nationally recognized ACT exam in 2012 met ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks, which meant they had received the lowest score required to have a 50% chance of receiving a "B" or higher in first-year college classes. By looking at these statistics, they determined that too many students entering college did not have the basic skills and content knowledge needed to perform at the college level. They also explained that college professors complain that students are unprepared for the writing, reading, thinking, and learning required at the college entrance level. Venezia and Jaeger (2013) stated that current policies are confusing students over what is expected in order to graduate high school versus what is expected at the college entrance level.

Conley (2008) shared this idea and stated, "A key problem is that the current measures of college preparation are limited in their ability to communicate to students and educators the true range of what students must do to be fully ready to succeed in college" (p. 3). He recommended

one way to fix this would be if colleges had readiness standards to highlight key cognitive strategies and also provide content knowledge information that students should know before coming to college.

College readiness is an important issue to investigate, as research has shown that students' first year of college lays the groundwork for future academic success (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006). Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) conducted a study using data from the 2003 and 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to better understand the factors that impact student academic success in the first year of college. By conducting this study, they hoped to examine how "the individual, organizational, environmental, programmatic, and policy factors" worked individually and collectively to affect students' success in their first year of college (Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2006, p. 150). Through this study they found that students' learning and cognitive development is shaped by experiences in the classroom, including teacher behavior. They found that teachers played a large part in the success of students, especially if they were prepared, available, helpful, and had rapport with students. They also determined that students in the study who felt supported by faculty and who were challenged cognitively by their professors made greater gains in academic competency than those who were not supported or didn't feel challenged.

The support of teachers and professors is important to consider, as Patterson and Duer (2006) found when they examined a survey conducted by ACT Inc. in 2002-2003 that evaluated approximately 2,000 secondary and postsecondary educators' views on reading and writing. The surveys showed that some high school teachers decide what to teach their students based on whether or not they think their students will go to college after they graduate. At the postsecondary level, Hjortshoj (2009) stated that professors don't always understand what



students have learned in high school and have trouble adequately helping students make adjustments needed in college. Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo's (2006) study showed how important the first year of college is and also showed the need for the restructuring of current policies and practices in order for students to be more prepared for success in college, especially during the first year.

### **Transition from High School to College Writing**

While it is clear that many students are unprepared for college, one specific area where they need significant improvement is being ready for writing at the college level. According to Conley (2008), writing is the academic skill most linked to being successful in college. He suggested that the best change that could be made to help better prepare students for college is to increase the writing students do and the quality of that writing. He stated that in college students are expected to write papers quickly in succession, but in high school they may take weeks or months to write the same kind of papers. He also explained that the papers students write in college are generally longer than those they write at the high school level and that the papers must be organized, critical, and have used credible resources as evidence to support arguments, whereas in high school students often think their personal views are enough to support their arguments.

Looking at data from the Center for Educational Policy Research (CEPR) where thousands of syllabi from high schools around the country were examined, Conley (2007), the director of the CEPR, noticed that students often handed in work only once, rather than taking time to edit and revise, which is an idea shared by Hjortshoj (2009). Hjortshoj, Director of Writing in the Majors at Cornell University, stated that students generally have an overwhelming desire to finish an assignment quickly, rather than take time to revise. In his opinion, professors

often see student work in a rough draft form, but students often see their work as the final copy. While he seemed to put the blame on the student, he also explained that students may not realize how dissatisfied professors are with student writing and that while professors provide instructions and guidelines, they don't provide guidance on how to write in a particular way, which may create a lack of understanding between the professor and students. While this is a problem, Hjortshoj (2009) mentioned that first-year students are often reluctant to reach out and utilize support, such as their professors or writing centers, because they view them as remedial and that only bad writers should utilize these resources.

Hjortshoj (2009) also explained that some of the responsibility for the lack of student preparedness in writing comes from the differences between the way high school courses and college courses are taught. He stated that many high school courses prepare students to pass standardized tests, but college courses do not function in the same way. Patterson and Duer (2006), using surveys conducted by ACT Inc. in 2002-2003 that evaluated approximately 2,000 secondary and postsecondary educators' views on reading and writing, found that college professors are more concerned than high school teachers with grammar and usage. They also determined that most high school teachers and college professors agree on what are important skills in writing, but that high school teachers don't always know what's expected at the college level and don't always know how to best prepare students.

Another study looking at why students aren't adequately prepared for college writing was conducted by Beil and Knight (2007), who surveyed first year students at George Washington University about their writing, which included questions about assignments, types of writing tasks, writing process and feedback, research sources used, and the frequency, format, and length of assignments. By examining the data they found that the traditional five-paragraph essay was

assigned frequently to 75% of the students surveyed and 61% of students never wrote a paper more than five pages long. Less than half of the students had to complete a research paper every month and only about a third of students used scholarly journals frequently. They also discovered that students did not have much experience with peer feedback, drafting, or the revision process. They preferred teacher feedback over peer feedback, but did not have to turn in drafts often and the teacher feedback given was minimal. They found that students had not frequently been assigned work that utilized the type of writing expected at the college level, such as criticizing arguments, stating a problem and proposing a solution, and analyzing one's audience. Overall, the study by Beil and Knight (2007) found that college level writing has a different purpose from high school writing and that students are not prepared for the complexity of college writing.

While college writing preparedness is a large problem, there have been ideas put forth to help students succeed. Sommers and Saltz (2004) investigated the views of approximately 400 first year students at Harvard University on their college writing through surveys and interviews conducted in 2001. They found that students felt that they were expected to use new conventions of college writing while still struggling with the familiarity of the model of writing they were taught in high school. Sommers and Saltz (2004) explained, "It doesn't take long for most first-year students to become aware of the different expectations between high school and college writing, that something more is being offered to them and, at the same time, asked of them" (p. 125). Instead of seeing this lack of knowledge as an issue, Sommers and Saltz (2004) saw it as an opportunity for students to let themselves be open to being a novice, which would let them be open to new ideas instead of sticking to what they know.

First-year students who see themselves as a beginner of college writing rather than an expert of high school writing are most able to learn and absorb new skills. They also generally will be more apt to view writing as something that matters to them, rather than just as an assignment, which will increase their chance of sustaining an interest in academic writing (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). Students who are closed off to the idea of being a novice often see writing as just an assignment and don't see it as a way to explore things they are interested in. While Sommers and Saltz (2004) saw being a novice as an innovative idea for first-year college students, they cautioned that students should not stick to being a novice for the entirety of college, but rather move forward as they learn, as students who stay at the novice level often fail to see a larger purpose for writing and do not open themselves to learning.

Another idea to help students succeed with college writing is the first-year writing course. Hjortshoj (2009) explained that first-year writing courses exist to aid the transition between high school and college by helping students to write, read, and think more effectively at the college level. He explained that these courses vary from institution to institution but that they are “the new beginning of a learning process” for first-year students (Hjortshoj, 2009, p. 26). These ideas are starting points for improving college writing preparedness, but there are other things that need to be done as well.

### **Role of Self-Efficacy in Writing**

While looking at how the transition from high school to college writing can be improved, it is important to consider the self-efficacy of students. Martinez, Kock, and Cass (2011) defined writing self-efficacy as the belief one has about their ability to write. Mattern and Shaw (2010) explained that students with greater self-efficacy have more positive outcomes in college. They also mentioned that while self-efficacy may be predictive of student success, it is not always a

true representation of a student's capabilities, but if self-efficacy beliefs are accurate students and their teachers will benefit by knowing and understanding these beliefs.

Martinez, Kock, and Cass (2011) conducted a survey of 127 college students at a southwestern Texas university. They found that high expectations for writing affect anxiety levels in students, which may lead to a lack of willingness to take writing courses. This anxiety affects faculty, as those who teach in disciplines other than English and use writing in their courses are often challenged by students who are resistant to writing, which could come from anxiety, poor academic performance, or a lack of seeing writing as having importance. They recommended that universities who use writing across the disciplines should work to reduce students' anxiety by helping them increase their writing self-efficacy and the quality of their writing. One specific way they recommend to do this is by encouraging students to utilize campus writing centers and work with peer writing tutors. They stated, "Tutoring empowers students to make important, informed choices as they write and revise their work, helping to reduce anxiety and increase self-efficacy" (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011, p. 359). By partnering students with writing centers, the level of self-efficacy can increase as they become stronger writers who feel more empowered and less anxious.

Their work showed a correlation between anxiety and self-efficacy, as those with higher anxiety about writing had lower self-efficacy. They also discovered that students who wrote in their spare time reported higher levels of writing self-efficacy. Another finding was that tutoring helps students by empowering them to make important choices as they revise their writing which helps reduce anxiety and increase self-efficacy (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011). However, Mattern and Shaw (2010) suggested that the beliefs about seeking help may change between high school and college and students might not be as comfortable seeking help at the college level. By

using data from the SAT from 2006, they determined that the majority of students believed that they were above average in their writing ability. They also discovered that only about 10% of the highest scoring group stated that they wanted help with writing, while almost 60% of those who thought they had below average writing wanted help. While this data showed the desire for seeking help, it was not clear whether students who had indicated this desire ever sought out help once at college. Mattern and Shaw (2010) recommended that peer-tutoring be introduced and utilized in high school, which could result in increasing students' self-efficacy in writing and increase their willingness to seek help at the college level. It is important to consider students' self-efficacy in writing, as it may be a factor that differentiates students who are more prepared for college writing than others.

### **Common Core State Standards**

While looking at students' self-beliefs is important in understanding their writing preparedness, it is also important to look at the educational system they are participating in and see what is being done at the policy level. One thing that is currently happening at the educational policy level that is trying to improve college preparedness is the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Starting in 2006, state leaders wanted to create new standards that would be common across states and would make sure that the standards met the expectation of postsecondary education, along with preparing students for careers (Rothman, 2012). As of 2011, 47 states and the District of Columbia have agreed to align their state standards with the CCSS (Conley, 2011). Conley (2011) explained that if the standards are implemented the right way they will be able to take learning beyond basic test preparation and enhance learning outcomes for students, but if they are implemented incorrectly they could greatly increase accountability and not allow for meaningful school and student improvement.

In the field of writing, the CCSS are intended to help increase literacy skills by having the skills taught in not just language arts courses, but across the disciplines (Conley, 2011). The CCSS take on a broad definition of literacy, and as explained by the Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts and Literacy (2011), “Effective programs emphasize that all of the components of literacy—close and critical reading, coherent writing, articulate speaking, and attentive listening—are essential in a democratic society” (p. 8). Literacy encompasses reading, writing, speaking, and listening, according to the CCSS. When it comes to these skills, the official website for the CCSS (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012) states:

Each year in their writing, students should demonstrate increasing sophistication in all aspects of language use, from vocabulary and syntax to the development and organization of ideas, and they should address increasingly demanding content and sources. Students advancing through the grades are expected to meet each year’s grade-specific standards and retain or further develop skills and understandings mastered in preceding grades.

These skills are assessed by classroom teachers, along with specific state exams, such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2014). The CCSS changes the way writing is taught at the K-12 level by reducing the emphasis on narrative writing and increasing the emphasis on informational and explanatory writing (Rothman, 2012). According to Conley (2007), the CCSS allows students to practice frequently more complex tasks and assignments, but he explained that students must be actively involved in their learning in order to meet the new standards.

So far the CCSS reflects college expectations, but it is too early to have any solid data on the success of the new standards (Rothman, 2012). While the CCSS intend to improve college and career preparedness, there are some important issues to consider. Venezia and Jaeger (2013)

explained that there is disagreement among experts on whether college and career readiness are different and, if they are different, it has not been clear whether one framework, such as the CCSS, can ensure that all students are prepared to succeed at all postsecondary institutions and in all career opportunities. They also mentioned that throughout the history of decentralized control of education in the United States, one model or intervention has not met the needs of all students. Rothman (2012) agreed with this idea and explained that the CCSS, by themselves, will not ensure college and career readiness. He also brought up an important point, which is that the CCSS are the same for students regardless of where they live. This is complicated as students from affluent school districts and students from poorer districts are going to be held to the same standards without their socioeconomic status being taken into account. Venezia and Jager (2013) explained that states are concerned that the lack of funding for the implementation of the CCSS may affect their ability to support the successful execution of the standards. As the CCSS are an unfunded mandate, schools with fewer resources will be expected to implement the standards in the same way as schools with more resources, which will affect the way the standards impact students.

Another issue Rothman (2012) discussed was the idea that assessments should be developed to evaluate whether students are achieving the new standards, but that higher education should be involved to validate the assessments and ensure that college preparedness is being accurately assessed. As Venezia and Jaeger (2013) stated, “Greater consensus is needed about what it means to be college- and career-ready, and higher education needs to play a more active role in reform efforts” (pp. 131-132). While the CCSS may be a step closer to helping students be more prepared for college, especially in the area of writing, according to Venezia and Jaeger (2013), higher education needs to play a bigger role.



**K-16 Partnerships**

While the CCSS are happening at the K-12 level, they have an impact on the way students are performing once they go to college, and therefore it is important to consider the way K-12 institutions are partnering, or not partnering, with postsecondary institutions. According to Hoyle and Kutka (2008), who looked at previous literature on the subject, the disjointed educational system in the United States is no longer adequate and K-12 and higher education should work to create a single, unified system. This idea is shared by Andrea Venezia (2003), who directed The Bridge Project at Stanford University which investigated how to strengthen K-16 transition policies. Venezia (2003) stated, “The lack of coordination between the public K-12 and postsecondary sectors could impede successful transitions between the systems and reduce educational opportunity for many students” (p. 27). It has been clear throughout history that K-12 institutions operate in a different system than postsecondary institutions, even though both are working towards the same goal (Venezia, 2003; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). However, as Hoyle and Kutka (2008) explained, the separate systems have been in place for over 130 years and it would be very difficult to change them into a unified system.

While history seems to impede change, there are still many who are hoping that change will happen. Conley (2007) stated that because the needs of students are changing, the relationship between high schools and college must also change. In addition, with the rising number of students entering postsecondary education, he explained that high schools and colleges need their programs to be better aligned. He advised that high schools need to analyze their curriculum, possibly by working with a local postsecondary institution. Venezia (2003) also recommended that higher education should collaborate with K-12 institutions to develop student-centered change and that “K-12 and postsecondary education must be equal partners in their

work to prepare all students to graduate from high school ready for college” (p.30). Additionally, Barnes, Slate, and Rojas-LeBouef (2010) suggested that high schools should partner with local universities and colleges to help implement a college-going attitude at the K-12 level. They also explained that as standards rise, it is more important than ever for colleges and high schools to work together to make sure students are prepared.

According to Justin Young (2014), Assistant Professor at Eastern Washington University, one area that specifically needs K-16 collaborations is the field of writing. Young (2014) stated, “the effective teaching of composition instructors should involve direct collaboration with local K-12 educators; college writing teachers need to learn from the experiences and observations of secondary school English teachers, and vice-versa” (p. 20). After participating in an “Affinity Network” put on by the College Board, which brought together K-16 educators to discuss the CCSS, he returned to his institution and led workshops for both K-12 and postsecondary educators on the CCSS. He focused the workshops in current composition theory and hoped that they would serve as an example for other institutions.

Based on his workshop experience, Young (2014) explained more of his thoughts about K-16 partnerships by saying:

Before the CCSS have been fully implemented in the high school classrooms, secondary and post-secondary writing teachers as well as program administrators need to develop a shared understanding of the areas of writing where their local soon-to-be and entering college students are currently falling short of college readiness (p. 22).

It is clear that K-16 partnerships are vital in helping students to be more prepared for college writing. Hopefully, with more K-16 collaborations, there will be improved success in college preparedness for students, especially in the area of writing.

## **Conclusion**

By investigating the literature, I was able to confirm my previous assumptions about there being a large difference between the way students are taught to write at the high school level and the way they are expected to write at the college level. I also determined, by looking at the literature, that the role of self-efficacy plays a large part in student success, which is one of the reasons why I was interested in talking with students and getting their views about writing for this project. Also, it was important to look at the current changes happening at the education policy level, such as the CCSS, and also see what kind of relationship currently exists between K-12 and postsecondary institutions, as I wanted to understand what is happening currently in education to better inform my study. By looking at these topics, I was able to gain a theoretical foundation that informed my study. By taking what I learned and coupling it with qualitative methods, I was able to make beneficial recommendations that will help students have better success with college writing preparation in the future.

## **Methods**

In order to better understand the experiences of students in relation to their college writing preparedness, I conducted 10-15 minute interviews with first year students at a small, liberal arts college in Massachusetts during February of 2014. By using qualitative research, I was able to better understand the issue of college writing preparedness from the students' perspectives. The interviews were conducted from a constructivist paradigm, as I constructed meaning from the experiences of my participants. According to Mertens (2010), constructivist researchers assume that knowledge is socially constructed and they should better understand the world by looking at the experiences of those living in it. The constructivist paradigm is the best

choice for my project because the lived experience of students is valuable in determining how to best serve their needs in a socially constructed world.

I recruited students by visiting them in their First-Year Writing course during the December of 2013, with permission of the professors, and discussing my project. I was looking for first-year students who had taken this introductory writing course, so I made sure to recruit the students through this class for my sample. I provided them with an oral invitation, along with a handout explaining the basics of the project. As I recruited during the fall semester, but did not conduct interviews until the spring semester, I only asked for names of interested potential participants during the class visits. Students who signed up as interested received an e-mail with further details about the project during January of 2014. If they replied that they were still interested in participating at that point, I sent them a short questionnaire about demographics, as I was hoping to narrow down my final sample by conducting non-random purposeful sampling in order to ensure I had a balance of students who were honors students, traditional students, and students in the COMPASS program, a bridge program designed to support students who come to college with a lower GPA, but have a high potential for success. I was hoping to conduct around ten interviews for the final sample.

Originally, thirteen students replied with interest and filled out the demographics questionnaire, but three ended up dropping out of the project. I was unable to complete the purposeful sampling I was hoping to do because I did not receive enough interest to do so. I ended up with ten students: six honors students, two traditional students, and two COMPASS program students. Five students went to public high schools in Massachusetts, one student went to a public high school in Maine, one student attended a semi-private high school in New Hampshire, and three students attended private high schools in New Hampshire, Vermont, and

Massachusetts. All students were traditional age first-year students who had taken the introductory writing course during the fall semester of 2014. Students received a large-size candy bar as compensation for their time and sharing their experiences. Students' identifying information has been made anonymous in this study and pseudonyms have been designated for each student (See Appendix A).

The interviews were conducted and included questions about students' experiences with being prepared for college in general, then more specifically, being prepared for college writing (See Appendix B for interview protocol). The questions asked them about specific experiences they had at both the high school and college level and also asked them to identify how they viewed themselves as writers and what skills they found to be easy or challenging for them. The interviews were recorded in audio format and were transcribed and coded by the researcher.

### **Findings**

During the interviews I asked students questions about their high school writing experience, their transition to college writing, and their views on college writing so far. The following summary depicts these perspectives.

#### **Transition to College**

When asked about their college experience so far, all students reported that their first semester of college was a positive experience. Some students mentioned that they did very well in terms of grades; however, one student mentioned that she did worse than she expected. A few students mentioned that they had to adjust to the workload. One student explained that having more free time in college than in high school allowed her to better transition to the heavier workload. Overall, the general transition to college for the students was a positive experience.

### **High School Preparation**

Students were next asked about general academic preparation at their high school and also specifically about writing preparation. When asked about general academic preparation many students expressed that their high school prepared them well for college and that writing was often a big part of their coursework. Several of the students discussed taking honors and/or Advanced Placement (AP) courses during high school. Most of the students who attended public school in Massachusetts discussed the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and taking the exams. Zack explained:

Like overall, just, what a lot of public high schools tend to do up until your junior year...when all the MCAS [testing] is going on they kind of teach in that direction. But junior and senior year was kind of when I really started getting into the major core classes and teachings that would go towards what I would be taking in college. Sophomore math classes and other types of classes were largely taught just for like MCAS purposes.

Emma also had much to say about the MCAS:

Particularly in like middle school, I would say, it was definitely more focused on the way that the MCAS wanted you to do it. Everything was focused on the MCAS. The way they were doing it was the way you should be doing it just to pass that, which I don't think that's good because it doesn't set you up for life, it just sets you up to take the MCAS. And the MCAS is just a standardized test, it's not reality.

Other students who took the MCAS stated that they felt there was more preparation specifically for college once the MCAS testing ended after their sophomore year.

When asked specifically about writing preparation in their high school coursework many students discussed how their schools used writing across the curriculum, not just in English classes. Elizabeth stated:

They started this thing senior year where they tried to get a lot of writing in all of the areas, so I had to write a few papers for my statistics class. And even junior year I had to write a paper for my calculus class. And then in my history classes, like AP US and AP Government, I had to write like four or five papers throughout the year for those too, so I guess writing in all the subjects was kind of emphasized a lot.

When asked if she knew why this program had started this expectation during her senior year, Elizabeth responded, “I don’t know it was just for college preparedness, like writing across the curriculum, as they called it, was their big thing.” I next inquired whether Maine, where she attended high school, had implemented the Common Core State Standards, and she replied, “I heard about it, but I don’t know. I’ve seen teacher’s statuses [on Facebook] complaining about the Common Core Standards, so I think so, but I couldn’t tell you anything about it.”

A few students mentioned that they had supportive high school teachers who helped them prepare for college writing. Other students mentioned that writing is something they enjoy doing and one of those students explained that she specifically enjoys creative writing and took creative writing electives in high school.

While many students discussed having a good deal of writing preparation in high school, including writing across the curriculum, a few students expressed that their writing preparation was not perfect. Charlotte explained difficulty with writing from an early age, saying “You know, I struggled with writing in high school...I don’t think I had a very good foundation in elementary school and then it builds and I didn’t really know how to write.” A few other students also had less than perfect experiences with the way they were prepared in high school for college writing. Emma discussed her writing preparation:

It definitely was in every single class that I had. I definitely had to write for every course. As far as my English classes go, I think they were not as good as they could have been. I think they could have prepared me in a different way because it’s so much different in college.

When asked about the structure of the essays she was required to write in high school, Emma responded:

It was the 5 paragraphs, you should have this many sentences. In reality writing is nothing like that (*laughs*). We had the burger thing, the introduction, the conclusion, the body in the middle. I've been learning the burger since like third grade.

Patrick also discussed the structure of essays he was expected to write in high school, by stating, "Most of our essays were read a book and then write the essay. And they were usually five-paragraph essays. All of them were five-paragraph essays. Three body paragraphs, an intro, and a conclusion."

When asked how their high school English teachers could better prepare them for writing at the college level, students had lots of advice. Some of the advice included was for teachers to have students complete longer essays, have shorter deadlines for work to be turned in, more research-based writing assignments, more structured assignments where drafts were turned in more than just once, and also letting students use more of their personal style in their writing. Emily mentioned that she wanted her teacher to be tougher on her in high school so that she was more aware of her writing weaknesses, such as repetition, which she wasn't made aware of until she got to college. Emma suggested that high school teachers have more interaction with college professors:

[High school teachers should] go to a college and talk to professors and get the sense of how we should actually be writing in college because, like I said, it's completely different. I know from just last year, last semester, there are so many different kinds of writing you can do and I wasn't even aware of these different kinds. It was basically just here's your thesis talk about it in the beginning. I didn't realize you could talk about it at any point in the entire essay. It's so much different in high school. I think they try their best to prepare you for college, but you know, it's completely different from high school.

Overall, students expressed a variety of views on how they were prepared in high school for writing at the college level. Students discussed how standardized testing affected their preparation, the trend of writing across the curriculum, not feeling that their high school



experience prepared them well enough for college, and the differences between high school and college writing.

### **Writing at the College Level**

Next, students were asked about how prepared they were for writing at the college level when they first arrived. Many students discussed feeling nervous over what would be expected of them and what their professors would be looking for in their writing. Charlotte elaborated on this feeling:

I was terrified to pass in my first paper. My first paper was a memoir and I never had written anything creative, it was strictly either doing a scientific report or a literature analysis. I didn't really have much in the way of creative writing. So I was really worried I didn't have the skills and that it wasn't what the teacher was looking for. I was worried that my language was not up to par, that I was using everyday language instead of the formal sense and when I actually got the paper back as a draft she said that mine was too formal, that I needed to let go a little bit. I think because I was so worried that I wasn't going to get it right. There was definitely a pressure. I was very, very nervous handing in the first paper. It was nice because it was just a draft, the first round, which, you know, now I try to send in my papers a little bit earlier to see if the teacher will kind of give me some feedback on it, because what I'm worried about is not getting what the professor wants from the paper.

Elizabeth also mentioned this feeling of nervousness:

I was definitely intimidated and I didn't know if I'd be prepared enough at all. Going into my class, my professor said we had to write a memoir, and that was a type of paper I had never even been exposed to, I guess, and so I felt a little behind, but once you kind of catch on to the style the teacher is looking for and what requirements I guess it was a lot easier. I know how to write and I know how to make my sentences flow together and I know transitions and stuff like that, but it's just like trying to figure out applying it to something I guess is the hardest part.

While students did express anxiety over writing at the college level, many of the students expressed that they felt prepared for college level writing, including the students who had previously mentioned enjoying writing. Emma felt confident coming into college writing but felt differently once taking the First-Year Writing course:

I thought I had a good sense of where I was in terms of my own personal writing. I did take newspaper, so I was used to writing articles, types like that, so I thought I had a broader spectrum of things than most particular people would have, but that changed as soon as I took the class. I was just like okay, everything I learned [in high school] was complete bullshit, pretty much. (*laughs*) Once I got to the class I was like okay, this is different. But before taking it I was like okay, I'll be fine. And I was fine, I picked up on it easily, it's not something that takes rocket science, but it definitely was completely different.

Students were also asked how prepared they felt for college writing after taking the First-Year Writing course and if there were any significant changes they noticed. Out of the ten students, only two, Olivia and Nicole, felt that their writing didn't change after taking the course because they were very well prepared in high school. Emily explained that the course helped her better address her weaknesses and write better papers. Charlotte stated that she is much more confident about her writing and has a better sense of how to write at the college level. Zack and Patrick discussed how the course helped them develop better research skills. Emma felt that the course helped her to write better in all her courses. Elizabeth explained that the course helped her write in a more concise way, which she felt would be helpful, as she majors in Engineering. Sarah and Brittany both discussed the use of the Writing Center along with the course and how working with writing fellows, peer writing tutors assigned to the course, helped them to develop stronger writing skills. Overall, many students were able to gain improved skills and confidence from this course.

While many students found the First-Year Writing course to be very useful and that it was a positive experience, they also were asked what advice they would give to their First-Year Writing professor to help their transition from high school to college writing. Some students expressed a need for more focus on writing skills and technique. Elizabeth explained:

I felt like the class could have focused a lot more on, like maybe we could have done a class on grammar or a class on conventions or a class on citing. I mean, we talked a lot

about globalization and that's what the focus of every class was like discussing a reading. So I felt in a way it wasn't particularly a writing class, like writing was more in the background. Like you did it on your own time and got comments back. So I felt like, we had a book that had everything and we just referenced it and it told us how to do it, and the book was really good about it, but I felt like in the class we could have talked about writing more.

Some students also discussed the need for more of a transition period at the start of the course with clearer guidelines and expectations, as college writing is different from high school writing.

Emma stated:

I would say definitely more guidelines because we are coming straight out of high school. I wasn't used to just being like told go write an essay. She would give us some guidelines in class, but I feel like it should have been more hands-on with the professor and things like that. Just to really help structure it and this is exactly how it has to look. I feel like there was a little bit of leeway there and it could have been a little more structured. I think it would have been easier to kind of transition then towards the end of the semester, now you do it. Just a little bit in the beginning.

A few students also mentioned the need for more feedback and critique, especially in the beginning of the course. Zack suggested that there should be one non-graded paper to complete as a trial to see what the professor is expecting and to receive feedback so that students know how to go about their next graded paper. When asked about their experience with college writing when they first came to college, students discussed the pressure of college writing, how the first-year writing course affected their transition from high school to college writing, and advice for their professors who taught the course.

### **Self-perception of Writing Skills**

Another topic students were asked about was writing skills. They were asked to explain which skills they found easier and which ones they found more challenging. The responses were varied, with students expressing skills that were easier as being development, organization, grammar, spelling, supporting arguments, analysis, creative writing, finding information, flow,

personal writing, transitions, and word choice. Most students had different skills they found easier than other students, so there was no major skill that appeared to be the easiest one for everyone. When asked which skills were challenging students responded with varied answers as well. Some of the more challenging skills included repetition, being concise, transitions, research, supporting arguments, paraphrasing, structure, analysis, organization, depth, and personal writing. A few students expressed that getting started on a paper was challenging for them.

Another question students were asked about was what kind of writer they see themselves as now and what areas they would like to develop as a writer in the future. Many students described themselves as good, confident, academic, or strong writers. A few students described themselves as casual, personal, and creative writers, preferring the non-academic type of writing. Areas of development for the future that the students expressed were being stronger researchers, improving upon vocabulary, having better organization and structure, and improving on development and analysis. Sarah mentioned wanting to develop better revision skills, such as reading her paper aloud, as she didn't feel confident doing so, even though she found it helpful to do so with her writing fellow when she visited the writing center. It was important to discuss how students see themselves as writers and what skills they find easy and challenging as the literature explained that self-efficacy plays a large part in achievement at the college level, especially in the area of writing. Students discussed which skills they found easier and more challenging, how they view themselves as writers, what areas they would like to develop as writers in the future, and also working on skills by visiting the writing center.

## Final Thoughts

The last question students were asked was whether there was anything else they wanted to discuss about their preparation. This question evolved throughout the interview process to also ask about the major differences they saw between high school and college writing. Many students again expressed anxiety over expectations at the college level. Charlotte stated:

I don't think that I had the best teachers to prepare me to get to high school and then in high school it kind of was just a free for all in terms of writing. I mean I had teachers teaching me different ways to write so that got confusing because you didn't know which way was correct or which way you were supposed to write. So then coming to college, it was what are they actually expecting of me? I think at the college level when you are coming in that's one of your biggest worries. Is my performance level going to be what the professor is expecting? And I think that was definitely my biggest fear when taking the college writing class.

She also discussed the difference between AP courses and actual college courses:

Even in my AP classes, I had two different teachers at one point telling me, no this isn't the way you should be crafting your essay for this exam, so, I think it was really challenging because you're in an AP level course that's supposed to be college level and you're not teaching me how to write correctly.

Elizabeth also discussed expectations of college level writing:

In college writing, it's a lot harder to gauge what the professor wants out of you. So like in my Philosophy class last semester, my first paper I was terrified handing it in, but I basically just explained what it was and I didn't really have much in the paper, it was a page and a half I think, and I ended up getting an A on it. But another teacher might want a lot more than that. I don't know, it's hard to gauge what a professor wants. I think that's the most difficult thing right now. High school teachers would be like 'I want this' and then you can go up to them and ask what you should mention, you can run your paper through them first, but in college it's more intimidating to ask a professor what they want because I don't want them to feel like they have to baby me, but at the same time it's like what do you want from me? It's kind of rough.

Other differences between high school and college level writing that students noted were longer papers, more papers, structure and style of writing, and more critical feedback at the college level.

Overall, the students discussed many topics about preparation for writing at the college level. Students discussed how prepared they were by their high school teachers and how that preparation could be improved. They also talked about how they felt about postsecondary writing when first coming to college and how the first-year writing course affected them, along with giving advice to their first-year writing professors about how the course could be improved. Students also explained how they felt about their own strengths and weaknesses when it came to writing and how they want to improve in the future.

### **Discussion**

One major topic that was discussed during the interviews was the difference between high school and college writing. Students discussed heavier workloads, longer papers, and different structure when it came to writing papers in college versus writing papers in high school. Similar to Beil and Knight's (2007) findings, students in the study mentioned that the standard five-paragraph essay was utilized often and methods such as the "burger" method (where the hamburger meat, or the body paragraphs, were put between two pieces of bread, the introduction and conclusion) were used to teach this structure. While the five-paragraph essay is a common structure used at the high school level described by many students in the study, it is not always the structure required at the college level, as college papers usually require greater depth and more expanded papers. Students are often taught this structure at the high-school level and expect that this is the way they will be expected to write in college, which is generally not the case. Students are expected to take this general structure and adapt it based on what is expected of them at the college level; they must be open to straying away from the structure they have previously learned, which is often difficult for students to do, as they have been used to a very strict style of writing.

In addition to having a very structured style of writing, many students who went to public school in Massachusetts discussed having to take the MCAS exams and felt that they were restricted to certain ways of writing because of this system. Similar to Hjortshoj's (2009) findings, students felt that much of what they were taught at the high school level was taught just so that they could pass the standardized tests. Hjortshoj (2009) also found that high school teachers are not always aware of what is expected at the college level, which was supported by this study as well. Students also expressed that their high school teachers often would contradict each other and they didn't always have a sense of what the correct form of writing was, which caused them confusion when entering college. Standardized tests, such as the MCAS, are often used to see if students are prepared for college, but students in the study felt that these tests were not able to do that. Instead of preparing students for college, teachers prepared students to pass the test and students felt this was not a realistic assessment of whether they were prepared for college level work. It was clear from the students' responses that there needs to be better coordination between the preparation that happens at the high school level and what is expected once students arrive at college.

Another topic that was mentioned by many students was the anxiety over expectations at the college level versus the high school level. Students discussed confusion over what their professors expected of them numerous times throughout the interviews, which is supported by Venezia and Jaeger (2013) who explained that students are often unclear about what's expected at the college level. Some students felt the expectations for writing were not communicated as clearly from their college professors as they were from their high school teachers, which is not surprising as professors often don't realize how students are prepared at the high school level and are unsure of how to communicate guidelines and expectations to students in a way they

understand (Conley, 2008; Hjortshoj, 2009). In addition to communicating guidelines with students, some students also mentioned that it would be helpful if those guidelines were more on how to specifically write the paper, which is an idea shared by Hjortshoj (2009). Professors need to be more transparent with students about their expectations and ensure that the guidelines put forth to students are clear and understandable.

Another topic students talked about in this study was their self-efficacy. Students discussed the pressure of college writing and a desire to give their professors what they wanted. They had anxiety over performing up to the level that the professor was looking for, which many struggled with and found difficult. These high expectations for writing often led to a decline in the students' self-efficacy, at least temporarily, an idea also found by Martinez, Kock, and Cass (2011). Students were very concerned with what professors expected and wanted to make sure they lived up to the expectations. Professors may underestimate the level of students' need for writing self-efficacy and should work on providing clearer guidelines and ample feedback to students.

While some students discussed being nervous, other students had high levels of self-efficacy when it came to their writing, including students who mentioned enjoying writing in their free time. The correlation between students enjoying writing and having high self-efficacy is a finding also discussed by Martinez, Kock, and Cass (2011). Students with high self-efficacy about their writing also discussed positive outcomes, such as receiving good grades, which is another correlation previously discussed in literature (Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011). Encouraging students to see writing as something that will help them better understand what they are learning in class instead of seeing it as a required chore may help make writing a more enjoyable process and help raise their self-efficacy.



A subject that students talked about during the interviews was their experience with a First-Year Writing course, which mainly was seen as positive. This correlates with Hjortshoj (2009) who discussed these courses as being helpful to students' transitioning from high school to college level writing. Students felt that the course helped them to be stronger writers, but also discussed that the course was not perfect and gave advice on how to improve it. Some students felt the course needed to be more focused on technique and skills rather than be focused on a topic that was used as something to write about. By being focused on a topic, the course may be lacking a focus on what students express they really need, improving skills and confidence in writing at the college level.

There were other perspectives mentioned in the interviews as well. Reaching out for support, such as through writing centers, was discussed by only a few students, but seen as positive and helpful. Some students discussed how having supportive high school teachers greatly helped them to feel prepared for college level writing. A few students also discussed wanting more feedback and critique from their college professors, especially during the first few assignments of college so that they would be more supported in their transition. By encouraging students to utilize resources such as writing centers and faculty support, and also by providing more feedback, especially at the beginning of college, colleges can help better support students in their transition from high school to college writing.

### **Recommendations**

After reviewing the literature and conducting interviews, I was able to investigate current issues surrounding the transition from high school level writing to college level writing through the perspectives of first-year students. By conducting this study I have attempted to answer my research question: How can K-12 institutions and postsecondary schools work to better prepare

students for college writing? In this section I will recommend ways that K-12 and postsecondary institutions can work to help students in their transition from high school to college level writing.

### **Recommendation #1: Colleges Should Partner with the K-12 System**

Colleges need to be creating stronger partnerships with K-12 school systems in order to improve the way students are prepared for college level writing. When students come to college they are often met with a more loosely structured system that is not as standard or structured as the one they were used to at the high school level. One way to do this would be to create professional collaborative teams between faculty at the K-12 level and faculty at the college level. By creating partnerships, both institutions will benefit and the students will also be better served. By having meetings between faculty at both educational levels, teachers can discuss what is happening at both levels and discuss ways to make the material being taught be more connected and effective for students so that they are truly prepared for college level work when entering a postsecondary institution.

The best way to create these partnerships would be to utilize local networks, such as a school district and a nearby postsecondary institution, in order to learn about what is happening at both levels and to better suit the needs of students. This could also be done using technology, such as a discussion board or blog, to bring faculty and staff from both levels together to create a forum for these issues. K-12 and postsecondary institutions need to stop working as separate entities and instead work together. By continuing to work separately, nothing will be done to improve the transition for students and the two levels will continue to have confusion over what it means to be prepared for college level work. If partnerships are created it is more likely that positive outcomes for faculty, staff, and most importantly students, will occur.

The good news is that some K-16 partnerships do currently exist and can be used as models for future partnerships. An example is the K-16 Partnerships Network, which is part of the Philadelphia Higher Education Network for Neighborhood Development (PHENND, 2014). This partnership brings together faculty and staff from colleges and local public K-12 schools to learn best practices from each other through meetings and to also work together with the School District of Philadelphia to expand these types of partnerships. One thing this partnership utilizes that future partnerships should invest in is a full-time K-16 partnerships coordinator. By having a staff member who can facilitate these kinds of partnerships, it will be easier to bring faculty and staff from both levels together in a meaningful way.

These kinds of partnerships would help provide professional development and awareness about the K-12 system for college faculty and staff. If it isn't clear where students have been previously in their educational trajectory, how can college faculty and staff truly meet the needs of their students? K-16 partnerships would help them be aware of the structure of the system that students are coming from and provide them with resources to help ease the transition for these students.

A further recommendation I have is for students to be involved in this process of collaboration as well. By talking to students in this study I was able to gain valuable insight from their perspective that I believe would be valuable to these types of partnerships as well. Students need to have the chance to feel that they are important members of the discussion about their education. By empowering students to have a voice in these partnerships, they will have a greater stake in the educational process and may gain self-efficacy that can help them better succeed at the college level. The student voice should be part of the decision making process on what is best to help students prepare for college level work.

Involving students in this process could be done in a variety of ways. One way could be by having monthly meetings with K-12 staff representatives, local college faculty and staff representatives, and student representatives from both the high school and college level. All of these representatives could meet to discuss current happenings in their institutions and bring forth issues that they feel are important to discuss as a group. After the meeting, the representatives could take back the information learned at the meeting and share this with their respective institutions. Students, for example, could share what they learned at their institution's next student council meeting or present to administration at their school.

Another way students could be involved would be to visit the meetings of K-16 partnerships that already exist and present on educational issues that are important to them in order to help educators understand their perspectives on the educational system. This could involve one student or a group of students from both the high school and college levels. K-16 partnerships could also invite students to be part of a panel during a meeting in order for K-16 educators to ask questions of the students and hear their views on educational matters. Involving students would help educators better understand the needs of their students by hearing from them directly.

By raising awareness about what is happening at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels for educators at both levels, it will be easier for students to transition from high school to college, as their teachers and professors will have greater understanding about where students are coming from and where they are going. Having partnerships involving K-12 and postsecondary educators will be a useful way to bring these entities together to discuss issues that affect both levels. Finally, by involving students in these partnerships, it will raise awareness about what students truly need and also empower students to be part of their educational process.

**Recommendation #2: Colleges Should Take Action to Improve Students' Writing**

In addition to creating more awareness and partnerships, there are also things colleges can be working on independently of K-12 institutions. By taking action, colleges can work on improving writing success for students and help ease their transition to postsecondary writing. It is imperative that colleges take action instead of continuing to stick to the status quo.

**First-year writing.** While it was clear in this study that first-year writing courses were beneficial, students still explained that there were things about the course that they felt could be changed. One recommendation for all instructors who teach first-year courses that involve writing is to provide more structure for students, at least at the beginning of the course. As students are coming from a very structured system, it is important for them to be provided with structure at the beginning of their college career in order to better help their transition. By providing clear guidelines and expectations, especially with the first few papers, students will feel more prepared to write and less anxious about the process. As students continue with the writing process, faculty members will be able to lessen the structure that is needed, but at the beginning it would be useful for students to help them feel more confident about their writing.

This could be done by having very structured drafting and revision processes for the First-Year Writing Course and making sure each class has a similar structure, regardless of who is teaching it. One way to do this would be to provide a planning guide for instructors to ensure that their syllabi include certain elements, such as requirements for the amount of drafting and revision that students need to complete. One institution that does this is the University of Michigan (Sweetland Center for Writing, 2014), as they provide all their instructors with a syllabus planning sheet that notes requirements that need to be standard across the board (See

Appendix C). Providing structure for both the course and for the writing students have to do will clarify expectations and help with the transition to college level writing for first years students.

**Connecting students with faculty members.** A further recommendation I would suggest is that students should be highly encouraged to reach out to faculty members. While this resource is often available, students often do not take advantage of it because they are unsure of what they are or feel that there is a stigma associated with reaching out for support. The answer to this solution may be to again provide more structure around this resource. For example, instead of just offering office hours, professors can require students to meet with them during office hours at least once or twice a semester to help students get in the habit of doing so and to help them understand that faculty are available to support their needs. Students may not have been used to the concept of office hours before, as often in high school they just meet with teachers in an after-school period that is more structured. By providing them with more structure around office hours in their first semester of college, they may have a better understanding of what they are and be more apt to voluntarily utilize the resource in the future.

**Encouraging the use of writing centers.** Another area where more structure could be utilized is in the use of campus writing centers. Students should be encouraged to utilize these centers and faculty members could also require first-year students to visit these centers once or twice during a semester to familiarize themselves with this resource and also to help strengthen their writing skills with peer tutors. As meeting with peer tutors in a writing center can be a way to reduce anxiety and raise self-efficacy when it comes to writing, faculty should be encouraging students to make use of this resource. Students should also be made aware that writing centers are not just editing services, but rather a place where they can work with a peer tutor on their writing to not just fix it, but strengthen it and learn skills that they can continue to utilize in

future writing. More awareness for both students and faculty over what writing centers can provide is necessary so that this resource can be utilized in a way that is most effective for helping students transition to college writing.

Another resource provided by many writing centers is a writing fellows program. These programs generally involve a tutor being assigned to a particular section of a course. The students in the course are required to meet with the tutor at least once or twice during the semester. The tutor also attends the class with the students or has previously taken the course so that they are aware of the content being taught. While some students in this study mentioned the use of writing fellows in their classes, not all classes utilize this resource. Writing fellows programs are generally effective, but also costly to writing centers, as they pay tutors to have individual meetings with students that are more costly than just the drop-in tutoring writing centers often provide. Further research should be conducted on the effectiveness and best practices for writing fellows programs to investigate how to best use this resource, which is successful, in a cost-effective way.

Writing centers staff should be aware of current trends in K-16 education, as it will affect the way students are writing and tutors who work with students should be made aware of these trends. By understanding where students are coming from in regards to writing, tutors can be better prepared to work with students and help them break free from the structures they may have been used to at the high school level. Training tutors on these trends can be done during monthly staff development meetings or through a separate workshop. Writing centers could also bring in high school teachers to these trainings to help tutors hear more about how students are being prepared at the high school level. Writing centers should work to provide their tutors with the

most current information on how writing is being taught at both the K-12 and postsecondary level in order to best train them for working with students on their writing.

**Helping students see themselves as novices.** Finally, it is important to help students coming to college understand that they are beginners again, rather than experts. While many students, especially honors students, come into college having excelled at the high school level, it is important to encourage them to be open to learning more. This is important when it comes to writing, as many students are not open to learning new forms of writing, as they are used to a very structured form that has served them well previously. Unfortunately, as seen in this study, students are often more focused on grades and meeting their professors' expectations rather than seeing college as a learning experience where they can open themselves up to learning new things. By working on shifting the framework to a focus on learning, students can let themselves be novices and open to learning new things, rather than be stuck on thinking they are already an expert. Helping students understand this concept could be something that is done in the first-year writing course. Instructors could even provide students with a writing assignment where they need to find literature and report on how college writing is different from high school writing. This would help students immediately investigate the differences to help them understand that what they previously learned in regards to writing may be different than what they will be expected to do at the college level. While this would be one way to help students see themselves as novices, further research needs to be done to investigate the true purpose of college for students, whether they are actually open to learning or whether they are just focused on getting good grades, or conversely, just getting through.



**Recommendation #3: Systematic Changes within the Educational System are Necessary**

While I have laid out some practical recommendations, it is also important to investigate how work still needs to be done on the educational system as a whole. It has been seen through this study that the educational system is not working effectively for students. However, it is much easier to think about small changes, such as encouraging students to utilize writing centers or faculty support, rather than taking on the educational system in the United States. While it is a difficult task, it is something that needs to continue to be investigated in order to better help students be prepared for college level work.

As the CCSS have become the new standard in public education in the United States, it is important to continuously evaluate the effects they are having on students' preparation for college. As access to college continues to grow, it is important to evaluate what college preparedness is and how it is being assessed. Further research needs to be conducted as more students enter college who have come from high schools that have implemented the CCSS in order to see what impact they are having on students and their writing preparation. As colleges vary greatly and are not as standardized as public elementary, middle, and high schools, it is important that K-12 and postsecondary institutions all work together as an entire system in order to ensure that mixed messages on education are not being communicated.

While the public system is important to look at, it is also important to note that many of the students in this study attended private schools and felt generally well prepared. It might be important for public education to benchmark private K-12 institutions to see what best practices could be adapted for public schools. As other different types of K-12 education emerge, such as the rise in charter schools, it is necessary to continue to evaluate what each type of institution is doing to prepare students for college in order to make sure students are being best prepared.

Public education need to look at other types of schools in order to see which preparation model works best for students.

In order to improve upon college writing preparedness, it is vital that changes occur in many ways. K-16 partnerships need to be created and expanded in order to bring all parties involved in education together to best improve the transition from high school to college writing for students. Colleges also need to ensure that their first-year writing course is effective and consistent, encourage students to utilize resources such as their professors' office hours and writing centers, and also help students see that they are novices and should be open to learning. In addition to these recommendations, the education system in the United States needs to be continuously evaluated to ensure it is working to best prepare students for college, especially in the area of writing. Lawmakers, Administrators, and Teachers all need to be evaluating what is happening in educational systems and continuing to conduct research in order to understand the effectiveness of the education system in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

This study was conducted to further expand on the issue of college preparedness, specifically in the area of college writing preparation. From this study I was able to gain valuable insight into the perceptions of first-year students on their college writing preparation and investigate ways to improve upon the transition from high school to college level writing. This research is significantly important for the field of higher education, as it is vital that higher education professionals understand the way students are academically prepared to come to higher education institutions.

The most important thing I learned from this study was that as higher educational professionals it is imperative to meet students where they are in terms of academic preparation.

Instead of asking them to reach expectations they are unprepared for, we need to assess their level of preparation and see what areas need improvement so that they are able to succeed in postsecondary education. As access to higher education continues to grow, students will continue to be coming to college with varying levels of preparation and we need to understand where students are coming from to best meet their needs and help them succeed at the college level.

While it is clear that understanding how students are prepared for college is important for academic affairs, it is also important for those who work in student affairs. As students are more often coming to college unprepared for the level of work expected, they may have greater difficulty adjusting to college life as a whole and may also be dealing with mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, due to the raised expectations. Student affairs professionals should be aware of how students are being academically prepared to anticipate the needs of the student as a whole in order to ensure that students are able to have a positive college experience.

It is also absolutely necessary that collaboration between all levels of education continues and grows. Working together as an entire system instead of separate entities is extremely important in order to ensure that students are being guided and taught in the proper ways that will help them be adequately prepared for college level work, especially in the field of writing. Collaboration between K-12 and higher education is essential for continued improvement for students in the transition between high school and college.

We also need to work on empowering our students to have a larger voice in their own education. Listening to the perspectives from the students in this project helped me see the great ability students have to articulate their needs, but also made me realize that students often don't put forth this information without being asked first. By helping our students realize that their

voice is important, we can hopefully encourage them to advocate for their needs and help shape future change in the field of education.

Overall, this project was a wonderful experience that helped me better understand how to conduct qualitative research and explore a topic that is very important to me, college writing preparation. This study has provided information on college writing preparation that can be utilized at both the K-12 and postsecondary levels. This subject is one that will continue to be important to the field of higher education as the true purpose of college continues to be discussed and assessment measures at the postsecondary level are being considered by the government. Hopefully, further research will continue to be done on this topic and actions will be taken to improve the transition from high school to college writing for students.

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## Appendix A

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Student Classification</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Public/Private</b>
Emily	Honors	New Hampshire	Semi-Private
Olivia	Honors	New Hampshire	Private
Charlotte	Honors	Massachusetts	Private
Nicole	Honors	Vermont	Private
Zack	Traditional	Massachusetts	Public
Brittany	Compass	Massachusetts	Public
Emma	Traditional	Massachusetts	Public
Patrick	Honors	Massachusetts	Public
Elizabeth	Honors	Maine	Public
Sarah	Compass	Massachusetts	Public



## Appendix B

1. How did your first semester at college go?
2. Did you attend a public or private high school?
  - 2a. What academic preparation did you receive for college at your high school?
3. Describe how writing was or wasn't a part of your high school academic preparation.
4. If you could tell your high school English teacher one thing that would have helped you better prepare for writing in college, what would it be?
5. Tell me about how prepared you felt you were for writing at the college level when you first arrived at college.
6. Tell me about how prepared you feel you are for writing at the college level after taking the First-Year Writing course; have you noticed any significant changes?
7. If you could tell your First-Year Writing professor one thing they could do better to help your transition to writing in college, what would it be?
8. What do you find to be writing skills that are easier for you?
9. What do you find to be writing skills that are challenging for you?
10. What kind of writer are you now? What areas would you like to develop as a writer in the future?
11. Is there anything else I didn't ask about your college writing preparation that you would like to tell me about?

## Appendix C – Page 1



### First-Year Writing Requirement Course Syllabus Planning Sheet

*The purpose of this planning sheet is to aid faculty and GSIs preparing syllabi for First-Year Writing Requirement (FYWR) courses (and administrators approving these syllabi) to insure a common experience for students across the university taking these courses through the inclusion of course features that support the FYWR guidelines approved by the College of LS&A and overseen by the Sweetland Center for Writing.*

✓	<p><b>Successful First-Year Writing Requirement courses incorporate the following features, which should be clearly indicated in course syllabi. They will:</b></p>
	<p><b>Address the shared learning goals common to all FYWR courses.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The course description should make it clear that this is a FYWR course and writing instruction is its primary focus.</li> <li>▪ The syllabus should speak directly to the FYWR course goals in some way. (See <a href="http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/writingrequirements/firstyearwritingrequirement">http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/writingrequirements/firstyearwritingrequirement</a> for FYWR course guidelines and learning goals.)</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Assign a substantial amount of polished writing.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Course assignments should add up to 25-30 pages (or the new media equivalent) of polished prose over the course of the semester. “Polished prose” is print or multimodal text that has been thoroughly revised and edited.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Connect the writing placement process to classroom instruction.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Students’ Directed Self-Placement (DSP) essays should be incorporated into coursework in some way, which is indicated on the syllabus. (See <a href="http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/forinstructors/dspinstructorresources">http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/forinstructors/dspinstructorresources</a> for suggested approaches.)</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Provide sequenced opportunities to write in a variety of genres.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ These genres should include, but need not be limited to, evidence-based argument.</li> <li>▪ These writing assignments should build on each other throughout the term.</li> <li>▪ Instructors are encouraged to include new media assignments in FYWR courses.</li> <li>▪ Writing assignment prompts should be included in the syllabus itself.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Require multiple drafts for at least 50% of writing assignments.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Revision should be required and explicitly built into the structure of the course.</li> <li>▪ The revision process should include structured opportunities for feedback (see below).</li> <li>▪ The syllabus should indicate the types of feedback students can expect on their writing and when they will receive it.</li> </ul>

## Appendix C – Page 2

<i>FYWR Course Syllabus Planning Sheet</i>		2
	<p><b>Provide at least three structured opportunities for students to receive feedback on their writing-in-progress. These opportunities could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Peer review or workshopping sessions.</li> <li>▪ Written or recorded feedback from the instructor or GSI.</li> <li>▪ Individual student conferences with the instructor or GSI.</li> </ul>	
	<p><b>Ask students to reflect on their own writing and its connections with the genres in which they write. Such reflection could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Written or verbal reflection at various stages in the drafting and revising process.</li> <li>▪ Written or verbal reflection as part of peer review or workshopping.</li> <li>▪ Written or verbal reflection on assigned and in-class readings.</li> </ul>	
	<p><b>Communicate course expectations regarding participation.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The criteria for participation and how it will be evaluated should be made clear to students.</li> <li>▪ Participation should count for no more than 20% of the course grade, and preferably less.</li> </ul>	
	<p><b>Familiarize students with resources available to support their writing at the University of Michigan. These resources include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Sweetland Center for Writing's workshop and peer tutoring services. (See <a href="http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/">http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/</a> for information.)</li> <li>▪ Sweetland's web-based writing resources for students.</li> <li>▪ Any department-specific writing resources.</li> <li>▪ Relevant library services, including research and technology support.</li> </ul>	

Source:

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/UMICH/sweetland/Home/Writing%20Requirements/First-Year%20Writing%20Requirement/FYWR%20Course%20Syllabus%20Planning%20Sheet.pdf>