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The Will to Write: An Assessment of the Perceptions of Writing Readiness and Success of First-Generation Students

Samantha C. Bruno
Merrimack College, brunos@merrimack.edu

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Abstract

Writing is one of the most influential means of communication utilized in all disciplines across the world. This pragmatic, qualitative study sought to explore students' perceptions of writing preparedness and success, as well as first-generation students' transition into college writing. Seven first-generation college students at a small, private, four-year institution located in Massachusetts were interviewed. The findings of this study indicated that for this sample, the transition into college writing was marked by a drastic change in expectations at the postsecondary level. Moreover, students faced challenges regarding writing style, frequency, and research. In order to successfully master college writing, students pursued additional support, including professorial support and writing and research center services. Recommendations for practice include writing introductory courses be restructured, and diagnostic assessment of students be completed in order to appropriately place them. Moreover, higher education institutions should encourage writing through co-curricular activities. Lastly, partnerships between faculty, writing support specialists, and secondary level instructors should be established.

Introduction

Scope of Problem

Currently, first-generation students (hereafter, FGS), commonly defined as those "whose parents' highest level of education is a high school diploma or less" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998, p.7) are one of the fastest growing underrepresented populations within American higher education (Jenhangir, 2010 as cited in Unverferth, Talbert-Johnson, & Bogard, 2012). This is exemplified by the fact that approximately 33% of all domestic students between the ages of 5-17 identify as first-generation students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012 as cited in Balemian & Feng, 2013). Moreover, it is expected that this figure will continue to rise as Millenials, also known as "those born in 1982 and approximately the 20 years thereafter" (Bump, 2014, p.3) continue to matriculate into higher education. While first-generation students are expanding their presence in the landscape of higher education, they continue to face more barriers than their non-first-generation counterparts, as research has proven that first-generation students often arrive on campuses unprepared for the rigor of postsecondary education (Conley, 2007/2008).

Strayhorn (2006) noted that "traditional students have higher initial college graduation rates and face fewer perceived difficulties than do FGS" (as cited in Unverferth et al., 2012, p.239). Among those perceived difficulties is academic preparation, also referred to as college preparation and readiness. College readiness is defined as "the degree to which previous educational and personal experiences have equipped students for the expectations and demands they will encounter in college" (Conley, 2008, p.3). Unverferth and her colleagues (2012) asserted that first-generation students lag in curricular, instructional and out of class experiences.

This gap in academic achievement is even more apparent in writing assignments and relates back to the college preparation that first-generation students receive.

This discrepancy in academic preparation and writing readiness greatly influences the success of first-generation college students. Often times, students are unprepared for the type of writing that they are required to do, as well as the length, and the depth of the assignment (Beil & Knight, 2007). Moreover, they often struggle with the frequency of writing and the formatting of the various types of papers in postsecondary courses (Beil & Knight, 2007). This is frequently noted as a result of the incompatibility between the preparation in secondary education and the expectations in postsecondary writing (Beil & Knight, 2007; Fanetti et al., 2010).

The purpose of this study was to assess the writing preparedness of first-generation students at a small, private, four-year institution. This study employed qualitative methods and a pragmatic framework. I interviewed seven first-generation students to understand their high school writing experiences, as well as their experiences with college level writing, and their perceptions of their writing. Furthermore, I also wanted to understand how students perceived the transition from secondary to postsecondary writing, and what they believed qualified as good writing. My objective was to learn more about the writing process for first-generation college students so that academic support professionals and writing instructors would be better prepared when working with this population. Moreover, I anticipated that I would be able to construct recommendations including programmatic interventions to better support them. Ultimately, I was able to not only recommend programmatic interventions, but also curriculum modifications, which will improve the efficacy and overall writing success of this particular population.

Literature Review

College Readiness and Academic Success

In order to succeed in postsecondary education, students must arrive at their institution with a specific skillset that will contribute to their academic success. Regardless of a student's generational status, there are certain abilities that are required for postsecondary achievement. Much of the literature has explored the concept of college readiness, often interchanged with college preparedness, to evaluate what gaps are lacking between secondary and postsecondary education. Seeking to explore the nature of college readiness from the perspective of first-generation students, Byrd and Macdonald (2005) interviewed eight non-traditional first-generation students over the age of 25 from a small urban university liberal arts program. The researchers conducted partially structured interviews to inquire about the participants' backgrounds and experiences as college students. Moreover, they sought to understand what it meant to be ready for college, and the tools needed to sustain success throughout their undergraduate career. Following the interviews, participants were invited to review the researchers' notes and the audio recordings of their interviews, which strengthened the data and enabled the researchers to discover trends.

Ten themes emerged from the data and were organized into three categories: skills and abilities perceived as important for college readiness, background factors and life experiences that contribute to college readiness, and nontraditional students' self-concept. In terms of college readiness skills and abilities, participants indicated that they perceived that academic skills, including refined skills in reading, writing, math, technology, and communication were required. They also noted that time management, goal focused orientation and self-advocacy were

necessary. Background factors such as family experiences and familial expectations, career influences, financial concerns, and college preparation in high school contributed to their readiness. Lastly, non-traditional students' self-identity was contingent upon their self-concept and the college system, including college culture and standards that influenced their readiness and success.

In addition to the themes that emerged in Byrd and MacDonald's (2005) research as predictors for college readiness, the literature also suggested a variety of ways that high schools can better prepare all prospective college students for the transition from secondary to postsecondary courses, specifically in writing. As mentioned previously, Conley (2007) 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" (p.4). He further discussed how one of the most significant issues in higher education is retention and explained how college readiness is directly linked to it. Knapp, Kelly-Reid and Whitmore (2006) reported that of those who started college in 1998, only 35% earned a bachelor's degree in four years, and only 56% graduated within six years (as cited in Conley, 2007).

Conley (2007) asserted that part of the issue with retention is that students are not academically prepared for college courses. Many college professors expect students to make inferences, interpret and analyze data, make arguments utilizing supportive evidence, and solve complex problems; they also expect students to work at a faster pace and take responsibility for their learning (National Research Council, 2002 & Standards for Success, 2003 as cited in Conley, 2007). On the other hand, several observational studies found that high school

assignments often require students to perform prescribed tasks that lack cognitive engagement. Conley (2007) asserted that for high school students, "learning has been reduced to a form of sleepwalking, requiring no deep mastery or understanding" (p.2), which is quite contrary to effective pedagogy.

Conley (2007) continued by stating that in order to prepare students for the transition into college, high schools should align secondary and postsecondary curriculum. High school instructors should also be held accountable for developing high quality syllabi that illustrate the developmental process. Above all, they should add missing content to high school courses (Conley, 2007). Language Arts courses should work on developing extensive vocabulary sets and word analysis skills, which will help foster writing development. Furthermore, students should be expected to write across all subjects, and write in a variety of styles. This will prepare students for the multitude of writing assignments they will face in college (Conley, 2007).

While Conley initially explored the concept of college readiness as it pertains to secondary education, he later explored the facets of college readiness that ultimately lead to college student success. Some of the fundamental differences that exist between secondary and postsecondary education are that professors teach at a faster pace and expect their students to infer, interpret and analyze data, as well as solve complex problems and think critically (National Research Council, 2002 & Standards for Success, 2003 as cited in Conley 2007). Conley (2008) also noted that in college, students are often expected to write multiple papers at a time, often times in succession; whereas, in high school, students might have only written one or two research papers over a long period of time. Conley claimed that in order for students to adjust to these differences, they must master sets of academic self-management skills, cognitive strategies,

and general academic knowledge. Furthermore, Conley (2008) drew attention to similar cognitive strategies as Byrd and Macdonald (2005), noting that well prepared students have foundational knowledge and abilities in problem solving, conducting research, constructing strong arguments, analyzing information, and accuracy in performing certain tasks.

Moreover, in relation to academic knowledge and skills, Conley (2008) noted that students should have comprehensive skills in six subject areas, including Math, English, Science, Arts, World Languages, and Social Studies. Furthermore, in order to be well prepared, students should demonstrate self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-control. They should have good time management, task prioritization and note taking skills, as well as study skills. Lastly, students should have contextual information of the institution and the structure of higher education. This is often difficult for students who come from marginalized backgrounds, specifically first-generation students, because this information is unequally distributed, and is seldom taught in lower performing school districts (Conley, 2008).

Academic Success and First Generation Students

While Conley (2007/2008) analyzed the literature to assess what factors contribute to college readiness and academic success, Reid and Moore (2008) employed qualitative methods on a small sample to assess the perceptions and attitudes that first-generation students have of their preparation for postsecondary education. The researchers purposefully sampled 13 African American and immigrant first-generation students who were alumni of an urban high school located in the Midwest, and who were moderately or high achieving. Reid and Moore (2008) administered biographical questionnaires in order to gather demographic information, and later utilized semi-structured interviews to gather data. After conducting their interviews, Reid and

Moore (2008) coded their biographical data as well as the information collected from the interviews. The participants named two themes, noting that English courses contributed to their success in college, as they not only challenged them, but also helped them develop writing skills. Moreover, they noted that AP courses (especially English) helped prepare them for the level of work they would face. Lastly, they noted that support from mentors, high school teachers and guidance counselors, paired with college preparation programs contributed to their academic success in college. In regards to the skills that they felt were subpar, three students felt unprepared for the rigor of the courses. Moreover, they felt unprepared for Math and Science courses as compared to their English courses. The only exception was that students that took ESL classes felt that they had inadequate writing skills, which were impacting their college success. Lastly, most participants reported that they were not equipped with the study skills and time management skills that are needed to succeed in postsecondary work.

In contrast to Reid and Moore's (2008) qualitative study, Atherton (2014) employed mixed-methods to focus on the academic preparedness, both subjectively and objectively, of first-generation college students in comparison to their non-first-generation counterparts. Atherton (2014) evaluated conventional measures of academic preparedness including standardized test scores and grade point averages, as well as subjective self-ratings of first-generation college students and their peers. The sample consisted of 6,280 first year students from a public four-year institution in Southern California. Out of the 6,280 participants, 39% identified as first-generation students, 60.1% identified as female, and approximately 51% identified as White.

Data gathered independent of students input included SAT Math and Verbal Scores as well as high school GPAs. To gather the subjective data, the researcher asked students to rate their mathematic and writing abilities, as well as overall academic abilities. The results indicated that close to half of the students maintained a B+ grade point average or higher in high school. However, only 25.4% ranked themselves in the top 10% for academic ability, and 16.7% ranked themselves in the top 10% for writing ability versus 19.2% whom self-ranked in the top 10% for math. The regression analyses showed that participants whose parents had some postsecondary experience were significantly more likely to be more academically prepared. Furthermore, analyses of GPAs depicted that students with two college graduate parents were 20% more likely to have a B+ or better high school GPA than first-generation students. Despite this statistical evidence, data from three regression analyses did not indicate that being of first-generation status correlated with low self-reported ratings of math, writing and general academic ability. Atherton (2014) suggested that student affairs practitioners must understand that testing scores are not thorough measurements of college preparedness. Moreover, Atherton (2014) recommended that practitioners focus on the skills that lead to academic success and college preparedness.

While Reid and Moore (2008) discovered that first-generation students' perceptions of their preparedness was positive, the literature (Conley, 2007/2008 & Atherton, 2014) demonstrated a consistent gap between the preparation that occurs at the secondary level and the expectations that professors have at the postsecondary level. Moreover, Atherton (2014) noted that the gap that exists only expands for students whose parents did not have any experience in a postsecondary setting. Furthermore, the literature revealed that students are required to master cognitive skills, including critical thinking, analysis, the ability to infer and problem solve, while

also mastering practical skills such as time management, if they want to succeed (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Conley, 2007/2008; Reid & Moore, 2008).

Self-Efficacy and Academic Success

As noted by Conley (2007/2008) and Atherton (2014), college preparedness is a predictor of academic success; moreover, Atherton (2014) alluded that aside from preparedness, the concept of self-efficacy serves as a predictor of academic success, as noted by the results of the subjective part of his study. Self-efficacy is defined "as an individual's belief in his or her ability to perform a specific task" (Bandura, 1997 as cited in Elliott, 2014, p.29). A variety of studies have been conducted to further understand the role that self-efficacy has on college students' academic success. Based on the premise of social cognitive theory, which states that success is dependent on behaviors, personal factors, and environmental cognitions (Bandura, 1986, 1997 as cited in Mattern & Shaw, 2010), Mattern and Shaw (2010) examined the relationship of academic self-efficacy with other academic outcomes. They utilized coursework, data on grades, as well as retention data of 107,453 first-year, first-time students from 110 American colleges and universities. The researchers collected demographic information, including gender, race/ethnicity, and the participants' primary language. They also gathered a self-estimate of math ability and writing ability based on students assessing how well they are in each subject compared to others in their age group.

Lastly, Mattern and Shaw (2010) considered the participants' degree goals. The findings demonstrated that 33.5% believed they were in the highest 10% of math ability, and only 1.2% believed they were below average. Students in the top 10% were more likely to be Asian American, and white males. In relation to writing ability, the researchers noted the majority of

the students felt they were above average, with 29.4% indicating they fell into the top 10% and 44.7% believing they were above average. Interestingly, "for the highest 10% in writing ability, there were smaller percentages of African American, Asian, and Hispanic students, as well as students whose best language was not English" (Mattern & Shaw, 2010 p.675). These findings indicate that those from marginalized populations have lower self-efficacy beliefs in relation to writing, which impacts performance.

Similar to Mattern and Shaw (2010), Elliott (2014) utilized quantitative methods to examine the relationship between first-generation students' academic self-efficacy beliefs and their academic adjustment and success in college. The data were gathered from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at UCLA, which administers The Freshman Survey, a survey that provides baseline data for longitudinal assessment. The sample for this study consisted of 2,358 students from 25 private institutions located in 14 states. Approximately half of the sample (46%) self-identified as first-generation and 67% self-identified as female. The assessment measured demographic characteristics and first-generation status. It also assessed the institutional selectivity, which was based on SAT scores and ranked institutions as less selective, selective, and highly selective designations. Lastly, it evaluated students' perceptions and beliefs about their academic ability in order to assess their academic self-efficacy, as well as the students' GPA and perceptions of academic adjustment. The analyses yielded a variety of results, including that both self-efficacy and first-generation status were significantly related to grade point average, and students with high academic self-efficacy beliefs earned higher GPAs. However, first-generation status was negatively related to GPA. Moreover, even when first-generation students experienced increases in their academic self-efficacy perceptions over their

freshman year, they still had lower GPAs than their peers. Elliott (2014) also found no significant difference between first-generation students and their non-first-generation counterparts in relation to their academic adjustment, which is defined as how successfully they transition into college level courses.

In addition to analyzing the role that self-efficacy has in relation to academic success, research has also been conducted to assess how intrinsic motivation can increase self-efficacy as well. In her review of the literature, Petty (2014) explored the motivational factors that contribute to first-generation students' academic success. She noted that according to Engle and Tinto (2008), 4.5 million first-generation students have enrolled in American postsecondary institutions in the past decade; unfortunately, of that 4.5 million, 43% left without obtaining a degree. While more first-generation students are matriculating into higher education than in the past, they continue to face barriers that limit their retention. Some of these barriers include that they are older, have families, often times come from a low socioeconomic background, and are working, which means they are less likely to be enrolled full time. In order to reduce the obstacles that this population faces, Petty (2014) asserted that Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs could explain this, which asserts that people have esteem and self-actualization needs. It is crucial that first-generation students have "self-actualization in academics, socially and culturally as they transition into college" (p. 261).

Furthermore, self-actualization contributes to intrinsic development, which motivates first-generation students to academically integrate into higher education. Moreover, as students develop intrinsic motivation, they experience an increase in self-confidence and self-worth, which in turn increases their belief in their abilities and their involvement, both academically and

socially (McClelland, 2001 as cited in Petty, 2014). The literature clearly demonstrated that a student's belief in their abilities, specifically first-generation students, is a contributing factor to success at the college level. However, it does denote a generational gap, as even when first-generation students do feel confident, they are still actually lagging behind their non-first-generation peers (Elliott, 2012). Moreover, it also demonstrates that certain content areas, specifically writing, can be problematic for some marginalized students, as they often feel less confident in that area (Elliott first (alpha order). Mattern & Shaw, 2008; Elliot, 2012).

Contributing Factors to Postsecondary Writing Preparedness

Self-efficacy and college writing. It is overwhelmingly evident that there is a gap between secondary preparation and postsecondary expectations, and that gap is even more so apparent in writing. Additionally, it is important to note that similar to overall academic success, both college preparation and self-efficacy in writing contribute to a student's ability to successfully write at a high level. Pajares (2003) explored the principles of Bandura's (1986) self-efficacy theory in relation to writing self-perceptions. According to Pajares (2003), Bandura (1986) suggested that people's self-perceptions and beliefs about their capabilities often serve as predictors of how they actually perform. Therefore, the data collected on college undergraduates has typically demonstrated that writing self-efficacy beliefs and writing performance are connected. Moreover, the results have also found correlations between self-efficacy in writing and writing anxiety, grade goals, processing abilities, and the students' expected outcomes (McCarthy, Meier, Rinderer, 1985; Meier, McCarthy & Schmeck, 1984; Shell, Murphy, Bruning, 1989 as cited in Pajares, 2003). In order to increase students' mastery experience and self-efficacy, professors should provide students with writing strategies, and regular feedback, as

studies show that the two linked together improve writing competence and confidence (Schunk & Swartz, 1993, as cited in Pajares 2003).

According to the preexisting literature, female students often outperform their male counterparts on written assignments; however, both males and females often report equal writing self-efficacy (Pajares & Valiante, 1999 as cited in Pajares, 2003). In regards to race and ethnicity, Pajares and Johnson (1996) found that the writing self-efficacy of Hispanic students was significantly lower than their White peers. Furthermore, they discovered that Hispanic students often reported more anxiety about their writing than their peers as well.

While Pajares (2003) explored previously conducted studies on self-efficacy as it pertains to writing, Martinez, Kock and Cass (2011) randomly sampled and surveyed 127 students at a small public institution in Texas to further understand writing self-efficacy and their attitudes towards writing. The students were surveyed twice; once at the beginning of the semester and 10 weeks into a course that involved writing in order to assess if their feelings changed. The survey collected demographic information and students' attitudes and beliefs towards leisurely writing, writing anxiety, and writing self-efficacy. The survey also asked participants to identify how often they write in their classes, and how often they visited the school's writing center. Writing anxiety, leisure writing, and writing self-efficacy were all assessed on 5-point Likert-scales. Martinez et al. (2011) discovered that GPA has a significant negative relationship with leisurely writing enjoyment, signifying that the higher the GPA, the less the student enjoys writing for fun. Similarly, the analysis revealed that higher the GPA, the less likely it is that a student would suffer from writing anxiety.

Gender did not have a significant relationship with leisure writing, but it did with anxiety; the findings suggested that women experience more writing anxiety than males. Furthermore, students with higher levels of writing anxiety expressed low self-efficacy in their writing, compared to those who did not suffer from writing anxiety. The results also indicated that those who enjoyed leisurely writing expressed higher levels of self-efficacy in their writing; however, students with high GPAs were less inclined to spend time writing leisurely, as opposed to their counterparts with low GPAs.

College writing preparedness. It is evident that college students maintain specific beliefs in regards to writing and that those beliefs influence their success. However, self-beliefs are not the only factors that influence student success in writing; one of the main predictors of student success in writing is the preparation that they received in high school and how that preparation aligns with college expectations. Beil and Knight (2007) examined students' high school writing experiences in order to further understand the gap that exists between high school and college writing. The researchers distributed a survey to 2400 first year students at George Washington University. The survey was designed to cover five aspects of high school writing preparation. Participants were asked about the various types of writing assignments they were given, their writing process and the frequency at which they received feedback, their experience with utilizing different types of resources, and the frequency, format, and length of the papers that were assigned.

The results indicated that out of ten types of writing assignments, students were only required to write literary analyses, analytical essays, and lab reports on a monthly basis, and less than half of the participants had been assigned a research paper on a monthly basis. Students

were most frequently asked to provide their opinions and summarize and synthesize, which is in stark contrast to the critical type of writing that is expected in college. In terms of resources utilized, approximately one third of the participants used scholarly articles with frequency. Lastly, in regards to frequency, approximately 75% of the participants estimated that five-paragraph essays were assigned often or very often and that most of their assignments were three pages or less; thus, indicating that students are not prepared to write longer papers, which are typically required in college (Beil & Knight, 2007).

While Beil and Knight (2007) surveyed a large sample of first year students to understand the gap that exists between secondary and college writing, Fanetti et al. (2011) interviewed first-year writing instructors, as well as middle school and secondary school teachers to gain another perspective. The researchers interviewed first-year writing instructors from a large metropolitan university, all of whom had unique teaching styles, philosophies, and specializations. They also interviewed middle school and secondary teachers from the surrounding neighborhoods of the university, selecting demographic areas from which the university's population derived from. All of the participants were asked the same questions, which were modified to the education level at which they taught. Instructors at the secondary level were asked questions about learning outcomes, the effects of standardized testing, and what material was in their curriculum. First-year writing instructors were asked similar questions, but in addition they were asked about their expectations for the students, their pedagogical approach, as well as common obstacles that their students typically face. Lastly, they were asked whether their expectations are typically met.

Upon the completion of the interviews, results indicated that standardized assessments and the high school model aligned with those assessments have left students underprepared for

college writing. The data showed that secondary instructors are constrained to teach to the test, and their efforts to teach writing are often corrective rather than instructive; thus leaving students with the notion that writing is formulaic and systematic, rather than an evolving process. University instructors indicated that their expectations have dropped over the years, and that they often have to help their students unlearn the rules that led them to success in high school. The findings also noted that university instructors' expectations for student abilities and preparation varied somewhat, but they all assumed that "most of their students would enter English 101 with a clear and fixed understanding of writing as a defined and particular skill intended to produce a defined and particular product" (Fanetti et al., 2011, p.81).

Evidently, the transition from secondary education to postsecondary education can be difficult for many students. This is especially true for first-generation students who often lack cultural and social capital. Moreover, the transition from secondary to postsecondary writing can be all the more challenging because the expectations of professors are not aligned with the preparation the students received (Beil & Knight, 2007; Fanetti et al., 2011). Additionally, many students arrive on campuses with anxiety about writing, and their self-perceptions and self-efficacy can have an effect on their academic outcomes, specifically in writing (Pajares, 2003 & Martinez et al., 2011). Therefore, the primary purpose of this study was to assess first-generation students' beliefs about their academic writing, and the preparation they received prior to entering college in order to better understand how to remediate the gap that currently exists.

Methodology

In order to conduct this research, I utilized the pragmatic paradigm to guide my project. I selected this paradigm in part because "the ethical goal of research is to gain knowledge in the

pursuit of desired ends" (Morgan, 2007 as cited in Mertens, 2015, p.37). As the primary researcher, it was my hope that I would gain an understanding of what contributed or deterred from the writing preparedness of first-generation college students. Moreover, I was hopeful that the data that I collected would lend itself towards the creation of recommendations that included programming or curriculum modifications to further support this particular population. Furthermore, pragmatic research generally takes place in a community; therefore, the researcher needs to interact with the community members to understand and address the issue at hand (Mertens, 2015).

Typically, pragmatists employ mixed methods in order to understand complex realities through multiple methods. However, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) asserted, "pragmatism allows the researchers to choose the methods that work best for answering their research question" (as cited in Mertens, 2015, p.38). With that being said, I chose to employ qualitative methods in order to further understand the perceptions of writing-readiness and success of first-generation college students.

I conducted my research at a small, private, four-year institution located in Massachusetts during the spring semester of 2016. The population that I initially sought to study was first-generation college students who were enrolled in First Year Experience. I contacted the Assistant Director of First Year Experience for permission to recruit and was granted access into one of four courses, which was comprised of traditional and transfer students. In order to recruit participants, I visited class to inform them about my study and collect contact information. This allowed me to establish rapport with the sample immediately, which was crucial to my study. After explaining the purpose of the research, six out of the eighteen students were interested, but

only two were first-generation students. I immediately contacted the students via email, and provided them with project information, and asked if they were still interested. After scheduling and interviewing the two First Year Experience, first-generation students, they referred me to others who were first-generation college students, who subsequently referred me to more first-generation students.

Ultimately, I utilized a snowball sampling technique, and was able to interview seven first-generation undergraduate students. Each interview lasted between 20-30 minutes, and was conducted in a private room located on campus. Prior to the beginning of the interview, the participants were informed that there were no inherent risks, and that their interview would be recorded and transcribed but complete confidentiality would be maintained. Afterwards, they were given time to read and sign the consent form. I provided the participants with refreshments throughout the interview process, in order to ensure that they felt comfortable and to show my gratitude for their willingness to participate. Each interview was then transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed using coding patterns to identify common themes (Saldaña, 2015).

The participants were asked a series of questions relating to their writing experiences in high school, their experiences thus far in college, and how those experiences are similar or different. The first series of questions primarily focused on their high school preparation, in order to understand what typical assignments looked like at the secondary level and how that might have changed. The second set of questions focused on their perceptions of their writing. My objective was to understand how they judge their writing, what factors contribute to their judgment, what their writing process looks like and also what areas they think they excel on and

need additional support with. The last set of questions focused on college level writing and their experiences thus far. (See Appendix A for a copy of the interview protocol).

After completing the seven interviews and transcribing them, I realized that some of the data were not in alignment with typical first-generation students' experiences. I felt that in order to fully understand my sample, I needed to collect demographic information, and grade point averages. After contacting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and completing a continuing review form, I was given permission to re-contact the seven participants to anonymously collect demographic information. I utilized Google forms to send out a brief questionnaire, inquiring about demographical information. (See Appendix B for demographic questionnaire).

Sample Demographics

The sample for this study consisted of seven first-generation college students: two first year students, a sophomore, two juniors, and two seniors. Participants reported a diverse range of majors, including Information Technology, Exercise Science, Psychology, Biochemistry, Environmental Studies & Sustainability and Criminology. Three of the participants reported attending private, religiously affiliated high schools in the region. Two participants attended regional high schools. One participant attended a public high school, which has been nationally recognized for its high performance, and one participant attended a local public high school. Participants self-reported their cumulative high school grade point average (GPA), which ranged from 3.2-4.0. Lastly, participants also self-reported their current, cumulative grade point average (GPA), which ranged from 2.5-3.79.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	HS Type	HS GPA	College Major	College GPA
Jenna	public	3.6	Criminology	3.75
Christina	public	3.4	Psychology	3.51
Melissa	Private	4.0	Biochemistry	3.79
Mary	Regional	3.94	Psychology	3.5
Victoria	Private	3.7	Environmental Studies & Sustainability	2.5
Kate	Private	3.2	Exercise Science	3.0
Rose	Regional	3.4	Information Technology	3.25

Findings

After transcribing and coding the data, the findings yielded four themes: writing abilities and self-efficacy, writing at the secondary level, writing perceptions and practices, and writing at the postsecondary level.

Writing Abilities and Self-Efficacy

One concept that was explored throughout this study was the connection between the participants' writing self-efficacy and their grades. Interestingly, many students were hesitant to label themselves strong writers, and often used terms such as okay and decent when referring to themselves as writers. As noted by Mattern and Shaw (2010), first-generation students and other students from marginalized backgrounds often have lower self-efficacy beliefs in relation to writing. However, while students in this study were hesitant to utilize positive terms to describe themselves as a writer, the majority noted that their grades in writing intensive courses or courses

that are heavily writing based, are in fact high, which contradicts Mattern and Shaw's (2010) finding that lower self-efficacy beliefs impact performance. Mary discussed how she seeks additional support yet feels satisfied with her writing, commenting that:

> I'm okay. I've heard from my professors that I write really well, but I also know that I do need to go to the Writing Center and have someone else check it. But overall, I'm happy with my grades and what I'm doing.

The concept of supplemental support arose frequently, as Kate described how English is not her native language, so she often seeks extra help from her professors. She stated:

> I would say I'm good at organizing things but I'm not too great at grammar or sentence structure...I think my grades are higher than my ability is. I think my ability is in the middle. I do well in my science courses but I always have feedback on how to make my reports clearer, but the content is there so that is why I do good. I also rely on my professors to help explain what needs to be better, and help me get to that point.

According to Elliott (2014), self-efficacy and first-generation status were significantly related to grade point average, signifying that students with academic self-efficacy beliefs maintained higher grade point averages. It is interesting to note that in this study, several students commented that their grades are higher than their perceived ability, which signifies that first-generation students do in fact have lower self-efficacy beliefs, yet, in this case they still perceive and report that their academic performance is strong.

In addition to exploring students' self-perceptions of their writing and their grades, I also sought to explore how they perceive their abilities as they compare to their peers. When drawing upon this comparison, students described themselves as being in one of three categories: being lower than their peers, average/in line with their peers, or stronger than their peers. Rose, a student who self-identified as lower than her peers said:

> Sometimes I want to say lower just because I don't have the parent that used to sit with me that went to college and knew what they were doing. So I always had to figure out everything else for myself. And I had to reach out, so once I got here, I went to the writing center. I feel like it was way harder for me to improve on my writing than for my peers who have doctors as parents and I'm over [here] like "yeah my mom is an accountant and my dad does construction".

Astoundingly, this was the only student who drew upon her first-generation status and described it as a deficit to her learning. As noted by Petty (2014), even when first-generation students do maintain high self-efficacy beliefs, they still perceive themselves to be lagging behind their non-first generation peers.

On the other hand, Melissa, a student who described herself as average, did not mention her first-generation status, but noted that being an ESL student has impacted her. She stated:

> [My academic performance is] about average. I think that in my major, I spend a lot of time in the department around my professors and asking questions so I think I know the content better and can write about that. But my friends who are from here (US) know the language better so they can organize and talk better but mine is more fluent in the sciences.

Lastly, Christina, a student who described herself as more mature, attributed this to her love of literature and remarked:

> I would say that it's more mature than most but I definitely can improve. I spent my whole life reading and learning new words. I think that vocabulary and terms really come into play when you write and can make a paper sound really poetic and meaningful- and I think I do that.

It is fascinating to note that a student who described herself as lower in academic ability than her peers also used literature as the reasoning, saying, and "I think I should read more to learn from other people's style and incorporate more of theirs into my writing." Essentially, these

students are referring to imposter syndrome, which is a feeling of fakeness and that they are not performing well, despite evidence of high achievement (Richards, 2015).

Writing at the Secondary Level

Institutional type and course load. When speaking about their high school experiences, participants commonly referred to the type of high school they attended, the quality of the course load that they were required to take, as well as their experiences with the curriculum. Most of the participants reported that they attended a public high school; however, a few did in fact note that they attended private high schools. While the institutional type varied, most participants reported that regardless, the education that they received was rigorous. This is unusual, as Reid & Moore (2008) noted that first-generation students are often disadvantaged when it comes to postsecondary preparation at the k-12 level. Despite this, Christina shared:

> I went to a school that was in a suburban town; it actually is one of the best right now because of their MCAS scores. I think it's called a blue ribbon school because it is so high performing and intense.

In addition to institutional type, several students also discussed the required course load for matriculation. Participants noted that most of their courses were college preparatory and honors level courses. Within those levels, participants reported taking a variety of courses as noted by Jenna, who stated:

> The courses I took were called C1 courses so that was just your average course and then honors courses...I took courses like Journalism, Classic English Literature, Psychology, World History, Latin, Spanish, Forensics and different math courses too.

While discussing the various courses at the secondary level, most participants also spoke of their experiences within their courses. Some students spoke of the level of instruction and

expectations, as Christina noted, “typically they’d ask for a 5 paragraph essay. So introductory paragraph with a thesis statement, three supporting arguments for that thesis statement and a conclusion...It helped me organize my thoughts a lot”. As noted by Beil and Knight (2007), five paragraph essays are assigned quite often, which makes them the norm at the secondary level. However, while some signified that this was the norm, others reported that their course load prepared them for writing in various styles, as Jenna remarked:

> For Journalism, English Literature, American Fiction, those were all primarily essays. Obviously for Journalism it was a little modified so we would write articles about the high school...it would mirror the local newspaper… In the other courses like psychology or foreign language we would have different expectations. So for Latin it was never a paper, but more language based so write a sentence or learn the roots. For Psychology, it was more research based.

Interestingly, this student's experience is contrary to most students’ experiences at the secondary level, as Beil and Knight (2007) asserted that students often lack experience with various writing styles and were often asked to summarize, synthesize and provide their opinions. As asserted by Jenna, her experience with writing in different contexts and styles allowed her to gain mastery experiences (Mattern & Shaw, 2010), which may have contributed to her arrival at college with greater confidence than her peers.

Secondary vs. postsecondary writing. In this study, most participants were able to discuss their perceived differences between secondary and postsecondary writing. Several participants spoke candidly on their perceptions of secondary level writing and noted that assignments were often short in length and that they were provided with guidelines and a concrete structure. Victoria shared, “It was usually 5 paragraph essays and journal entries. If we did have bigger papers, they were always laid out with prompts and guides so it wasn’t hard.”

This is similar to what Conley (2007) discussed when he noted that high school assignments often require students to perform prescribed tasks that often lack cognitive engagement.

On the contrary, a few students reported that while they often were assigned shorter papers, they were required to do some research but that the requirements and the expectation for quality was drastically different than what is expected at the college level. Mary commented:

> In psych it was like a 10 page paper in APA format...Like we weren't supposed to use Wikipedia for research but we used it as an academic resource, whereas now, it is way stricter and all the guidelines are enforced and you're held to a higher standard.

While the quality and requirements at the postsecondary level changed, participants noted several more discrepancies between secondary and postsecondary writing. Among those discrepancies were the decrease in instructions provided by professors, as well as the increase in length, research, and organization. Victoria stated:

> I just had a project that was 10-12 pages long and I never had something like that when I was in high school. When I was in high school, it was mostly one page. So definitely the length and the fact that in college it's mostly research. Right now when I hear MLA and APA, I'm like sure! But in high school I was like "what? I don't know what you're talking about".

This concept is interesting as it notes that not only has the length increased dramatically, as Victoria noted a nine to eleven page increase, but the caliber of research and formatting style has escalated and taken precedence. Beil and Knight (2007) noted that there is a substantial difference between secondary and postsecondary work, as most high school students are rarely asked to do research in assignments, and less than one third utilize scholarly articles with frequency.

Finally, a few participants discussed the principle of writing for a specific discipline, and how they never broached this subject throughout their time in high school. The participants noted

that they had become accustomed to a specific format of writing, and once they arrived at college, that format no longer was relevant. Kate described:

> At my high school, everything followed the general format. It was usually 5 paragraph essays and journal entries...But here, I had to learn more about writing and writing in different disciplines. I had to forget what I knew. I had to learn how to write for Health Sciences and that was really hard.

This is a recurring theme in the literature, as Fanetti et al. (2011) noted that most First Year Writing instructors have to spend time helping students unlearn the rules and formats that have been engrained in their minds for years. In addition to unlearning these rules, another participant commented on how the professors grading and worries have shifted. Melissa stated, "I just mainly do lab reports and all the other classes are electives so they aren't focusing on specifics like they did in high school. They don't care about grammar or punctuation of that nature." This is similar to what Conley (2007) noted, as he found that professors use a critical eye and read for inferences, interpretations, analyses and the utilization of supportive evidence, rather than focus on lower-level issues.

Perceptions on secondary and postsecondary level preparation. Throughout this study, the participants described challenges, strengths, and their perceptions on secondary and postsecondary level writing. Interestingly, when explicitly discussing whether their high school courses adequately prepared them for writing at the college level, there was a sharp divide within the sample. Many students felt that they were in fact well prepared, and noted that high school helped them develop a sense of self-advocacy, as well as an understanding of different writing techniques, styles, and resources. Some noted that this understanding was developed through research in a variety of courses. Jenna asserted:

> It taught me what resources I needed to look for and what I needed to do to get a good grade. So I know that I took advantage of the writing center here. During *First Year College Writing,* obviously I learned how to write more in depth at the college level but high school taught me what I needed to do to prepare to be successful.

As Jenna noted, advocating for her needs and pursuing additional resources was something she learned at the secondary level. Conley (2008) suggested that a student's mastery of self-management skills and self-advocacy skills would contribute to success at the postsecondary level. Similarly, Melissa said that:

> AP Chemistry taught me what the general structure should look like so that when I got to Merrimack and I had to do lab reports, I knew what to expect and how to do them. In First Year Writing, they don't teach you how to write a lab report so I would have never known. AP language taught me how to structure my thoughts, and what a good opening statement should have and how to improve my style.

It is intriguing to note how this student made connections to other courses besides their high school Language Arts courses. Reid and Moore (2008) discussed the importance of AP work and how it prepares students for college level work as well.

On the other hand, several participants felt underprepared for postsecondary writing and referred to the format and lack of experience with writing at length as the reason. Kate explained:

> When I was in high school the style that they taught us was intro, body and then conclusion, so I would always have three to five paragraphs only. I got here, the first time I tried to do 3 paragraphs, I was told at least 10. That was really difficult for me to do because I was taught to only have three to five...Like a lot of the stuff that I learned in high school, I don't feel like it was useful when I came to college.

This is important to note as it shows that faculty expectations and discrepancies among them in terms of length of papers may contribute to students' sense of self-efficacy and preparedness at the college level.

While the sample was divided among those who felt adequately prepared for college writing and those who did not, all of the participants expressed suggestions that they felt would have better contributed to their success. Participants suggested more structure and integrating postsecondary level research standards into the curriculum, as well as a variety of writing assignments. Victoria noted how the intense guidelines and structure helped her develop self-efficacy, which greatly changed once she reached college. She stated:

> I think in high school I was always the best writer in my class, like my teacher told me I should consider majoring in English when I got to college. But then in college, I was like "Wow these people are really good." I think having the prompt helped me because I knew exactly what I had to write about and exactly what I had to do to get a good grade. It was all right in front of me. But like the one major paper that I had to write so far in college, I had to come up with the research question and everything and that was really hard.

While Victoria briefly mentioned her struggle with developing a research question, Mary explicitly stated, "I think there should've been more research papers in high school...Because to be completely honest with you, I didn't care too much about papers. They were mostly one page and we could just say whatever." Evidently, the lack of depth and breadth at the secondary level creates a disadvantage for students as they enter into the world of academia.

Writing Perceptions and Practices

A prominent finding of this study was that despite their perceptions on their writing, the majority of the participants had a negative outlook on writing itself. When asked what the first words they associate with writing are, responses included "Ugh,", "stressful," "scary," and "chaos," "research and boring." As these words were explored further, most of the dread that the participants expressed developed from the length of papers, as well as the time and effort that goes into them. Mary stated, "They just take so long, it's not something you can get done quickly

and a lot goes into it". Christina expressed similar sentiments, saying, "As you get older, you progress in college depending on your major and you write more. It takes a lot of time to plan out and write a paper, it gets very difficult to prioritize".

While the majority of the participants held negative attitudes towards writing, Rose noted that the first thing that came to mind was blogging and free writing. She discussed how she derives satisfaction from writing independently, she smiled as she stated:

> I blog and I write for the Beacon... I kind of made it my open diary...I like to do that much more than writing papers...I like it because I get to write about what I care about and real issues that people want to read and not just a paper that one professor will read and never see again. But I think it helps me too because I get more practice and editing experience.

It is important to note that this student feels that blogging and writing for the student newspaper enables her to express and advocate for causes that she is passionate about, and feels are prevalent in today's society. Martinez et al. (2011), noted that students who enjoy leisurely writing often express higher self-efficacy in regards to their writing, which in turn can influence their academic performance.

In addition to understanding participants' sentiments towards writing, I also sought to understand what they consider a strong paper. When speaking about what their perceptions of a good postsecondary level paper are, several students spoke of the centrality of structure and organization, as well as the need to concisely defend one's main argument. Christina confidently asserted:

> It's to the point. It conveys the answer or the main argument throughout. There's a nice introduction and a nice conclusion, but they aren't a carbon copy of each other. In the body, you are conveying your thoughts clearly and backing up any statements you make with research and facts.

While most students commonly referred to organization, some struggled to concisely describe components of a strong college paper. Victoria hesitantly said, “I don’t know. I guess I need to do more. Probably good grammar.” This lends credence to the concept that without specific guidelines and structure many students are unaware of the expectations of professors at the college level.

The concept of organization carried over to students’ prewriting practices as well. When discussing the writing preparation process, the majority of participants expressed the need to outline or engage in a prewriting process. Most expressed that the prewriting process is just as crucial, if not more crucial, than the writing process itself. Christina stated:

> I read the assignment really carefully, in case there’s something I don’t know or understand, and I do some research to find out what it is. Then I start to brainstorm and outline. I’ll do research, take notes, and describe what my main points are going to be and how I’m going to support them. I really need a lot of quiet time to work on my projects and prepare. If it’s a longer paper, I outline but usually when I brainstorm I have a flowchart or arrows that connect my ideas so I don’t need a definitive outline. Typically, it changes a lot from the outline to my first draft and second draft. But it helps me stay on track, and ensure that I am covering each point that I want to.

Similarly, another participant discussed how it is important that she has all of her research completed before she dives into the paper. She noted:

> I'll write what my thesis and then I’ll find the supporting literature for that and jot down a lot of notes, and what the main arguments are. I’ll highlight what I want to include, so I can just begin writing and not get thrown off track.

While most participants had an exceptionally thorough prewriting process that they engaged in, one did not. Victoria noted it, “I just kind of go for it. I do it top to bottom but I just kind of dive in. It works for me.”

In addition to exploring the prewriting process, I also sought to understand what skills and support first-generation college students' use when composing a writing assignment. Two patterns emerged, including organizational skills such as time management and preplanning. Byrd and Macdonald (2005) as well as Conley (2008) asserted that in order to succeed at the postsecondary level, students need to have task prioritization skills, and time management skills. For many participants in this study, this often included blocking off time, dividing the paper into sections to work on, and the revision phase. In addition to organizational skills, several students mentioned that they sought professional support from the writing center, their professors, as well as the institution's research librarians. Jenna commented:

> For me, it's more about planning it out so I start with the outline and I can see how long I'm really going to need to actually sit down and write the paper. Sometimes it's hard because there's so much that you can't really give it all the time you want, but if you plan ahead and block off your time, it usually is doable. Same with research. If the paper is based on research or you need information, you have to schedule that in. So I usually will do that before I outline.

As this student noted, there are multiple phases to writing papers, which requires a substantial amount of planning ahead. Rose discussed how she utilized the support services available on campus, mentioning that:

> I recently found out that we have a librarian who helps us find research so I use her a lot. I try to get an appointment a week before the paper is due so that I can get all my research then I'll organize the papers I have by topic and just pull the main ideas from those as I write. If I have time, I try to go to the Writing Center to get another set of eyes on it.

In addition to task prioritization and time management skills, Byrd and Macdonald (2005) also discovered that self-advocacy skills, which participants described as seeking extra help, are required for student success at the college level.

Writing at the Postsecondary Level

Writing challenges. Another common theme that arose throughout this study were areas of growth in writing skill for the participants. When asked to reflect on their last several writing assignments for areas of improvement, most participants asserted that they struggle with higher-level issues, including formulating strong research questions, writing specifically on abstract ideas and concepts, as well as being concise. Mary, a student who struggled with writing in depth on abstract ideas, noted:

> I had one writing assignment due last week and it was such a vague question… It was seven pages and the question was "What is religion?" I could answer that in a paragraph. I just felt like it was ridiculous. So I think I need to better understand how I can take something so vague and write about it for so many pages.

This is crucial to note, because not only is it related to writing development, but also to cognitive development. According to Piaget (1952), adolescents progress into the formal operations stage around the age of 12, and continue to develop into adulthood. Within this stage, one is beginning to formulate abstract thoughts and utilize high order reasoning, which lends itself towards sophisticated thinking (as cited in McLeod, 2010). By the time students reach the postsecondary level, they should not be struggling with thinking critically and writing about abstract topics. Similarly, Kate asserted, "I struggle with figuring out research questions and what good ones are and look like". This should also not be an issue at this level of education. However, Conley

(2007) noted that the repetitive nature of secondary education often enables students to complete tasks without cognitively engaging, which is why this is often difficult for students.

While most participants described improving on higher-level issues, a few noted that they also struggle with lower level issues, including formatting, citations, and sentence structure. Kate commented:

> I definitely struggle with my works cited, MLA format and in text citations because I feel like not a lot of people stressed that and taught it. It's kind of like you can do it online now and different professors have different styles, so I don't know how to do it without using a website.

Coincidentally, while most inadvertently suggested that they improve on higher-level issues, there was a sharp divide amongst those who perceive their abilities with lower-level issues to be stronger than with higher-level issues. Several participants remained consistent and noted that they struggle with organization and making connections. Mary explained:

> I don't think I have a problem when it comes to simple sentences and grammar. Sometimes organizing everything is hard. I never know where to end a paragraph and to start a new one because it's all the same thought, and in high school it was always the same thought stayed in the same paragraph. And sometimes connecting different pieces is hard.

The organizational issues were reiterated multiple times, with Victoria hesitantly remarking, "I just struggle with grouping things together."

While organizational issues and other higher-level issues including making connections and integrating information were especially prevalent, a few participants noted they struggle with lower level issues more than higher level ones. Interestingly enough, Christina said, "I think the lower ones might pop up more because I'm so used to autocorrect and spell check so when I'm writing a paper I move faster...and sometimes I'll miss little errors."

Postsecondary writing support. Lastly, participants were asked about what type of support is needed at the college level. The participants discussed two different types of support, one that was based on methodology and instruction, and one that was pragmatic. In regards to instruction and methodology, multiple participants recommended that professors employ a pedagogical practice that is more explanatory and consistent. Melissa further explained this saying:

> Consistency from everyone is needed. Sometimes I wish professors would explain things so instead of saying something is wrong, explain why. Sometimes they'll say it but sometimes they won't and I don't learn how to correct my mistakes in the next paper.

This is a theme that has emerged throughout the literature, as Pajares (2003) noted that in order for students to succeed and increase self-efficacy, they need regular feedback and need to be provided with writing strategies in order to improve.

In addition, several participants discussed the lack of impact and instruction that they received in *First Year Writing.* Jenna described her experience, saying:

> I know that in *First Year College Writing* I did well but I think it's because I came so prepared. I think if they went over more of the standards of what they're looking for in papers, and what typical research papers and argument papers look like it would help. I had to write an opinion paper, a research paper, and then a reflection paper in one class and they're all different. I can see my classmates do not understand those...I think covering that in intro to writing would be helpful so that in other classes we don't continuously have to.

Interestingly enough, this touches upon the idea of consistency, and the need to explore foundational concepts in First Year Writing courses, so that subsequent courses do not have to spend weeks of the semester explaining the expectations and differences amongst various types of assignments

While several students suggested changes in instruction and methodology, a few made pragmatic recommendations for the institution and the institution's writing center. A couple of students recommended that the writing center be more public, and that a writing consultant should be affiliated with each course. Rose said:

> I think the Writing Center is a great resource. I know in my business class we had to do business writing, which I had never done. So we had a writing fellow assigned to our class and that helped me through it. So have more of those fellows in different classes.

Another student suggested that the pedagogical practices of the writing consultants also need to be more consistent. They mentioned how each time they visit the center, the tutoring they receive is different, noting that "Sometimes I'll read my paper out loud and sometime I won't and sometimes they'll look at grammar and I think it needs to be more accurate."

While a few students made suggestions to improve the practice of the writing center, one student suggested an overall change in the curriculum. They noted that science students often struggle with writing because they do not have writing intensive courses. Melissa stated:

> I think maybe if they require science students to take more than just First Year Writing that would help and maybe have a class on just how to write research papers in a science field. I think that science students are limited in their electives so we don't get to experience writing as extensively as humanities and business students do, so we are naturally behind. Also, if we were taught how to conduct research and write different types of analyses we wouldn't have to spend time each semester doing it.

Again, this harkens back to consistency, and the need to have instruction once, so that other courses do not get deterred, and spend weeks re-teaching various writing styles. Here, it would be best to summarize your overall findings in a few sentences, noting the areas of strength, challenge and capacity for students in their high school and college writing. This will help transition nicely into the next section.

Recommendations

After reviewing the literature and interviewing seven first-generation college students at a small, private, four-year institution, I was able to better understand their writing experiences, and perceptions on writing preparedness and transition into college writing. In addition, I identified several common practices, problematic areas, and barriers to writing success. While some of the participants in this study drew from atypical first-generation backgrounds, there were several commonalities expressed throughout the interview process. State here also that you have integrated your findings and your literature for this part of the paper. The following section will consist of five pragmatic recommendations that faculty and student affairs practitioners, as well as k-12 administrators, should implement. While these recommendations require program additions and modification as well as reform, they all have substantial benefits. They will greatly influence all students matriculating into American higher education, and will improve the writing success of the ever-growing first-generation college student population.

Recommendation 1: ***The standards and expectations between secondary education writing and postsecondary writing need to be reevaluated and there must be collaboration between both sectors.***

After reviewing the literature and findings, it is apparent that there is an enormous disconnect between secondary education preparation and higher education expectations, specifically in regards to writing. Beil and Knight (2007) reported that there is a fundamental difference between writing assignments, writing tasks, writing process, as well as the frequency, format and length of assignments. This was echoed in the data collected for this study, as participants reported that both the length and the breadth of their assignments drastically increased, as did the level of required formatting and research. Between secondary education and

postsecondary education, there is often a shift in the level and quality of work, which often leaves students overwhelmed, underprepared, and lacking confidence (Beil & Knight, 2007). This can be exceedingly true for first-generation students, who often are disadvantaged and receive a less rigorous education than their non-first-generation counterparts (Warburton, 2001 & Mattern & Shaw, 2011). With that being said, I recommend that the standards and expectations for secondary and postsecondary writing be reevaluated and reformed.

Currently, secondary education preparation is guided by the common core curriculum and standardized testing (Fanetti et al., 2010). The common core curriculum mandates teachers learning outcomes and goals, and is essentially failing students when it comes to English Language Arts standards. According to the Core Standards (2016), students in grades 9-12 are expected to write and revise short submissions over a duration of time. These submissions include narratives, responses, and reflections, all of which are repetitive (Conley, 2008 & Core Standards, 2016). This structure is detrimental to students' growth as writers, and is inhibiting their ability to write at the college level.

It is imperative that secondary preparation be in alignment with postsecondary curriculum and expectations, which means reforming standardized testing and the standards set forth by Common Core. If we expect students to write in a variety of styles once they arrive at college, then it is absolutely imperative that they are exposed to them and learn how to do so throughout their time in high school. Moreover, throughout the course of their secondary career, should be taught how to continue to revise and write with more depth.

Modifying the Common Core is an issue at the federal level, which requires much examination and often garners much debate (Resmovits, 2015). In order to initiate change at a

grassroots level, higher education institutions need to work collaboratively with secondary education institutions to help prepare prospective college students. Pre-existing partnerships such as Upward Bound should work to educate students of the college standards and expectations, so that they arrive prepared. In addition, academic support professionals, as well as college student volunteers should work with students in programs like Upward Bound to build their writing competency. We can no longer expect students to arrive at college and unlearn what they have been told for years. Thus, partnerships with programs like Upward Bounds and other college preparatory and remedial programs could work to implement developmentally appropriate practice and promote ideal and reasonable writing outcomes.

As part of this reform and reevaluation, I recommend that introductory level writing professors connect with secondary level English Language Arts instructors. Fanetti et al. (2010), discussed how both sets of instructors often teach in completely incompatible ways, stating "No longer can we think of high school as its own end. We must begin to think about it [high school] as preparation for the next educational step- college- and we must calibrate our instruction, with that in mind "(p.83). Both high school and college level instructors must be aware of what is being taught, and must adjust their standards based on their students' abilities. Ultimately, college level instructors can no longer ignore the gap that exists. It is crucial to meet the students where they are at in terms of their abilities. Instructors must reconcile for the lack of preparation by modifying their curriculum, and providing students with additional support, which will be explored in the subsequent recommendations.

Recommendation 2: Faculty should partner with writing center support staff to offer writing groups and writing lab hours.

On several occasions, participants in this study referred to how they often visited the Writing Center for additional support with their writing assignments. Many felt that they needed additional support for help with organizing, revising, and clarifying. To assist students with the writing process, writing center support staff should partner with introductory level writing professors to facilitate writing groups for students enrolled in introductory level writing courses throughout their first year. According to Curtis (2011) and Langford (2015), writing groups are a common practice among graduate students and faculty, but the same model can be implemented at the undergraduate level. Generally, the structure of writing groups consists of students who are engaged in the writing process, that come together to write, disseminate, and revise their work. Within an undergraduate framework, a peer-writing consultant (PWC) would be on hand to facilitate group work, and assist with all phases of the writing and revision process. This would help provide mastery experiences for the students, while also providing them with additional layers of support during their transition.

The implementation of writing groups for undergraduates is a fairly simple process at institutions that already have a writing center or a writing lab. In order to prepare peer-writing consultants to facilitate the writing groups, writing centers should work to devise a training. The training should consist of familiarizing the PWC with the course curriculum, as well as emphasizing common mistakes and difficulties that first year writing students often encounter. Moreover, the training should teach PWCs how to consult and revise in a group setting, in accordance with the International Writing Centers Associations best practices. It is recommended

that peer-writing consultants be compensated for their training, as well as the course hours in which they are facilitating writing groups.

In addition to training the PWC, course instructors should alter their syllabi and build in required writing group hours for each assignment so that the program is consistent and students know that they are being held accountable for their learning. Once the PWC have been trained, they should be assigned to a group of students of which they will work with over the course of the semester. Course instructors should work to ensure that the groups are a functional size of no more than 7 students to a PWC (Curtis, 2011). The program would be a shared responsibility between the academic support staff and course instructors. In order to assess the success of the program, students should be sent a brief survey following each group. Furthermore, it is essential to understand the peer writing consultants' perspectives in order to modify the program; thus, peer-writing consultants should partake in focus groups at the end of the semester to understand their experiences.

Recommendation 3: Colleges and universities should be committed to nurturing students' writing, and should offer an intentional sequence of writing courses.

In this study, some participants discussed how their success in First Year Writing was due in part to the preparation they received at the secondary level. On the other hand, several participants discussed the need for more support and structure within the introductory level course. In order to avoid classes comprised of students with a wide variety of levels of preparation, higher education institutions should assess students' preparation, and offer different sections of introductory writing based on the students' abilities.

Currently, Harvard University is doing exceedingly well at determining students' writing needs, and placing them into courses that are contingent upon those needs. At Harvard, all first

year students test into *Expos 10* or *Expos 20*, and are required to complete the *Expos 20* before the start of their sophomore year (Harvard College Writing Program, 2016). While most students directly test into *Expos 20*, *Expos 10*, is the introductory level course, which consists of no more than 10 students in a section. Throughout the semester, students begin by writing and revising brief papers in a variety of writing styles. After mastering their experiences with smaller assignments, students are then expected to apply those strategies to two longer essays. *Expos 10* enables students to slowly transition into postsecondary work, while also teaching them what is expected. After completing *Expos 10* in the fall semester, first year students then move onto *Expos 20*, courses that are more specialized and based on specific topics. In *Expos 20*, students explore the fundamentals of analytical writing, including how to structure and refute arguments, use primary sources, crafting thesis statements and defending them.

This program could be implemented out of pre-existing departments within the institution that house the introduction to college writing courses. Currently, at the institution where this research was completed, *First Year Writing* was moved from the Communications of Arts and Sciences department, to the English department. I recommend that it be housed in the English department, as the faculty are more specialized in writing pedagogical practices. The department chair, as well as the Dean of Liberal Arts would oversee the program. In order to successfully establish the program, a curriculum would need to be developed and approved. In addition to the funding needed to research and develop a curriculum, it is more than likely that additional adjunct professors with rhetoric backgrounds would need to be hired. After securing a curriculum and faculty to teach, an assessment would need to be created to determine which students need to take the first course.

Each course should be a semester long, and all first year students would be required to complete the second course. First year students who test into the introductory course, should take both courses sequentially. The first course in the sequence should focus on transitioning into postsecondary writing, and teaching students how to write a variety of assignments, with more instruction. The second course in the sequence should be based in research, and require students to write at more depth.

The learning outcomes for the introductory course would be for students to learn how to develop, organize and clarify their ideas. This would be done through constant advising, and revision of papers. Students would also be expected to think critically about sources, which entails asking questions, analyzing and building arguments. The learning outcomes for the second course in the sequence would be for students to craft and defend arguable theses, refute arguments, integrate sources, and apply theory. In order to assess the program, instructors should utilize course evaluations, as well as pre and posttests to understand if students' writing is improving.

Recommendation 4: Students should be encouraged to pursue additional academic engagement experiences such as extracurricular blogging.

As higher education professionals, we know that student involvement increases retention (Astin, 1984); therefore, when students arrive on campus, we often encourage them to pursue addition co-curricular opportunities. Moreover, as noted by Unverferth et al. (2012), often times, first-generation students struggle with finding co-curricular opportunities. Therefore, I recommend that students should be encouraged to pursue academic engagement experiences that enhance interpersonal communication skills, as this will help them to reframe how they feel about writing. Furthermore, it will allow this population to become engaged in a unique way.

As noted in the findings of this study, we have a generation of students who look at writing with a dismal attitude. They believe that it is stressful, boring, scary and chaotic. With this mindset, they are already operating from a deficit-based approach. In order to provide more mastery experiences to increase writing self-efficacy, students should be encouraged to explore opportunities with school newspapers, blogs, and peer tutoring. Martinez et al. (2011) noted that students who explored leisurely writing were less likely to have writing anxiety and low self-efficacy. In this digital age, communication is more vital than ever before.

I recommend that student affairs professionals provide more opportunities for students to be engaged in co-curricular opportunities that include a focus on developing writing skills. One program that could be explored is student blogging. Currently, Cornell University has a blog series called "Life on the Hill". It is showcased on the institution's homepage, and consists of nine students' blogs about their college experience (Cornell University, 2016). This is a great way to get students to reframe how they think about writing, and get them writing about issues and experiences that matter to them.

Institutions could easily implement a student blog series on their website by forming a team that consists of an informational technology representative, student affairs professional, a writing consultant, and a group of students that are high achieving and trustworthy. Schools should first seek to design a mission that would guide the types of writing that they want, and what the objective of the blog series is, as well as the guidelines for publishing. Afterwards, they should release an application to the student body in order to recruit students who are eager and willing to commit their time. After screening and selecting a group of students, they should provide them with a manual of the expectations and guidelines, but also provide minimal

instruction so that students do not feel confined and constrained. Students should then feel free to explore the topic that they are committed to, and submit it to the writing consultant for revision and publication. This opportunity would be cost-effective, and would emphasize the college in a positive light, while also providing students with mastery and professional experience, which first-generation students especially need.

Recommendation 5: More research should be conducted about the writing experiences and challenges of first-generation students at community colleges, and at 4-year public institutions.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics report on first-generation student success and academic preparation (2011), first-generation college students are often grossly underprepared as compared to their non-first-generation peers. This is exemplified by the alarming statistic that 40% of surveyed first-generation students did not exceed the core New Basics curriculum, the lowest level of expected curriculum to be completed. In addition, first-generation college students had lower first-year GPAs than students whose parents had a college degree, typically averaging a 2.5. Contrary to the image painted by Warburton (2001), first-generation students in this study-completed high school with a mean cumulative GPA of 3.58, and currently held an average cumulative GPA of 3.31 at their current institution. Moreover, several of the participants attended private secondary institutions that are renowned in the region, and have high tuition.

In order to further understand how first-generation status influences perceptions of writing preparedness and writing success, additional research should be conducted at institutions that have a large first-generation population. Moreover, further sampling techniques should be used in order to study the effect of certain demographic characteristics of first-generation

students. Researchers should seek to learn more about first-generation students' experiences with their introductory level writing courses at the college level. In addition, I believe it is imperative to study sequential courses, such as *Expos 10* and *Expos 20*, in order to understand if they help remedy the anxieties that first-generation college students often face. Lastly, future studies should compare first-generation students to their non-first generation counterparts, in order to understand whether the first-generation identity is having a substantial impact on students' writing preparedness.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that writing is one of the most frequently used methods of communication, whether it be sending text messages, crafting emails, or drafting papers; writing is an art that keeps people connected and informed. Within the college setting, students are expected to write across a variety of disciplines, and integrate literature, narratives and a wide variety of styles. Unlike many other prescribed tasks, writing does not stop once students matriculate into the "real world", thus; it is imperative that students learn the art of writing, and feel successful.

This pragmatic, qualitative study was conducted to explore the perceptions of writing preparedness of first-generation college students, a traditionally underserved population that is matriculating into higher education at a quicker rate than ever before. Throughout the course of this study, I interviewed a sample of seven first-generation college students at a small, private, four-year institution to understand their experiences, both within high school and in the postsecondary setting. Throughout this study, I gained valuable insight into the world of writing through first-generation students' eyes. In addition, I was able to further understand the gap that

exists between secondary preparedness and postsecondary expectations, as they specifically pertain to writing.

As higher education practitioners, it is our responsibility to educate and empower students, both academically and socially. Part of that responsibility includes preparing students adequately, and meeting them where they are, academically. This research demonstrated that even when first-generation students do have a rigorous high school experience, they often struggle with writing when they arrive at college. Part of this struggle is attributed to the discrepancy that exists between secondary and postsecondary level writing. Throughout this research, I was able to explore the challenges that exist as a result of this gap. While these challenges often arise as a result of ineffective educational policy at the K-12 level, higher education practitioners have the capacity to assist students with their writing and academic preparedness, in order to increase self-efficacy.

As a result of my research, I recommend that both student and academic affairs professionals, including faculty, engage in interdepartmental collaboration, to better serve students. One of my major recommendations is building a partnership between writing support specialists and introductory level writing courses, so that students are familiar with the services that they can use. In addition, I propose that students' affairs professionals do a better job at marketing and acquainting students with co-curricular opportunities that involve writing. As previously mentioned, writing is unavoidable. J Donald Monan (2009), former president of Boston College, asserted that at its core, "Liberal education should aspire to educate for the enriching and constructive exercise of liberty", (p.26). If we collectively worked to reshape the

way students think about writing, we could empower a generation of young scholars so that they have a critical understanding of the society in which they live in.

In addition to my aforementioned recommendations, one of my final recommendations is that higher education institutions need to be held accountable to the population that they admit. It is not sufficient to accept students, and then not adequately teach and prepare them for writing at the college level. Like Nussbaum (2012), stated, higher education is not meant to be profit based and business oriented. If we choose to admit students who are underprepared, which is often the case, we are ethically responsible to educating them and meeting them where they are. I propose that higher education institutions offer diagnostic assessment to better understand their students' needs, then place them in the appropriate introductory level writing course, so that they feel prepared and confident. Writing has been and will continue to be a vital form of communication and assessment within American higher education and it is imperative that we provide our students with the tools necessary to succeed.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

- How's the semester going so far?
- Tell me a bit about the high school you attended and the courses you took.
- Think back to high school, what did a typical assignment look like for you? How has that changed since coming to Merrimack?
- Describe how your high school courses prepared you for writing assignments at Merrimack.
- Tell me what the first thing that comes to mind is when you think about writing.
- How would you describe your writing abilities? Does that reflect in your grades?
- What measures do you take to prepare for a writing assignment?
- Describe some of the characteristics of a "good writing assignment".
- Think back to your last few writing assignments. What are the areas that you would like to improve upon?
- Tell me how you typically prepare for a writing assignment.
- Describe some of the skills that you use when composing a writing assignment for one of your college courses.
- How do you think your writing ability compares with your classmates? Why is that?
- How do you perceive your abilities with lower level issues (writing a simple sentence with proper punctuation) versus higher-level issues (organizing sentences and paragraphs to clearly express an idea)?
- What type of support do you feel is needed in order to master college level writing?
- Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you would like to share?

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your classification?

    A. Freshman

    B. Sophomore

    C. Junior

    D. Senior

2. What is your major?

3. What is the name of the high school you attended?

4. What was your cumulative GPA in high school?

5. To date, what is your cumulative GPA in college?