Looking Beyond Undergraduates’ Attitude About a University-wide Writing Requirement

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A sample of 263 junior and senior undergraduates (101 males, 162 females) participated in a study to determine relationships between their agreement/disagreement about a university-wide writing competency graduation requirement and (1) level of writing capability as measured by the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) test, (2) attitudes toward writing in college classes, (3) challenges encountered in writing, and (4) self-regulatory strategies to resolve writing challenges. Students with “high” THEA writing scores approved of the writing graduation requirement, desired more writing in college classes, and sought help in resolving writing dilemmas. Students with “low and average” THEA writing scores disagreed with the graduation policy, desired less writing in classes, and used negative practices to resolve writing challenges. Survey instrument and suggestions for practitioners are included.

Personnel in post-secondary institutions have a vested interest in knowing and understanding how students are doing—their level of satisfaction with their overall university experiences (Gillis, 1988; Murrell, & Glover, 1996), how they feel about specific university services (Paradise, & Papa-Lewis, 1986; Webb, & Bloom, 1981), and whether or not they are succeeding in courses. Student feedback can be gathered on a specific program or system-wide basis and can offer university administrators and faculty significant insights about many aspects of the university. Most importantly, faculty can gain important information about class requirements and their instructional methods from the student’s viewpoints.

The present study was designed to obtain information on undergraduates’ perceptions about the junior level essay—a longstanding locally developed, holistically scored writing competency examination required for graduation. The focus of the study was of interest because the only feedback university officials consistently received was summarized results of Junior Level Essay administrations three times per year. During the more than fifty years that the university has maintained the writing requirement for graduation, more students than faculty have questioned its necessity. However, no known documented evidence exists about obtaining student feedback on this requirement. Furthermore, there were no known attempts to obtain information about the educational characteristics of students with differential writing scores on the THEA or the Junior Level Essay.

The writing competency graduation requirement at the regional university began in 1950 when support for writing competency in colleges and universities was virtually unknown or was a guarded secret. However, when the nationwide push for basic skills assessment gained momentum in the early 1990’s, the writing competency exam at the regional university was in vogue. Generalized support for writing provoked by the nationwide movement on basic skills assessment strengthened the university’s stance on the value placed on writing.

Academia has historically considered writing to be the most highly developed, abstract, and complex language mode (Gam-
The importance of writing in a college setting, however, is best reflected in the belief that writing ability is used to communicate thoughts, including what is learned and is a critical element of a college education. Gambell (1991) adds that college students are expected to possess the ability to communicate their thoughts in writing because, “at the undergraduate level writing is the dominant, if not exclusive, language mode through which learning is evaluated”, p. 421. Writing may enjoy generalized support on college campuses because students use this skill in all aspects of the university experience such as, taking notes, developing essays, and responding to examinations—each unequivocally related to college success.

While the study was not considered an in-depth formative or summative self-evaluation of undergraduates’ writing experiences, it was believed that feedback from students in the present study could not be overlooked. The study’s four aims were to obtain information about undergraduates’—
1. attitude toward class writing requirement,
2. attitude toward the university’s writing competency graduation requirement,
3. major challenge faced when writing, and
4. major self-regulatory strategy used to resolve writing challenges.

While it was deemed important to obtain this important information, it was believed that findings of the study would have generalized teaching and counseling implications.

Methods

Participants

Participants included a volunteer sample of 263 junior and senior undergraduate students (101 males, 162 females). The study was conducted at a four-year comprehensive regional university with a historical student enrollment ranging between 6,000 and 9,000. There are a substantial number of ethnic minority students, and many undergraduates enrolled at the regional university are considered nontraditional, first generation students.

Instrument

A forced-choice, four-item survey was developed to correspond with the study’s aims (See Appendix A). Survey items were modeled after selected questions used by Gamble (1991, p. 423) in which he challenged respondents to describe themselves as a writer, to identify problems they had with writing, whether or not they proofread and edited papers before submitting them, whether or not they solicited others’ help in proofreading and editing papers before submitting them, the number of drafts they created, whether or not professors commented on their papers when they evaluated them, if they found professors’ comments on papers useful, and to make general comments about their university writing.

The first survey item asked participants to select one of six options that reflected their perception about the amount of writing requirements in college classes. Response options ranged from “there should be LESS writing assignments in ALL college classes” to “the amount of writing is just right.” The second survey item requested respondents to select one of eight writing challenges most often faced when writing. The third survey item solicited participants’ choice of one of seven available self-regulatory strategies they used to resolve writing challenges. The fourth survey item petitioned participants to indicate whether or not the university should continue writing competency as a graduation requirement. Demographic information was requested from participants. Finally, participants’ THEA writing score was obtained.

Procedures

Undergraduate juniors and seniors are required to document whether or not they have fulfilled the university’s graduation
writing competency requirement. For brevity, the graduation requirement is labeled Junior Level Essay (JLE). The JLE requirement may be accomplished by one of the following alternatives: (1) meeting or exceeding established cut scores on the state-mandated high school writing exam, (2) meeting or exceeding locally established credit-by-exams score criteria on AP-English or CLEP English Composition each of which include an essay, (3) passing the writing section of the state-mandated Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) examination, or by (4) passing the Junior Level Essay examination. If students met the JLE requirement by passing the writing portion of the THEA, their writing score was documented.

Upon completing the verification process, students were given the opportunity to participate in the study. If students agreed to participate, they were briefed on the aims of the study, were provided the one-page survey, and were encouraged to ask questions about its content. Participants were requested to complete the survey in the testing office without time constraints and were informed that they could terminate their participation at any time.

For analysis purposes, the six response options in the first item were grouped into three categories. Category one was labeled “less writing assignments in all/some college classes,” category two was labeled “more writing assignments in all/some college classes,” and category three was labeled “amount of writing is just about right.” Response options for the writing challenges item were grouped into three categories. Category one was labeled “writing process” and included three options: “organizing my thoughts,” “pulling written thoughts together,” and “making writing flow.” Category two was labeled “focusing” and included three options: “difficulty deciding on a topic,” “not knowing what to write,” and “getting started.” Category three was labeled “technical skills” and included two options: “spelling,” and “mechanics and grammar.” Finally, response options for the writing strategies item were grouped into three categories. Category one was labeled “get assistance” and included two options: “get help from a friend” and “ask for help from the instructor.” Category two was labeled “solve problems independently” and included two options: “work harder at solving the problem” and “start over by selecting another topic.” Category three was labeled “negative practices” and included two options: “write the essay and hope for the best” and “putting off assignment as long as possible.” The option, “don’t do the assignment,” was deleted due to lack of responses.

The THEA writing examination contains a multiple choice section and a written essay. Examinees must respond to both the multiple choice and essay sections to receive a THEA writing score. Scores on the written essay range from zero to eight, with a score of eight reflecting optimal writing skills. The minimum passing score on the THEA written essay is five with the stipulation that the multiple choice must be passed. The multiple choice section is discounted for essays with essay scores of six or higher. In this study THEA writing scores were divided into two categories: category one contained THEA scores five and six and category two contained THEA scores seven and eight.

Participants’ agreement/disagreement with the university’s writing competency graduation requirement was used as the criterion variable in data analyses. Table 1 reflects dichotomized data categories for each variable. Analyses of data were conducted using the Chi Square statistic because data were classified into nominal categories. An alpha level of .05 was used in all statistical tests.

Results

Results of the present study are presented in four segments: (1) agree/disagree with JLE requirement versus students’ THEA writing scores, (2) agree/disagree with JLE require-
ment versus amount of writing requirements in college classes, (3) agree/disagree with JLE requirement versus writing challenges, and (4) agree/disagree with JLE requirement versus strategies used to resolve writing challenges. Results of Chi Square analysis of the frequency distributions for each item category across undergraduates’ “yes—no” responses to the writing competency graduation requirement are found in Table 1.

JLE versus THEA Writing Scores. A significant relationship was found between the frequencies of undergraduates who agreed or disagreed with the university’s writing competency graduation requirement and the frequencies of undergraduates’ THEA scores (by category) \( \chi^2 (1, 263) = 6.036, p = .014 \). More than the expected number of undergraduates who earned THEA scores of five or six (O = 32, E = 26.5) \( \chi^2 = 1.60 \) and fewer than the expected number with THEA scores of seven and eight (O = 5, E = 11.4) \( \chi^2 = 3.59 \) disagreed with the university writing competency graduation requirement. The response frequencies of these two subgroups contributed 86% to the total Chi Square value \( \chi^2 (1,263) = 6.036, p = .014 \).

JLE versus Amount of Writing in College Classes. Significant differences occurred between the frequencies of undergraduates who agreed or disagreed with the university’s writing competency graduation requirement and the frequencies in the “amount of writing” category \( \chi^2 (2, 263) = 20.139, p < .000 \). Significantly more than the expected number of undergraduates who disagreed with the JLE graduation requirement desired less writing in their college classes (O = 15, E =

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Variable & Grad Req & Pearson & df & Significance \\
& Yes & No & Chi Square & \\
\hline
THEA Scores & & & 6.036 & 1 & .014 \\
5, 6 & 150 & 32 & & \\
7, 8 & 76 & 5 & & \\
Amount of Writing & & & 20.139 & 2 & .000 \\
Less Writing & 31 & 15 & & \\
More Writing & 114 & 7 & & \\
Just Right & 81 & 15 & & \\
Writing Challenges & & & .789 & 2 & .674 \\
Writing Process & 61 & 8 & & \\
Focusing & 111 & 21 & & \\
Technical Skills & 54 & 8 & & \\
Self-regulatory Strategies & & & 7.779 & 2 & .020 \\
Negative Practices & 40 & 10 & & \\
Get Assistance & 82 & 19 & & \\
Solve Prob. & 104 & 8 & & \\
Independently & & & & & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Chi Square Values for Frequency of Writing-related Variables Across Undergraduate’s Agreement/Disagreement With a Writing Competency Graduation Requirement}
\end{table}
6.5) ($\chi^2 = 11.12$). Fewer than the expected number of students who desired less writing (O = 31, E = 39.5) ($\chi^2 = 1.83$) agreed with the writing competency graduation requirement. Finally, significantly fewer than the expected number of students who desired more writing in college classes (O = 7, E = 17) ($\chi^2 = 5.88$) disagreed with the writing competency graduation policy. These three Chi Square values (11.12, 1.83, and 5.88 = 18.83) contributed 93.5% to the total Chi Square value $\chi^2 (2, 263) = 20.139, p < .000$.

**JLE versus Writing Challenges.** No significant relationship was found between the frequencies of undergraduates’ agreement/disagreement with the university writing competency graduation requirement and the frequencies of undergraduate’s writing challenges [$\chi^2 (2, 263) = .789, p = .674$].

**JLE versus Self-regulatory Activities.** A significant relationship occurred between the frequencies of self-regulatory strategies used by undergraduates to resolve writing challenges and the frequency of students who agreed/disagreed with the writing graduation requirement [$\chi^2 (2, 263) = 7.779, p = .020$]. Analysis of the frequency distribution for self-regulatory strategies indicated that fewer than the expected number of undergraduates who disagreed with the graduation policy attempted to solve writing challenges independently (O = 8, E = 15.8) ($\chi^2 = 3.85$). In addition, more than the expected number of undergraduates who disagreed with the graduation requirement tended to seek assistance with writing difficulties (O = 19, E = 14.2) ($\chi^2 = 1.62$) and used negative practices when confronted with writing challenges (O = 10, E = 7.0) ($\chi^2 = 1.29$). These three Chi Square values (3.85, 1.62, 1.29 = 6.76) contributed 86.9% to the total Chi Square value [$\chi^2 (2, 263) = 7.779, p = .020$].

**Discussion**

The Junior Level Essay, as a graduation requirement, is a non-course based factor that has the propensity to derail undergraduates’ graduation plans. Because of its significance in undergraduates’ college careers, it was deemed important to obtain feedback from students about its influence on them. In addition, it was believed important to gain information about students attitudes toward writing, their perception about the amount of writing in college classes, the challenges they faced when writing, and the self-regulatory strategies used to resolve writing challenges. Wisely used, this feedback can help university administrators and faculty monitor/evaluate activities and program offerings, make informed changes if necessary, and counsel undergraduates about dilemmas or issues with which they struggle.

Results of the present study revealed that the majority (82.5%) of undergraduates had no problem with the amount of writing required in courses. However, in-depth analysis of response data showed a direct relationship between attitude toward the amount of writing in classes and attitude toward the university writing competency graduation requirement. Those who desired less writing in classes disagreed with the university writing competency graduation requirement while those who desired more writing in classes agreed with the graduation policy.

According to McLeod and Oehler (1980), a “negative” attitude toward writing may not be that unusual because “few of us are skilled enough to be paid for our writing. And, even more of us do not like writing very much”, p. 357. It may be that the cumulative effects of the struggles experienced during the writing process and the negative outcomes of the writing effort serve as basis for a dislike of writing by some students. However, if we believe McLeod and Oehler, all students struggle with the act of writing and develop a reserved attitude toward writing. It is also true that students must learn strategies to overcome writing challenges. But, as reflected in this study, students that experience writing difficulties may exacerbate their writing challenges by “putting off writing assignments”
and/or submitting essays prematurely and “hoping for the best.” These actions may show that students with writing difficulties persist in their writing task to the point that “joy of completion” (McLeod, 1987, p. 432) is the controlling factor of whether or not to revise, refine, rethink elements of their writing before submission. It may be argued that positive or negative attitudes toward writing may be shaped by the cumulative effect of each aspect of the writing process, from the planning stage to the point when students receive a grade for their effort.

Undergraduates’ dissatisfaction with the amount of writing in classes and the disagreement with the writing competency graduation requirement may be a guise to protect their self-worth. If this is the case, there are profound implications about the role that writing plays in one’s career success. To some, the link between writing and career success may not be obvious at first glance. However, upon reflection, writing proficiency becomes a pivotal factor in a chain of events that culminate in career success. First, it is a commonly accepted belief that writing skills are of paramount importance in educational achievement. Second, there is evidence that education is a determining factor in status attainment in the workplace (Walcott, & Buhr, 1987). And, third, we know that the perception of a person’s status is closely linked to the prestige of the occupation in which they are employed. It can be argued, therefore, that the results of this study about undergraduates’ attitude toward writing and how they go about overcoming their writing shortcomings could have critical implications about their ultimate level of success and how others perceive them.

If we are convinced that writing skills are of paramount importance in a person’s life, it may be prudent to counsel undergraduates to make “attitude toward writing” a personal/professional issue. Students must be convinced there are short and long-term benefits in possessing good writing skills. First, they must see that high-quality writing skills have short-range benefits and will be reflected in positive instructor feedback and excellent course grades. Second, they must realize that excelling in coursework has long-range benefits in that educational excellence gives them a competitive edge when applying for prestigious jobs, which are indicators of upward mobility.

Undoubtedly, students who continuously struggle with writing need special assistance (McLeod (1987). In the present study, 46% of undergraduates revealed that their greatest writing challenge was related to “focusing” issues—31.9% reported having difficulty in “getting started” and 14.1% reported having difficulty in “identifying a topic.” “Grammar/mechanics” was the major challenge to 17.5% of undergraduates and “spelling” was a major writing challenge to 6.5% of undergraduates. These results are similar to those reported by Gambell (1991) in which 56.3% of university education students indicated having trouble with “selecting, refining, or narrowing a topic” and 29.2% identified “researching the topic” as the most trying part of writing a paper. In the Gambell study grammar problems were mentioned by 18.8% and spelling was mentioned by 16.7% of university education students. While these two sets of data do not report identical results on writing challenges/problems, they do show enough correspondence to corroborate the type of writing challenges encountered by undergraduate students.

The frequency of the type of self-regulatory strategy used to resolve writing challenges was significantly related to the frequency of undergraduates with differing attitudes about the university writing competency graduation requirement. Of the undergraduates who disagreed with the university writing competency graduation requirement, 20.9% “sought assistance” in resolving writing challenges from instructors, 17.1% from friends. Eleven percent used “negative practices” by putting off writing
assignment; 8% submitted essay and hoped for the best. Gambell (1991) reported that 47.9% of university education students did not allow others to proofread or edit their papers, 18.8% reported they had others (friends) read their papers, 37.5% said they wrote one draft, and 11% put off writing essays to the last minute.

Results of the present and Gambell studies indicate that (1) students write their essays independently (47.9% in the Gamble study; 43% in the present study;), but when they seek assistance, they acquire it from friends (18.8% in the Gambell study; 17.1% in the present study), and (2) students are procrastinators and put off writing assignments. Results differ between the Gambell and the present study in the following ways: (1) 37.5% of education students in the Gambell study wrote one draft of their essay; 8% of undergraduates in the present study submitted essay and hoped for the best, implying little or no revision of their essays, and (2) more students in present study (38%) than in the Gambell study (18.8%) got assistance with their writing.

Differences in results between the two studies may be due to the question format used in each study. Gambell (1991) used open-ended question such as “What problems do you have in writing? Please be specific. (E.g., narrowing a topic, conceptualizing a topic, researching a topic, structuring an argument/paper, sentence structure, grammar, vocabulary, spelling)” and “Do you have others proofread and edit your papers before your hand them in? Explain.” In the present study, participants responded to items in a forced-choice format.

Suggestions for Practitioners

Our students deserve the opportunity to “learn how to write” as well as to learn “how to use writing skills” in their college majors and in their chosen careers. Undoubtedly, university faculty have more than a passing interest in instilling in students the belief about the importance of writing and in teaching them essential strategies to improve this essential and important skill.

The following suggestions, taken from the literature, provide anchors from which to launch a renewed effort in making writing less painful for students.

1. Structured approach to writing, much like the Cognitive Writing Process Model developed by Flowers and Hayes’ (1981) and used by and Eves-Bowden (2001). However, use models only as props to help them see that their own writing is planned and intentional (Eves-Bowden, 2001).

2. Teach students the writing process and the process of thinking—not just the model (Eves-Bowden, 2001). This may require instructors to actually produce writing in “vivo”, allowing students to observe what creating of a written piece entails.

3. Provide examples of strong and weak papers (Jackson, 2008).

4. Make a connection between reading and writing. Basic writers need to read more to write better. (Rose, 1983).

5. Provide a grading rubric for student to use in producing writing samples so they know the criteria on which papers will be evaluated. Discuss these criteria to let students know that successful writing is based on numerous factors, and not the presence or absence of any one thing. (Elliot, Plata, & Zelhart, 1990; Jackson, 2008; McLeod, & Oehler, 1980; Eves-Bowden, 2001; Young, 1997).

6. Allow students to use personal experiences to develop essays and share them with the class. It will increase chances of students attaching meaning to their writ-
ing and precludes running short on “what to say” (Eves-Bowden, 2001; Freedman, 1983; Massa, 1997; McLeod, & Oehler, 1980), thus, increasing chances of maintaining and/or increasing students’ motivation to write. Freedman (1983) found that student who find pleasure in a writing topic, find writing to be the less difficult; those who found the writing task more difficult felt less confident about their writing skills. Thus, it is suggested that writing attitude may be related to the writing topic.

7. Build on the writer’s existing writing skills and processes they use. To increase the validity of students’ existing writing skills and processes, use essays created by students from their personal experiences (Eves-Bowden, 2001) or from knowledge gained in their major fields of study (Massa, 1997; Walcott, & Buhr, 1987).


9. Do not focus on grammar in early drafts (Connors & Glenn, 1999; Jackson, 2008). Specifically, give students time to write, time to let their thoughts lie dormant, and time to revise.

10. Praise students for what they have done well (Jackson, 2008).

11. Collect feedback from students about their feelings toward and perceptions about writing (Walcott, & Buhr, 1987). Use feedback information to counsel them about their feelings, give them advice on how to improve their writing discourse, and suggest strategies that yield success in their writing efforts. Help students understand that successful writing is not the product of just more effort (Eves-Bowden, 2001).

12. Consider allowing students to revise writing assignments for higher grades. Revision makes grades “a tool to motivate learning” rather than grades as a final judgment on their product (Connors & Glenn, 1999; Jackson, 2008).

13. The following suggestions were adopted from McLeod, & Oehler (1980)

   a. Develop a definite sense of what we are going to be able to accomplish realistically with students in the time we have them.

   b. Spend time preparing students for each writing assignment. Give students time to write, time to let their thoughts lie dormant, and time to revise.

   c. Assign frequent short writing assignments (a paragraph or a few paragraphs) more than infrequent long papers of several pages. Have students write frequently, but do not compel them to submit each piece of writing. However, occasionally allow them to submit the piece of writing they feel best about.

   d. Make at least some of the writing assignments public. Publish them by passing them around, posting them, putting them in a class or school publication, etc.

   e. Do not evaluate every piece of writing. However, on those papers that are formally evaluated, identify what is to be evaluated ahead of time and tell the stu-
dents. Comment only on the factors of writing to be evaluated, such as punctuation and grammar, sentence structure, or semantics. Ask questions intended to interact with the writer. For example, ask, “what do you think will happen?” Not, “do you think it will happen?” Or, say, “explain to me why you did....” Not, “did you do it.”
Appendix A

1. My perception about the amount or writing requirements in college classes is that
   __a. there should be LESS writing assignments in ALL college classes
   __b. there should be LESS writing assignments in SOME college classes
   __c. there should be MORE writing assignments in ALL college classes
   __d. there should be MORE writing assignments in SOME college classes
   __e. the amount of writing is just about right

2. Select the ONE challenge you wrestle with the most when you write. (SELECT ONLY ONE)
   __a. organizing my thoughts
   __b. difficulty deciding on a topic
   __c. not knowing what to write
   __d. spelling
   __e. mechanics and grammar
   __f. pulling written thoughts together
   __g. making writing flow
   __h. getting started

3. Select the ONE thing you do the most when you confront problems in completing your writing assignment. (SELECT ONLY ONE)
   __a. get help from a friend
   __b. work harder at solving the problem
   __c. write the essay and hope for the best
   __d. putting off the assignment as long as possible
   __e. ask for help from the instructor
   __f. don’t do the assignment
   __g. start over by selecting another topic

4. Should there be a writing competency requirement to earn a baccalaureate degree? For example, requiring a passing score on the TASP, THEA or taking the JLE.
   ___ Yes ___ No

Gender: __Male __Female     Ethnicity: __Am Indian __Afro American __Asian
                     __Hispanic __White

Your THEA writing score________
References
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