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# Faculty expectations and perceptions of writing at a community college

Lynn Kraemer-Siracusa

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**FACULTY EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING AT A  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

by

Lynn Kraemer-Siracusa

A Dissertation

Submitted to the

Department of Educational Leadership

College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

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Doctor of Education

at

Rowan University

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Dissertation Chair: Maria Sudeck, Ph.D.

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Lynn A. Kraemer-Siracusa

## **Dedication**

*I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my husband and children who were a consistent source of motivation and to my parents who set me on the path of pursuing my dreams.*

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## **Abstract**

Lynn Kraemer-Siracusa  
FACULTY EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING AT A  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

2015

Maria Sudeck, Ph.D.  
Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership

The purpose of this multi-method qualitative study was to determine the nature and extent of any gaps that exist between the writing skills faculty members across disciplines at a community college expect their students to utilize in intermediate-level writing intensive courses, their perceptions of the students' general ability to demonstrate those skills, and the importance of the learning outcomes of the two semesters of FYC courses. The faculty members identified a majority of the FYC learning outcomes as having some level of importance to their courses across disciplines. In addition, the directions for the writing assignments used by these faculty members reveal that students are frequently being challenged to analyze, explain, identify, and evaluate. Connections between the required skills, professors' use of class time to teach/review writing, and their perceptions of the students' ability to demonstrate FYC learning outcomes are discussed.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Larger Context**

The rapidly changing world has brought many challenges to education. One of these challenges is how to equip the next generation of students with the tools necessary to succeed. A variety of conceptual frameworks have been developed such as the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills; en Gauge, the North Central Regional Education Laboratory and the Metiri Group; the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise. While there are some differences among the frameworks, they converge on the inclusion of communication skills as a necessary component of education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills also identifies core subjects for the 21<sup>st</sup> century which include English, reading, or language arts (Dede, 2010).

The identification of English, reading and language arts, and communication as important components of education underscores the need to examine current practices and outcomes to insure students are receiving the education they need. Many college professors comment on their students' seeming inability to apply the writing skills they learned in first-year composition (FYC) courses to higher level courses, both in and out of the English Department. Is the problem that the requisite writing skills are not being taught in the FYC courses? Or, is there another explanation? Are colleges providing the necessary scaffolding to support students in the quest to develop their ability to communicate effectively in writing?

Research indicates that students learn best when they are taught within their "zones of proximal development" through the use of explanation, modelling, coaching,

and other forms of structure and scaffolding (Brophy, 2000, p.24). Vygotsky (1978) defines the zone of proximal development as the distance between a student's actual developmental level and the level of potential development under the guidance of an authority or in collaboration with more skilled peers. Vygotsky believes that providing assistance to a student will help her/him successfully achieve tasks s/he could not have achieved on her/his own. Once a student masters the task, the assistance (scaffolding) can be removed and the student should be able to complete the task on her/his own.

Writing is an important skill, one for which there are numerous contexts that people will use in their daily lives. However, different communities use writing in specialized ways, leading to many differences in what constitutes "good" writing (Downs & Wardle, 2007). Students write research papers and essays; business people write memos and speeches; scientists write lab reports; many people send emails and text messages; therefore, being able to express oneself clearly via the written word is an important competency for the 21st century (Dede. 2010). In a recent study conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc. for The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2006), the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing were identified as key areas of concern for employers. Institutions of higher education across the world offer, and often require students to take, composition classes to improve their writing skills, yet students are still graduating with weak skills.

Within the state in which the community college being studied operates, writing courses are required by a range of colleges and universities. For example, most schools within one large, public institution require students to take a minimum of one writing course (expository writing). Another medium-size, public institution, requires students to

take two college-level composition courses to fulfill the general education requirement. A nearby medium-size, private institution, requires students to complete two semesters of writing. All the community colleges in the same Northeastern state have at least two writing courses in their general education requirements. (One of which has three courses.) Even a small for-profit institution requires students to complete at least one writing course. These different examples reflect a pervasive belief in the value of writing.

Despite writing proficiency being identified by colleges and universities as an important skill not only in higher education, but in most careers, and life in general, students often produce written work that does not utilize the skills they have been taught, or utilizes patterns or structures that are not appropriate for the context in which they are writing. In fact, in 2002, 74% of employers and professors rated high school graduates' writing skills, including grammar and spelling, as either "fair" or "poor" (Public Agenda, 2002). This sentiment was echoed by former Harvard President Derek Bok (2006) who worried that many college graduates were not able to write well enough to meet the expectations of employers. Yet, this is not a new trend.

Student writing proficiency has been on the decline since the 1970s, according to Carter and Harper (2013). In fact, the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveals that only about 24% of eighth through twelfth graders communicate effectively in writing, while approximately 52% demonstrate only partial mastery of writing skills (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2011). While the NAEP only studies K-12 students' writing competency, these students then begin college underprepared for writing tasks. In fact, Singleton-Jackson, Lumsden, and Newsom's (2009) recent study of 97 higher education graduate students reveals that graduate

students do not write better than high school seniors. In their study, students enrolled in a higher education course at seven universities in the United States were given the SAT II Writing Test, Part B, which is a normed test, usually given to college-bound high school students. After scoring the tests and converting the raw scores into scaled scores, the researchers found that the graduate students in the sample did not score significantly higher on the test than the high school students, indicating that the graduate students were no more proficient in writing than high school students. In addition to not learning new skills, they have not improved on the skill sets they achieved in high school. Writing skills stagnate.

A potential factor in declining writing ability is technology. Technology has increased the need for people to communicate well via the written word, has reduced the amount of time it takes to write, and has sped up the writing process, often at the expense of an individual's skill acquisition (Carter & Harper, 2013). Students often rely largely on grammar and spelling checkers in computer software, which is problematic. As a result of heavy reliance on technology, students may lack basic spelling and writing skills, perpetuating poor written communication skills (Tyler, 2007). In addition, many software programs exist that help students organize ideas; however, students may not take responsibility for developing organizational skills, and are, instead, relying heavily on outside assistance. Many students have expressed to me disbelief that their computer did not automatically fix the errors in their writing. In a culture of smart phones with auto-correct, students are accustomed to, and perhaps more accepting of, incorrect word choices. Despite having access to quick and easy information, students do not regularly use the available technology to check the accuracy of information they receive. Cohen

and Kisker (2010) also note that technology enables students to employ habits of screen-scanning and skimming, which minimize close reading.

The problem is not unique to the United States. For example, in the United Kingdom, despite a national literacy strategy which increased time spent teaching writing, K-12 students were still found lacking in writing skills (Montgomery, 2008). Montgomery reports that writing was occurring across disciplines, not just in English; however, the transfer of skills taught during Literacy Hour to other classes was not happening. These results suggest that more time spent writing is not enough to noticeably improve writing proficiency. Downs and Wardle (2007) concur that the “learn once/write many” mentality does not work (p. 555). Because Montgomery’s study includes handwriting, spelling, and composition under the umbrella term “writing,” many of the author’s findings may not be entirely consistent with the skills being taught in college, as handwriting is not an aspect of FYC. Yet, there is a common link which is that students, regardless of age, are not applying what they learn in a writing/English classroom to writing in other situations.

The inability to apply writing skills across contexts carries over to higher education. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) (2013), nearly half of all undergraduate students in the United States are enrolled in a community college. As a result, many of our nation’s students are taking FYC courses at community colleges. Therefore, the skills being taught in FYC at community colleges are the skills that these students will bring with them to higher level courses as they complete their education and on to their chosen careers and daily lives. Thus, community colleges’ FYC courses are an important focal point for improving writing ability.

The first challenge in teaching writing stems from the nature of writing studies. Composition is multidisciplinary, not considered its own discipline (Elbow, 2000), and it is often housed in English Departments. Because composition is multidisciplinary, faculty teaching FYC (typically members of English Departments) should introduce and develop foundational writing skills that will enable students to become proficient writers able to succeed in different contexts. However, FYC courses alone are not sufficient to insure successful attainment of writing skills. Dede (2010) notes that writing is a “collective outcome” and all faculty share the responsibility for teaching the necessary skills across subject areas and disciplines (p. 68). DuFour and DuFour (2010) confirm this by explaining that educators must collaboratively engage in dialogue with those who teach the courses above theirs to inform the educators’ understanding of the learning that is necessary for their students.

Downs and Wardle (2007) also address the misconception that FYC can, over the course of one or two semesters, teach college writing – a basic set of fundamental skills that will apply in other college courses as well as in the business world. They argue that students should be taught *about writing* rather than “how to write in college” (p. 553). Because there is no universal academic discourse, students would be better served by a course designed to improve their understanding of rhetoric, writing, language, and literacy as scholarly inquiry (Downs & Wardle, 2007). They argue that teaching writing as an Introduction to Writing Studies would provide a scaffold for writing across the curriculum and writing intensive courses.

In order to achieve proficiency, students must be supported in the development of written communication. Writing is a part of learning and should be utilized in a variety of

courses/contexts to aid in both skill development and course content mastery. Ambrose et al. (2010) highlight the importance of fostering connections between students' knowledge and skills and contexts in which they do or do not apply. In fact, Bosse and Faulconer (2008) note that purposeful writing in math classes results in deeper learning of mathematical concepts. However, to help students develop mastery, faculty teaching all courses that require written communication must help students understand the conditions and contexts in which their skills and knowledge are relevant (Ambrose et al., 2010). Thus, a connection between FYC courses/faculty and higher level writing-intensive courses/faculty is vital to fostering students' understanding and ability to apply what they are learning. Writing is not independent of context.

Colleges have made numerous attempts to address declining writing ability over the years. Alter and Adkins (2001) trace many of the collegiate-level attempts to address the decline in students' writing ability such as implementing Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC), working to develop higher standards in high schools, creating resource centers to provide assistance with writing, offering developmental writing courses, and implementing various changes in pedagogy. Despite these efforts, many college students continue to graduate with substandard writing skills (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Bok, 2006). As Bosse and Faulconer (2008) note, there is often ambiguity in efforts to increase writing across the curriculum, resulting in assignments that require the students to write, but do not enhance the students' learning of the course content. Thus, faculty members play a role in the declining skill level (Arum & Roksa, 2011). However, as Law (2001) explains, colleges and universities that infuse writing in the curriculum campus-wide do so to reinforce and expand upon the skills students learn in FYC (in

Haswell, 2001). Insuring that goal is met is important. Unfortunately, faculty trained in English studies tend to teach humanities-based writing, writing as it is realized in their own discipline, often at the expense of other disciplines (Downs & Wardle, 2007).

Other suggestions for addressing the problem of declining writing proficiency include examining the intensity and size of freshman-level composition classes (Carter & Harper, 2013; Downs & Wardle, 2007); placing greater emphasis on reading and writing skills in all levels of college courses, thus debunking the myth that first-year composition provides a one-time fix (Carter & Harper, 2013; Jewell, 2004; Bosse & Faulconer, 2008); and utilizing peer editing strategies in class (Carter & Harper, 2013; Stowers & Barker, 2003). Additionally, it has been suggested that colleges should consider developing writing courses in specific disciplines and providing students with experience in writing and an understanding of writing as a scholarly pursuit (Jewell, 2004; Bosse & Faulconer, 2008; Downs & Wardle, 2007).

Along these lines, St. John's University utilizes a Summer Faculty Writing Institute, during which faculty members who teach writing spend time with other writing faculty practicing and receiving feedback from peers on their own writing. The intention behind the program is that if faculty members spend time working on their own writing, they will be more effective in encouraging their students to do the same (Geller, 2011). Inherent in this practice is the building of a community of writers who can support each other. This involves a change in mindset. Writing is not an isolating experience, and should not be taught in an isolated context.

While institutions of higher education try to improve writing proficiency, they also play a role in the declining skills of students. One reason for an inability to

successfully transfer writing skills between contexts is related to decreasing education budgets: increasing class sizes. Increases in class size result in fewer essay-style examinations due to the time-consuming nature of grading essays. The end result is less writing experience for students (Carter & Harper, 2013). Grade inflation also has negatively impacted student writing because students are not alerted to their weaknesses and are passed when, perhaps, they should not be (Carter & Harper, 2013), which reflects the “disengagement compact” between faculty and students (Kuh, 2003). Kuh (2003) explains the existence of an unstated agreement that faculty will not ask students to produce a lot of work so the faculty do not have to assess a lot of work. Kuh believes this “compact” is evident in the fact that many students receive high grades for minimal work.

An additional factor that impacts colleges’ ability to provide instruction is funding. As funding for higher education is reduced, ways to do more with less must be identified. Moor, Jensen-Hart, and Hooper (2012) point out that college budgets have created a need for strategies that are accessible to financially-strapped departments that also often have limited human resources. One northeastern state’s Commission on Higher Education (2010) acknowledges that in light of the state’s financial constraints, it is important for institutions of higher education to continue to find the most efficient ways to provide the best education for students. Change can be costly, not to mention time-consuming; yet, scaffolding skills from course to course can be an inexpensive way to improve students’ skill development (Cohen, 1987).

In addition to institutional factors, writing poses challenges for assessment, partly because writing is a skill that develops incrementally over time. Students must

continually work over an extended period of time to improve their writing. One semester or even one year will not necessarily result in full skill development.

One challenge for students stems from the fact that the context for and language used in writing varies greatly from discipline to discipline (and even within a department/discipline) (McCarthy, 1987; Downs & Wardle, 2007). For example, Armstrong and Paulson (2008) discuss the great variation in terms associated with peer review, a common classroom activity. They identify numerous terms that seemingly refer to the same activity: peer evaluation, peer response, peer editing, and peer critique. They also highlight the wide range of practices that fall under this umbrella term such as students responding to formal questions, responding informally, looking for surface-level grammatical errors, and/or commenting on the ideas presented in the paper, to name a few. These differences can be confusing and may seem arbitrary to students (Dombek & Herndon, 2004). As such, clearly defined terminology and clearly expressed goals within the community are necessary to enhance a student's understanding of a concept (Falconer, 2007). Downs and Wardle (2007) note that despite some general features of writing being shared across disciplines, these features are often realized differently in different disciplines or courses. Therefore, faculty members across disciplines should engage in dialogue regarding what skills they are teaching and how those skills are used.

An attempt to articulate a general framework for first-year composition courses nationwide was developed by a group of writing program administrators. The group created the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, a document which identifies - based on common outcomes, theory, and practice - a general guideline for what students should know and be able to do after completing first-year composition

regardless of “institutional home, student demographics, and instructor characteristics” (Yancey, 2001, p. 321). The WPA Outcomes Statement lists 22 outcomes organized by category: rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and writing; processes; and knowledge of conventions (Yancey, 2001). The document is an attempt to define the writing skills necessary for students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century while providing individual colleges flexibility in the adoption of their own course objectives.

Each FYC course has specific course objectives, identifying skills students should be able to demonstrate upon completion of the course. As Bloom (1956) explains, objectives “are explicit formulations of the ways in which students are expected to be changed by the educative process” (p.26). Individual FYC classrooms are organized around these intended outcomes, but as Redden (2005) notes, the complex classroom system is part of the larger school system with components that must interact. Because writing is not discipline-specific, the objectives will most effectively be achieved when the components of the larger system are balanced with those of the individual classrooms (Redden, 2005). In terms of writing proficiency, the outcomes of FYC courses must align with expectations for student writing in higher level courses across disciplines. As Kuh (2003) notes, the more practice and feedback students receive on their writing and problem solving, the more proficient they will become. Much of that practice and feedback comes from instructors other than the students’ FYC faculty member, but without some broad sense of writing as a scholarly pursuit and without some consistency, the feedback may not be meaningful to the student (Downs & Wardle, 2007).

As Cohen and Kisker (2010) note, curriculum is designed for the acculturation of students; therefore, institutions of higher education respond to changes in society,

although not always quickly or readily. Over time, institutions' purposes or areas of emphasis may shift, leading to accretion in courses offered. This is where curriculum alignment comes in. As Lezotte (1996) explains, curriculum alignment is a research-based concept that, when successfully applied in an educational setting, will result in improvements in student achievement. He suggests that curriculum alignment should begin with the desired outcomes and then work backward to create a coherent sequence of courses or instructional units. He asserts that when faculty members know what standards will be used to judge students' levels of proficiency, they are better able to support the students as they work toward developing the necessary knowledge and skills. Compounding the challenge is the fact that little research exists regarding which genres will best serve students' learning (Downs & Wardle, 2007).

### **Local Context**

Community College (CC) is a suburban, two-year college located in the Northeast United States. Community College enrolls approximately 9,000 students (CC Fact Book, 2013). At Community College, students who are enrolled in FYC have either submitted requisite scores on the SAT, PSAT, HSPA, or ACT; successfully completed the Accuplacer test to demonstrate knowledge of the requisite reading and writing skills; or they have successfully completed the developmental reading and writing course sequence, certifying their ability to read and write at a college level. They have begun to cross the bridge from high school to higher education. However, we must help them continue on the path of improving their skills and ultimately on to writing competency in their majors and future careers/daily lives.

As students enroll in course work, often following the program of study guide for the particular degree or certificate program they are pursuing, it is easy for students to view their education as a checklist of required courses rather than an integrated program of interrelated series of courses, experiences, and ideas. Faculty members can also easily fall into silos within their own departments, focusing largely on their own course content without much consideration of what skills students are being taught in other courses. One important area in which connections across departments, disciplines, and/or courses is necessary is writing.

To begin the conversation between faculty members across disciplines with regard to writing, an understanding of the learning outcomes of CC's FYC courses (two courses during different semesters) and of intermediate-level writing-intensive course faculty members' expectations and perceptions of students' writing skills must be identified. Examining the expectations (for students' writing ability and experience) of community college faculty teaching intermediate-level courses as determined by surveys of said faculty and analyzing the writing assignments as well as syllabi for these courses can provide insight into the content being taught in FYC courses as well as its connections to and distinctions from writing in other disciplines/courses which can be used to create a dialogue between faculty members and create a community of writers (Geller, 2011).

The writing skills that are the focus of this research come from CC's learning outcomes for FYC. They are: (1) the ability to consider an essay's purpose, voice, and audience; (2) to identify and focus an appropriate essay topic; (3) to develop assertions with supporting details; (4) to build coherent paragraphs; (5) to create a functional essay

structure; (6) to respond critically to source readings; (7) to synthesize information from sources; (8) to observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions; (9) to accurately document material from sources; (10) to frame, and communicate in writing, an interpretation of a literary text; and (11) to use basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature.

Based on the research presented in Chapter 2, it is evident that college students are not mastering written communication. Organizational theory provides a basis for understanding what is happening. Argyris (1990) questions why human beings persist in proliferating errors when they do not purposefully “design and produce” errors (p. 9). He notes, however, that automatic or spontaneous actions are taken for granted and often not carefully examined. In light of this, changes must be made in what Argyris (1990) refers to as Model I Theory-in-Use. While Community College’s writing-intensive courses and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program reflect the espoused theory (of the college) that writing is important and relevant in all academic areas, the theories-in-use (of individual faculty members) may not accurately reflect the espoused theory.

Because the college is made up of a diverse group of faculty, administrators, staff, and students, institutional beliefs may not always reflect the beliefs of the individuals who make up the college. Therefore, an examination of the material culture – writing assignments from intermediate-level writing-intensive courses and syllabi – in comparison to faculty members’ responses to a survey about their espoused beliefs and theories-in-use with regard to teaching and evaluating student writing and skills was used to potentially identify inconsistencies that could be resulting in lost opportunities to improve students’ written communication skills. The examination of material culture

could also open lines of communication between faculty members who may not come into contact with each other with any regularity.

At CC, faculty members who teach a WAC course (see Appendix A) must design/use writing assignments that total a minimum of 1,200 words and require critical thinking. At the end of each semester, faculty members must submit their writing assignment/s along with representative samples of student writing to the Dean of their academic school. However, thus far, the current system of assessing the writing-intensive courses has not resulted in any changes to the courses or in documented proof of student improvement. What is needed is a wider view that reveals the faculty members' perspective on the skills necessary for success in their discipline as well as their beliefs regarding where these skills are taught and learned.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to determine the nature and extent of any gaps that existed between the writing skills faculty members across disciplines at Community College, a two-year college in a suburban area of the Northeast United States, expected their students to utilize in intermediate-level writing-intensive courses, their perceptions of the students' general ability to demonstrate those skills, and the importance of the learning outcomes of the two semesters of FYC courses.

Community College offers writing intensive courses in art, business, communications, English, film, health and human performance, humanities, math, philosophy, political science, and sociology. Through careful analysis of assignments designed and used by faculty members who taught courses designated as writing intensive, the researcher was looking for skill sets that could be introduced and developed

or supported in FYC as well as ways to help students successfully transfer the skills they learn into different contexts. Analysis of course syllabi was used to determine the importance of writing in the students' overall final grade. This study was used to open a dialogue between faculty members across disciplines and to make recommendations for changes to the current FYC program. Ultimately, FYC could be utilized in the scaffolding process to better prepare students for writing assignments in higher level writing-intensive courses.

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks answers to the following questions:

Research Question One - What expectations do faculty members, who teach intermediate-level writing-intensive courses (courses designated by the college in which students must generate a minimum of 1200 written words in graded work) at the community college, have for students' writing proficiencies?

Research Question Two – Which of the learning outcomes of First Year Composition do the faculty members identify as connected to their intermediate-level writing-intensive courses?

Research Question Three - What are the faculty members' perceptions of the students' ability to demonstrate writing proficiency in the intermediate-level writing-intensive courses, and are there gaps between the expectations and perceptions of these faculty members and the learning outcomes/goals of First Year Composition?

The data gathered through this research was used to identify the expectations of various faculty members who taught courses with a writing component. Determining

which written communication skills faculty members were expecting their students to possess prior to enrolling in an intermediate-level course in each discipline provided a larger framework/context for teachers of FYC. If the research revealed a common expectation of intermediate-level faculty that was not currently addressed in FYC, this knowledge would be used to inform a revision of FYC to better serve the higher level courses and students' skill development. In addition, if the research revealed discipline-specific expectations for written communications, this knowledge would be used to clearly draw a line between skills taught in FYC and skills that must be taught by the individual faculty members in each discipline. Ultimately, the goal is to provide students of Community College with the best opportunities to continue improving their level of writing proficiency beyond FYC.

According to Fullan (2007), people do not make complex changes simply because they are told to do so. This applies both to students and faculty members. Students require continuous practice and experience to improve their writing, while faculty members require opportunities to reflect on the potential to make connections between current course material and students' prior knowledge and experiences. This research provided data that was used to open discussions between all departments regarding the teaching of writing skills and writing as a scholarly pursuit, which is not a one-size-fits-all process. These discussions enabled the campus community to identify and make clear distinctions between what was and should be taught in FYC and what must be taught or reviewed in higher level courses. This discourse also aided in developing a community of writers sharing experiences, expectations, and terminology. Most departments function in silos focused primarily on their discipline. The challenge is incorporating the teaching of

writing into all the academic departments with a level of consistency that will aid students' ability to transfer writing skills from one context to another.

While much research focuses on the large number of first-year students who require remedial work in writing and the gap between high school and college-level writing (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010), there is not much research devoted to the consistency in the teaching of writing skills within community colleges. With close to 50% of all college students enrolling in community colleges, community colleges are largely responsible for providing the base knowledge and beginning skill acquisition in writing. We must also help students make deep connections between knowledge they already possess and knowing when or how to use that knowledge in different contexts (Ambrose et al., 2010). In order to achieve this goal, faculty who teach intermediate-level writing-intensive courses must recognize their role in continuing to develop students' ability to effectively communicate in writing. And, faculty members who teach FYC courses must be involved in an ongoing dialogue with the intermediate-level faculty who will continue to develop the skills students have begun to work on. Without two-way communication, effective teaching of written communication will not be achieved.

### **Scope**

This study was conducted at Community College, a two-year college located in a suburban area in the Northeast United States. The total enrollment for Fall 2014 was 9,000 students of which 76.5% were White (CC Fast Facts, 2014).

While writing assignments are common in many college classrooms, this study focused only on classes that were specifically designated as writing-intensive and that

were considered second-year courses (intermediate-level). Although there were a few courses designated as writing-intensive at the first-year (introductory) level, students in these courses are more likely to be concurrently enrolled in first-year composition, or may not have taken it at all. With the exception of a few courses (14 courses in disciplines other than English), first-year composition is not a pre-requisite for most writing-intensive courses at CC. However, by the time students reach course work at the intermediate level, most of them are expected to have completed FYC. While the college does not have a specific requirement for when students enroll in FYC, advisors encourage students to enroll in the first semester course of FYC during their first semester, unless remediation is required (Connolly, personal communication, 2014).

This research is informed by organizational change theory. Institutions of higher education must adapt and change, yet they tend to do so slowly. As community colleges begin to focus more on assessment and student outcomes, gathering data on multidisciplinary writing practices and beliefs can be used to inform changes and to gain the support of larger groups of faculty members. No program or system is perfect, yet large-scale changes are slow in taking shape and are often difficult to maintain. However, Fullan (2007) asserts that, under the right conditions, teachers are willing to adopt changes at the classroom level. One of the conditions he identifies is having adequate information. This research study sought to gather that adequate information.

## **Specialized Vocabulary**

The way people use language often depends upon the context in which it is used. This is one of the challenges facing students working to improve their competency in written communication. While some of the terms used in this research can be used in various ways, what follows is a list of important terms used here and an explanation of the way in which they are used.

*First-year composition (FYC)* – The introductory curriculum designed to introduce students to college-level writing. At Community College, two courses make up first-year composition.

*Writing-intensive courses* – These are courses across disciplines at Community College that have been designated by the college as requiring writing activities designed to enhance learning. These courses require students to produce a minimum of 1,200 words of graded writing in a format that is appropriate to the discipline.

*Writing proficiency* – What constitutes competent writing varies widely depending upon context. This study does not attempt to address a core set of skills or a specific level of mastery of those skills that would be deemed proficient. Instead, the term is being used to refer to the extent to which student writing achieves its goal in a given context.

*Intermediate-level courses* – These courses are typically second-year courses. These courses often continue to introduce students to concepts and terminology of the discipline that were introduced in introductory-level courses, but they tend to be more narrow in focus than the lower level (introductory) courses which assume minimal or no prior experience with the subject matter.

## **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the limited number of sections of intermediate-level writing-intensive courses offered each semester. Certain disciplines such as film and humanities often only run one section of an intermediate-level course per semester. However, these courses are often taught by the same faculty member semester after semester, making the analysis of the assignment representative of the college's offerings. In addition, due to fluctuations in enrollment, courses can also be canceled, potentially resulting in a department not offering a writing-intensive course during a semester or year.

An additional limitation stemmed from the nature of document analysis – the data is limited to the document that exists and may be incomplete (University of Texas, 2011). Faculty members who teach writing-intensive courses must submit (to their Dean) copies of their writing assignments and representative student writing samples each semester. CC's WAC Policy requires students to produce at least 1,200 words of graded writing that is appropriate to the discipline (CC Policies and Procedures). These assignments will be used as the basis for determining what skills students were being asked to demonstrate in the intermediate-level writing-intensive courses. To overcome some of the challenge of document analysis, a multi-method qualitative research study was employed to incorporate additional sources of information to provide a better understanding of the documents and the expectations that underlie their purpose.

Finally, this study focused primarily on the teachers' expectations for students. It analyzed the approach to writing employed by faculty members across disciplines at Community College in attempt to identify gaps that may exist between CC's FYC and

those expectations. This study cannot provide insight into students' opinions about the assignments or how they approach writing across contexts.

This paper is arranged as follows. Chapter 2 provides a review of the existing literature on the transferability of writing skills. Chapter 3 describes the research methods, data gathering strategies, and research plan. Chapter 4 presents the findings, what was learned from the research, and how it reflects the literature. Chapter 5, the concluding section, examines the implications of the research and makes suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Literacy skills of reading and writing have long been tied to schooling. Bazerman et al., (2005) note that reading and writing are not easily taught, but rather require an extended focus. Despite this knowledge, they explain that along with the rise in departmental research universities came a separation between subject matter and language/rhetoric, resulting in less instruction in written communication. Partially as a result of this separation, writing was taken for granted, and when problems or weaknesses in writing were noted, the fault was placed on the literacy instructor or the individual student (Bazerman et al., 2005).

Through my experiences as a student writer and my work in teaching both literature and composition as well as student success courses, my beliefs about how students learn to write and utilize those skills have been shaped. Often FYC is used as a scapegoat for students' weak skills, as Bazerman et al. (2005) note; however, placing blame does not help students develop the requisite skills. Rather, the nature and extent of institutional gaps in the support/teaching of written communication must be identified, examined, and minimized to best support the developing student writer. While much attention has been given to the gap that exists between high school graduation requirements and FYC expectations, less attention has been directed toward the expectations for student writing after completing the FYC courses.

Identifying an expected level of writing proficiency that should be achieved by students prior to enrolling in their intermediate-level courses will provide a guideline for college faculty across disciplines regarding a "base" level of skill that can be expected of students in intermediate-level courses. This base can then be built upon. Understanding

the expected level of writing proficiency would also benefit faculty members working to transition students from high school-level writing to college-level writing through to discipline-specific and/or professional writing, helping eliminate some of the potential mismatch between a professor's expectations for student knowledge/skills and the actual knowledge/skills students possess (Ambrose et al., 2010). From the students' perspective, if faculty members have expectations that are aligned with FYC objectives, students will be able to better determine what constitutes appropriate writing within various courses/ contexts (McCarthy, 1987), thus enabling them to produce competent writing. As student writers develop, faculty members must be able to support and expand upon the students' skills by meeting the students where they are.

Being able to communicate effectively in writing requires students to demonstrate a variety of skills. For example, students' ability to write in an academic style reveals their understanding of the material, while being able to write in the style of their chosen field demonstrates an even higher level of organization/skill, reflecting the style and values of the field of study (Hamilton et al., 2010). However, Elbow (1991) argues that we should not be satisfied if students cannot express their ideas *without* using the language of their chosen discipline. Having the ability or flexibility to write both in academic/professional discourse and "everyday" language is also an important skill, one that might better satisfy employers (Elbow, 1991, p.137). Being able to accomplish these differing objectives requires ongoing practice.

The research on developing writing skills reveals that there are numerous definitions of academic discourse, its expectations, and its real world value, which pose a challenge to creating opportunities for writing skill transfer to occur. Research on

knowledge transfer also reveals challenges facing both teachers and their students in achieving transfer. Opening a dialogue between FYC faculty and other faculty teaching writing intensive courses creates expanded opportunities to help students identify and activate prior knowledge that is appropriate in a new context.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**Writing theory.** Peter Elbow (1991) defines academic discourse as writing that provides reasons and evidence from the perspective of an author who acknowledges her/his own interest and writes with the interests of her/his audience in mind. He notes that this definition also reflects nonacademic discourse and can be problematic because even if students achieve the goals of his definition, they still may not produce writing that reflects all the elements that their audience and/or professors are looking for. His discussion of the challenges inherent in defining academic discourse underscores the obstacles in teaching writing skills to students. For example, in FYC, when students are being introduced to academic discourse, they are often receiving an introduction to the discourse of one discipline, often dependent on the instructor's area of expertise (Downs & Wardle, 2007).

Yet, the value of writing proficiently is evident. Writing is a process by which students can learn, although not all writing leads to learning. Elbow (2000) notes that writing is not simply one thing. He believes that "everyone can write" (p. xiv), and everyone does write. Within the education system, students must learn to understand and engage in the process of composition: pre-writing, writing, and rewriting. The process approach to writing helps students gain a deeper understanding of subject matter as they develop their writing skills, and begin to understand writing as a scholarly pursuit

(Downs & Wardle, 2007). Elbow (2000) also points out that teaching students to write helps them find their voices, trust themselves, and to be more forceful and articulate in their writing. To achieve these goals, many colleges and universities have implemented policies infusing writing in all areas of the curriculum.

Since the 1870s when Harvard created a first-year writing course to address cultural concerns about literacy, the continuation of FYC has often been supported by its use-value (the usefulness of a commodity) (Brauer, 2009). Brauer (2009) notes that the current beliefs about FYC courses reflect their status as “service courses,” intended to introduce academic discourse and prepare students for writing within disciplines, despite FYC’s disconnect from the rest of the curriculum. This disconnect is compounded by differences in the use of language and linguistic conventions. McCarthy (1987) explains some of the differences in use of language by highlighting the social function of language. Her research focuses on the students’ ability to identify and use the appropriate rules of discourse – which can be complex across disciplines. She identifies the importance of following the accepted linguistic conventions of each community or discipline within one’s writing. Yet, determining the appropriate conventions for a new writing task can be daunting.

One way to help students develop an understanding of the rules of discourse is by providing them with an understanding of various genres. Miller (1984) explains that genre can help clarify how “we encounter, interpret, react to, and create particular texts” (p. 151). Dean (2008) notes that genre theory defines writing as inclusive of all types of writing: writing on paper, on phones, and on computers. These different forums for writing also complicate the task of determining the appropriate conventions for the

situation. In addition, there is some disagreement over what constitutes a specific genre: similarities in strategies or form, similarities in audience, similarities in modes of thinking, and/or similarities in rhetorical situations (Miller, 1984). Complicating the distinction of genres is that elements of one genre appear in others. Accordingly, writing also includes the writer and his/her reason for writing (Dean, 2008; Brauer, 2009; Miller, 1984).

People are communicating in writing frequently, and must be able write in a wide range of contexts, not just in the college classroom. Elbow (2000) highlights the distinct nature of composition by explaining that there is no single theory, methodology, or paradigm for composition. Others point out that there is no specific definition of academic writing (Downs & Wardle, 2007), and the definition of what it means to write is changing as well (Yancey, 2004). As Yancey (2004) mentions, perhaps FYC should focus on preparing students to become part of the writing public. She notes that FYC should be both an entrance to writing and a gateway on to other experiences and situations. Therefore, skill transfer must occur to enable people to write effectively and clearly in different situations.

**Skill transfer.** The concept of transfer comes from psychological literature on learning theory (Perkins & Salomon, 2004). Skill transfer is defined as the appropriate application of a skill learned in one context to a different context (Ambrose et al., 2010; Perkins & Salomon, 2004; Kaniel, Licht, Peled, 2000). Perkins and Salomon (2004) express the importance of skill transfer in education. They argue that if the transfer of learning is at risk, so is the point and process of schooling.

Transfer of learning is an intricate process. There are two types of transfer: near and far. Far transfer occurs when the contexts are dissimilar, while near transfer occurs when the contexts are similar. While Perkins and Salomon (2004) note that there is no clear dividing line between near and far transfer, it is the far transfer that is most important to education because we want students to be able to use what they have learned in a classroom in contexts that may intuitively appear to be vastly different than the environment in which they learned the skill.

**How learning happens.** Following Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy provides a structure for the mastery of writing skills. Tasks that require higher order thinking cannot be successfully completed before students have developed their knowledge and comprehension of the foundational information. Once the foundation has been formed, students must then be guided in the application of the basics to various contexts, enabling them to transfer what was learned in one context to another context.

Educational theorists Perkins and Salomon (1988) define transfer as going "beyond ordinary learning" (p. 22). Bloom's Taxonomy provides guidelines for this. Each of the six categories of cognitive domain as identified by Bloom – knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation – moves from concrete to abstract, and each level is dependent on mastery of the previous level (Krathwohl, 2002). Anderson et al.'s (2001) revision of Bloom's Taxonomy has renamed and slightly altered the levels of the taxonomy. The revised levels, lowest to highest, are: Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating. With this model in mind, students must first gain the necessary knowledge and comprehension skills with regard to writing before being asked to perform more cognitively challenging tasks such as

transferring skills from one context to another. Perkins and Salomon (1988) highlight the need for students to develop a “data base” of knowledge and skills that can be used in multiple contexts, both in and out of school.

### **Themes from the Literature**

**Student learning.** Brent (2011) notes that there is growing evidence that what students learn in their writing courses is not easily applied to writing assignments in other courses. If writing is taught without strategy and a focus on process, transfer does not occur (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000). Brent (2011) cites numerous studies that reveal a gap between what students learn and what employers expect. However, he notes that studies reveal that the attempt to teach “a series of idealized forms” or skills that are valued in the workforce does not make students better prepared for the work place (Brent, 2011). A deeper level of understanding is necessary for students to be able to successfully apply what they have learned.

Perkins and Salomon (1988) note that researchers studying skill transfer have often focused on metacognition. They also note that transfer requires the ability to decontextualize the skill or strategy (Perkins & Salomon, 1988). Therefore, an important challenge facing teachers stems from the fact that it is the students’ thoughts and actions that result in learning. For example, Jewell (2004) notes that students must develop a metacognitive framework for writing, one that helps them view themselves as writers using tools to deliver a message, rather than focusing primarily on the content of their writing. Because metacognition is a higher-order skill, many undergraduates have yet to develop it, and they must work on its development. Kaniel, Licht, and Peled (2000) explain the necessary interaction between the learner, task, and strategy involved in

problem solving. They point out that in new situations, learners must rely on metacognitive knowledge, monitoring, control, and feedback to recognize task similarities. Using this strategy results in what they call high road transfer, the deliberate abstraction of a skill from one context to another. However, this is a challenging process, not one that simply occurs on its own (Perkins & Salomon, 2004).

Ambrose et al. (2010) question why students often cannot apply what they have learned and why students often hold fast to misconceptions. Teachers cannot simply present material that will automatically result in all students learning the requisite writing skills. Research has shown that no transfer takes place in the absence of numerous similarities in the learned task and the transfer task, showing that learning is highly specific (Thorndike, 1906; Pea & Kurland, 1984; Scribner & Cole, 1981). Ambrose et al. (2010) later note that building on a shaky foundation or not addressing misconceptions in students' knowledge results in less student mastery of the material. Unfortunately, as Reiff & Bawarshi (2011) point out, students often do not recognize how they are using and applying skills learned previously. Therefore, faculty members must help students become aware of how they are applying previously learned skills, both appropriately or inappropriately. Providing students with cues that help them identify connections to what they have previously learned (backward reaching) or ways in which they will later use what they are learning (forward reaching) will help concept transfer occur (Brent, 2011).

When a person is able to use previously learned ideas in a new context, positive transfer has occurred (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000). Positive transfer is aided by task similarity. One way to help students begin to recognize commonalities is by helping them understand and recognize various genres of writing. Students should develop an

understanding of genres, how they work, and strategies for using the genres so the students can build on these concepts as they move from context to context (Brent, 2011). At an even higher level, students must develop the metacognitive ability to clarify the goals and problems of the specific writing task, control the sequence of operations while writing, read their writing self-critically (with the goals of the task in mind), select task-appropriate content, and adapt their writing to the intended audience (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000). These are big challenges for students.

Kaniel, Licht, and Peled's (2000) study of 136 students who were divided into four groups, each receiving different types of intervention (two groups received metacognitive instruction and two groups received traditional instruction), reveals that the students who received metacognitive instruction had an advantage over the students who received traditional instruction. The students who received metacognitive instruction used an instructional program that provided guidelines/training for the writing process including controlled implementation of the stages and tools of writing used by skilled writers as well as guidance for developing self-monitoring skills. The traditional instruction groups received instruction related to the composition elements of title; opening; body; paragraph structure, types, and order; and ending. Their research reveals that beginning writers are better supported by being reminded of the metacognitive practices and questioning that goes along with the writing process as well as task-specific thinking. Elements of composition are not enough.

Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) conducted a study focused on how "evoked genres" triggered students' use of prior knowledge and skills in a new context. What they found was that there was little skill crossover between contexts. Their research suggests the

need for a close look at FYC as their study revealed that students who do not hold the same understanding of an assignment/genre as their teacher may incorrectly apply prior knowledge in a new context. Their research identifies a distinction between “boundary crossers,” students who are willing to assume the role of learner, and “boundary guarders,” who stick more closely to the rules they have previously learned (p. 314). Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) note that a student’s level of confidence in his/her writing ability did not necessarily translate into ability to produce a text in the assigned genre.

Writing involves high-level decision making processes (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000) that require strategy. Improving writing proficiency is an ongoing practice, but students have varying levels of interest in improving their skills (Stowers & Barker, 2003; Mayer, 2002). Brent (2011) explains that despite similarities in writing tasks, the motivation for completing the task varies within different activity systems (demonstrating knowledge to a professor for a grade vs. earning a living). Situated learning theory explains that rhetorical skills, often highly-context dependent, can only truly be learned in the context in which they are used daily (Brent, 2011). In addition, often students retain “stock rules of thumb” without understanding the deeper context in which these rules are relevant (Lovoy, 2004, p.11). Their lack of clear understanding results in the repetition of patterns of writing without showing improvement or adaptation. As highlighted by Ambrose et al. (2010), students’ prior knowledge as well as how they organize knowledge by making connections between pieces of knowledge and/or experiences influences how they apply what they learn. Thus, it is important for instructors to guide students in effectively activating their prior knowledge (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Another challenge in transferring writing skills stems from the fact that basic language is easier to learn than sophisticated language which expresses complex ideas (Falconer, 2007). Falconer (2007) notes, however, that language often lacks the power to make distinctions between complex concepts clear. Bazerman et al., (2005) identify the problematic practice of separating the content from the competence in writing. Students must be made aware of the need to precisely articulate ideas. This reflects Ambrose et al.'s (2010) belief that students must learn skills in components, practice incorporating those skills to become more fluent, and eventually determine when to apply those skills. In order to achieve this, students must learn to monitor their own approach to learning. Students must develop an internal locus of control so they come to believe they can solve problems on their own (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000).

**Faculty's role.** Moor, Jensen-Hart, and Hooper (2012) point out that faculty members' understanding of what their expectations for quality writing are and the communication of these criteria to students often are not the same. They note that faculty members may not teach students the desired skills, not because faculty members do not know the skills, but rather because the faculty members do not recognize that the style of writing they require is fundamentally different from what students may have learned in FYC. As Applebee (1984) notes, faculty members also often do not provide instructional support for writing. However, transfer must become part of the objectives and learning activities of courses if it is a desired outcome (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000). If faculty members teaching in the disciplines do not teach writing skills and clarify both the similarities and differences in writing expectations, how can students be expected to make a successful transition?

Writing instructors also face challenges in teaching writing. Wardle (2004) found that many writing instructors struggled to teach various academic disciplinary genres. FYC instructors often are not experts in writing in a variety of disciplines; therefore, they tend to teach the writing style of their own experience/expertise, often the humanities (Downs & Wardle, 2007). Unfortunately, as Elbow (2000) points out, often faculty who incorporate writing in their courses (beyond FYC) do not define themselves as writing teachers, so teaching writing is not a primary goal. Other research has also shown that writing instructors, who are part of learning communities, paired with faculty from different disciplines struggle to learn highly specialized genres and communication styles of the specialized disciplines (Bayer, Curto, & Kriley, 2005; Cross & Wills, 2005). Researchers note that the connection between writing and expertise in a discipline is complex (Jones & Comprone, 1993; Langer, 1992; Petraglia, 1995); this relationship is best taught/modelled by faculty members who are experts in the discipline. Simply being able to write well is not enough.

**Differing contexts.** In her 2004 address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Yancey identified the vast changes taking place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with regard to writing. She notes that writers are now self-organizing into technology-driven communities and learning to think together, organize, and write without formal instruction. People have a rhetorical situation, a purpose, and an audience, and they are choosing to write. Yet, writing must be evaluated by the standards of the particular community for which it was written (McCarthy, 1987), and writing in an online community is not the same as writing in a college classroom or in a profession. However, it is encouraging that people are choosing to write for personal reasons. MacDonald

(1987) clarifies one distinction between these forums for writing. She believes that all academic writing stems from problem-solving activities. There are, however, different approaches, based on discipline, to defining problems.

Another factor that impacts students' writing proficiency is the difference in expectations across disciplines. Hooper and Butler (2008) question whether the writing competencies that are taught in FYC courses are sufficient to support students through discipline-specific courses. Compounding the problem is that many students believe that grammar, sentence structure, and patterns of organization do not matter in courses outside the English Department; content takes precedence over style and mechanics (Jewell, 2004). MacDonald (1987) explains that discipline-specific variations in writing also have a range of implications for students. She notes that formal conventions of writing such as using third person are not as troubling for inexperienced writers as are the internalized assumptions that are unique to writing in different fields. It is these internalized assumptions that must be identified, examined, and modelled for students. Freedman, Adam, and Smart's (1994) study revealed that students enrolled in a financial analysis course were able to successfully produce written texts that mirrored the type of written documents they would produce in the field without specific writing instruction. What the students did receive was a substantial amount of modeling of the desired language and tasks in the classroom environment (Freedman, Adam & Smart, 1994).

An additional challenge stems from differing types of knowledge. Ambrose et al. (2010) highlight the important distinction between "declarative knowledge" and "procedural knowledge" (p. 18). Declarative knowledge refers to knowing facts or concepts that can be stated. Procedural knowledge refers to knowing when and how to

apply various solutions, approaches, or theories in a given context. Bloom (1956) refers to this ability in his taxonomy as “intellectual abilities and skills” (p. 38). Students may have enough procedural knowledge to function in a specific situation (FYC), but not a deep enough grasp to transfer that skill to a different situation.

Because learning and memory are partially dependent on context, performance in a concept-learning task can result in differences in near transfer and far transfer of the concept (DiVesta & Peverly, 1984). Ambrose et al., (2010) discuss how college composition courses can contribute to the phenomenon of knowledge from one disciplinary context obstructing learning in other disciplinary contexts. They point out that students often think of writing as a “‘one-size-fits all’ skill” and are not able to choose the appropriate writing conventions based on the context in which they are writing (Ambrose et al., 2010). In addition, writing is often not clearly situated as part of the larger college, but merely as a subset of FYC (Brent, 2011). Therefore, because different disciplines require different and additional writing skills from those taught in FYC, students often require direct instruction to successfully transfer previously learned skills and develop content-specific skills (Bosse & Faulconer, 2008). Monroe (2003) counters this notion by pointing out that responsibility for writing should reside with the faculty who are the authorities on what constitutes quality writing within their disciplines, highlighting for students that writing matters. Practicing a skill in a variety of contexts should improve its transferability (DiVesta & Peverly, 1984). As students learn to understand writing in a variety of different situations, they will become better prepared to write in professional or academic genres (Bazerman, 1994). Another potential solution is

explicitly teaching students the contexts in which knowledge is applicable (or inapplicable) (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Many students reported their perception that previous writing experiences utilizing different genres would help them succeed in other courses; however, most students noted they did not write using the same genre across contexts (Reiff and Bawarshi, 2011), contradicting the students' theory. More is needed for students to transfer skills between contexts. "Carefully designed instruction can help wean students from misconceptions through a process called bridging" (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 26). Monroe (2003) suggests another way to approach this disconnect. Monroe (2003) believes that the most philosophically sound approach to teaching writing is to embed writing as much as possible in the teaching of the disciplines. In addition, by identifying and building many commonalities from the disciplines into FYC this approach can be made even more successful. Unfortunately, students often organize knowledge in ways (because they have not mastered the material) that are not flexible enough to bridge across various contexts/disciplines (Ambrose et al., 2010). Helping students organize knowledge and develop skills that will support the kinds of tasks they will be asked to carry out will enhance student performance (Ambrose et al., 2010). For transfer to occur, students must be taught to master/control the stages of writing as well as receive training "in the contexts of complete, comprehensive, complex and interdisciplinary problems" (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000, p. 60). This can only be achieved through careful examination of the intended goals of individual courses and/or programs.

**Supporting students.** Falconer (2007) reflects a problem similar to the transferability of writing skills. She notes that changing the structure of teaching requires

a translation of what the practitioner does as well as its implications into a format that is useable and meaningful in another (different) context. While Falconer is focused primarily on the format (online vs. face-to-face) of teaching/learning, the challenge she identifies is similar to the challenge facing student writers: how can they take what they have learned in one format (FYC) and make it useable and meaningful in another format (a class in another discipline or a different context).

Falconer (2007) also notes that the nature of the larger community is important in making a successful transfer between segments of the community. Because students tend to group knowledge according to course, semester, professor, or discipline, they often miss the connection to previous course work (Ambrose et al., 2010). To this end, Perkins and Salomon (1988) identify well-designed instruction as a tool for helping students successfully apply the skills they learned in one context to another context. Ambrose et al. (2010) underscore the importance of dialogue between faculty across disciplines to identify “differences in approach, emphasis, terminology, and notation” that can be used to connect with students’ prior knowledge (p. 28). In addition, they recognize the need for individual faculty members to carefully think about the knowledge/skill requirements set forth in her/his assignments. Individual instructors must convey the discipline-specific conventions and expectations in writing assignments to help students avoid relying on conventions from a discipline they have more experience with (Ambrose et al., 2010). In addition, repeated practice is necessary for skill development.

**Areas of weakness.** Studies across disciplines have been conducted that point to specific deficiencies in writing. Common areas of concern that are not discipline-specific include organization, focus, complexity of ideas, and proper use of research (Alter &

Adkins, 2001; Hooper & Butler, 2008; Granello, 2001). Other areas are more dependent on context such as the use of discipline-specific language, understanding the connection between writing and course work, and understanding purpose (Bosse & Faulconer, 2008; Stowers & Barker, 2003). An additional theme – students not investing time in their writing – also arose across disciplines (Stowers & Barker, 2003; Alter & Adkins, 2001; Hooper & Butler, 2008).

Organization, focus, complexity of ideas, and proper use of research are four areas in which students have documented weaknesses. In social work courses, where writing is viewed as a tool for empowerment (Hooper & Butler, 2008), researchers note deficiencies in the students' ability to produce focused written work and their "imprecise or unethical use of research data" (Alter and Adkins, 2001, p. 493; Hooper & Butler, 2008). They note that students are not producing material that is organized in a coherent manner and that does not demonstrate complexity of thought, often due to lack of details, weak organization, and/or unethical use of research. Hooper & Butler (2008) also point to rambling responses that do not answer the questions or meet the requirements established by the assignment/instructor, which might be minimized through use of Ambrose et al.'s suggestions. Ambrose et al.,(2010), suggest helping students to analyze the assigned task to determine effective forms of organization and providing templates for students to follow to aid in student transfer of skills.

Using discipline-specific language, understanding the connection between writing and course work, and understanding purpose are additional areas of concern. For example, writing in mathematics poses challenges for students because the language used in writing in math is extremely precise and terse (Bosse & Faulconer, 2008). In addition,

Bosse and Faulconer note that students must have a strong understanding of the purpose for writing in order to be successful. Students must understand that their writing does more than meet criteria on a checklist. Stowers and Barker (2003) note that students must see the connection between the writing assignment and the course content to produce better work. Faculty who explicitly connect new knowledge to previously learned knowledge can aid students in making important connections and distinctions in their learning of new skills (Ambrose et al., 2010). In addition, researchers note that students do not recognize the discipline-specific expectations that are often embedded in writing assignments (Moor, Jensen-Hart & Hooper, 2012; Stowers & Barker, 2003). Therefore, faculty must model the skills necessary for identifying all the required components of an assignment, otherwise students do not recognize one writing task as being different from other writing tasks.

Other challenges are tied to specific writing situations in specific disciplines. Granello (2001) points out students in counselor education programs demonstrate low levels of competency in analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing ideas in their writing. She attributes part of the problem to the lack of a tool in the APA manual for students to use to develop more complex writing. Without developing the skills necessary to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize ideas in writing, students are left struggling in their attempts to write (Granello, 2001). Hooper and Butler (2008) also note that social work students struggle with recording, an important discipline-specific ability. Students must gain enough expertise in writing and rhetorical skills that will enable them to be flexible and adapt their skills for use in a new environment (Brent, 2011). However, Brent also notes that it is challenging to find pedagogical approaches to designing environments in which

students are encouraged to transfer or transform their prior knowledge and experience to other contexts.

Finally, time is a factor in student writing. For instance, within business courses, students are challenged to compose letters, memos, case reports, and proposals (Stowers & Barker, 2003). One challenge these students must master is producing such documents quickly but accurately. Yet, students often do not spend the necessary time to polish their writing before submitting it (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Hooper & Butler, 2008), resulting in a lack of accuracy. However, activity theory holds that the motivation for writing is different, therefore, the writer's product may be vastly different in a different context (Brent, 2011), making it challenging to determine how accurately the students' class work reflects future performance on a similar task.

Elbow (1991) offers a different perspective on the requisite writing skills. He believes that when employers express dissatisfaction with graduates' ability to write, it often refers to the inability to *unlearn* the style of academic discourse and write for the discourse community of the "world of work" (p.136). Brent (2011) reflects this notion. He reasons that students may have developed the rhetorical skills of their discipline through writing assignments in their courses, but will have to learn how to participate in the discourse of a new community upon graduation. This same challenge faces students as they move from FYC to higher level courses. Developing writers face a two-fold challenge: learning techniques for writing and learning to recognize the needs and requirements of the situation in order to adapt successfully.

## **Relation Between Literature and This Study**

The literature consistently reveals that writing skills are valued across disciplines on college campuses (Granello, 2001; Bosse & Faulconer, 2008; Hooper & Butler, 2008; Moor, Jensen-Hart & Hooper, 2012; Stowers & Barker, 2003). The literature also reveals that different disciplines define quality writing differently (Moor, Jensen-Hart & Hooper, 2012; Stowers & Barker, 2003). Complicating the issue is the complexity of defining the salient features of writing that are necessary to students' successful mastery of written communication (Elbow, 1991).

While colleges and universities have made various attempts to improve student writing, a decline in students' skill levels continues (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Carter & Harper, 2013). While many colleges are financially strapped, a practical way to help faculty improve their instruction and students improve their writing may be possible through an evaluation of FYC goals and expectations for students' writing proficiency as they enter intermediate-level courses. As Reiff and Bawarshi (2011) note, FYC is often viewed as a bridge between high school and college-level writing. FYC must also bridge students to adaptability in writing and an enhancement of writing proficiency. Identifying expectations for what constitutes writing proficiency by the end of FYC at a community college, will begin the necessary dialogue between faculty members regarding necessary skills and helping students build a strong skill/knowledge base on which later faculty members can build. Building a community among disciplines that reflects and supports coherent values and skills is important (Brent, 2011).

Brent's (2011) conclusion regarding transfer theory reveals that transfer is not automatic and is often a challenge to document; however, it does happen, and requires the

right conditions. Perkins and Salomon (2004) explain the significance of transfer as an educational goal: students should be able to apply what they have learned in school to their lives and the world around them. They explain that schools teach writing not so students can produce essays in a classroom, but so they can be “practical, effective writers in their lives” (n.p.). Brent notes that research must be conducted to determine how to provide experiences for students that encourage the development of expertise that can then be transformed in a new community, as Perkins and Salomon’s (2004) example highlights. Brent notes that context-bound rhetorical strategies do not help students adapt to new writing situations as much as general rhetorical knowledge. However, working toward a connected curriculum in which course content can be presented in ways that highlight connections will aid in transfer of skills (Perkins & Salomon, 2004).

This study attempted to determine what faculty members’ perceptions and expectations were regarding what constitutes effective writing across multiple disciplines and to identify connections between FYC skill attainment and skills used in intermediate-level writing-intensive courses. In addition, the information gained from this study can be used to clearly delineate the distinction between the outcomes for FYC and faculty ownership of discipline-specific writing skills. Opening a dialogue between faculty members teaching writing-intensive courses across disciplines and faculty teaching FYC will also enable the flow of information and ideas about writing in the disciplines to FYC instructors, providing a clearer picture of where the students are heading. This study will follow what Perkins & Salomon (1988) suggest by first identifying the desired skills to be transferred, and then shaping the instruction to enable that transfer.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

Community College established a policy in 2007 to implement Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). As part of the policy, the college identified 75 courses across disciplines including anthropology, art, biology, business, chemistry, communications, computer science, English, environmental science, film, health and human performance, history, humanities, math, music, nursing, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology as “writing-intensive.” 23 of the writing-intensive courses are offered by the English Department, 22 of which are intermediate-level courses. All of the writing-intensive courses in the English Department identify the first semester FYC course as a prerequisite. The remaining 52 writing-intensive courses are offered by departments other than English. Of the 52 classes, only 25 are intermediate-level courses, and eight of those 25 identify the first semester FYC course as a prerequisite. For this study, only the intermediate-level courses were considered because by the time students enroll in these courses they are more likely to have completed the FYC course sequence as they are encouraged by the Advising Office to complete the FYC courses as soon as possible.

The Writing Across the Curriculum policy requires students in writing-intensive courses to produce at least 1,200 words of writing in a format that is appropriate to the discipline. For some consistency across courses and disciplines, the policy states that the assignments should be in essay format (although other formats are acceptable) and should require some type of critical thinking. Faculty who teach these courses are required to submit samples of the assignment/s they used to fulfill the WAC policy requirement to the administrator within their academic school who is responsible for WAC submissions.

The dean of each academic school (Language and Arts; Math, Science and Technology; Nursing; or Business, Social Science and Human Services) is then responsible for reviewing the submissions.

In order to determine whether the FYC courses are providing students with a strong and relevant base knowledge for the types of writing they will have to produce in higher level courses, the intermediate-level writing-intensive courses and sections as well as the faculty members assigned to teach each one were identified. During the Spring 2014 and Fall 2014 semesters, 43 faculty members taught 31 intermediate-level writing-intensive classes.

Pragmatism provides a foundation for this research as the focus was on a common problem and the concern was for finding a solution that would work in the given context. Conducting multi-method qualitative research enabled the gathering of data utilizing different approaches (survey and document analysis) that resulted in a better understanding of the extent of the relationship between the professors' perceptions of student writing, their expectations for student writing, and the learning outcomes of FYC at Community College. Conducting multi-method qualitative research provided the opportunity to draw on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research while minimizing the weaknesses of each method (Creswell, 2014). In addition, this strategy provided a more complete understanding of the research questions (Creswell, 2014).

This research seeks to answer three questions: 1) What expectations do faculty members who teach intermediate-level writing-intensive courses (courses designated by the college in which students must generate a minimum of 1200 written words in graded work) at the community college have for students' writing proficiencies? 2) Which of the

learning outcomes of FYC do the faculty members identify as connected to their intermediate-level writing-intensive courses? 3) What are the faculty members' perceptions of the students' ability to demonstrate writing proficiency in the intermediate-level writing-intensive courses, and are there gaps between the expectations and perceptions of these faculty members and the learning outcomes/goals of FYC?

The first research question was designed to identify the expectations of faculty members teaching intermediate-level writing-intensive courses across disciplines. The answer to this question must come directly from the faculty members themselves. This information was gathered through document analysis of writing assignments created for or used in the writing-intensive courses and the course syllabi—required documents in which course learning outcomes, grading policies, course standards, and an outline of the course schedule are included. The course syllabi and writing assignment/s provided concrete examples of the types of writing students were being asked to produce.

The second research question was used to determine what connections exist between the FYC learning outcomes and faculty expectations for students' writing. This information was gathered through a survey which included both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The survey responses enabled the researcher to make comparisons of and/or connections between expectations for student writing through Likert-type scale questions and also allowed the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the faculty members' expectations through their own words in response to open-ended questions.

To develop an understanding of the expectations for and perceptions of student writing, material culture from the courses was examined. All faculty members who

taught the courses identified as writing-intensive were required to designate an assignment (or multiple assignments) as fulfilling the WAC requirement and then submit samples of the assignments to the appropriate WAC administrator. Copies of the assignments were collected from each school's WAC administrator and/or from the faculty members themselves. The writing tasks that students were being asked to perform in each assignment were categorized by genre (essay, lab report, case-study, business report, search diary, poster, research proposal, letter, etc.) and rhetorical skill (define, identify, explain, support, describe, agree/disagree, choose, argue, relate). These categories were used to develop an understanding of the skills required at the intermediate level for students to successfully transfer writing skills learned previously. After the skills were identified, they were compared to Bloom's revised Taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001) to determine the level of challenge posed by each assignment.

In addition to the assignments, course syllabi were collected from each school's administrative assistant. The syllabi were used to determine the weight placed on writing in the final course grade. The percentage of the final grade that was determined by writing in each course was compared to other courses across disciplines and to the faculty members' perceptions of the students' ability to demonstrate the FYC learning outcomes.

The purposes of chapter three are as follows: (1) to describe the research methodology, (2) to explain the selection of the participants, (3) to describe the procedure used in designing the survey and collecting the data, (4) to provide an explanation of the procedures used to analyze the data, and (5) to identify the ethical considerations of the study.

## **Research Methodology**

A multi-method qualitative study was employed. First, the English Department's Official Course Descriptions were used to determine the learning outcomes for writing of each FYC course. These learning outcomes were used to provide a point of comparison between the skills being focused on in FYC and the skills students were being asked to use in intermediate-level coursework. Then, a survey of the intermediate-level faculty across disciplines who taught, during Spring 2014 or Fall 2014, a writing-intensive course was deployed. Additionally, the assignments that were given by intermediate-level faculty across the disciplines were collected approximately the same time as the survey was deployed. This allowed the researcher to integrate the findings for interpretation.

Using a multi-method qualitative design provided opportunities for additional insight into the expectations and perceptions of faculty members that may not have been clearly reflected in the analysis of just one aspect of the courses (the written assignments, the syllabus, or the survey). To that end, both a survey and document analysis were utilized in this research to gather data.

Surveys have been shown to be effective measures of aspects of school reform such as the content covered by teachers and their pedagogical strategies (Desimone & Le Floch, 2004). In addition, they can provide numeric descriptions of perceptions, values, and habits of the respondents, and are effective when the information being sought should come directly from the people (Fink, 2013). Because this study was designed to determine the perceptions of faculty members – rather than student ability - surveying the population being studied (faculty) provided an opportunity to gain a rich understanding of their beliefs.

The survey employed in this study was sent electronically to the faculty within each discipline who, as part of their courses, must assign writing assignments/essays that are written in the style of the discipline. Fink (2013) explains that surveyors must choose the method of administration most likely to produce accurate results. In this case, the use of an online survey allowed for flexibility in timing for both the researcher and the participants, enabling participants to reflect on their perceptions of student writing and the learning outcomes of FYC before responding. In addition, it enabled participants who were teaching a writing-intensive course during the semester of this study (Fall 2014) to respond to the questions when appropriate for the timing of the writing assignment within their own classes, reflecting Creswell and Plano-Clark's (2011) reminder that a researcher must not disrupt the flow of the activities she is researching. Because the college employs many part-time faculty members, it was believed that the flexibility of an online survey would result in a greater response rate than an in-person or phone interview.

The survey contained both open- and closed-ended questions, including two Likert-type scales. Using open-ended questions on surveys allows the participants to describe their feelings, perceptions, and/or reasons (Fink, 2013), providing the researcher with a more full understanding of the closed-ended responses. In addition, Likert scales are an essential as well as frequent tool for assessing the attitudes of respondents (Dittrich, Francis, Hatzinger, & Katzenbeisser, 2004). Additionally, the employment of a survey containing both closed-ended and open-ended questions provided more data to confirm, conflict with, or explain the data gathered through document analysis of syllabi and writing assignments. The survey responses provided additional information beyond

what could be identified in the documents that were analyzed. The surveys enabled the researcher to specifically identify the learning outcomes of FYC and question the faculty members regarding their perceptions and expectations of student ability for each outcome.

Prior to deploying the survey, participants were sent advance notification of the study and were encouraged to participate in the survey. An explanation of the purpose of the research and survey were provided to the faculty members.

However, surveys alone might not have provided enough information regarding the faculty members' perceptions of the requisite writing skills. The survey used in this research was designed to elicit responses from faculty members regarding the importance of and perceived student ability to demonstrate the skills identified in the college's FYC courses' learning outcomes. Because FYC courses are taught by English Department faculty only, these outcomes may not reflect other important, discipline-specific writing and non-writing objectives in intermediate-level writing-intensive courses across disciplines. Therefore, additional sources of information were needed to determine whether students were being challenged to demonstrate other rhetorical skills. To gain this additional information, material culture – writing assignments and syllabi from intermediate-level WAC courses – were collected and analyzed.

A significant portion of an organization's collective knowledge can be found in its documents (Salminen, Kauppinen & Lehtovaara, 1997). According to the University of Texas (2011), document analysis is a systematic, critical examination of documents (such as assignments and syllabi) in order to gain insight into an activity or approach to instruction. As Salminen, Kauppinen, and Lehtovaara (1997) explain, document analysis

also focuses on the meaning imbedded in the language used in the documents. Document analysis can help identify trends or patterns and can be used to inform survey results (University of Texas, 2011). Therefore, document analysis was conducted for writing-intensive course syllabi and WAC writing assignments.

Because of CC's Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) policy and procedures which required faculty members to assign, collect, grade, and then submit to their academic department copies of the writing assignment, document analysis was chosen as part of the research methods. The assignments that are actually being employed in all the WAC courses are collected by each academic school each semester, making them readily available, but more importantly, making them representative of what skills the students were being asked to demonstrate in writing-intensive courses, without interrupting the courses.

## **Context**

**Setting.** The setting for this study was Community College (CC), a two-year, open enrollment, community college located in a suburb in the Northeast United States. Total student enrollment for the college during Fall 2014 was approximately 9,000 students of which 76.5% are White (CC Fast Facts, 2014). The student body is primarily made up of county residents; 93% of students in Fall 2014. According to the county government's website, the county in which the college resides is one of the fastest growing counties in the state, and continued growth is expected (County of CC, 2009).

According to the college's Self-Study Report (2013), approximately 80% of students seeking an Associate of Arts (A.A.) in Liberal Arts transfer from CC to four year institutions each year. All of the college's general education courses (including FYC)

have been approved by a state-wide committee to insure the transferability of credits to other institutions within the same state, as per a state bill which provides for ease of transfer to a four year institution for students who hold an Associate's Degree from a community college. The college also has 40 articulation agreements with colleges and universities (Self-Study, 2013). These articulation agreements help simplify the transfer of credits earned at CC to four year colleges because the colleges that enter into articulation agreements have agreed upon the curriculum and level of instruction to insure that the courses taken at CC will fulfill the requirements of the four year institution. In addition to these agreements, the college has a partnership with a state university, which enables students to transfer seamlessly from the community college to the four year state university while continuing to attend the university's classes on CC's campus. Prior to this arrangement, the only four year college in the same county as CC was a private four year college, much more expensive for students than attending a state university.

The college offers three degrees – Associate in Arts (A.A.), Associate in Science (A.S.), and Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.). There are two A.A. degree programs, ten A.S. degree programs, 11 A.A.S degree programs, as well as 12 Certificate of Proficiency programs (which require the completion of 30 or more credits), and nine Certificate of Completion programs (which require the completion of between 16-24 credits, depending upon the program). Of the 12 Certificate of Proficiency programs, only three do not require completion of any FYC course, and six require only the first semester FYC course. Of the nine Certificate of Proficiency programs, only one does not require completion of any FYC courses; the other programs all require the first semester FYC course. All of CC's Associate's Degree programs require two semesters of FYC,

making it clear that CC, and the colleges with which articulation agreements are in place, value the skills being taught in FYC courses. A majority of the Certificate of Proficiency and Certificate of Completion programs – designed to enhance a person’s skill set for immediate employment – also require at least one semester of FYC, signaling the importance of written communication and the skills taught in FYC courses in career fields that do not require college degrees.

While writing assignments are common in many college classrooms, this study focused only on classes that were designated as writing-intensive and that were considered intermediate-level courses. Writing-intensive courses are designated by the college as courses in which students must produce a minimum of 1,200 words of graded writing in a format appropriate to the discipline in which it is assigned. Although the college offers courses designated as writing-intensive at the introductory level, students in these courses are more likely to be concurrently enrolled in first-year composition, or may not have taken it at all. During their first year, students tend to enroll in the introductory-level courses, most of which do not have any prerequisites. Also, because FYC is comprised of two semesters of classes, many students enrolled in course work during their first year will be concurrently enrolled in an FYC course or a developmental reading and writing course. With the exception of a few courses (14 courses offered by departments other than English), most writing-intensive courses do not have any prerequisites. Therefore, limiting this study to intermediate-level courses was more likely to include students who have taken FYC.

CC has two required introductory-level FYC courses that address writing skills. The writing skills addressed in these courses were used as a baseline for student writing

in the intermediate-level courses. The learning outcomes of the first semester FYC course included the students' ability to (1) consider the essay's purpose, voice, and audience; (2) identify and focus an appropriate essay topic; (3) develop assertions with supporting details; (4) build coherent paragraphs; (5) create a functional essay structure; (6) respond critically to source readings; (7) synthesize information from sources; (8) observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions; and (9) accurately document material from sources.

According to the official course description, the first semester of FYC was designed to develop students' expository writing skills through a series of primarily text-based writing assignments. The course also reinforces the development of critical reading and thinking, the writing process, and information literacy.

The second semester FYC course reinforces the nine previously identified learning outcomes of the first semester course with the addition of two outcomes: (10) framing, and communicating in writing, an interpretation of a literary text; and (11) using basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature. According to the official course description, the second semester course was designed to introduce students to the study of literature – fiction, poetry, and drama – as well as build on the writing and research skills introduced and developed during the first semester FYC course.

Both FYC courses are three-credit courses, offered during the traditional 15-week semester, both fall and spring; during a 10-week session, both fall and spring semesters; and over the summer. The two course sequence is required for all CC's degree programs. The first semester course is a pre-requisite for the second semester course.

The first semester FYC course supports the college's mission and vision of creating intentional learners, as well as the Academic Master Plan's commitment to core competencies such as "the ability to competently read, write, and compute . . . and to make informed and logical decisions based on accurate and adequate resources" (p.1). In addition to the connections between the first semester FYC course and the college mission, vision, and Academic Master Plan, the second semester FYC course also supports these college-wide goals by developing an appreciation of diversity and its expression as well as developing the ability to transform information into knowledge.

Both courses have been approved by the state in which the college operates to fulfill common general education requirements, making the credits earned in these courses transferrable to other colleges/universities. In addition, through a state bill, any student who earns an Associate's Degree from a community college will have all her/his credits accepted toward a Bachelor's degree in that discipline at a four-year college/university in the same state.

**Participants.** In 2014, the college enrolled over 5,000 full-time students and over 4,000 part-time students during the fall semester; during the spring semester of 2014 the college enrolled 4,500 full-time students and over 4,000 part-time students. The average age of part-time students (26.5) was higher than the average age of full-time students (21.2) at this community college. According to the college's Fact Book, 41.1% of the 2007 new full-time student cohort (the most recent cohort for which five year data is accessible) graduated in five years; 38% graduated in four years; 31% graduated in three years; and 15% graduated in two years. According to the president's Fall 2012

Colloquium Speech, consistently between 75-80% of incoming students indicate their desire to transfer.

The full-time faculty of the college consist of full-time tenured/tenure-track faculty and 12-month Lecturers. According to the college Fact Book, as of 2012 (the last year for which data has been updated) the college employed 100 full-time faculty members and 404 part-time faculty. The Lecturers teach a full-time course load in addition to performing administrative duties. In addition to the full-time faculty, the college relies heavily on adjunct, part-time faculty members. Tenured/tenure-track faculty members teach 15 credits per semester; Lecturers were required to teach 21 credits per semester during the Spring 2014 semester, and 15 credits during the Fall 2014 semester; and adjunct faculty typically teach between three and nine credits per semester.

This research study focused entirely on faculty members. Participants were purposefully recruited based on their direct experience with the key concept - expectations for and perceptions of students' level of writing proficiency. The participants were faculty members, full-time and part-time, who taught during spring 2014 or Fall 2014, an intermediate-level course/s that was included on the college's Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) list of writing-intensive courses (See Appendix A). The current list of courses designated as writing-intensive was updated and approved in the spring of 2013 and includes 75 courses, although not all of the courses are offered regularly.

The faculty members who taught these courses were identified by searching Web Advisor for the names of faculty assigned to teach WAC courses during the Spring 2014 and Fall 2014 semesters. These faculty members (who taught approximately 50 sections)

represented a variety of disciplines: art, business, communications, English, film, health and human performance, humanities, math, political science, and sociology. Disciplines that did not have an intermediate-level writing-intensive course, or which did not run an intermediate-level writing-intensive course during the two semesters that were studied were eliminated from the study.

### **Instrumentation**

**Survey design.** This study was designed to determine what was expected of students (with regard to writing) after completing FYC. The results of this study provided insight into the faculty members' beliefs regarding the students' ability to meet their expectations as well as the faculty members' perceptions of the importance of each FYC learning outcome.

The purpose of the survey was to gather information on faculty members' expectations for and perceptions of student competency with writing as well as to identify connections between the FYC learning outcomes and intermediate-level writing-intensive courses. Determining faculty attitudes was important to understanding what impressions they hold of the writing skills being taught in FYC, as these impressions might not accurately reflect the content of the courses, yet might impact students' success with writing. In addition, cross disciplinary faculty expectations for writing proficiency were important in determining if and how first-year composition was meeting the needs of the students as they advance in their studies. As Yancey (2001) explains, focusing on what we want students "to know, to do, or to understand," enables us to determine *how well* these standards should be met (p. 323).

The survey (See Appendix B) was designed using the 11 course learning outcomes related to writing identified by the college as the outcomes for FYC. Nine of the course learning outcomes were goals of both FYC courses. Two of the course learning outcomes were unique to the second semester FYC course. While the learning outcomes of the college's FYC courses do not address all aspects of the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, a document which identifies a general curricular framework for first-year composition courses nationwide, all of the college's course learning outcomes were reflected in the WPA document, thus reflecting a commonality of purpose.

In order to establish survey content and question clarity, two college faculty members were asked to peer review the survey. The results of the peer review were used to revise the wording of the final survey instrument prior to distribution to participants. Once the survey was finalized, the researcher created an online survey.

The writing skills, as identified in the Student Learning Outcomes of each FYC course, were listed on the survey, and faculty members were asked to identify the importance of each skill to her/his discipline and course utilizing a Likert-type scale with four response categories. A second Likert-type scale with four response categories was utilized to gauge the participants' perceptions of the students' ability to successfully demonstrate the writing skills. As Dittrich et al. (2005) discuss, pairing scales provides the researcher with an ordering of the relative importance of specific items and how this relative importance is influenced by other variables. In this case, the faculty members' rankings of the importance of writing traits were compared to the faculty members' perceptions and expectations for the students' ability to produce those traits in order to

identify gaps. In addition, open-ended questions were included to allow participants to contribute discipline-specific insight regarding their expectations and perceptions.

A link to the online survey was distributed via e-mail to the faculty members who taught during Spring 2014 or Fall 2014, a writing-intensive courses, at the community college. Since web surveys tend to suffer from lower response rates as a result of “oversurveying” (Sauermann & Roach, 2013, p. 273), a reminder email was sent to participants who had not responded to the survey after five days. A final reminder email was sent 14 days later. As Sauermann and Roach (2013) explain, repeated contacts may have helped to signal the researcher’s persistence, resulting in a greater response rate.

### **Researcher Bias**

As a professor of literature and writing, I am concerned about the relevance of the learning outcomes of FYC courses to later writing-intensive courses across disciplines. Within the intermediate-level writing-intensive courses that I teach, (all of which have a prerequisite of the first semester FYC course), I witness students who do not demonstrate proficiency in the learning outcomes identified by FYC. Discussions with colleagues have revealed that they notice similar weaknesses in student writing at the intermediate-level as well. At the same time, because I also teach FYC, I value the learning outcomes and want to believe that the students who begin to develop their writing ability in FYC continue to use the skills and are able to demonstrate their ability in different contexts.

In evaluating student writing in FYC courses, I determine grades based on a rubric of skills that are required to complete the assignment and which have been taught in class. However, in intermediate-level writing-intensive courses that I teach, I review writing skills, but evaluate student writing more holistically. The difference in grading technique

is attributable to the increased level of expectation for student writing at the intermediate level.

It is important to recognize that different faculty members will have different grading techniques as well. Some evaluate writing using a rubric while others look at written work more holistically; still others give more weight to content than expression. The researcher must recognize the impact that differences in grading techniques may have on the professors' perceptions and experiences.

### **Data Collection**

**Research questions.** First, an online survey was sent out to faculty members who taught an intermediate-level writing-intensive course during the Spring 2014 or Fall 2014 semester. Then, document analysis of the directions for writing assignments given in the intermediate-level writing-intensive courses and of course syllabi were completed. The survey responses and document analysis were used to collect multi-method qualitative data to help answer the following questions:

Research Question One - What expectations do faculty members who teach intermediate-level writing-intensive courses (courses designated by the college in which students must generate a minimum of 1200 written words in graded work) at the community college have for students' writing proficiencies?

Research Question Two – Which of the learning outcomes of FYC do the faculty members identify as connected to their intermediate-level writing-intensive courses?

Research Question Three - What are the faculty members' perceptions of the students' ability to demonstrate writing proficiency in the intermediate-level writing-intensive

courses; and, are there gaps between the expectations and perceptions of these faculty members and the learning outcomes/goals of FYC?

Using the Student Learning Outcomes for each FYC course as identified by the English Department, School of Language and the Arts at CC, a list of writing skills that students should acquire in FYC was created. This list included: the ability (1) to consider an essay's purpose, voice, and audience; (2) to identify and focus an appropriate essay topic; (3) to develop assertions with supporting details; (4) to build coherent paragraphs; (5) to create a functional essay structure; (6) to respond critically to source readings; (7) to synthesize information from sources; (8) to observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions; (9) to accurately document material from sources; (10) to frame, and communicate in writing, an interpretation of a literary text; and (11) to use basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature. This list was used as a point of comparison for the skills students were being asked to utilize in the intermediate-level writing-intensive courses.

Forty three (43) faculty members were sent a seven-question online survey regarding their perceptions of the importance of the learning outcomes of FYC within their own courses as well as their estimation of students' ability to demonstrate the skills.

First, responses from faculty members to the online survey were collected. The survey included both open-ended and closed-ended questions (including Likert-type scales) to allow for individual faculty members to provide discipline-specific information about writing. Respondents were promised confidentiality and were asked to indicate their consent prior to participating in the survey. Respondents were not asked to put their

names on the survey responses. They were, however, asked to identify the writing intensive course/s they teach.

Then, two different types of documents were collected and analyzed. The first set of documents collected was the directions for the writing assignments used by the intermediate-level faculty members teaching writing-intensive courses. Many faculty members did not finalize the directions for their writing assignments until a few weeks into the course. However, they knew in advance that their writing assignments were to be submitted to their department, allowing for the document collection to be seamless and unobtrusive.

The document collection for this research study did not require any additional work from the faculty members or their students. IRB approval from the college was obtained in order to gain access to the documents. First, the individual directions for the writing assignments were obtained from the school dean or administrator of each academic school (The School of Language and the Arts; The School of Math, Science and Technology; and The School of Business, Social Science and Human Services) or, in some cases, from the faculty members themselves.

Finally, syllabi for the writing-intensive courses being studied were also obtained from the administrative assistant in each of the college's academic schools after obtaining college approval. All faculty members were required to submit copies of their course syllabi to the administrative assistant during the first weeks of the semester, thus they were readily available. The college requires that grading policies be identified on all syllabi, which provided information regarding the weight of writing assignments as part of the students' final grade.

## **Data Analysis**

The purpose of this study was to determine the nature and extent of any gaps that exist between the writing skills faculty members across disciplines at Community College, a two-year college in a suburban area of the Northeast United States, expect their students to utilize in intermediate-level writing-intensive courses, their perceptions of the students' general ability to demonstrate those skills, and the importance of the learning outcomes of the two semesters of FYC courses to their courses.

Data analysis requires the researcher to carefully examine all gathered data and determine answers to the research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Analysis of the data gathered from the examination of writing assignments and syllabi was done through document analysis, a useful technique for determining consistency in instruction through questioning the purpose of the assignment, how the students are using it, and how it is (or is not) contributing to the improvement of student learning (University of Texas, 2011).

The first phase of data analysis was conducted using the results from the faculty expectations and perceptions survey. The data was grouped by discipline and analyzed to identify themes within disciplines/academic schools and then was analyzed college-wide to identify expectations across campus. The responses to the open-ended questions were coded and analyzed for emergent themes as well as variations in terminology. These themes were grouped according to discipline/academic school and then assessed for college-wide themes. The data gathered from both types of questions were then merged to determine whether the different sources of data were reflective of each other and were used to provide a depth of understanding not possible from one source alone.

The data gathered from the multi-method qualitative survey questions were analyzed separately and then merged with the data from the document analysis of the syllabi and assignments, following Creswell and Plano-Clark's (2011) suggestion for data collection in convergent design. The data was used to make inferences about the attitudes of the intermediate-level course faculty members across disciplines.

After the survey results were analyzed, the directions for each writing assignment were analyzed. Document analysis of the assignments created or used by intermediate-level faculty members who taught writing-intensive courses (which were submitted to the school deans in accordance with the Writing Across the Curriculum policy) was used to identify values, assumptions, and priorities of the faculty members who taught those courses as well as discipline-specific language used in the assignments. The assignments were expected to vary greatly, as the only requirement for writing-intensive courses is that students produce 1,200 words of graded writing during the semester. While essays are suggested, the writing format must be appropriate to the discipline. An additional variation was that to meet the required word length, the assignments could be made up of a series of shorter writings or one longer writing assignment.

Document analysis of the course assignments was conducted to identify genres and rhetorical skills required by the assignments. The tasks each writing assignment required of the students were first coded by genre (essay, lab report, case study, research proposal, book review, etc.), using emergent coding to allow for additional genres to be identified. Then the rhetorical skills required to complete the writing task were identified, recording the language of the assignment (define, explain, describe, argue, synthesize, summarize, choose, etc.), also using emergent coding. These word choices were recorded

and counted to determine the most frequently used words. Then, these word choices were grouped by the rhetorical skills each required and were counted. Finally, any discipline-specific language used in the assignment was identified and recorded.

The codes that emerged from the analysis were compared to the FYC courses' learning outcomes to identify connections and gaps between expectations and course outcomes. Finally, the rhetorical skills were compared to Bloom's revised Taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001), using Clemson University's guide (n.d.) to identify the level of challenge each skill posed for students. This analysis was completed prior to analyzing the course syllabi to create an understanding of the writing skills being required by the assignments' directions prior to determining the impact the writing assignment had on students' final course grades.

To insure reliability of the document analysis, inter-rater reliability was achieved through the use of a second coder who analyzed the documents and coded the assignments in the same manner. Once the reliability of the coding was established, the data was entered into a spreadsheet to determine the frequency of each genre and rhetorical skill. The data was categorized both by skill type and by academic school to determine whether certain skills were more frequently used in certain disciplines. The data was analyzed separately by discipline first, followed by a college-wide analysis. Breaking down the data in this way allowed the researcher to determine which writing skills were discipline-specific and should be taught within the discipline and which writing skills were important across disciplines and should be addressed by FYC.

Because terminology differs across disciplines, examining the assignments did reveal some differences in language. All discipline-specific terms were recorded in a

spreadsheet. The actual assignments designed and/or used by the instructors provided a valuable opportunity to observe the instructional approach and activities related to writing, without intruding on the courses.

Analysis of the course syllabi was then conducted to identify the percentage of a student's final grade that was dependent upon the writing assignment/s. This percentage was recorded and used to track the importance of writing in relation to the students' final grade. The grading scale was used to compare the value placed on written assignments by different instructors in different disciplines.

Finally, the data from the survey and document analysis of both the assignments and the course syllabi were combined and evaluated in comparison to the specific skills identified as important student outcomes in First-Year Composition. The skills identified as important on the faculty survey were compared to the rhetorical skills required by the assignments and the grading value placed on the written assignment. Identifying the skills that different faculty members in different disciplines value in student writing helped create an understanding of the standards being used to judge student writing at the intermediate level.

Table 1

*Data Analysis and Interpretation*

Research Question	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
	Faculty Survey	Assignments	Course Syllabi
What expectations do faculty members who teach intermediate level writing-intensive courses at the community college have for students' writing proficiencies?	<p><b>Analysis:</b> analysis of Likert scale questions; coding of open-ended questions; identify themes</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> comparison and combination of results; use member checking and/or critical friends</p>	<p><b>Analysis:</b> Identify themes, categorical analysis, determination of genre and rhetorical skills</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> use a second coder, member checking and/or critical friends</p>	<p><b>Analysis:</b> identify value placed on writing</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> identify different weights of writing assignments by discipline</p>
Which of the learning outcomes of FYC do the faculty members identify as connected to their intermediate level writing intensive courses?	<p><b>Analysis:</b> analysis of Likert scale questions; coding of open-ended questions; identify themes</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> comparison and combination of results; use of critical friends</p>	<p><b>Analysis:</b> determination of genre and rhetorical skills</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> compare to levels from Bloom's Taxonomy</p>	<p><b>Analysis:</b> identify any supplemental information/grading policy related to student writing</p>
What are the faculty members' perceptions of the students' ability to demonstrate writing proficiency in the intermediate-level writing-intensive courses, and are there gaps between the expectations, perceptions and the learning outcomes/ goals of FYC?	<p><b>Analysis:</b> analysis of Likert scale questions; coding of open-ended questions; identify themes</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> comparison of and combination of results; use member checking and/or critical friends</p>	<p><b>Analysis:</b> Identify themes, categorical analysis</p> <p><b>Interpretation:</b> use member checking and/or critical friends; relate to the literature</p>	<p><b>Analysis:</b> identify any supplemental information/grading policy related to student writing</p>

## **Ethical Considerations**

While a significant portion of this study involved document analysis, the assignments that were analyzed were reflective of individual faculty members' values and expectations for their students because they were actually used within the writing-intensive courses studied. When the faculty members submit their writing assignments to their academic deans, they often leave their own name on the assignment although they do not have to. Therefore, when collecting the assignments, the names of the faculty members were removed from the assignments to prevent making personal connections between the faculty member and his/her assignment. In certain instances, however, there were only one or two faculty members who taught a particular course, so care had to be taken to keep identifying information about the course confidential as well, to protect the confidentiality of the faculty members.

Another consideration was to avoid analyzing or comparing individual instructors or the quality of the assignments. The main focus of this research was to determine how First-Year Composition courses at CC could best serve the needs of the students in intermediate-level courses and beyond, not to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of individual assignments.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

This study sought to identify both the expectations for student writing held by faculty members who taught intermediate-level writing-intensive courses and the importance of rhetorical skills identified as FYC learning outcomes to each discipline/course. In addition, the study sought to identify the perceptions of these faculty members regarding their students' ability to demonstrate the FYC learning outcomes. By gathering the directions for writing assignments used by the faculty members, the course syllabi, and asking the participants to complete an online survey, an understanding of the rhetorical skills the participants valued and wanted students to demonstrate in writing-intensive courses emerged. Data collection yielded 35 unique syllabi and 31 writing assignments.

Identifying the value placed on writing by examining the course grading statements on the syllabi revealed that a wide range of importance is placed on writing. Depending upon course and instructor, the lowest weight placed on writing was 10% of the final grade, and the highest weight placed on writing was 70%. While only about 9% of course syllabi weighted the writing assignment at 10% of the final grade and approximately 6% weighted writing assignments at 70% of the final grade, the majority of the course syllabi (approximately 24% in each category) weighted the assignments at 20-25% of the course grade or at 40% of the final grade. The next highest category was 50% of final grade with about 15% of courses assigning this weight. The weight placed on student writing reflects the notion that writing skills are valued across disciplines on college campuses (Granello, 2001; Bosse & Faulconer, 2008; Hooper & Butler, 2008; Moor, Jensen-Hart & Hooper, 2012; Stowers & Barker, 2003).

## **Length and Type of Writing**

The data revealed that roughly 84% of the writing assignments given in intermediate-level writing-intensive courses required students to write essays, which reflected the FYC course learning objective: (5) students are able to create a functional essay structure and the guidelines set forth in the college's WAC policy.

Analysis of the writing assignments faculty members designed and/or used in the intermediate-level courses revealed that slightly less than 39% of the assignments were long essays requiring research. For the purposes of this study, a long essay was defined as three or more typed pages, or the equivalent word count. The next most frequently occurring type of essay assignment was the long essay without research (using the above definition of length), at roughly 32% of the assignments analyzed. On the other end of the spectrum, there were a few genres assigned in only one course such as a summary-response paper. The search diary and business report are genres that were also used in only one course each, but both within business classes, while the portfolio and profile are genres that were each assigned in one course, but both within classes in the social sciences, thus indicating that these genres might be discipline-specific.

## **Word Choice and Usage in Writing Assignments**

Coding the assignments according to word choice revealed a wide range of words that were used. In analyzing the language faculty members used in the writing assignments, the most frequently occurring words were (in order): *discuss*, *analyze*, *argue*, and *explain*. *Argue* and *explain* appeared an equal number of times. However, when the assignments were grouped by academic school, *discuss* was used primarily in

assignments given within the School of Language and Arts (SLA), with six different courses/faculty members using the term. Only one course from the School of Business, Social Science and Human Services (SBSSHS) used the term. It is important to note, however, that SLA is the largest school on campus, thus offering more courses than the other academic schools. *Analyze* was used in the assignments from four classes within the SLA and three courses within the SBSSHS. *Argue* was used in the assignments given in four classes within the SLA and one course in the SBSSHS, while *explain* was used in the assignments from four classes within the SLA, one (the only intermediate-level writing-intensive) class within the School of Math, Science, and Technology (MST), and two classes from the SBSSHS. *Explain* was the only term used in assignments from all three academic schools.

However, when the assignments were analyzed for the skills students were being asked to demonstrate to successfully complete the assignment, a slightly different picture emerged. Each assignment was coded according to the rhetorical skills that were required rather than the specific word choice. The most frequently required skills across the disciplines were (in order): *analyze* and *explain* (each required in 77% of the assignments collected), followed by *identify* (in 64% of assignments), *evaluate* (55% of assignments), and *argue* and *research* (each required in 45% of the assignments). The ability to *discuss* a topic was required in only 18% of the courses analyzed, despite the specific term being used frequently.

Analysis of the individual writing assignments also revealed that faculty members both within the same disciplines as well as across disciplines were creating writing assignments using a wide array of terminology, ranging from discipline specific terms

such as *deliverables* to action verbs that should inform the students about the requirements and expectations for their writing. Many of the terms that were identified in the assignments such as *argue*, *prove*, and *agree/disagree* required the same skill from students.

Three learning outcomes of FYC directly addressed the rhetorical skills identified during document analysis of the writing assignments: (3) students are able to develop assertions with supporting details (*analyze* and *explain*); (6) students are able to respond critically to source readings (*evaluate* and *analyze*); and (7) students are able to synthesize information from sources (required in 36% of the courses).

### **Expected Skills and Level of Challenge for Students**

After the skills required in each assignment were identified, they were compared to Anderson and Krathwol's (2001) revision of Bloom's Taxonomy. Table 2 provides a few examples of the language used by the faculty members in their directions for completing the writing assignments that were determined by the coders to refer to the skill identified in Clemson University's list of Bloom's Taxonomy Action Verbs (n.d.) and the appropriate level of difficulty, according to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy.

Table 2

*Examples of Coded Assignments*

Taxonomy Level	Taxonomy Action Verb	Assignment Terminology
Creating	Synthesize	Incorporate, Make References to, Include
Creating	Construct	Come up with, Create, Form, Develop
Analyzing	Criticize	Agree or Disagree, Prove
Applying	Discover	Investigate, Trace, Follow

In the table, the first column identifies the level of Bloom’s revised Taxonomy (2001). The second column contains the action verb from Clemson University’s Bloom’s Taxonomy Action Verb List, and the last column contains the actual words used in the assignments.

Based on the revised Taxonomy, the two most frequently expected skills, analysis and explanation, require a higher level of rhetorical skill. Both skills, as used in the assignments, fit Bloom’s fourth level (Analyzing) of six. However, the next most frequently required skill, identifying, requires a lower level cognitive process, Bloom’s second level - Understanding.

The data revealed that of the 16 skills (not including research, which requires skills across various levels) identified by the research study, 31% of the assignments reflected skills from the lower half of Bloom’s Taxonomy while 69% of the assignments required higher order (top half) skills based on Bloom’s Taxonomy. These more challenging tasks are important to student growth, but, as Ambrose (2010) suggests,

coordinated efforts to help students make connections between ideas and assignments can help students develop mastery of skills.

### **Faculty Perceptions of the Importance of FYC Learning Outcomes**

Data gathered from the survey of faculty who taught intermediate-level writing-intensive courses revealed that a majority of respondents, 85%, felt that the ability (3) to develop assertions with supporting details was an essential objective. Eighty percent (80%) of respondents acknowledged that the ability (2) to identify and focus an appropriate essay topic was essential to their course. And, 70% identified both (4) building coherent paragraphs and (6) responding critically to source readings as essential to their course. None of the respondents indicated that these objectives were not important, thus confirming the importance of these goals as part of FYC. And, as McCarthy (1987) notes, the students benefit when their instructors' expectations are aligned with FYC.

Of the 11 learning objectives of FYC that were listed on the survey, only two – (10) students are able to frame and communicate in writing, an interpretation of a literary text and (11) students are able to use basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature – were identified as not important by some respondents (25%). (See Figure 1).

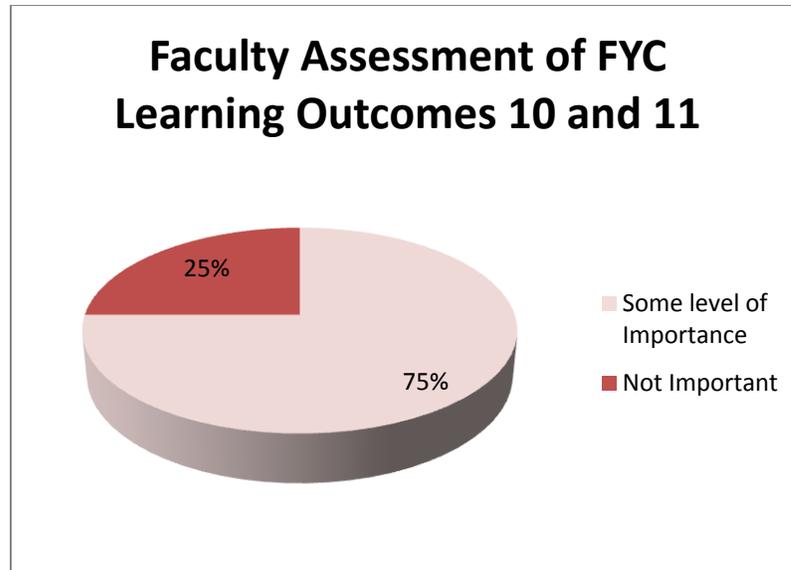


Figure 1. Faculty Members' Assessment of FYC Learning Outcomes 10 and 11

It was not surprising that some respondents identified these two outcomes as *not important* to their courses because these objectives focus primarily on writing about literature. However, the percentage of respondents who indicated these objectives were not important to their course was expected to be higher. Yet, this figure, when considered alone, did not reveal the most important point; the breakdown of the 75% of the faculty (by discipline) who indicated that these two objectives were either *important*, *very important*, or *somewhat important* provided insight into writing in the disciplines. (See Figure 2)

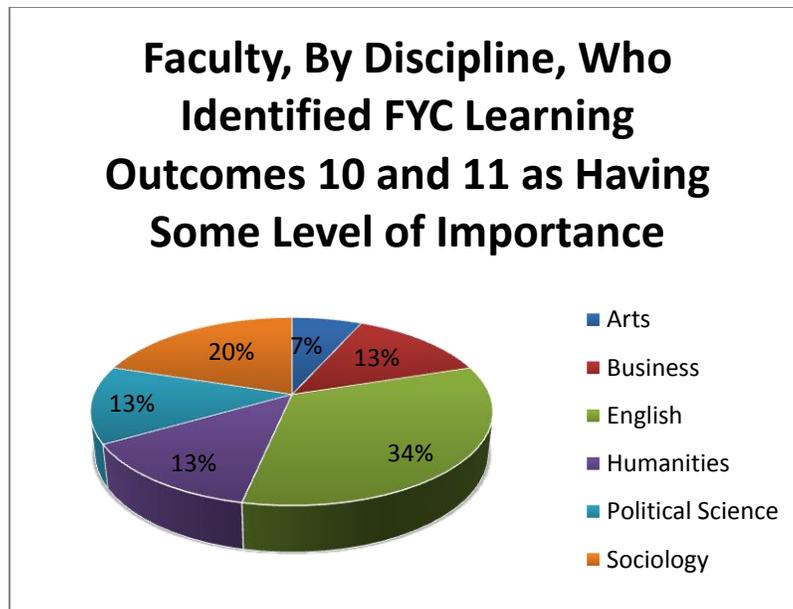


Figure 2. Faculty, By Discipline, Who Identified FYC Learning Outcomes 10 and 11 as Having Some Level of Importance

Seventy five percent (75%) of the respondents, comprised of faculty members who taught in six different disciplines, from two academic schools – SLA and SBSSHS – indicated that these skills were relevant in some way to their disciplines. (See Figure 2). The largest percentage of these respondents was, not surprisingly, comprised of faculty members from the English Department (34%) who taught courses in literature. However, the data revealed that more than one faculty member in each of four other disciplines also identified these skills as important on some level to the intermediate-level writing-intensive course/s in disciplines other than English. In the fifth discipline, only one respondent completed the survey, but indicated a connection between these two outcomes and her/his course.

The two learning outcomes that were most frequently identified as not being relevant to the respondents’ intermediate-level writing-intensive courses were (10) the ability to frame and communicate in writing an interpretation of a literary text (82%); and

(11) the ability to use basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature (91%). The next learning outcome most frequently chosen as not being relevant to the respondents' classes was (1) the students' ability to consider the essay's purpose, voice, and audience (27%). However, in an earlier survey question, no respondents indicated that this outcome was not important to their course.

### **Grammar, Mechanics, and Documentation**

Two learning objectives of FYC directly addressed grammar, mechanics, and documentation: (8) students are able to observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions and, (9) students are able to accurately document material from sources. In FYC, students were taught to use the format of the Modern Language Association (MLA), partly because the writing classes at CC are taught only by faculty members who have degrees in English, reflecting a trend that Downs and Wardle (2007) noted. For both objectives focused on (8) grammar, mechanics, and (9) documentation, a majority of the respondents indicated that the objective was *essential* (45% and 65%, respectively) or *very important* (40% and 30%, respectively). Yet, a lower percentage of respondents indicated that students were able to demonstrate these skills on their own (30% and 20%, respectively). Faculty members had more confidence in the students' ability to demonstrate these skills with help (45% and 55%, respectively).

However, 20% of respondents indicated that they did not believe students could demonstrate either of these skills. The respondents who indicated that students were not able (8) to observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions and were not able (9) to accurately document material from sources taught in two of the college's three academic schools, SLA and SBSSHS. Of the respondents who said students were not

able (8) to observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions, two said this objective was *essential* and two said it was *somewhat important*. Only one of these four faculty members indicated that s/he used class time to review or teach discipline-specific writing expectations.

Of the four respondents who said students were not able (9) to accurately document material from sources, three indicated that this objective was *essential* to their course and one indicated that this skill was *very important*. However, only one of these faculty members indicated that s/he used class time to review or teach discipline-specific writing.

### **Perceptions of Student Ability**

Using the same 11 learning outcomes of FYC, when asked about their perceptions of the students' ability to perform these tasks, the largest percentage of faculty responses fell in the category of *most are able to do this with help*, rather than the highest level of performance, *most are able to do this on their own*.

Approximately 63% of respondents believed that students were able to (7) synthesize information from sources with help, while only 20% believed students could do this on their own. Fifty five percent (55%) of respondents believed both that students were able to (1) consider the essay's purpose, voice, and audience; and, were able to (2) identify and focus an appropriate essay topic with help, while 30% of respondents believed students could (1) consider the essay's purpose, voice, and audience on their own, and 40% of respondents believed students could (2) focus an appropriate essay topic on their own. The skill identified by the most respondents, 25%, as a skill that *most are not able to do* was (6) responding critically to source readings. (See Figure 3)

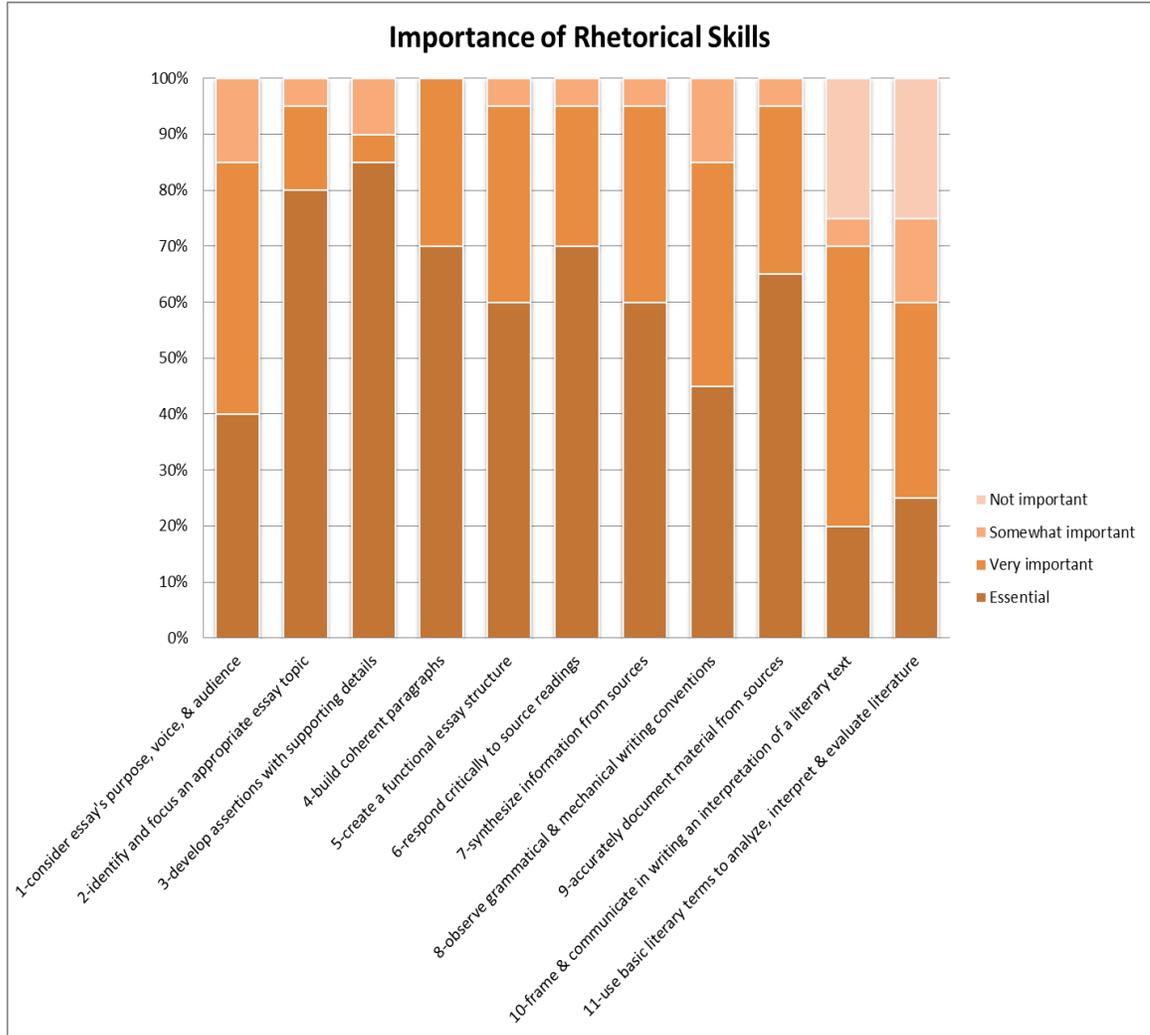


Figure 3. Faculty Members' Rankings of Rhetorical Skill Importance

When comparing the responses to both sets of Likert-type questions, some interesting relationships were revealed. For each of the 11 FYC learning outcomes, more faculty members identified the outcome as *essential* to their course than felt the students were able to perform the skill on their own. The biggest differences in the faculty members' assessment of the importance of each skill when compared to their perceptions of student performance were in the four skills: (3) ability to develop assertions with

supporting details; (6) ability to respond critically to source readings; (2) ability to identify and focus an appropriate essay topic; and (7) ability to synthesize information from sources. Seventeen respondents noted that students' (6) ability to develop assertions with supporting details was essential, while only eight felt students could do this on their own; 14 respondents said that students' (6) ability to respond critically to source readings was *essential* to their course, while only five felt students could *do this on their own*; 16 respondents said that students' (2) ability to identify and focus an appropriate essay topic was *essential*, while only eight felt students could *do this on their own*. And, 12 respondents noted that students' (7) ability to synthesize information from sources was essential, while only four felt that students could *do this on their own*, and four felt that students *could not do this at all*. (See Figure 4)

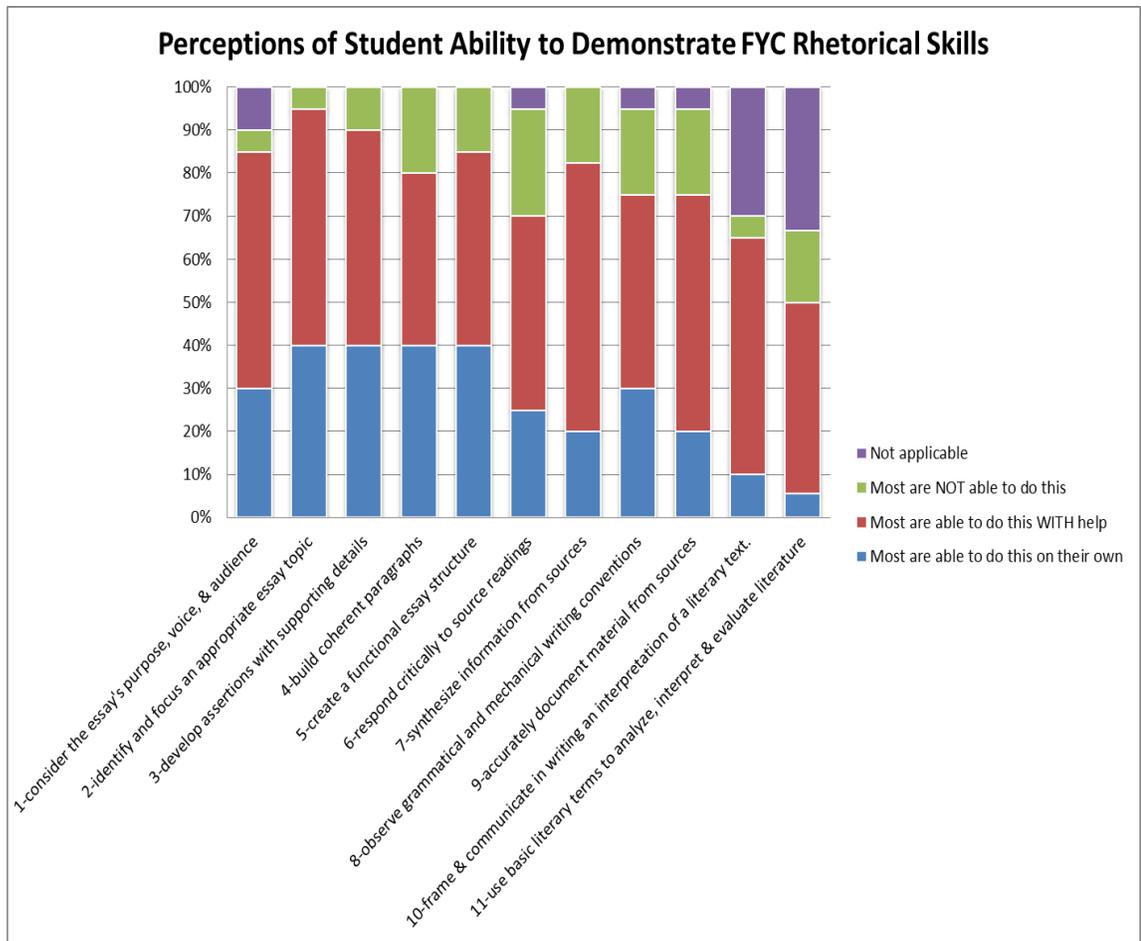


Figure 4. Faculty Members' Perceptions of Student Ability to Demonstrate FYC Rhetorical Skills

On the survey, 58% of respondents indicated that they dedicated at least some class time to teaching or reviewing their expectations for discipline-specific writing. The activities conducted in class (which were identified by the respondents) ranged from reviewing essay structure and organization to discussing formatting, grading, and expectations. Some faculty members also indicated that they provided feedback to students during the writing process, prior to the students' submission of the final paper, or provided examples of successful writing.

Sixteen percent (16%) of the respondents indicated that they did not use class time to teach/review writing expectations, but that their expectations were identified either on the assignment, online, or on the course syllabus. The remainder of the respondents (26%) did not provide any feedback regarding their choice not to devote class time to writing expectations. The data does not provide any detailed explanation of the instructors' choice not to devote class time to writing expectations. However, Moor, Jensen-Hart and Hooper (2012) suggest that the reason may be because the faculty members do not consider the potential that the assumptions, skills, and style of writing taught in FYC may be different than writing in their discipline.

Additionally, the open-ended question regarding the type of assignment in which students tended to perform the best generated a wide range of responses, but two themes emerged: shorter assignments with specific instructions/specific questions and assignments whose topics were personally relevant to the students seemed to generate the most successful student writing.

### **Combined Data Source Findings**

**Faculty who did not teach or review writing expectations.** When faculty responses to question seven on the survey - Do you use class time to review or teach discipline-specific writing expectations? - were compared with the number of learning objectives from FYC for which the faculty members selected *most are not able to do this*, interesting results emerged. Of the nine classes in which at least one faculty member said s/he did not use class time to teach or review writing expectations, only three, all from the same discipline within SBSSHS, responded that students were able to complete (either on their own or with help) all the FYC learning objectives that were related to their discipline. None of the respondents selected *not important* as a response to any of the

objectives. One of the respondents identified two learning objectives that were not applicable to her/his course, and one identified three learning objectives as not applicable. Two of the objectives identified as not applicable are the same, not surprisingly because the two objectives (10 and 11) relate to writing about literature. One of these courses was in the SBSSHS and the other in SLA.

One instructor from SLA who did not use class time to teach/review discipline-specific writing identified two of the 11 learning outcomes as *most are not able to do this*. Another instructor from a discipline in SLA identified four of 11 learning outcomes as *most are not able to do this*. An additional two instructors from SLA (who taught three different courses) identified six of 11 learning objectives as *most are not able to do this*. And, finally, one instructor from SBSSHS identified two of 11 learning objectives as *most are not able to do this*. (See Figure 4)

The learning objectives that these faculty members identified as skills students were not able to do were counted, revealing that only one learning outcome - (10) students are able to frame, and communicate in writing, an interpretation of a literary text - was not identified as something the students could not do. However, this same learning outcome was identified by two faculty members as not applicable to their courses.

The learning outcome most frequently identified as something students were not able to do was (6) to respond critically to source readings, cited by four faculty members. The next most frequently identified learning outcomes that students were not able to do were cited by three faculty members each: (4) build coherent paragraphs; (8) observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions; and (11) use basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature.

Of the nine faculty members in this group, assignments from two were missing. The assignments of the three faculty members who felt their students could at least meet the FYC learning outcomes with help were not considered in this analysis. The remaining four faculty members' (three from SLA and one from SBSSHS) assignments were compared to the weaknesses the faculty identified in students' ability. Each assignment was compared to the instructor's responses of *most are not able to do this* to determine if the skills instructors perceived their students could not demonstrate were skills the instructor was looking for in the writing assignment. In all three classes and assignments, the skills for which instructors selected *most are not able to do* were required components of the writing assignment.

The syllabi from these nine classes revealed that writing assignments accounted for anywhere from 10% to 40% of the students' final grade. The three classes in which the two instructors noted that most students could not demonstrate six of 11 learning objectives and did not use class time to teach/review discipline-specific writing based either 30% of the final grade (1 class) or 40% (2 classes) of the final grade on the writing assignment/s.

**Faculty who did teach or review writing expectations.** Of the 11 faculty members (teaching 13 different classes) who indicated that they did spend class time teaching/reviewing discipline specific writing expectations, seven believed students were capable of achieving the FYC learning outcomes either on their own or with help. Only three faculty members (who taught four different courses) indicated that *most are not able to* achieve some of the learning outcomes. With the exception of one faculty member who identified six learning outcomes that *most are not able to do*, the others

identified only one (two faculty members) or two (one faculty member who taught two different courses) learning outcomes that most students were not able to do.

The most frequently identified learning objective that students were not able to do was (7) synthesize information from sources. Interestingly, this same objective was the least frequently identified by faculty members who did not use class time to teach/review discipline specific writing expectations. The second most frequently identified (by two faculty members) learning objective that *most are not able to do* was (9) accurately document material from sources.

The syllabi of the faculty members who used class time to teach/review writing expectations revealed that the value of the writing assignments (as part of the students' final grade) was evenly spread over the following ranges: 10% (2 classes), 20-29% (2 classes), 30-39% (2 classes), 40% (2 classes), 50% (2 classes), or 60% (1 class) of the students' final grade.

### **Methodology and Framework**

Using a multi-method qualitative research study allowed for additional insight into the perceptions of the faculty respondents. For example, the instructors' perceptions regarding student ability as identified by the survey could be confirmed by artifacts such as the requirements of the assignments given and the syllabi of the classes they taught. People's perceptions are best collected directly from the people being studied. The design of this study, using document analysis and a survey, provided a snapshot of the respondents' espoused theories and theories-in-action (Argyris, 1990). A survey may generate espoused theories as respondents can consider what they think is the best answer, but analysis of the syllabi and writing assignments can reveal theories-in-action.

While this study was not designed to determine the accuracy of the instructors' perceptions, it did provide different outlooks on how the instructors perceived student ability and the value they placed on certain skills (FYC learning outcomes).

### **Assumptions**

An important assumption in this study was that writing skills are valuable skills across disciplines and that faculty members who taught writing-intensive courses viewed the development of writing proficiency as an important part of their role. Writing proficiency takes time to develop; it is an ongoing process which requires focus over an extended period of time (Bazerman et al., 2005). And, while the students must maintain that focus, faculty members who design and require written assignments as part of the coursework should support the students as they learn to become flexible, adaptable, proficient writers.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Implications**

As the world rapidly changes, the system of higher education in America must also change, and community colleges are an important part of this. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the community college began to emerge as a bridge between the K-12 education system and the system of higher education (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Now, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, as effective communication skills are becoming increasingly important, addressing this need is becoming another role of the community college.

The purpose of this study was to determine the nature and extent of any gaps that existed between the writing skills faculty members across disciplines at Community College, a two-year college in a suburban area of the Northeast United States, expected their students to utilize in intermediate-level writing-intensive courses, their perceptions of the students' general ability to demonstrate those skills, and the importance of the learning outcomes of the two semesters of FYC courses.

Faculty members in English departments often teach FYC and/or other writing courses; however, across disciplines, faculty members who do not teach FYC are also teaching their students to write in different disciplines with different styles and expectations. The purpose of this study was to explore the expectations that existed regarding writing proficiency and the faculty's perceptions of the students' ability to demonstrate those skills in courses across disciplines.

#### **Discussion of Key Findings**

The data revealed that faculty members across disciplines valued writing. Although the overall weight of writing as a percent of a student's final grade varied from

10% to 70% across all courses studied, some of these differences could be accounted for by the number of writing assignments given during a semester. In general, although there was at least one outlier, the more writing assignments students were given in a course, the higher the percent of the final grade. For example, one course for which 70% of the final grade was determined by writing required students to write six papers. Another connection between writing assignments and percentage of final grade was also reflected in the scope of the writing assignment. For example, in a course for which the assignment was long, involved very careful analytical research, and required the students to demonstrate a clear understanding of the course's objectives, the one writing assignment accounted for a high percentage (25%) of the final course grade. Therefore, in this case, it is safe to say that the instructor's intended outcomes for the writing assignment factored into its overall weight in the final grade.

The assignments collected and analyzed for this research revealed that a majority of the assignments given at the intermediate level (84%) required students to write essays, which reflected the FYC learning outcome students are able (5) to create a functional essay structure and the college's WAC policy suggestion to require an essay. This research study was not designed to determine whether the essay format was chosen because of the suggestion in the policy or whether it was chosen because the essay format matched the writing style of the discipline in which it was assigned. However, it is important to note that several different courses required students to utilize a genre other than the essay. These included a summary-response, search diary, business report, portfolio, and a profile. While each of these genres was assigned in only one course, the fact remains that students will be challenged to write using different genres in different

situations. Therefore, if faculty members are aware of the differences that exist between what the students are likely to have written prior to the intermediate-level courses, they can better highlight the similarities as well as the differences to aid students in developing a metacognitive framework for approaching assignments (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000). In addition, students will develop an understanding of the multidisciplinary nature of writing by identifying what constitutes good writing in different contexts (Elbow, 2000).

This study also identified a vast array of terms that were used by the participants to convey to the students the requirements and rhetorical skills required by the writing assignment. While close to 100 different descriptors (See Appendix D) were used in the individual writing assignments, the most frequently used words were: *discuss*, *analyze*, *argue*, and *explain*. However, when the assignments and words were analyzed closely, the descriptors could be condensed to fewer than 20 skills. And, of the roughly 20 more focused skills, six stood out in terms of frequency of rhetorical skill requirement: analyze, explain, identify, evaluate, argue, and research. This revelation from the data suggests that there was some consistency regarding the types of writing and rhetorical skills intermediate-level students should have been capable of demonstrating. As such, faculty members both in FYC and intermediate-level writing-intensive courses might do well to highlight these skills for their students in each course in a way that is appropriate to the instructor's style, discipline, and course content. This will aid in creating scaffolding for students and activating connections to previously learned skills.

Knowing that students are likely to be required to analyze and explain, identify, argue, and/or research topics in their intermediate-level writing assignments will also enable instructors to focus more on teaching these skills within FYC. The first two

learning outcomes of FYC are: students are able to (1) consider the essay's purpose, voice, and audience; and (2) identify and focus an appropriate essay topic. In order for students to be able to consider the purpose, voice, and audience for their writing as well as choose an appropriate topic, they must understand the requirements set forth in the assignment they are given. As McCarthy (1987) notes, it can be challenging for students to develop the ability to identify and use appropriate rules in a given context. This may be partially a result of variations in terminology. The question is, do the students recognize that these assignments which use different terms are requiring the same skill. This is an important aspect to study further. If students do not understand the requirements, they are more likely to incorrectly apply skills learned in other contexts (Reiff & Bawashi, 2011).

An additional observation based on the data gathered on terminology from the assignments is that although different faculty members used different terms that, in effect, were asking the students to use the same skill, the connotation of these terms can impact the students' perception of how and what they should write. For example, directions such as *comment on* or *discuss* may be perceived as less formal than *explain*, resulting in a different response from students. However, without student writing samples, this distinction cannot be commented on in any depth.

However, the focus on terminology opened another area for consideration: students' perceptions of the words used in the directions for writing assignments. Attempting to identify the skills required by some of the assignments, because of the word use, proved challenging for the coders. Coding the assignments involved numerous conversations with colleagues and member checking regarding the skills required to complete an assignment. And, while students can, and should, ask for clarification of

assignments and instruction, they do not always do so. Therefore, if an assignment containing language that a student considers vague is given in a class in which the instructor does not review writing, the student may apply inappropriate knowledge and skills to complete the task s/he was given (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011).

For example, when students were asked to “tease out” an idea, what did this mean to them? A student who did not seek clarification may have written a very informal response, perhaps not well organized because s/he assumed the assignment was an informal or brainstorming piece. However, when the specifications of the assignment were carefully reviewed, this essay actually required five pages of research. While it is not possible to make all assignments clear to all students in one document, faculty members should be aware of how students might or do perceive the directions they are given. One possible suggestion would be to provide students with the assignment’s requirements and then ask the students to break down the assignment into its component parts.

From the perspective of a faculty member, we perceive our assignments as clearly written because we know what we expect from the students, and we have an understanding of the terminology we used in the assignment as well as an understanding of the “basic” rules of writing. These terms may mean different things (or nothing at all) to different people, and it is important to recognize this. Even among faculty members and across disciplines differences arose in the use of the term *analysis*. Some faculty members felt that research did not involve analysis or evaluation while others viewed these skills as intertwined. Many rhetorical skills overlap; there are not necessarily clear-

cut distinctions, and being aware of how we use the language of our disciplines is a good step in the direction of clarity for our students.

An additional point of interest identified in the research study relates to Bloom's Taxonomy. According to Anderson and Krathwol's (2001) revision of Bloom's Taxonomy, cognitive development occurs in six hierarchical levels: Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analyzing, Evaluating, and Creating. The assignments that were analyzed for this study revealed aspects of all six levels, with many assignments utilizing skills at more than one level. The important thing to remember is that the higher the level of skill, the fewer students will be able to complete the assignment on their own. That is not to suggest that instructors should simplify the assignments. The point is, instructors must recognize the challenges inherent in their assignments. Therefore, the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy should be considered when designing, explaining, and evaluating student writing. Sometimes perceptions of the students' abilities might be misplaced.

Applying Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) to the development of writing proficiency reminds instructors that students are not all on the same cognitive level and may need varying levels of support to complete the tasks set out for them. Being aware of the level at which assignments are structured and the fact that some students will not be able to complete higher order tasks without substantial amounts of support is important. The students should be supported in developing an understanding of the relationship between the student, the task, and the strategy they choose to complete the task (Kaniel, Licht, Peled, 2000).

Developing an awareness of the difficulty inherent in their assignments can help instructors to communicate more effectively with their students regarding expectations. The lower the level of skill required to complete an assignment, the greater the number of students who should be able to demonstrate greater mastery of the writing assignment. Interestingly, the fourth most frequently expected skill (based on this study), evaluation, requires students to perform at the highest level cognitive process – Creating, thus indicating a need for student support. Assignments that require students to utilize skills at this level are likely to require substantial amounts of support as most intermediate-level students often have not developed this ability yet. This is reflected in Kaniel, Licht, and Peled's (2000) discussion of the challenges students face as they work to develop the metacognitive ability to clarify the goals and problems of the specific writing task, control the sequence of operations while writing, read their writing self-critically (with the goals of the task in mind), select task-appropriate content, and gear the text to the intended audience.

What expectations do faculty members who taught intermediate-level writing intensive courses at the community college hold for students' writing ability? An overwhelming majority of the faculty members in this sample (17-19 out of 20) indicated that the first nine of FYC's learning objectives: (1) consider the essay's purpose, voice, and audience; (2) identify and focus an appropriate essay topic; (3) develop assertions with supporting details; (4) build coherent paragraphs; (5) create a functional essay structure; (6) respond critically to source readings, (7) synthesize information from sources; (8) observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions; and (9) accurately document material from sources were either *very important* or *essential* to their course.

This significance was confirmed by analyzing the many writing assignments designed by the faculty members. These nine learning outcomes were reflected in those assignments. Thus, there was agreement on these learning objectives.

When the assignments given were compared to the skills instructors noted that students could not do, gaps were revealed. For example, despite respondents indicating that grammar and mechanical writing conventions were essential, many did not use class time to review or teach these conventions, and they indicated that most students were not able to demonstrate proficiency in these areas. The research indicated that the FYC learning outcomes were important in the intermediate-level courses in various disciplines, yet many faculty members did not perceive that their students were fully able to use the skills they learned in other contexts. However, these findings did not enable the researcher to draw conclusions regarding these skills. This is a point that should be researched further to determine if the faculty members' perceptions match the reality of their students' writing by examining the students' writing.

An important distinction in the expectations of different faculty members was evident in their use of class time to teach or review discipline-specific writing expectations. The division of faculty (who responded to the question) who did and did not use class time for this purpose was almost even. However, 26% of the participants did not answer this question. Underlying this division is potentially an expectation that the students should be able to demonstrate writing proficiency without any discipline-specific guidance, or without general reminders about what constitutes effective writing. Further study would be required to determine the actual implications of this difference; however,

for close to half of the participants there seems to be an expectation that students would address their writing on their own, out of class.

This division among the participants leads to another interesting point. The expectations of the faculty members certainly informed their perception of student writing. As a result, the faculty members who indicated they did spend class time reviewing and/or teaching discipline-specific writing expectations, overall, expressed a stronger perception of the students' ability to demonstrate the skills taught in FYC. These participants perceived far fewer weaknesses in student writing than their counterparts who did not spend class time on writing expectations. This presents a positive perception of student ability and reflects the early stage of development of writing skills – most students need help, but can achieve the desired outcomes.

There may be numerous factors, beyond the scope of this research, contributing to this perception, but, at least for the faculty who did spend time addressing their expectations for student writing, there was a positive connection between class time spent and its impact on students. While this study involved a small population, these results might be indicative of an assumption being made regarding where or by whom writing skills should be taught.

The faculty members who did use class time to review/teach writing reflect Elbow's (1991) belief that even students who are able to write well in one course may not be able to meet another course or instructor's expectations. By using class time to clarify expectations, professors are helping students analyze the task, determine an effective organization, and/or identify an appropriate example/template (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Based on the data, the faculty members who did use class time to teach/review writing expectations appear to have a more positive perception of students' abilities.

The study also revealed, not surprisingly, that students' use of grammar, punctuation, and documentation continue to be areas of concern for the participants. Most of the participants believed that these skills were important, but significantly fewer were confident in the students' ability to demonstrate these skills on their own. While a few participants revealed that students struggled to write coherent paragraphs and demonstrated weaknesses in organization, many identified sentence level problems as a big concern. This perception leads back to the discussion of where and by whom these skills should be taught.

Because writing is a skill, it is not achieved over night or within the time frame of one or even two composition courses (or over the span of one's K-12 education). It is a skill that requires attention and practice. It is also a skill that is challenging to improve without feedback regarding strengths and weaknesses. This study was not intended to determine the level of feedback the participants provided on student writing. However, what the study did reveal was that faculty members across the campus were noticing their students' strengths and weaknesses. Requiring students to write provides them with the practice necessary to their progress.

Grammar, punctuation, and documentation can be tedious to teach (and learn); however, they are important aspects of effective communication. People are communicating in writing more because of the vast advances in technology. These advances can make writing quicker, but the process of writing still requires time and attention to detail. Often, as noted by one participant in the study, students simply did not

think about editing and proofreading their writing. Whether that is the result of not having time or thinking the computer will fix their errors is another question. Another participant commented on the students' use of spell and grammar checking programs, and noted that students uncritically used any word/suggestion that popped up.

Helping students develop writing proficiency takes time and is challenging. However, through conversations among faculty members across disciplines, common goals can be achieved. While this research study did not identify disagreements over the importance of the writing skills and the learning outcomes of FYC, it did find support for FYC's learning outcomes. This is simply a starting point for discussions on the college campus. Further research could be conducted to determine if additional writing skills should be added to the FYC outcomes, and what those additions should be.

The data from this study can be used to inform instructors of the FYC courses regarding the most frequently required skills in intermediate-level courses, thus enabling FYC to be used as a gateway course to upper-level writing rather than an end point in writing instruction (Yancey, 2004). As Elbow (1991) notes, it is important for people to be able to write both in academic/professional contexts and in everyday contexts. This requires flexibility and adaptability, which are important skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Dede, 2010).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Some of the strengths of this research study were the relative availability of the artifacts being studied – syllabi and writing assignments, the easily defined pool of potential participants, the clearly defined FYC course outcomes, and the strong response rate of participants to the online survey. The use of course syllabi and course assignments

also represented the reality of expectations for student success with regard to writing in each course because these documents were created for and used in the courses being studied. These sources of data were able to be collected and analyzed without interrupting the flow of the classes. In addition, the faculty who participated in the study were receptive to any requests for information or clarification, adding to the trustworthiness of the information gathered.

The design of the survey, including both Likert-type scales and open-ended questions, also enabled faculty members to easily respond to the learning outcomes of FYC and have their voices heard regarding their individual experiences, expectations, and perceptions. The open-ended questions provided valuable information and a richer understanding of the respondents' expectations for their students and their own role in the teaching of writing. The online format of the survey enabled the researcher to extend to all faculty members who taught an intermediate-level writing-intensive course over the last year an invitation to participate, even if they were not physically present on campus. The study included both full-time and part-time faculty which is especially important at a community college where many courses are taught by part-time faculty.

One limitation of this study was the number of sections of intermediate-level courses offered each semester. Certain disciplines such as film and humanities often only run one section of an intermediate-level course per semester. However, these courses are often taught by the same faculty member semester after semester, making the analysis of the assignment representative, but limited to one or two faculty members' perceptions.

Another limitation was the small participant group. Because the study was conducted at one college, the population was limited to the number of faculty who taught

the courses designated as writing-intensive at the intermediate-level. The population was also limited by how many sections of each course ran during the two semesters studied. However, 23 out of the 46 faculty members invited to participate responded to the survey, which is a good response rate for a survey. In addition, at least one faculty member from each discipline responded to the survey. This provided a nice representation of differing perspectives.

An additional limitation is part of the nature of document analysis – the data is limited to the document that exists and may be incomplete (University of Texas, 2011). This was a limitation during this study, but whenever possible, additional information was requested or member checking was utilized to lessen the impact of the missing documents. Unfortunately, certain documents simply were not available. However, conducting a multi-method qualitative research study incorporated additional sources of information to provide a better understanding of the documents and the expectations that underlie their purpose.

Additionally, although the study included information and data from 27 different courses, not every course had all three data sources available. A copy of the writing assignment used in a few classes was missing. Or, a participant may have skipped a question on the survey. However, other documents and/or faculty members' survey responses were still gathered and analyzed.

One question on the survey should also be revised to elicit a more detailed response. Faculty members were asked whether they used class time to teach/review discipline-specific writing expectations, and to provide a few details. Most respondents who said they did not use class time for this purpose, also did not provide any details

about why they did not do so. An important piece in understanding the perceptions of these faculty members could have been generated by a more specific follow-up question such as: if you do not use class time to teach/review discipline specific writing expectation, please explain why. The majority of the details that were provided in response to the original survey question were only provided by those who did use class time to teach/review expectations for writing. An assumption was made in designing the survey that most faculty members would provide some additional insight.

Finally, this study, focused primarily on the teachers' expectations for students, analyzed the approach to writing employed by faculty members across disciplines at Community College. This study cannot provide insight into students' opinions about the assignments or how they approach writing across contexts.

### **Implications and Further Research**

Faculty members were able to identify what they expected from their students: coherent, organized writing that displayed critical thinking (when required) and attention to details such as grammar, documentation, and appropriate source use. Faculty members expected their students to carefully read the assignment sheets because these sheets contained the requirements. Faculty members also expected their students to seek out information that they would need to appropriately complete an assignment such as rubrics contained in syllabi, online resources identified in course shells, and/or assistance with technical aspects of writing. These expectations were often clearly visible in the course syllabi and instructions for writing assignments. Unfortunately, they may not have been obvious to the students, especially if the student had to refer to another source such as the syllabus, as is evidenced by some of the weaknesses faculty perceived in student writing.

In the future, researchers might deploy the survey to all faculty members teaching intermediate-level courses as part of action research to develop actionable goals for faculty who teach writing in all courses. The researchers would have to request the documents from the participants themselves, as a large repository of course-level writing assignments given by semester may not be readily available from a central location, as they would not be at CC.

Ideally, this study could be expanded to other community colleges and four year institutions within the same state in an effort to determine a level of writing proficiency that students should attain before graduating from a community college. This expansion of the research would provide an even wider snapshot of the types of writing students are being expected to do and what the faculty members who teach the courses believe the students should be capable of.

As a result of this study, which provides a basis for discussing student writing, future research should be done to determine whether the faculty members' perceptions of students' ability to demonstrate certain writing skills accurately reflect the students' skills through the examination and analysis of the writing generated by the assignments already studied. Knowing whether the perceptions of faculty are reflected in students' writing will further the discussion regarding ways to improve not only individual instruction but also departmental requirements and/or support for student writers.

An additional opportunity for further research based on the present research study is to determine how students and faculty members across disciplines perceive the instructions and word choice used in assignments by examining word choice and perceived meanings of key terms used in the writing assignments. Faculty members

carefully design writing assignments, but are their word choices/directions/expectations clear to students? Are faculty members taking their knowledge and comfort level with discipline-specific assumptions about writing for granted? Are the assignment guidelines as clear to the students as the instructor hopes they are? If students do not clearly understand the expectations and requirements of an assignment, they will be more likely to approach the assignment in a way that does not yield the desired results (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011).

The data gathered in this study also has relevance for faculty development and new teacher training. A close examination of the variety of words used by different instructors to identify their expectations for the writing assignment can help in clarifying the expectations for students. In addition, terms such as *analyze* which may not be abstract to faculty members, may be abstract to their students. Also, the level of formality used in the language of the assignment specifications can impact the students' perception of what a faculty member expects as the finished product.

## **Conclusion**

This research study focused on faculty members who taught intermediate-level writing-intensive courses at a community college and their expectations for students' writing ability, their identification of the importance of rhetorical skills, and their perceptions of the students' ability to demonstrate writing proficiency. The study that was conducted was a multi-method qualitative research study which gathered data from the faculty members' directions for writing assignments, an online survey, and the individual course syllabi.

This research study successfully identified the expectations of a small group of intermediate-level course faculty members across disciplines. The data show that there was general consensus that the majority of the learning outcomes of FYC were relevant to intermediate-level courses in disciplines other than English. However, for many faculty members, gaps did exist between what they expected their students to do and what they perceived the students were able to do. This is an area that must be addressed to improve the learning process for CC's students. What is important is that a dialogue has begun. In order for skill transfer to occur, students must be supported over an extended time as they develop the metacognitive knowledge, monitoring, and control necessary to successfully performing a task in different contexts (Kaniel, Licht, & Peled, 2000). No one instructor or one class is entirely responsible for the development of student writers; It takes a campus.

While part of this study focused on CC's faculty members' expectations for student writing, it also revealed and reinforced the power of the written word. The analysis of the directions for students' writing assignments revealed a wide range of terms being used to inform students of the expectations. Often the terms were not discipline-specific; rather, they were a matter of the faculty members' style. And, while it is beneficial to students and faculty to be able to personalize their writing, students – especially at the intermediate level – might need clarification or explanation of the expectations identified in the directions of the writing assignments. However, the students and their faculty members may not realize the ambiguity that is inherent in the language of the assignment.

The significance of word choice in the directions being given to students is important to acknowledge and pursue. What better way to demonstrate to students the expectations for writing than by providing them with clear examples of the instructor's use of language, discipline-specific or not? Setting high standards and providing examples as well as guidelines to achieving those standards is a worthy goal; one that would go a long way in closing any gaps between espoused theories and theories-in-action.

This study revealed that the rhetorical skills taught in FYC were important to the faculty members who taught intermediate-level writing-intensive courses, as evidenced by the survey results and analysis of the directions for the writing assignments. Analysis of the writing assignments revealed that students at Community College were frequently expected to write papers that involved the ability to analyze, explain, identify, and evaluate information. These are tasks that require students to construct meaning through different processes and at different levels of difficulty. For each of the 11 FYC learning outcomes, a majority of participants said the outcome was either *essential* or *very important* to her/his course, indicating a relationship between the skills taught in FYC and the skills being used in intermediate-level writing-intensive courses. Finally, the course syllabi revealed that each of the writing assignments factors in to the final grade of each student, some to a substantial portion of the overall course grade.

FYC courses are an important part of a student's education, not just at CC, but across the country. However, these courses should be considered as the entryway to improved writing proficiency rather than the place in which students learn, once and for all, how to write well (Yancey, 2004). Policies and procedures can only go so far in

creating a culture of writers. CC has created a policy and procedure for encouraging growth in students' writing abilities by requiring specific courses, as chosen by their academic departments, to include a written paper that is appropriate to the discipline. What happens beyond that is largely up to the faculty members who teach these classes and design the writing assignments. This flexibility is important to the pedagogical concerns of the individual instructors and should be maintained. However, a forum for instructors who teach courses that require writing should be provided for and utilized by the faculty. Having a place to discuss concerns, ideas, best practices, or partner for a project will only further benefit the students.

It is difficult to drive change, however, when faculty become engaged in discussions of pedagogical concerns and the identification of important skills, change begins to come about naturally. Changes do not have to be large and earth-shattering. Sometimes small changes have a big impact.

Based on the results of this study, it does not appear that a major overhaul of FYC is needed. What is needed is more discussion about writing, more opportunities to connect with others who teach writing, and more chances for cross-disciplinary connections. Simply discussing what others do and how they do it provides important insight and opportunities for individual improvement. Something seemingly as simple as word choice can change the way we and our students view assignments and requirements. Discussing these types of topics with other faculty members who teach writing (whether it is their primary focus or not) can provide multiple perspectives.

This research is beneficial to Community College as it provides insight into current practice regarding the teaching of writing. The faculty members' perceptions of

students' abilities to demonstrate writing proficiency in different courses and disciplines can be used to change current practices regarding the teaching of writing skills and the creation of writing assignments through encouraging discussions and building connections across and among faculty members in different disciplines.

Within and beyond Community College, this study can also be used for faculty development, to inform an individual's approach to expressing expectations for writing to students and pre-emptively addressing perceived weaknesses in student writing. This research can also be used to inform new teacher training by identifying areas in which faculty members note weaknesses and strengths in student writing as well as in developing an awareness of the challenges students face when they are given directions for a writing assignment. Being aware of the climate and culture surrounding people's perceptions of writing and who is responsible for teaching/improving students' writing skills on an individual campus can identify areas in which connections must be made and/or gaps must be closed in order to best support the skills of developing student writers. In addition, areas in which faculty members' perceptions reveal satisfactory outcomes in terms of student writing, acknowledgement and awareness are equally important.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to helping students improve their writing skills. However, it is important to keep the conversation regarding these skills on-going. Identifying connections – or creating connections – between courses and across disciplines can help faculty members achieve a clearer vision of where their students are heading and/or where they are coming from, enabling the faculty members to better support the student as s/he develops and refines her/his writing skills. In addition, this

connection between classes could also help students view writing as a skill and a process rather than a course or two they must take during their first year of college.

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## Appendix A

### Intermediate Level Writing Intensive Courses

#### Art

Art History III  
American Art

#### Business

Business Communications  
Words Processing Applications  
Business Law II  
Principles of Management  
Legal Research and Writing

#### Communications

Communication Law  
Intercultural Communication  
Public Relations and Publicity  
Mass Communications

#### English

Intro to Poetry  
Intro to Drama  
Graphic Texts: Words, Pictures, & Cultural Meaning  
Native American Literature  
African American Literature  
Chinese Literature in Translation  
Arabic Literature in Translation  
Jewish & Holocaust Literature  
Science Fiction  
Literature & Myth  
Women in Literature  
Women in Film  
Women's Lives  
American Literature I  
American Literature II  
British Literature I  
British Literature II  
World Literature I  
World Literature II  
Short Story

Short Novel  
Shakespeare Plays I

Film

Understanding Film  
From Literature to Film

Health and Human Performance

Women's Health  
Introduction to Public Health

Humanities

Humanities I: Modernism  
Humanities II: Postmodernism  
Special Topics in the Humanities

Mathematics

Business Calculus

Philosophy

Biomedical Ethics  
Religious Experiences

Political Science

International relations  
Comparative Politics and Government

Sociology

Women in Society  
Social Problems  
Race and Ethnicity

## Appendix B

### Survey

1. What Writing Intensive course do you teach?

2. For each of the following objectives from ENGL 151 and ENGL 152, on a scale of 1-4, identify how important the ENGL objective is to your course. (1= not important; 2 = somewhat important; 3= very important; 4= essential)

2a. consider the essay's purpose, voice, and audience	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2b. identify and focus an appropriate essay topic	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2c. develop assertions with supporting details	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2d. build coherent paragraphs	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2e. create a functional essay structure	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2f. respond critically to source readings	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2g. synthesize information from sources	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2h. observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2i. accurately document material from sources	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2j. frame, and communicate in writing, an interpretation of a literary text	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
2k. use basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)

3. For each of the following objectives from ENGL 151 and ENGL 152, on a scale of 1-4, identify how well your students able to complete the following tasks: (1=not applicable; 2 = most are not able to do this; 3 = most are able to do this with help; 4 = most are able to do this on their own)

3a. consider the essay's purpose, voice, and audience	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3b. identify and focus an appropriate essay topic	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)

3c. develop assertions with supporting details	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3d. build coherent paragraphs	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3e. create a functional essay structure	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3f. respond critically to source readings	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3g. synthesize information from sources	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3h. observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3i. accurately document material from sources	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3j. frame—and communicate in writing—an interpretation of a literary text	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
3k. use basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)

4. Of the above list, which, if any, of these objectives are not relevant at all to writing in your class/discipline?

5. Do you use class time to review or teach discipline-specific writing expectations? Please provide a few details.

6. Over the last 2 academic years, what is the most significant weakness you notice in student writing?

7. Over the last 2 academic years, what kinds of writing tasks do students do the best on in your class?

## Appendix C

### Writing Skills/Learning Outcomes of FYC

#### Excerpts from Official Course Descriptions

Students who successfully complete ENGL 151 will be able to demonstrate growth in the following general and specific communication skill areas:

- a. Writing—to consider an essay’s purpose, voice, and audience; to identify and focus an appropriate essay topic; to develop assertions with supporting detail; to build coherent paragraphs; to create a functional essay structure; to respond critically to source readings; to synthesize information from source readings logically; to conduct research honestly and skillfully; to use accurate MLA documentation procedures; and to observe grammatical and mechanical writing conventions.

Students who successfully complete ENGL 152 will be able to:

- b. Develop further the analytical and writing skills learned in English 151 and apply them to writing about literature.
- c. Frame—and communicate in writing—an interpretation of a literary text.
- d. Use basic literary terms to analyze, interpret, and evaluate literature.

Appendix D  
Words Used in Assignments

Address

Agree/disagree

Analysis/analyze

Answer

Argument/argumentative

Categorize

Cite

Choose

Classify

Combine/combining

Come up with

Comment on

Compose

Compare/contrast

Connect

Consider

Create

Critical thinking

Decide

Definition/define

Demonstrate

Describe

Detail

Develop  
Discuss  
Document (meaning paper)  
Essay  
Evaluate  
Examine/examining  
Example  
Expand  
Explain  
Explore  
Express  
Extend  
Facts  
Find out  
Focus  
Follow  
Form  
Highlight  
Identify  
Include  
Incorporate  
Investigate  
Learn by discovery  
List  
Look (for)

Locate  
Make use of  
Organize  
Outline  
Opinion  
A Paper  
Perform  
Pick  
Place  
Plan  
Prepare  
Process  
Profile  
Project  
Prove  
Provide  
Questions  
Question/questioning  
Quote  
Read  
Record  
Refer  
Reflect/reflecting  
Report (as document)  
Report (vb)

Research  
Response  
Search diary  
Select  
Show  
Sources  
Summarize  
Support  
Talk  
Tease out  
Terms  
Theme  
Thesis  
Theory/theories  
Think  
Topic  
Trace  
Write  
Writing Assignment/assignment