Section Five

Writing Development Precedes and Extends Beyond College

One consequence of the relatively segmented nature of the US educational system is that we in writing studies tend to think about writing development in terms of what happens during the undergraduate years, as the research reviewed in the Introduction shows. Our questions and methods have varied across the years, but we have not, as a field, given much sustained attention to the practices and beliefs students bring with them from their high school experiences with writing. Yet, as many participants in this study make clear in their interviews, the influence of high school writing instruction extends far into college writing. Grace, the student discussed in several chapters, presents one such case, where the admonitions of a high school AP instructor continue to shape her thinking about writing and herself as a writer well past her sophomore year in college. But Grace is not alone. Many students describe their writerly selves in terms of their high school experiences. Some left high school feeling that they were not writers because they had concentrated on other areas, had received negative feedback on their writing, or somehow lacked the appropriate skill, background, or preparation. Others left high school convinced that they could be successful college writers because they had been in an AP course, had received affirmation from writing instructors, or had done comparatively better writing than their peers.

Frequently students’ high school–based assumptions about their own writing abilities proved to be wrong. First-year students in our study who claimed they weren’t writers found that they actually had an undiscovered talent for writing or actually really enjoyed the processes of writing. In contrast, students who felt very well prepared for college discovered that the kind of writing expected for the AP exam didn’t align well with the kind of writing expected by college writing instructors. Student participants who had enjoyed deep personal connections with their high school writing instructors were unable to find similar support in college, and
as a result, felt diminished as writers. This absence had consequences for their writerly development because, as Emily Wilson and Justine Post show in chapter 1, the instructor-student relationship influences how students respond to feedback. Study participants who had been accustomed to producing highly successful one-draft writing, usually the night before a high school assignment was due, struggled with college expectations for extended development of ideas or had little understanding of how to undertake substantial revision of their writing. Talking with such students made us aware of the profound and often long-lasting effects of students’ high school writing experiences.

It was particularly painful because many students reported that their college writing instructors had admonished them to forget everything they had learned in high school, as if it were possible to erase all the relationships, understandings, and experiences they had developed during the previous four years. Students who had been successful high school writers resented having what they knew about writing dismissed so completely, and they felt betrayed when the advice of high school teachers proved to be significantly different from the instruction they encountered in their college writing classes. Students who had been less successful in high school writing often expressed confusion about what expectations they should address, and expressed hope that their college writing instructors would share with them the “secrets” for being a good writer.

While we could not, in the context of this volume, give full attention to all the ways that high school writing experiences shape how students perform in college writing, we did not feel that we could end this collection without gesturing toward the importance of directing writing research toward deeper understandings of what student writers bring to the college classroom and the complex effects of this baggage upon their writerly development in college.

Our field has done a somewhat better job of attending to the experiences of college student writers after graduation. There is a body of literature on the nature of professional writing (e.g., Anderson; Anson; Bernhardt and Farmer; Couture; Odell, Goswami, and Quick) that considers the nature of writing in the workplace and, in some cases, makes recommendations for improving the alignment of college writing with what is expected in professional life. The lived experiences of college student writers entering the world of work have received much less attention, but Anne Beaufort has provided leadership in this area. Her Writing in the Real World looks at the experience of four students as they make the transition from academic to professional writing, focusing on the overlapping knowledge domains, opportunities for transfer of learning, and traits and conditions that foster further writing development. Beaufort’s College Writing and Beyond provides additional
information about the experience of moving from being a student to working by
following one student as he negotiates this transition.

One of the chapters in this section explores how two students negotiated the
transition from high school to college writing, and the other describes how four
student writers moved beyond college. Looking a few years in each direction from
college writing does not address all of the issues raised by recent discussions of the
lifelong journey of writing development, but these two perspectives can inform the
larger conversation, and our thinking has been influenced by the principles artic-
ulated by Bazerman et al. regarding the long view on writing development. These
principles are:

- Writing can develop across the lifespan as part of changing contexts.
- Writing development is complex because writing is complex.
- Writing development is variable; there is no single path and no single
  endpoint.
- Writers develop in relation to the changing social needs, opportunities,
  resources, and technologies of their time and place.
- The development of writing depends on the development, redirection, and
  specialized reconfiguring of general functions, processes, and tools.
- Writing and other forms of development have reciprocal and mutually
  supporting relationships.
- To understand how writing develops across the lifespan, educators need
  to recognize the different ways language resources can be used to present
  meaning in written texts.
- Curriculum plays a significant formative role in writing development. (7)

All the chapters in this collection show how these principles take on life in the writ-
ing experiences and perceptions of the students in our study. Nearly every chapter
speaks to the complexity of writing and the variability of writerly development as
shaped by shifting contexts and resources. Naomi Silver in chapter 8 and Lizzie
Hutton and Gail Gibson in chapter 3, among others, give particular attention to the
relationship between personal and writerly development. The chapters in this sec-
tion focus on expanding the span of life considered in writing development. Sarah
Swofford’s chapter looks at the context shifts experienced by two students as they
move from high school to college, reconfiguring the resources they brought from
high school to meet the expectations of college writing. But before she narrates
their experiences, she argues that the concept of the “typical” student at any college
or university contributes to a homogenization of the very different writing expe-
riences and perceptions that students bring from their high schools. Sometimes “typical” is constructed from local lore, and in other cases from institutional data, but in either case it can obscure features integral to understanding and fostering student writing development. She claims, “Using both broad demographic data and rich individual qualitative studies offers a fuller perspective on the writing experiences, resources and development that students bring into college” (p. 255). To put this claim into action Swofford demonstrates how Descriptor Plus, a College Board product that profiles communities and high schools across the country, can be used to understand where students come from, based on geodemographic data. A tool such as Descriptor Plus can provide at least a general overview of the kinds of resources students would have had access to in high school, and thereby complicate conceptions of the “typical” student.

Swofford goes on to show how qualitative research on individual students can augment the broad-stroke portraits offered by the “big data” of Descriptor Plus by narrating the stories of Natalie and Marie. Both came from communities different from those of more “typical” students at UM, which meant that they had access to fewer local resources—such as college-educated mentors, cultural experiences, and educational opportunities. Although there were similarities between their home communities, and each felt she was well prepared, these two students brought very different resources to college writing.

In her community Natalie had enjoyed a good deal of positive attention for her writing, both in and outside school. She was encouraged and supported by her teachers and, in Swofford’s words, experienced writing development in “relational” terms. At the university Natalie faced the challenge of finding a network of support to emulate the one that sustained her writing development in high school. Natalie’s confidence was "knocked a little bit" as she realized that her high school and the adults who supported her had not actually prepared her as well as she thought. But as she faced the challenge of responding to new writing expectations, Natalie called on others, including her roommate, instructors, and peers, for support. Marie, on the other hand, felt that her high school had given her good preparation in grammar and formatting, so she remained confident as a writer. From the beginning to the end of her undergraduate career, Marie maintained the view that skills that might be described as dealing with surface features of writing marked her as a good writer. In her engineering program, where collaborative writing projects are the norm, she frequently used these skills by taking the role of editor. Sharing writing projects with peers and making substantive contributions to the success of the group, Marie’s feeling of being well-prepared remained largely intact. Ultimately,
as Sarah reports, both students became successful writers, but their high school experiences clearly shaped the strategies they employed and their views of writing.

Anne Gere’s chapter looks at the other end of student experience, probing the concepts and capacities students take with them as they graduate and move on. Looking first at coded excerpts from exit interviews, Gere begins by noting how commonly students indicated that writing would be important in their futures. Many expressed very specific goals for the writing abilities they wanted to develop or pointed to skills they had developed in college writing that would be useful in their future lives. Other students talked about what they could do with writing, describing the repertoires they had developed or the greater confidence they felt. A number of students talked about the value of learning to reflect about their own writing and about other aspects of their lives. On a bittersweet note, a number of students, both minors and nonminors, spoke of the impending loss of opportunities to write regularly. Often in the context of explaining the strong personal connection they felt with writing, these students worried about “losing” writing as they moved beyond the university. This aggregation of student comments offers multiple perspectives on students’ writing development.

Moving from this broad overview of students’ comments about their college writing experiences, Gere looks closely at four recent graduates to learn about their transitions into new contexts with new writing challenges by conducting interviews to learn about their writing experiences two or more years after graduation. Stephanie, the first of these, graduated with a double major in math and English and is currently working for an insurance underwriting firm. In explaining her choice to major in English as well as math, Stephanie looked back to her strong high school preparation—writing fifteen- to twenty-page papers, for example—and credited her high school writing experiences as being instrumental in leading her to write an honors thesis in English. She also made special note of the importance of feedback, from both instructors and peers, in fostering her writerly development. Significantly, even though her position in the insurance firm did not provide feedback on her writing per se, Stephanie carefully saved a special folder of writing on which she has received positive comments and referred back to it when she faced a new writing task.

Linda, an Asian studies major and writing minor, reported a very different work experience and had actually resigned from her position with an auto parts supplier shortly before her follow-up interview. A prolific writer from childhood, Linda aspired to be a professional writer and took her first job with the hope that it would enable her to continue writing. Unfortunately, that didn’t work out, and Linda de-
decided to leave her position to devote more time to writing. Linda's commitment to writing was especially striking since, by her account, her writing received very little attention in high school. It was not until she reached the university that she had instructors who really helped her. Prior to that she had to rely on extensive reading and her own imagination. Like Stephanie, Linda assigned great value to getting feedback on her writing, and was discouraged by the difficulty of finding feedback since she had graduated.

Enrolled in a highly competitive PhD program in biology, Kris reported the greatest disjunction between her high school writing experiences and what she encountered in her undergraduate studies. She attended a “technical” high school where writing was given little attention, and she felt so lacking in writerly confidence that she enrolled in a developmental writing course during her first semester of college. In assessing her college writing experiences, Kris made it clear that writing courses did not play a role in the development of her capacities and confidence as a writer. She credited her omnivorous reading and her course work in philosophy with giving her new perspectives on writing, particularly writing in science. Like Stephanie, she found the experience of writing an honors thesis pivotal in her writerly development. As was true for both Linda and Stephanie, Kris highlighted peer review as one of the most important contributors to her development as a writer, and she took pleasure in the fact that the norms of science writing required her to collaborate regularly with colleagues and receive feedback from them.

Unlike Stephanie, Linda, and Kris, Dan, a communications major and writing minor, had very little use for peer feedback during his college years. In this, Dan, a writing minor, resembles the nonminors whom Benjamin Keating discusses in chapter 2. In both cases, peer review is held in low regard. For Dan, though, the issue seemed to be the control he wanted to exert over his prose and his desire to receive comments from his instructors. He described his decision to focus on writing as a process of elimination—in high school he wasn't good at math, didn't like reading, and found science intimidating. Dan currently holds a position as social media coordinator for a baseball team, where he is required to write constantly. He arrived at his position by way of writing for the Michigan Daily, a role he took up because of his confidence in himself as a writer. On reading a sports story Dan said to himself, “I can write a better story than this” (p. 305), and this insight led Dan to a successful undergraduate career of sports writing. Ironically, the feedback Dan eschewed as an undergraduate plays a central role in his daily work. “I wish I had bought in more to the classmate feedback” (p. 307), he lamented. Dan’s boss does provide feedback, in some ways replacing the instructor feedback that Dan valued as an undergraduate. And as was true during his college years, Dan still wants to
control the story. Speaking of social media, he claimed, “I like to think of it as talking from a position of power . . . you can say, ‘Why don't you look at—’” (p. 309).

In concluding, Gere points to the continuities that extend from high school through college and on into the postgraduation years for each of these students. Although each developed in several ways during college, many of the patterns they build on and the assumptions they held remained solidly present. Gere also describes the adjustments each has had to make in response to the need to integrate the visual and textual—charts and graphs for Stephanie, painted images for Linda, scientific figures for Kris, and captions for Instagram images for Dan. For each of the four the repertoires and rhetorical flexibility they developed as undergraduates provide resources to meet the challenges they encounter in their new roles.

Together these two chapters show the considerable similarities between the transitions from high school to college and from college to postgraduation positions while simultaneously illuminating some of the variations in patterns of development. These longer views of writing development affirm the principles that writing development is complex, follows many different paths, responds to shifting contexts, and is shaped by curriculum. Most of all, these chapters call for further research on writing development across longer stretches of time.

WORKS CITED


