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Writing Assignments and Instruction at Ontario's Publicly Funded Universities: A View from Three Disciplines

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Executive Summary

The ability of postsecondary students to write and communicate proficiently is an expectation identified by many, including not only organizations such as the OECD but also other public and employer groups. There is concern, however, that students and thus employees often fail to meet expectations in these areas. To address this concern, it is necessary to understand more about the writing skills that students learn during their postsecondary education. This research project was designed to examine whether and how students are taught to write at university.

This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the writing opportunities afforded to students at five Ontario universities in their first and second years. We analyzed course syllabi ($n=215$), distributed online surveys to university instructors ($n=31$), and held focus groups ($n=3$) of faculty ($n=8$) to identify the assignments and instruction that students received. We chose one representative department within each of three disciplines (arts/humanities, sciences and applied fields) to study: history, kinesiology and business.

The research questions that guided this research were:

- What types of writing assignments do students receive in first- and second-year courses in the humanities, sciences and applied fields (e.g., history, kinesiology and business)?
- What are instructors' perceptions about the in-class writing instruction they provide to address these assignments?

Our findings indicate that university students write an average of 2.5 assignments per course. This finding is consistent with the results of other research in Canadian and US universities. Based on these values and assuming a course load of 5, students would write an average of about 12 assignments over the course of a year, suggesting that university students do, in fact, have opportunities to learn advanced academic writing in their courses. We also found, however, that there were significant differences between the number of assignments expected across disciplines, with students in history writing almost twice as many assignments as those in kinesiology or business. So while many students are receiving opportunities to learn and practice writing in their first- and second-year courses, many others are doing little or no writing.

One instructional strategy that has been suggested to promote writing skill development is to use low-stakes writing assignments. These can be incorporated into courses as nested assignments so students have an opportunity to submit component parts of an assignment and receive feedback about their writing as they work toward a final product. Our syllabi analysis shows that almost one-quarter of assignments were categorized as nested assignments. There is therefore an opportunity for professors to increase the use of the nested assignment model and to incorporate more low-stakes writing opportunities in first- and second-year courses. We found that only about 5% of syllabi indicated an opportunity for students to receive any form of in-process feedback on their writing assignments. Using a nested assignment approach increases the amount of feedback that students receive from professors.

Our faculty survey and focus group interviews elaborated on the syllabi data. Findings from these additional data sources indicated that professors in all three departments at one institution relied on their own undergraduate and graduate writing experiences to inform their current writing instruction. Kinesiology professors appeared to feel the most competent to provide writing instruction to their first- and second-year students. Professors did not indicate that they received any ongoing professional development opportunities on writing instruction, so this might be worth considering when planning for departmental development.

There were several differences between departments and among individual professors' perceptions and approaches to writing instruction. Unlike history and kinesiology professors, for example, business faculty did not include a lot of writing instruction or assignments in their first- and second-year courses. History and kinesiology professors indicated that they considered disciplinary goals when they planned writing instruction and assignments, but business professors did not. Professors in the three departments reported using both in-class and online instructional strategies but emphasized different topics in their classes (e.g., grammar in history, APA style in kinesiology).

Finally, professors in all departments perceived students as lacking in writing ability or engagement, and while they recognized the writing centre as a reliable resource for students, they often spoke of it with a remedial purpose in mind.

In conclusion, this study shows that student writing at university is poorly addressed in any systematic, coherent way. Further, writing across the disciplines includes diverse experiences and instructional approaches. Professors in some disciplines may be more focused on sharing subject content than providing writing instruction. The barriers to university writing instruction identified in this study (i.e., lack of institutional resources, low level of student abilities and engagement, inconsistent departmental support), need to be addressed so that professors and institutions in general will be in a better position to support writing development in the early years of undergraduate education.

Future study should extend this research to include examination of writing assignments and instruction in other disciplines and with other student groups such as graduate students or international students. Also suggested are studies that include larger numbers of instructors in the focus groups so that a more comprehensive view of the departments from multiple perspectives is available. Finally, inclusion of students in a similar study would be of value so that their perceptions of the instruction and assignments they receive are considered.

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Introduction

The writing ability of university students receives considerable attention and is often criticized, not only in the media (see Holland, 2013; MacQueen, 2013) but also from within the academy (see Goldberger, 2014; Graves, 2013, 2014). Major reports on educational attainment, such as the OECD's *Education at a Glance* (2013), draw attention to the expectation that students at the postsecondary level be able to write well by the time they graduate. In articles about employability and the skills needed to succeed beyond university, communication skills factor highly in business fields and elsewhere (see Bloom & Kitagawa, 1999; Career Builder, 2015; The Conference Board of Canada, 2014). At the university level, in policy documents such as the 2007 Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents' Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (UDLEs), the ability of undergraduate students to communicate – orally and in writing – is prominently recognized as an important learning outcome. These UDLEs are reinforced in the similar but more recent policies for graduate students (see Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, 2010). Given this attention to students' communication and writing abilities, it is reasonable to ask what instruction students receive in university to develop their ability to write.

This project provides an analysis of writing/communication instruction in first and second year at publicly funded universities in Ontario. We describe writing assignments given to students in three disciplines, explore professors' expectations for student writing, and identify the kinds of curricular instruction available to first- and second-year undergraduate students. In the first phase, data were collected through syllabi analysis and an online survey of professors. In the second phase, we conducted focus group interviews with professors in three departments (business, history and kinesiology) at one institution. This project enables a discussion of how current university writing instruction aligns with expectations for student outcomes, public expectations about writing and best practices identified by writing researchers.

Literature Review

Identifying and describing the writing assignments that students are required to complete at university provides one approach to understanding how students learn to write. Course writing assignments may be designed to test students' knowledge of content as well as to enable students to develop, refine and practice necessary writing skills and to receive assessment on how well they are demonstrating those skills. Under this view, it is assumed that students not only receive the assignment but also instruction on how to complete it, along with clear and constructive feedback to guide them. Students' poor writing may thus reflect a variety of causes, including a paucity of writing instruction and feedback, in spite of the opportunity or requirement to write for class. While the omission of instruction is not likely to happen in specifically labeled "writing courses" with experienced writing instructors, it is possible in other courses, especially in large first-year classes in which course content may be emphasized at the expense of writing development. Despite its limitations, the identification and analysis of writing assignments given to university students is a reasonable starting point for an exploration and improved understanding of student writing development. One established method for identifying writing assignments is to analyze course syllabi. The benefits of conducting a syllabi analysis to determine the number and types of writing assignments in any given course

have been documented in the literature (Graves, Hyland & Samuels, 2010; Graves et al., 2014; Meltzer, 2003, 2009). Notably, course syllabi readily serve as a consistent component for examination across courses and institutions because they are required for all courses and are usually publicly available. Syllabi are understood to function as a contract between professor and student that outlines the expectations and structure of a course. As such, syllabi are likely to reasonably reflect the work that students are required to complete. Conducting a systematic analysis of course syllabi requires little reliance on professors or students to provide their recollections about assignments within a course, across a discipline, or across an institution. Stanny, Gonzales and McGowen (2014) summarize findings of four reviews of syllabi that occurred over a five-year period at the University of South Florida and suggest that this research approach can produce a rich data set that can address multiple focused questions about the nature of teaching and learning.

Previous research using syllabi analysis at a Canadian university indicates that students write on average 2.5 assignments of about four pages each in most of their classes, though this varies by program and faculty (Graves, Hyland & Samuels, 2010). The types of assignments (e.g., essays and research reports) required in students' degree programs suggest that professors design assignments to teach students how to meet traditional disciplinary and professional demands and expectations. Mathematics programs, for instance, may include no writing requirements (Graves et al., 2014).

Research on writing tasks at the university level has often focused on science and engineering (for example, Braine, 1995; Graves, Parker & Marcynuk, 2013), and relatively little attention has been directed to fields such as business. In engineering, Graves, Parker and Marcynuk (2013) suggested that a lack of genre identification or a misidentification of the required genre is a contributing factor to poor student writing. In other words, it is not clear to students what it is that they need to write as an assignment. A variety of undergraduate and graduate levels of study have also been examined to a limited extent. Recently, Samuels and McDonald (2015) conducted a syllabi study in a faculty of science and observed an increase in the number of assignments in third- and fourth-year undergraduate courses compared to first- and second-year courses while the number of courses offered actually decreased. Their findings showed a significant difference in the number of assignments in first- and second-year versus third- and fourth-year courses. In the case of biology, for example, none of the first-year courses ($n=2$) required writing assignments and only 9% of the second-year courses ($n=11$) included such assignments. Together, these studies provide some indication of the writing instruction students in the sciences may receive.

Although some recent research has focused on students' development of communication skills in business, systematic analyses of the writing tasks required in business courses remain rare (Zhu, 2004). In one early study on business writing, Canesco and Byrd (1989) analyzed 55 graduate course syllabi and found a lack of clarity regarding writing assignments. For instance, it was unclear from the syllabi how a "project" differed from a "report." Moreover, assignments often required teamwork and were controlled by the instructors. Bogert and Butt (1996) also completed a syllabi analysis to determine the types of writing assignments expected of students in MBA courses; the researchers found that MBA courses were designed to include both writing and oral skill development. Zhu's (2004) analysis of 95 course syllabi and handouts on writing assignments in undergraduate and graduate business courses revealed that students were expected to take on two roles: (a) an institutional role (writer as learner) and (b) a professional role (writer as business

person). More recently, O'Day Nicolas and Annous (2013) conducted a syllabi analysis using the model proposed by Graves, Hyland and Samuels (2010) in a Lebanese faculty of business. The researchers found that 70% of syllabi in their data set made no reference to writing, and in the remaining 30% of syllabi that did include a writing component, the function of the writing component was not made explicit. As these studies indicate, a variety of conclusions can be drawn based on the type of data extracted from syllabi. Many studies, like Zhu's (2004), relied upon analysis of assignments from only one institution. As a result, Zhu recommended that future research be conducted to analyze writing assignments from different types of institutions and business programs.

The concern that writing assignments vary not only by course and program but also potentially by institution is not well studied, though some differences are established. Writing instruction in Canadian universities generally differs from that in the US, which has a strong history of first-year composition courses (Clary-Lemon, 2009; Russell, 2002). Some Canadian universities do have introductory writing courses, writing courses in the disciplines, or even whole writing departments, but these are not universally present. Adding to the complexity, over the past few decades writing instruction in many school environments has adopted a writing-across-the-curriculum model (i.e., all teachers are writing teachers) and/or a writing-in-the-disciplines model (i.e., writing is best learned in disciplinary contexts), with much overlap between these and other approaches (Bazerman et al., 2005). As a result, writing instruction for university students is currently addressed in a variety of ways and locations. Little is known about how structured or comprehensive such writing instruction is in universities across Canada and what role assignments play in this instruction.

Research Questions

In this study, we sought to describe university writing assignments and instruction for students in the early years of their undergraduate programs at Ontario's publicly funded universities. The goal of the project was to create a case study of three disciplines, focusing on their provision of writing instruction and writing assignment design in first- and second-year courses. This study enables us to consider whether students are being given sufficient opportunities to develop their abilities to write/communicate at advanced levels and how this development is being addressed across the three fields of study.

Two research questions guided this project:

- What types of assignments do students receive in first- and second-year courses in the humanities, sciences and applied fields (e.g., history, kinesiology and business)?
- What are instructors' perceptions about the in-class writing instruction they provide to address these assignments?

Methods

Our mixed-methods investigation used document analysis and case study methods to explore the current state of writing at Ontario universities. We analyzed course syllabi, distributed online faculty surveys and conducted faculty focus group interviews to create a description of writing instruction across three disciplines. Although our initial goal was to have three universities serve as institutional “cases” for this project, difficulties in acquiring sufficient numbers of participants from each university and in data collection within the appropriate time span resulted in a revised approach. To capture potential differences between fields, we chose one department to represent each of the humanities, sciences and applied fields at any participating institutions. The departmental “cases” chosen to represent disciplinary differences were history, kinesiology and business. We also chose to focus on first- and second-year courses to limit the amount of data and analysis to a reasonable level given the constraints of this project. This focus enables us to separate the writing experiences of students in their early years of university study from those of upper-year students.

Procedure

Approval from the research ethics board was received to approach Ontario universities to recruit participants for this study. We sent a recruitment letter (see Appendix A) inviting each of the three departments at eight universities to participate by sharing the syllabi for their first- and second-year courses with us. These eight universities were identified because each of them had the targeted disciplines and departments. The departments were chosen primarily because of their popularity with students and the lack of existing research about writing within these disciplines. Following approval of each department, all professors (part-time and full-time) within the department were emailed an invitation to participate in an online survey about student writing and writing instruction and, if they wished, to participate in a focus group to discuss writing. We later emailed respondents interested in the focus groups to coordinate a meeting time. Two members of the research team conducted each focus group interview ($n=3$). The focus groups followed a semi-structured format; each focus group was about one hour in length. Each group’s discussion was audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.

Participants

Five Ontario universities that offered programs in the targeted departments or disciplines participated in the first phase of this project, the syllabi analysis. They ranged in size from medium (17,000 students) to large (30,000 students). A total of 31 instructors at five universities participated in the online survey, which was distributed to all full and part-time faculty in the targeted departments. Faculty focus group interviews were carried out at one institution and each group included faculty from one of the three departments: business and economics ($n=4$), history ($n=1$) and kinesiology ($n=3$). By conducting departmental focus groups, faculty members had an opportunity to respond to and comment on their colleagues’ responses. In addition, it was ideal to conduct focus groups rather than individual interviews because of the time limitation of this project.

Insufficient numbers of volunteers from other institutions made conducting focus groups at these institutions not feasible in the timespan of the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected syllabi from all first- and second-year courses offered in the Winter 2014 and Fall 2014 terms in the selected departments at the participating universities. The appropriate program assistant provided us with electronic copies of all syllabi. We coded and analyzed syllabi for characteristics of the writing assignments given to students (e.g., number of assignments, length of assignments, marks allocated, type of assignments, etc.), following the model used by Graves, Hyland and Samuels (2010). Appendix B provides an explanation of the coding categories. We organized the data into a shared Excel spreadsheet. Frequent team meetings were held in order to discuss the coding process and ensure that each researcher was interpreting syllabi and coding in a manner consistent with the others; differences in interpretation were resolved through group consensus. We then analyzed these data using SPSS software to determine frequencies and significant differences between departments.

Next, we distributed an online survey to professors to collect data on their perceptions of student writing and writing instruction. The purpose of this survey was to augment information collected from the syllabi with comments and elaboration from professors about their approaches to writing instruction in their discipline. The survey contained a mix of open-ended and Likert scale questions (see Appendix C). Finally, we conducted three semi-structured focus group interviews with a total of eight professors to explore their perceptions concerning: (a) the volume of student writing required, (b) the barriers faculty face when assigning writing, (c) the quality of student writing submitted, and (d) faculty awareness and use of instructional resources such as the writing centre and library. See Appendix D for the questions asked in these focus groups.

While ideally qualitative analysis would be conducted through lengthy immersion in the field and interaction with the data, the timeline of this project necessitated the adoption of a more efficient method. As a result, we interviewed each professor only one time and we limited our recruitment methods to what was manageable in the time frame. We used the coding program QDA Miner Lite (2015) as our tool to facilitate analysis of the survey's open-ended responses and focus group transcriptions. We created a series of codes that represented a range of possible topics concerning writing instruction; codes were added as new topics emerged out of the data. Each mention of these topics in the transcripts was flagged with the relevant code, and the program allowed us to evaluate and compare the coded instances in detail. The analysis of the coded transcripts allowed us to consider faculty comments on identified topics and their perceived importance. The survey and focus group analyses complement the syllabi analysis and allow us to comment on faculty members' current pedagogical approaches towards writing.

Findings

Quantitative Results: Syllabi Analysis

We collected a total of 215 first- and second-year course syllabi from the targeted three disciplines. These syllabi yielded 544 separate records of writing assignments. Table 1 summarizes the number of course syllabi and writing assignments for each department at each university.

To answer our first research question about the types of assignments given, we analyzed characteristics of writing assignments given to students across the three disciplines of interest. An overview of the key findings is listed in Table 2.

Table 1: Number of Course Syllabi and Writing Assignments Coded for each Department at each University

Institution	Discipline	Department	No. of Syllabi	No. of Assignment Records
Institution A	Applied	Business	13	25
	Humanities	History	15	27
	Science	Kinesiology	30	67
Institution B	Applied	Business	9	15
	Humanities	History	23	77
	Science	Kinesiology	11	6
Institution C	Humanities	History	49	219
	Science	Kinesiology	12	21
Institution D	Applied	Business	44	77
Institution E	Science	Biology*	9	10
Total			215	544

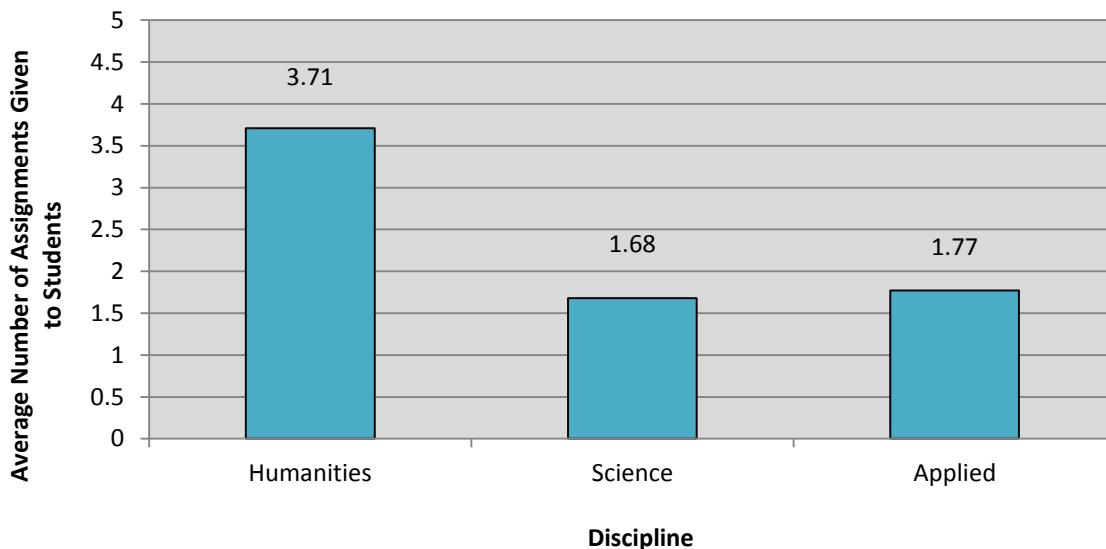
* This institution did not provide kinesiology department syllabi but did volunteer to contribute their syllabi from a related science department to our research project.

Table 2: Summary of Key Findings from the Syllabi Analysis

Characteristic of Assignment	Key Finding
Frequency of Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The average number of assignments given to students per course was 2.5.
Types of Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most common genre of writing assigned to students was labelled an “assignment” (e.g., tutorial assignment, written assignment, personal assignment, etc.)
Length of Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On average, writing assignments were 5 pages in length.
Value of Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The average assignment accounted for 12% of a student’s final grade.
Nested Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 21% of the assignments coded were nested assignments (i.e., broken down into separate components).
Learning Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learning goals (i.e., explicit statements of the objective of an assignment) were specified in 56.4% of assignments.
Rubric	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only 7.4% of assignment records contained rubrics.
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only 4.8% of assignment records provided the opportunity for students to receive feedback (e.g., peer review, comments on an unmarked first draft).
Audience Specified	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very few assignments (1.8%) specified an audience for student writing other than the TA or the professor

Frequency of Assignments. Across all of the disciplines and institutions, the average number of assignments given to students per course was 2.52 ($SD = 3.04$). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if the average number of assignments per course differed by discipline. Results revealed a significant difference between disciplines, $F(2, 212) = 12.25, p < .001$. More specifically, students in humanities courses ($M = 3.71, SD = 3.80$) were asked to write significantly more than students in science ($M = 1.68, SD = 1.78$) and applied courses ($M = 1.77, SD = 2.28$). This finding is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Graph Depicting the Average Number of Assignments Given to Students in Each Discipline Across Institutions



Types of Assignments. Of the 544 assignment records, 20% were identified by the professor as “assignments.” Included in this category was a wide variety of instructor-labeled terms such as “tutorial assignment,” “website assignment,” “written assignment” and “personal assignment.” The second most common category (encompassing about 11% of all records) was “essay” and the third most common category (accounting for 9% of all records) was “paper.” The remainder of the records identified a wide range of assignments, ranging from lab reports to online discussions. Exploration of the distribution of types of assignments across the different disciplines did not reveal any meaningful differences between disciplines. Overall, the labels given by professors to the most common assignments were general and provided little information about the specific elements or genre characteristics required in these assignments (e.g., essay).

Length and Value of Assignments. Instructors specified the assignment length in only 39% of assignment records ($n=212$). Of these, 20.3% were short assignments of one page or less. Assignments of two to four pages comprised 34.6% of all assignment records. Together, assignments of four pages or less made up 55% of assignments for which length was specified. Moderate length assignments (between five and 10 pages) comprised 36.7% of assignment records, while long assignments (greater than 10 pages) made up 8.4%. The average number of words per assignment was 1,307 words (approximately five pages), with a median of 1,000 words. Not surprisingly, the length of assignment significantly correlated with the value of the assignment towards the students’ final grade, $r(206) = .56$, $p < .001$. Therefore, assignments that were longer in length were also worth more towards students’ final grades. Correspondingly, individual shorter assignments had less impact on students’ final grades.

Nested Assignments. We also examined the extent to which assignments were “nested” within each other. A nested assignment is one that can be broken down into separate components and handed in separately over the course of a term (e.g., an annotated bibliography, proposal, first draft and final report). Students are thought to benefit from these sequential assignments as they introduce different genres of writing using a scaffold strategy. Overall, we found that nested assignments were not common. More specifically, 21% (n=115) of the assignments coded were nested. The number of nested assignments did not differ significantly across disciplines; however, there was a slightly higher percentage of nested assignments found in the applied courses (24%) than in the science (21%) or humanities (18%) courses. This suggests that applied courses may provide more structure for students as they learn the genres of the discipline.

Learning Goals. A learning goal is defined as an explicit statement of the learning objective(s) targeted by the assignment. In our data, learning goals were fairly common and were specified in 56.4% of assignments. The greatest proportion of assignments with learning goals was found in applied courses, with 87% of all assignments in this discipline identifying a learning goal. Approximately 51% of assignments coded from humanities courses contained a learning goal, and 40% of assignments coded from science courses contained a learning goal.

Rubric. We examined how many course syllabi contained a grading rubric for writing assignments. An assignment was coded as containing a rubric if it had a description of what the instructor would look for when grading the assignment. This information could be presented in tabular form, lists, or as a written comment, with or without numerical grades included. Our data indicated that rubrics were relatively rare, only occurring in 7.4% (n=40) of assignment records. Of the assignments that did contain rubrics, the majority of them (n=35) were in the format of written statements, with an average of four evaluation criteria per rubric. Approximately half of the rubrics (48%; n=19) were found in assignments from the applied courses, 33% (n=13) were found in assignments from humanities courses and 20% (n=8) were found in assignments from science courses.

Feedback. We coded how many writing assignments gave students an opportunity to receive feedback before the assignment was handed in for grading. Some examples of possible feedback include written comments by a faculty member or TA on a draft, peer review in or out of class, or scheduled office hours with a professor or TA. We found that only 4.8% (n=26) of assignment records indicated that students were provided with an opportunity to receive feedback. Almost all (96%) of the assignments that did offer feedback were found in the humanities.

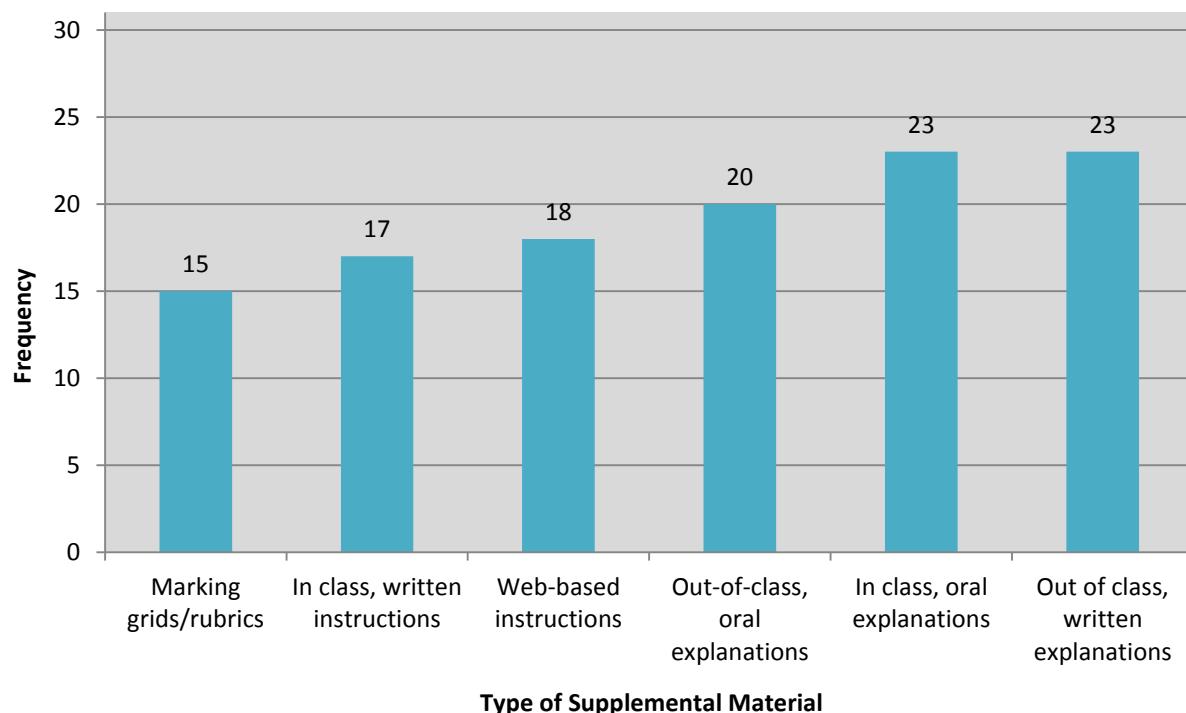
Audience Specified. An audience for an assignment (other than a professor or TA) may be specified by the professor and may be hypothetical or authentic. Our data showed that the audience was specified in less than 2% of assignment records (n=10). Therefore, students almost always wrote assignments with the professor or TA as the sole reader in mind. Examples of other audiences that were specified included a potential investor, the History Channel, a high school class and camp counselors.

Quantitative Results: Faculty Survey

To answer our second research question regarding faculty members' perceptions of student writing and writing instruction, we analyzed responses to our faculty survey. A total of 31 professors across five institutions completed the online survey. The majority of survey respondents identified themselves as being from an applied discipline (68.8%) and having tenured status at their institutions (80%). The distribution of survey respondents is outlined in Table 3.

Writing Instruction. Almost all faculty members who completed the survey (97%; n=30) indicated that they required students to write in their classes. They were also asked to identify the types of writing that they assigned to students in their classes, and the most common types were "analyses," "assignment" and "paper." Of the faculty members who required students to write in their classes, 80% (n=24) reported that they provided supplemental materials and information to students about the writing assignments given in their courses. The most common types of supplemental materials and information provided were out-of-class written explanations (e.g., answers to email requests) and in-class oral explanations (e.g., answers to questions). Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the types and frequency of supplemental materials and instruction faculty members reported providing to their students.

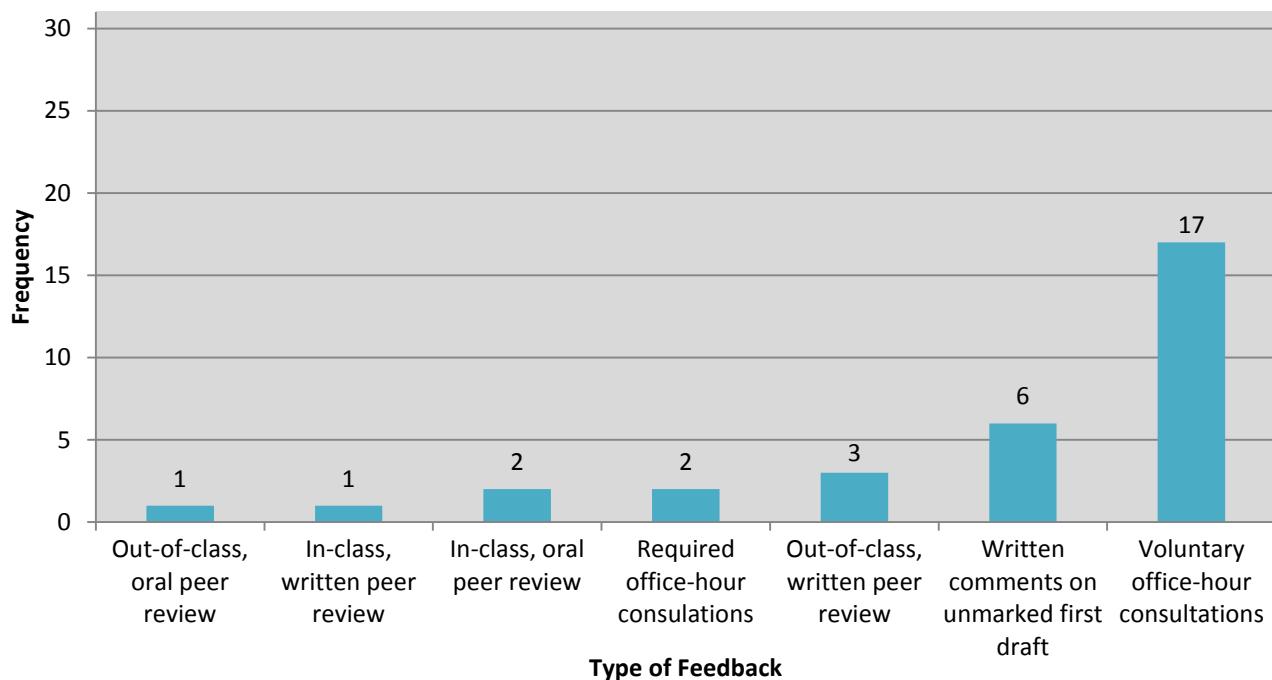
Figure 2: Types and Frequency of Supplemental Materials Faculty Members Give to Students



Feedback. Faculty members were also asked whether they provided feedback or required students to seek feedback on assignments before they were handed in for grading. Approximately half (51.6%; n=16) indicated that they provided feedback to students on their work prior to handing in writing assignments. This result was quite surprising given the findings from our syllabi analysis, in which very few writing assignments were found to include an opportunity for feedback. The most common type of feedback that faculty members reported providing was voluntary office-hour consultations. See Figure 3 for a breakdown of the types and frequency of feedback that faculty members reported providing to their students. Faculty members were also asked whether they provided written comments on writing assignments after they were marked. A total of four faculty members (13%) indicated that they provided this type of feedback.

Support from Department. We were also interested in whether or not faculty members perceived that they received support from their department about writing assignments and instruction. Approximately one-quarter of faculty members (26.7%; n=8) reported that their department had either formal or informal discussions about writing assignments and instruction, and 35.5% (n=11) of faculty members were unsure if such discussions took place in their departments. A total of six faculty members (19.4%) reported that their departments provided instruction for grading assignments, and four faculty members (12.9%) reported that their departments had guidelines or recommendations about expectations for undergraduate student writing. Taken together, these results suggest that faculty members perceived their departments as providing relatively little support regarding writing instruction, grading and expectations of student writing.

Figure 3: Types and Frequency of Feedback Provided to Students by Professors



Qualitative Analysis: Faculty Surveys and Focus Group Interviews

As indicated above, a total of 31 faculty surveys from five institutions were collected and coded. Our invitation to faculty to participate in focus groups received few responses, so three focus group interviews were conducted with eight professors, all from one institution, though all targeted departments were represented (see Table 3). One focus group was held for each department. Eight themes emerged from the coding and analysis of the surveys and interviews; these are described in detail below and summarized in Table 4.

Table 3: Record of Survey and Focus Group Interview Participants

Institution	Discipline	Department	No. of Survey Respondents	No. of Faculty in Focus Group
Institution A	Applied	Business	14	4
	Humanities	History	5	1
	Science	Kinesiology	3	3
Institution B	Applied	Business	2	-
Institution C	Science	Kinesiology	1	-
Institution D	Applied	Business	5	-
Institution E	Science	Biology	1	-
Total			31	8

Theme 1: Faculty Writing Qualifications

Although all professors indicated that they felt competent in their own writing proficiency, their perceptions of their ability to teach writing to first- and second-year undergraduates were varied, both within and across departments. While many indicated that they were able to correctly identify grammar and syntax mistakes, some felt inadequate or lacked the tools to explain the various errors using correct terminology. None of the instructors indicated receiving any recent training to teach writing and dated most of their formal writing development to their own graduate and undergraduate careers, or even earlier.

Business faculty reported different levels of ability to teach writing and a range of competencies to teach specific elements of writing. Sophia¹ stated:

¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' anonymity.

I don't feel I'm an expert on teaching writing. I think I'm much better at trying to give a succinct small number of feedback [on] items than I used to be. [...] But I don't think I'd be able to teach a writing course. No, let somebody else do that.

Luca felt

competent to teach writing at the level of structuring an argument, which is where I focus most of my energy. I know bad grammar when I see it, but I can't always label it correctly, so I don't get into that too much [...] I used to know it better, 25 years ago. I've forgotten most of it.

Some faculty, like Mindy, noted "that [the business programs] have some [teachers] who enjoy and are experts in [writing], but others who go, whoa."

When asked about how they developed knowledge of writing pedagogy, business faculty referred back to their own undergraduate and graduate experiences (and sometimes even high school). They spoke about drawing on their own experiences in learning to write to inform their teaching practices. Luca said, "[My teaching] would just go back to high school and college courses... what little I can remember. [...] Yeah, I took a number of courses as an undergrad and in high school, grammar and basic writing."

Similarly, Emma stated:

I didn't really get any formal grammatical training. I think in school, I think I was in the generation that was not taught formal grammar, I did a bit of Latin roots and stuff, but that was it. [...] Oh, and in my undergrad we didn't have formal writing training, but there were more writing assignments than you would get here normally I think.

Mindy indicated that she took two courses in professional writing that were geared more toward creative writing as a way to learn to write. Sophia stated that she had taken writing courses, "but not in the last ten years. I took one in grad school and I took one after I was on contract here." In sum, these business professors did not identify any specific programs or experiences where they learned how to teach writing. Instead, they drew on their own experiences as students.

Similar to business professors, history professors admitted a range of abilities in teaching first- and second-year students to write. They indicated that they felt proficient in their ability to identify errors in students' writing and they felt competent to tell students what mistakes to avoid. Most history professors indicated that they felt competent to teach writing, in part because of their expertise in other languages. Despite this general feeling of competency, at least one professor indicated a sense of inadequacy. Edgar, a professor of history of 40 years, said, "I could stand at a blackboard and explain things if I can't even remember the terms, but there's things I know that I can't even (long pause) I know that I can't explain them." Edgar had never taken a writing course nor had he ever participated in professional development related to writing instruction.

Kinesiology professors indicated that they felt competent in their ability to teach writing to first- and second-year students. When asked about their ability to provide writing instruction, most participants attributed their ability to write and give clear writing instruction to their graduate degrees. “I had my supervisor beat it into me,” revealed Natalia. Zoe affirmed this idea:

It’s the training you get as a graduate student, because you get so much feedback back and forth with multiple drafts, and depending on your program and depending on the courses you had to take – I’m thinking of some we did, it was very much about writing and evaluating each others’ work.

One professor was required to take a writing course during the fourth year of her undergraduate degree because she was registered for a thesis. Similar to the business professors, kinesiology faculty relied upon their own experiences as students to learn how to teach writing. Unlike business professors, however, they more consistently reported feeling competent to teach their students to write.

Theme 2: Writing Assignment Variety

Within their departments, faculty noted that the amount and type of writing assignments varied, and definite distinctions existed between departments. Business faculty indicated that first- and second-year business students do little writing, a perception borne out when comparing their comments to those of their counterparts in both history and kinesiology. In addition, they indicated that assignments in business focus more on content than on writing development, whereas history and kinesiology assignments appeared to be both content and writing-development driven.

Most business professors claimed that first-year students received no writing assignments, and second-year students had limited writing requirements. One interviewee said:

We have a variety of courses at the second year level, some more textbook based and those lend themselves much more to multiple choice exams, in part because they often have test banks associated with them. [...] Then – so that’s probably about half of our courses at second year level – the other half have writing and or major data analysis work, which often involves some writing as well.

Emma suggested that the focus for assignments is “more on the content than on the writing [...] at that point I actually don’t care about the grammatical side of things at all, and it’s just one sentence, two sentence answers, if that. Dot [bullet] point answers even.”

Reflecting on the business curriculum as a whole, from first to fourth year, Sophia admitted that “third and fourth year students have to do quite a bit of writing. Which, I guess now that we’re talking about it, I realize must come as a bit of a jolt to them.” She also described the typical assignments in the program:

A lot of times they [write] on teams, the teams’ reports... so there’s a lot of team business reports, some individual case analysis report type assignments – this would be in third and fourth year –

some industry report-type assignments, and they also do their fair share of straight-on exam writing short answer questions, that kind of thing.

Business professors emphasized writing for assessment purposes (e.g., point-form test responses) in the early years and suggested that more business-focused writing tasks occur in third- or fourth-year undergraduate courses.

In the history department, professors identified a limited number of discipline-specific assignments given to first- and second-year students (e.g., essays based on a book of documents, research papers analyzing a historical figure). Faculty responses, however, are contradicted by the findings of our syllabi analysis, which showed history courses as requiring the highest number of writing assignments – almost double that of business or science courses. Unfortunately, the limited number of surveys we received back from history faculty, and even greater limitation in focus group interviews, mean that the conclusions we can draw are tentative at best.

Similar to history, kinesiology professors indicated that writing assignments for first- and second-year students were planned with disciplinary goals in mind. Zoe explained:

In first year, [students] have an individual writing assignment that we've changed a lot over the years – there's usually three or sometimes four different instructors that teach the first year class. We separate it into different sections, but we co-ordinate very much on the kinds of assignments they do. So there may be some slight differences depending on the section and the instructor, but we do have a writing assignment. It used to be purely individual, where they would – they would do a paper that they would hand in, sort of like a one-time-only, hand-it-in-at-the-end-of-the-term [paper].

Zoe claimed that this assignment was ineffective and concluded that for students “during first year, the writing has been notoriously horrendous.” As a department, faculty decided to change the assignment to better scaffold instruction and expectations:

[Students] do it in pieces. So it's a little bit at a time. And that has proved to be much better for the student, much better from a grading perspective. So they just do little pieces of the writing assignment, to the culmination at the end, but they get feedback at least three different points across the term.

Second-year kinesiology students are required to complete a group assignment, “sort of a more term-paper type of thing, [in] which they have to incorporate good writing as well as the incorporation of research into that assignment” (Natalia). One participant explained the disciplinarily linked expectations of an assignment that required students to summarize an article:

to summarize an article in a certain length of time, to a certain word length or space, in terms of taking, you know, what are the key elements in terms of what's the thesis, what's the objectives in

the study, what is the methodology, what did they find, and [...] so it's more trying to read literature and trying to synthesize that into a written document of some sort.

In sum, the kinesiology professors described a cooperative and coherent approach to the re-design of writing assignments for students in their department.

Theme 3: Teaching Strategies and Types of Writing Instruction

Survey and interview data reveal the use of many teaching strategies and types of writing instruction across departments. Professors in all three departments used several teaching techniques, both in-class and online, for writing instruction. Some professors also indicated that writing instruction was provided in the syllabus and outside of class.

In her approach to writing instruction in business, Emma claimed that she:

takes one class, about an hour, to get [the students] to read one of the articles on the reading list, then go through in groups answering the questions [on our class website] and then trying to use the class responses from that to come up with an annotated bibliography. I'm not sure I'm doing it very successfully. [...] I also use that lecture – because it's one and a half hours [...] to try and teach them what a journal article is, and how to break them down a little bit. Although that's also perhaps not as successful as it could be.

While unsure of its effectiveness, Emma's approach is one example of an in-class teaching strategy. Other strategies included inviting a librarian as a guest lecturer, using podcasts, grading rubrics, and lists of common mistakes in their writing instruction. Writing instruction was thus delivered via the syllabi, in-class, and through the online course management system. Business professors reported instructing students on topics such as formatting, assignment structure, expectations, referencing style and data presentation.

Similar to business, the history professors mentioned using a variety of teaching strategies and writing instruction. Edgar explained that he:

made a slideshow on how to write, which, you know, it's advice like "start now," "don't wait until the end," "do this" [...] what is a comma splice, click on this link and go to websites that explain comma splices, I can see who downloads it, right, who looks at it, and very few students bother.

History professors posted information about writing to the course management system online and on the syllabus. They also reported providing weekly workshops and examples of previous students' work to guide their students.

Kinesiology professors reported using similar strategies as their colleagues in business and history. In comparison to business and history faculty, however, they commented more frequently on formatting style (e.g., APA). They reported that they incorporate online workshops and provide instructions about

assignment structure online and on handouts. Zoe organized additional tutorial time outside of class time to help students with their writing development. She said:

We did an extra tutorial outside of class time that was voluntary, if people wanted to show up, and one of my grad students ran the tutorial. We ended up doing two, and it was to help them with their writing and their APA and all that, and it was extremely well attended. So that was nice, because it was outside of class time. Totally up to them if they wanted to go. That went really well.

Tammy felt that it is punitive to tell students “don’t do this” or “don’t plagiarize.” Rather, she showed students

examples of what [those things] mean [...] so we do try to teach them, here's what it would look like, here's what you're trying to move towards with paraphrasing, initially – usually in first year they tend to just direct quote, direct quote, and I'm a little lenient with them in first year, I tell them that I understand you're probably going to over quote, but that's better at this point than under quoting.

Theme 4: Assessment, Feedback and Goals

Goals for student writing and assessment practices were varied. While participants indicated that they give students feedback on their writing, there were notable differences in the type and timing of the feedback. This suggests that departmental agendas are not necessarily involved when it comes to the type and amount of feedback given to students; rather, feedback is contingent on the individual instructor. There was also evidence to suggest that these individuals do set specific goals for their first- and second-year students.

In general, business professors recognized the importance of providing feedback to students about their writing and identified a variety of feedback strategies including quality scales (e.g., unsatisfactory to exceptional), posting of model writing and identifying grammar errors. These strategies were not always seen as ideal: “I always mark run-on sentences and dangling modifiers, punctuation, and sentence fragments [...] usually I end up writing all over what they've written, which is not popular” (Mindy).

In contrast, at least one professor did not provide students with detailed feedback on their writing “unless it's [...] if there are language issues I'll say there's language and grammar issues in this paragraph” (Sophia). Referring to her perception of the departmental goals for students, Sophia explained:

I think one thing that makes us a little different from other faculties and departments is that we are emphasizing business writing much more so than your average kind of thesis writing or even a formal report. We tell [students]: short sentences, short paragraphs, put the punchline first, don't, you know, work through to the end of your argument, tell us right up front what your recommendation is and then lay out your sections. We like them to use headings and subheadings, and so in a way, it's clear what we're after is clarity, readability, “skimability,” maybe.

While it appears that the departmental goals in business may be similar, the amount of feedback provided varies among individuals.

In history, the one professor interviewed believed that the purpose of his first-year writing assignment is to get students to understand primary sources and how to formulate an argument. In contrast, in his second-year class, he claimed to write comments on students' work and make note of students' use of grammar by using a form "where I check what's wrong, like comma splices, and then it explains what comma splices are and how to avoid it." For this professor, feedback appears to come only at the end of the writing process.

Similar to professors of business and history, kinesiology professors reported that they provide feedback to students through written comments on assignments, though some reported taking this one step further. Tammy explained that:

each individual's going to have their individual feedback, and then collectively I'll look across the group and say, what are sort of the common things that I'm seeing, and then I present that to the whole class. Yeah. So that hopefully helps. And then the [students] that come in – the rare ones that actually come in to review their feedback – then they can get even more.

Zoe explained that "we want [students] to be able to come out of this degree being articulate enough to get jobs in various kinds of careers, and they aren't going to be writing 20 page papers in most careers, or a lab report, in most careers." At the same time that professors reported these broad goals for students' writing development, the kinesiology professors who were interviewed referred several times to teaching first- and second-year students about citation using American Psychological Association (APA) style. While not acknowledged as a goal, it is clear that accurate use and reporting of sources was a high priority for some faculty members.

Theme 5: Department-wide Goals and Guidelines

Departmental goals and support for writing pedagogy were not universally reported. Faculty members from both the business and history departments stated that their departments identified no clear departmental goals. Professors in kinesiology reported ongoing discussions in the department about writing instruction and systematic efforts to plan curricula to better prepare students as they progress from first to fourth year.

Business professors reported that they were not aware of any departmental guidelines regarding the expectations of first- and second-year students' writing development. Luca claimed:

With over 110 faculty, we never get together to talk about teaching, or best practices, or invite people in to give us advice or professional guidance. And the only talking we do about writing is me generally complaining at the pub with other colleagues about how bad it is.

Conversely, faculty teaching economics courses reported that:

in economics we have a weekly internal seminar series, which one week, every second week is alternate between research and teaching, and so we've actually had sessions where we've discussed what we do to teach writing, [...] We have had the writing centre in, on occasion, into particular classes. [...] And of course there's quite a bit of informal discussion on what sort of writing assignments we do, so – and other assignments as well. (Emma)

Edgar stated that the history department had not “had any formal discussions” pertaining to department-wide goals for students. In surveys, however, faculty indicated that the department did adopt a new style manual, but many colleagues did not follow through and use it. This suggests that there is a gap between what faculty perceive as a departmental plan for writing and what actions appropriately constitute and support that plan. It also suggests that history faculty members may exert a fair degree of autonomy over curriculum planning rather than act as a collective group.

Unlike their counterparts in business and history, interview data in kinesiology revealed that the department is taking clear strides to improve overall coherence of their program. For instance, Tammy explained that:

right now the department is trying to sit down and talk about how can we best, which are the best writing courses, what kinds of writing material can we get in there, and different formats. [...] So we're in the throes of trying to decide what those types of assignments would look like for first year.

Zoe elaborated further:

We're making a much more conscious effort to have those [assignments] in our first- and second-year courses right now, so that it's known across the department. In the past it's probably been one or two people knew what one or two people were doing, but what we're attempting to do is make it so it's kind of department policy or departmentally known that this is what we're going to do, this is what whoever teaches 141 or 161 or 181, they're going to have – you can do whatever you want at one level, but you're going to have these kinds of writing pieces, [...] That's what we're attempting to do.

While the business and history departments show little departmental cohesion in setting program writing goals and guidelines, faculty responses indicated that the economics program and kinesiology departments were trying to implement clear goals and guidelines for their professors and students. In addition to the planning of a coherent curriculum that includes writing, it was notable that kinesiology faculty were passionate and excited as they spoke about these developments.

Theme 6: Expectations and View of Student Abilities/Engagement

In terms of professors' expectations and views of student abilities or engagement, there was general consensus among participants in all departments. Overall, professors believed that first- and second-year

students' writing abilities are weak and student engagement is low. Professors indicated that they held low expectations of first- and second-year students' ability to write, and there was clear frustration related to their perceptions of students.

In business, for example, Luca reported that he had no expectations of students' ability to write in first- and second-year courses. Mindy also stated flatly, "Very few of our students can write well, very few." Survey data corroborate the attitudes of the interviewees; participants reported that students "don't read or listen," are "incapable of following instructions" and "have poor attitudes."

In addition to the conviction that students have limited writing and academic skills, faculty responses indicated frustration with the state of affairs. Emma rhetorically asked, "What is the economic cost to society of having all these graduates who can't write? It's got to be enormous."

Faculty responses from the history department indicated similar disillusionment to that of their business colleagues: "Just generally, we all agree [student] writing is abominable" (Edgar). Regarding student engagement, Edgar complained that "the fact is the majority of students, and this is one of my biggest complaints, don't bother to pick up their essays. [...] I've seen students pick it up, look at the mark, and as they're walking out just drop the paper in a wastebasket." Concern was also raised about students' related skills such as reading, which, in Edgar's words, would give students "a feel for what makes sense." In other words, some faculty linked limitations in student writing with limitations in clear and logical thinking.

Like their colleagues, kinesiology professors reported that students' engagement was low and professor frustration high. Zoe, for instance, said:

It is frustrating when we've taken the time [...] to spend writing all that feedback, and then you don't see that they've made any attempt to correct it. That's frustrating for us, but it's also, it's like, but then [the students are] not getting out of this what [they] need to. That's unfortunate.

When asked to identify what she would like to see in student writing, Tammy lamented that "proofreading would be nice." Summarizing the perceptions of many faculty, she claimed, "We still struggle with our students and their writing. We have good students, [but] the writing is not good."

Theme 7: Challenges: Class Size, Lack of Time, TAs and Resources

Faculty responses indicated numerous challenges regarding writing instruction and professors' ability to include writing assignments in first- and second-year courses. Class size and the lack of time, availability of teaching assistants (TAs) and relevant resources were identified as the most prominent challenges. Class size and a lack of TAs were identified as significant concerns for business faculty members. Emma stated:

We have 1700 students in the course altogether, with multiple sections of instructors, so that makes marking writing assignments consistently more difficult. And we have limited TA resources. Very, very

limited TA resources, so it's really out of necessity more than anything [that business and economics has limited writing assignments].

Luca explained further:

If you set an assignment for one section, the assignments for the other sections have to be at the same time [according to departmental regulations], and then you've got 150 things to mark at once. And just that volume of things coming in at the same time, especially for writing assignments, makes it quite difficult to manage the marking. Just logically, right? We've got the hours [for TAs], yes, but the hours at that specific point in time? Maybe not.

History professors noted that lack of time posed a significant challenge for the inclusion of writing instruction in class. Edgar reported difficulty in removing course content as a way to make room for writing instruction:

I mean the thing is I've got so much... we have a twelve week term, I teach a course that has to cover you know, War and Society, I start back with prehistoric man and I end with terrorism. So I've got all this material to cover, in twelve weeks, and then to take out [...] 50 minute lectures – what do I take out to give them?

In addition to the perceived lack of time for in-class writing instruction, a survey respondent noted that there was limited time to grade assignments.

Professors in kinesiology identified the main challenges to be a lack of TAs and time for writing instruction. Zoe claimed:

It's manpower, person power issues. I find myself trying to go to the shortest, quickest, easiest, which isn't necessarily the best, because it's just there's not enough hours to mark, especially when there's no writing support in terms of grad student support or TA support or IA [instructional assistant] support.

Furthermore, the lack of TA support was felt to discourage professors from including writing assignments in their first- and second-year courses. Zoe reported adjusting her teaching approach because of a lack of TA support. She said that she had “to be really careful about what I'm doing, I've redesigned courses where I've taken out writing because I don't have time to mark it. So I think the biggest thing is the resource, the people resource – TA support.” Tammy concurred and explained that even if a professor were allocated TA resources, the quality of the TA may not be very good (i.e., the TA may have little writing expertise).

Theme 8: Institutional Resources Available

Professors in the three departments mostly claimed some knowledge of the institutional resources available for writing instruction, including the writing centre and the library. In particular, they reported that they promote the writing centre as a resource for students.

Business faculty members especially identified the writing centre as a helpful resource, though it was clear that their perceptions of the support available was largely remedial. Mindy, for instance, reported that when she “can hardly make heads or tails of [a student’s writing],” she would suggest, “you need to go to the writing centre.” Similarly, Emma indicated that she recommends the writing centre to her students: “I will often say to people, look this is really, this really needs some work, you need to go and talk to the writing centre.”

Like his colleagues in business, Edgar reported recommending that his students visit the writing centre. He said, “I send lots [...] I mean I send, I often write, I would say, 15-20% of the students I write, you know, ‘you might find it useful to consult the writing centre.’ How many of them follow up on it [is unclear].”

Professors from kinesiology also indicated that they promoted the writing centre as a support tool for students. Like those in history, however, they noted that such promotion was no guarantee that students actually used the service. Zoe explained:

We let them know about the resources, we sometimes give them the links to all the learning services and encourage them, I sometimes talk about oh hey, you know there's an upcoming study skills or writing centre whatever, and I tell them about it, and my understanding is that that is under-utilized by our students, yes.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

Table 4: Summary of Key Findings from the Interview and Survey Data Analysis

Theme	Key Finding
1: Faculty writing qualifications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professors in all three departments indicated their reliance on their own undergraduate and graduate writing experiences in order to increase their competencies to teach writing to first- and second-year students.
2: Writing assignment variety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Business does not include much writing instruction or assignments in first- and second-year courses. History and kinesiology professors considered disciplinary goals when planning writing instruction.
3: Teaching strategies and types of writing instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A variety of instructional strategies – both in-class and online – were reported.

Theme	Key Finding
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing instruction emphasized topics such as grammar (e.g., in history) and APA style (e.g., in kinesiology).
4: Assessment, feedback and goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variety exists among interviewees and survey respondents across departments. Types of feedback provided to students include comments on written assignments, an overview for the whole class, and online comments and discussions.
5: Department-wide goals and guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kinesiology seemed to have department goals about writing development that were supported by professors.
6: Expectations and view of student abilities/engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professors in all departments viewed students as having a lack of ability or engagement.
7: Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Class size, lack of time and lack of TA support are challenges identified by professors across all three departments.
8: Institutional resources available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All three departments note the writing centre as one resource for students outside of class.

Discussion

This study began by asking two questions: what assignments are university students in their early years required to write, and what instruction do students receive in their programs to help them learn to write these assignments. We found that students in the first and second years of their programs in science (kinesiology, biology), history and business (including economics) write an average of 2.5 assignments in each of their courses. This number of assignments is consistent with earlier data that indicated that university students write about 2.5 assignments per course in a Canadian liberal arts college (Graves, Hyland & Samuels, 2010). Over a typical academic year in which five courses are taken, this would mean that students are writing about 12 assignments per year. Students, therefore, *are* writing, and given that our data focus on students in the first two years of university, we can say that novice students in particular are being given opportunities to learn to write.

This average number of assignments, of course, masks differences between courses and programs, some of which contain little or no writing in first year and some of which require students to systematically write three or more assignments as steps towards completing a larger project. We found, for instance, that history courses contained significantly more writing assignments than did courses in business, which in turn required more writing than did science courses. Our data thus support the perception that students in some programs, such as those in the arts and humanities, have more opportunities to write than do other students, such as those in the sciences or business. So students are writing, but not all students are writing the same amount.

Professors were accurate in their assessment of how much writing was required in their departments, responding insightfully when asked to describe the amount of writing that students in their programs were

required to undertake. Their comments suggest that established disciplinary expectations regarding what is taught to entering students may be quite influential. Business faculty indicated that their priority was to present a large number of students with large amounts of subject-matter content, so writing expectations were not prioritized. In history and science, on the other hand, faculty members' comments identified an expectation that students in their fields should begin learning discipline-specific writing and communication. As a result, history students wrote many assignments and science students were facing increasing numbers of writing assignments.

This simple indicator of assignment frequency within courses leads to many other explorations, including comparisons of assignment characteristics between disciplines, consideration of why these characteristics are seen (or not), what they signify and how assignments might be improved. In addition to describing the types of assignments and instruction currently available, this case study identified three barriers to improving student writing in university settings. We describe each below.

Assignment and Instruction Descriptions

Research in academic writing has identified a number of characteristics associated with effective writing pedagogy (see Bean, 2011), including short, low-stakes assignments (see Elbow, 1997), providing formative feedback, supplying a rubric, identifying a learning goal, and specifying a relevant audience (e.g., Ashbaugh, Johnstone & Warfield, 2002). Our data indicate that, in addition to a moderate average number of assignments (with the caveat of significantly different numbers of assignments between disciplines), the length of assignments we found across the three disciplines is consistent with previous research (Graves, Hyland & Samuels, 2010). When specified in the syllabus, the majority of assignments were four pages or less in length, and the average length of assignment was about five pages. The value of assignments tended to go up as the length increased, meaning that many students did have an opportunity to complete short, low-stakes assignments. In addition, some nested assignments were observed, and learning goals were commonly identified, particularly in business. Unfortunately, many assignments (60%) did not contain guidance on how long a completed assignment should be, almost half had uninformative general labels ("paper" or "assignment"), few (less than 8%) included rubrics, even fewer (less than 5%) provided for in-process feedback – these were almost all in history – and almost no assignments (less than 2%) specified any audience other than the professor or TA. In short, the assignments given to first- and second-year students demonstrated an uneven mixture of effective pedagogical elements along with a greater proportion of missed opportunities for student instruction.

Professors indicated in their surveys and interviews that they used a wide variety of instructional strategies to teach writing, in contrast to the relatively conventional assignment design we found through syllabi analysis. Professors used online resources and distributed handouts, provided in-class and extracurricular workshops as well as extra tutorials on writing, used models of exemplary texts, and discussed expectations and rubrics with students. They indicated awareness of campus resources such as the library and the writing centre and claimed to use these resources. Their commitment to writing instruction was counterbalanced, however, by limitations in their knowledge of effective writing pedagogy. For instance feedback, when provided, was often focused on error identification and checklists rather than interaction with student

authors. Similarly, resources and handouts were sometimes identified as generic “tip sheets” rather than genre-specific guides. Finally, half of all instructors claimed to provide feedback or instruction on student writing, despite the finding from our syllabi analysis that indicated such feedback was rarely incorporated. The explanation for this anomaly is that professors viewed office hours, responding to emails and students’ in-class questions as the primary means by which writing instruction was given. Whether this view of instruction is reasonable or productive is debatable. Also notable in professors’ comments was their low assessment of students’ writing abilities and engagement with academic work, as well as their frustration. In contrast, professors in departments that actively promoted collaborative planning of program curricula to include writing appeared to be moving beyond identifying concerns about student abilities to addressing them.

Three Barriers to Improving Student Writing

(1) Lack of Resources

Professors identified large class sizes, limited numbers of teaching assistants (TAs) and rigid departmental rules on the use of available resources as impediments to more effective writing instruction in their disciplines. In high-enrolment disciplines like business, the existence of large first-year classes with few TAs was cited as a barrier to including writing instruction because marking large numbers of assignments would be prohibitive. In smaller classes like history, the barrier was one of time, i.e., how to include sufficient content instruction and writing instruction in a short, 13-week period. Other considerations mentioned were the lack of time for marking student assignments and the uneven ability level of TAs to support writing instruction. Professors, in other words, identified writing instruction as a labour-intensive and time-intensive activity and indicated that they felt their institutions did not provide them with adequate resources to support this activity.

(2) Low Level of Student Abilities and Engagement

A consistent theme across professors’ responses was a criticism of students’ level of preparedness to write, as well as their engagement in academic activities. Although teacher criticism of students may be easily dismissed as long-existing complaints, it is important to recognize that faculty members’ perceptions of students are an important element in the university context of teaching and learning. Concerns regarding students’ failure to follow instructions, ignorance of basic language features and poor reading skills are not simply items of academic skills deficits but the identification of student characteristics felt to be beyond professors’ ability to “fix.” Some faculty linked these concerns with access issues, i.e., the lowering of entrance standards. Across all disciplines, faculty voiced low or no expectations about students’ ability to write or communicate, most often in tones of resignation and frustration.

(3) Lack of Departmental Support

Two elements regarding departmental supports are notable in their omission. First, many faculty noted that while they themselves felt competent as writers, they felt poorly prepared to teach writing. Few faculty had taken any courses in writing instruction or identified this as an option in their own professional development. Most relied on their own experiences as graduate students for insight into how students learn to write in their discipline. Interestingly, faculty from the history department identified their knowledge of a second language as an important factor in being able to teach students to write. Overall, faculty acknowledged that they lacked formal knowledge of writing pedagogy, identified no opportunities within their departments for such professional improvement, and instead relied on informal experience to guide their instruction.

Second, faculty were asked about departmental goals for writing instruction and whether these were articulated and addressed in their program's curriculum. Business and history faculty provided mixed responses, suggesting that clear departmental goals were not in place. This lack of coherent program planning to include writing instruction suggests that the resources that might support such programming are also unavailable. While some attempts were made to specifying departmental writing expectations – such as through the adoption of a common style guide in history – professors did not consistently follow these initiatives, indicating that individuals rather than departments hold the balance of power in curriculum planning. Such imbalances result in an undermining of the ability of departments to plan and support writing instruction. In science, a collaborative effort involving many professors was directed towards designing a systematic progression of writing assignments to develop identified disciplinary writing skills. It is not clear why this kinesiology department is successfully progressing towards coherent and systematic writing instruction when similar-sized departments falter. It is notable, however, that the largest number of volunteers for our faculty focus group came from this department.

Limitations

We acknowledge that there are certain limitations regarding our methods of data collection. As discussed earlier, the process of syllabi analysis has been criticized in the past because syllabi may not accurately represent the amount of writing actually performed by students, and descriptions of assignments may be missing or incomplete in the syllabus. Syllabi analysis has been used successfully in past studies, however, and we believe that any shortcomings in the resulting data can be supplemented through additional sources of information, such as surveys or focus groups, both of which we used.

The issue of whether the group of professors who responded to our online survey and participated in focus groups was a truly representative sample of undergraduate instructors is also noted, especially given the small sample sizes from each university. Since responding to the survey was entirely voluntary, those who did respond may have been more likely to already be interested in the issue of writing instruction and have strong views on writing. Whether these professors would be more likely to view writing positively or negatively is not clear. Similarly, participants in the focus groups were selected because they indicated on

their returned surveys that they would be willing to participate. Those who were interviewed were therefore likely to be more interested in issues concerning writing instruction than other faculty. While greater participation from faculty across all departments would have been preferable, we believe the data collected do provide some indication of what faculty members in general perceive about writing.

In addition, because we had a relatively small number of professors who completed the online survey and the focus group interview, we cannot claim that the data are representative of any department nor are we able to draw valid comparisons between disciplines or institutions because the number of participants was too small. Ideally, we would have conducted focus groups at all of the institutions where we gathered syllabi data.

While we did not set out to gather data about students' perceptions of writing instruction, this might be a productive addition for future research. Collecting and analyzing data from first- and second-year students, as well as graduate students or English language learners, would provide insight about their perceptions about writing instruction and skill development and would allow for possible comparisons between student and professor perceptions.

Conclusion and Avenues for Further Investigation

Findings from this study provide evidence that student writing at university is poorly addressed in any structured, coherent way. The picture of writing across a variety of disciplines is one of diverse experiences, with some students introduced early and often to opportunities for relevant writing practice, and other students facing few opportunities to improve their writing and communication skills. The instruction that students receive is likely to be based on professors' idiosyncratic academic experiences rather than any formal training in writing instruction. Finally, the barriers to more effective instruction that we identified appear to be systemic and result in a good deal of faculty frustration.

Our findings suggest that action at multiple levels may improve the quality of writing instruction for students and lead to more effective student writing. These levels include the institutional, the departmental, as well as the individual level. Program administrators may use our findings to address gaps in writing instruction within their departments and to plan for an improved incorporation of writing-focused learning outcomes across designated university units. In particular, the three barriers to improving writing instruction need to be recognized by upper administration and policy makers as prominent components to address when considering what is desirable in terms of students' experiences and learning outcomes. Departments may recognize the need to study in more detail their own practices in comparison to other departments and with larger sample sizes of faculty members. Such studies may improve the ability to draw conclusions about university-wide and department-wide practices and effective strategies for implementing curricular change. At the individual level, faculty may recognize the benefits of collaborative approaches to the planning of writing instruction rather than relying primarily on their own experiences. Such approaches may also influence the levels of frustration felt by individual faculty.

Finally, this research moves the conversation about writing away from a critique of skills deficits to a more productive discussion about integrating writing expectations and instruction across Ontario's universities. Such a discussion will be necessary if meeting expectations regarding students' writing abilities is a priority. Future studies exploring the successes and challenges of current departmental and institutional supports may not only provide valuable information about the state of writing instruction, but also enable the identification of potential benchmarks for effective writing instruction at the university level.

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