STUDENT EXIT INTERVIEWS: SPRING 2011

Introduction

On April 13, 2011, the Writing Committee conducted the second round exit interviews with a panel of graduating seniors on their writing histories at UNH. These interviews consisted of brief student presentations followed by a Q&A session.

The following general prompt was given to each panelist several weeks before the event:

Please describe your personal writing history. Tell us where you were as a writer when you arrived at UNH, and where you believe you are now, upon graduation. In your estimation, what, if any, UNH experiences influenced your present status?

In addition, panelists were given the following supplemental considerations:

- How did you navigate the University Writing Requirement? Which courses did you take and why did you select those courses?
- Tell us about your most challenging writing projects and why they were challenging for you.
- What do you consider to be your strengths and weaknesses as a writer? Have these changed during your time at UNH? If so, how?
- What have you learned about writing in your discipline, field and/or chosen career? What seems unique about it – that is, not necessarily similar to writing in other settings?
- Where and how have you received substantial help in learning to write or becoming a better writer at UNH (e.g. specific instructors, peers, assignments, courses and/or UNH support like the Writing Center)?

2011 Student Panelists:*

Student #1: Psychology and Biology Double Major, Spanish Minor
Post-graduation plans: Master of Physician Assistant Studies

Student #2: Business Major, Education Minor.
Post-graduation plans: MA, Education

Student #3: Civil Engineering, Associate Degree in Liberal Studies, with an emphasis on Dance
Post-graduation plans: MA, Engineering

*Panelists recruited from students working in the Connors Writing Center
Common Themes That Emerged From Student Panelists
This was the second iteration of the event; bold entries indicate common themes between 2011 and 2010 findings.

The Undergraduate Panelists…

2011
1. valued EN401 as a service course (bypassing was seen as handicap)
2. appreciated explicit instructor attention to writing (expectations & guidance) [4,7]
3. suggested a "wish list" that would include a tech-writing course in discipline/major (pre-senior, post EN401)
4. noted an uneven application of writing standards/attention to writing, especially among TAs in large or lab courses.
5. appreciated the different demands of science vs business vs. other writing [3]
6. had experience with collaborative writing projects.
7. were cognizant of "real world" writing (proposals, applications, service learning) as a form of extra-curricular learning [5]
8. valued instructor feedback over unguided peer feedback [4]

2010
1. asserted that many writing skills transferred from secondary schooling (including explicit attention to grammar).
2. described the development of a non-linear writing process during their UNH experience.
3. exhibited a well-developed sense of genre awareness.
4. cited the positive influence of selected instructors beyond English 401.
5. cited the importance of writing for out-of-class rhetorical situations: applications, grants, etc.
6. mentioned the steep increase in writing (curricular and extracurricular) in the senior year.
7. felt the need for more instructor guidance in the early on, prior to the draft response stage.
Summary Transcript
This section is not an exhaustive accounting, but is intended to give a sense of the major points made by the panelists, which were often seconded by others. Nevertheless, it should be understood that these observations are reflective of student-perceptions, and as such are best read for insights on teaching methods and not as course or instructor evaluations.

Student #1: Business Major, Education Minor

Student took honors and AP English courses in high school. These were “drawn out” process-centered courses, and she felt her strengths upon graduating were in organization, transitions, introduction, and conclusions, but her weakness was in her wordiness and lack of conciseness.

Student chose to take English 401 at UNH, where she developed her voice and where she learned to write personally, something she was taught to avoid in high school. She also learned to write more quickly and to incorporate time management into her process, since the assignments in college were faster paced with closer deadlines than high school.

Student’s first “huge college paper” came in a behavioral organization course, where she received a lot of help from the instructor. After this, she took a marketing class where the instructor really focused on business writing and grammar.

In one upper division business course, the students were assigned a major research project, but the instructor left it open ended, with no explicit instruction on structure, formatting, or genre conventions, which frustrated students. The instructor was surprised to find that the students didn’t already know these conventions. As a result, the instructor did offer the class tips about business writing. Far from being bored or distracted by the topic, the students were grateful and attentive to instruction on writing in the context of their discipline. In the end, the student felt that this experience was invaluable. She says she wished that there could have been some sort of 500-level technical writing course offered for business majors. The writing done in upper-level business courses was mostly group writing, where it was difficult to demonstrate individual mastery of the conventions and understanding of the material.

The student pointed to the writing center as one of the greatest resources in helping her develop as a writer at UNH: all the available resources, the group help, and what she called achieving the “Aha! Moments.”

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Student #2: Civil Engineering, Associate Degree in Liberal Studies

Student attended a rural New Hampshire high school. When she graduated, she felt unprepared for college writing, so she took some community-college writing courses before enrolling at UNH.

At UNH, all of her writing-intensive courses were built into her major. The bulk of the writing came during her junior year when she started writing lab reports. In a large lab class, she and her classmates tended to become apathetic about their writing because of the perceived inconsistency among TAs in grading lab report writing. Another point of frustration came the following spring when she co-authored a group report, but they received no instructor feedback other than a grade.
Her impression was that faculty weren't able to provide very much support to her as a writer given the large number of students in her program. Consequently, she feels that she developed most through projects outside of the classroom, such as applying for scholarships, doing proposals, applying for graduate school, and creating a URC poster.

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Student #3: Psychology and Biology Double Major, Spanish Minor

Student took AP English in high school, but the class was huge and her teacher wasn't picky about her writing. Subsequently, by placing out of English 401 at UNH, she came to feel disadvantaged since she had never received explicit attention to citation and conventions of academic writing. Despite this, she related how in one particular 400-level class everyone but she failed their first paper for not properly documenting and formatting in accordance with APA. She says that she is still surprised to find peers in senior classes who have no idea how to use APA formatting. She recently took a lower division course where the instructor provided minimal direction with research, leaving the form and method of citation up to the students. She felt that this sent the wrong message to freshmen and sophomores, who might think that this is how all writing is done.

Student took a 500-level English course, as required by her major, which she admits she would never have signed up for on her own. In the end she gained much from this class, learning about mechanics and how to write papers in different styles. She also appreciated the peer reviews and one-on-one conferences with her instructor.

Student feels confident about writing lab reports, but she isn't as confident about other kinds of science writing waiting for her as a graduate student.

Student cited visiting and working in the writing center as one of the biggest influences in helping her develop as a writer.

Follow up Questions

- What is one piece of advice you would give to first-year students at UNH to help them develop as writers toward graduation?
  - Go to the writing center.
  - Get involved in the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program or help a professor with a research project.
  - Take English 401, even if you don’t have to.
- What kind of revision was allowed in courses represented by Writing Committee members or in your majors?
  - Psychology and Business = No revision
  - Education = Sometimes there were opportunities for revision
  - English = Yes there was revision
  - Biology = There was no revision, but feedback on lab reports would carry over to subsequent reports.
- How prepared do you feel for the next stage of your education?
  - Student #1: Well prepared. She’s already started graduate courses.
  - Student #2: Somewhat well prepared. She’s not intimidated by writing. She enjoys it, but still worries about organization.
  - Student #3: Confident, but still worried about science writing in graduate school.