A Mixed Method Study on Freshman Students' Writing Performance as Addressed by Postsecondary Professors

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that difficulty in general education classes significantly contributes to attrition among college freshmen. Accordingly, this mixed-method study sought to address the related problem of high school students' preparation for freshman composition or English classes. The purpose of the sequential explanatory study was to identify the writing weaknesses of freshman composition students, relative to the types of writing assignments they must be able to complete in class, and investigate freshman professors' assessments of student preparation. The quantitative research question investigated specific writing weaknesses and required assignments of freshman students. The qualitative research question focused on what professors perceive as skill indicators for low performance of freshman writing. A survey was completed by 25 professors teaching introductory English composition courses that included writing assignments across 9 Southeastern community colleges and universities. Descriptive analysis of the survey data revealed the 3 most common assignments were critical analysis, argumentative essays, and expository essays. The three most common student writing problems were revising, documentation, and research skills. Focus group data from 3 university professors were first coded for significant statements aligned to specific improvements in student writing. Coded data were then analyzed for core themes that included word usage, sentence structure, and diction as student weaknesses. The results of this study could create social change by providing high schools, their faculties, and districts with the specific requirements, noted problems, and insights from college professors which will enable all secondary personnel involved to make critical classroom and curriculum decisions in order to better prepare graduating students.

DEDICATION

To my husband who always supports me, my mama who has always encouraged my education, and in memory of Jesse who found great pleasure and humor in the fact that I would be a "Dr."

To life-long friends who never even blinked when I told them I was doing this. Your friendship has always been one of the best things in my life. For me, "family" and genuine "friends" are synonymous.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

Students preparing to continue their education past high school must be prepared to write at an academic level required by universities and colleges. Yet many students entering college are unable to write at the level required by university professors. If students are not prepared to begin their post secondary education, other problems may arise beyond academic performance. Students who are unprepared to begin first year English or composition classes will spend more time in college and ultimately will have more financial burdens (Capriccioso, 2006; Alliance, 2007). Alliance (2007), "a national policy and advocacy organization" (Alliance, 2009, About the Alliance) noted the financial monetary burden for families whose students cannot begin regular coursework due to inadequate skills, the main cost is on taxpayers, at a cost of "a billion dollars a year" (p. 2) which means taxpayers are "paying twice for basic writing instruction – first in the secondary schools, then again at the college level" (p. 2). Families paying for courses in which they do not receive credit is an concern in remediation.

Alliance (2006) stated that the economy of the United States would gain approximately $3.7 billion simply by "increasing the number of students graduating from high school prepared to succeed in college" (Alliance, 2006). A national survey of professors and business leaders estimated that four out of ten high school graduates are not academically prepared to enter college or ready to move into a "good" job (Achieve, 2006, p. 3). Writing is clearly a skill utilized across today's society.

In response to some high school students being unprepared for freshman composition or English classes, colleges require these students take remedial writing classes before they can enroll in first year courses (Schemo, 2006; Capriccioso, 2006; Alliance, 2007). This need for pre-course classes is also noted by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (2003) which found that out of "10,204 high school graduates, 54% enrolled in one or more developmental classes" before beginning their regular first year classes (p. 1) and "one in five students take pre-college developmental writing before taking college-level writing courses" (p. 3). Assumptions are made by secondary educators, administrators, parents, and students that if students complete the requisite high school courses, they will be prepared to enroll in first year college classes. Perhaps most compelling: ACT scores from 2006 show that 79% of students beginning 4-year colleges are not adequately prepared in four areas of course work, including writing (Jones & Jones, 2006, p.1).

College preparation issues are recognized by educational leaders (Achieve, 2006; NAEP, 2002, as cited in Alliance, 2007). According to Alsup and Bernard-Donals, schools need to "devise high school and writing curricula so that they are compatible and desirable for students who are planning to attend college" (Alsup & Donals, 2002, p. 131). States are beginning to understand the depth of the writing problem and policies are in place to modify kindergarten through grade twelve curriculum to better prepare students for college and work (Achieve, 2006, p. 9). Writing weaknesses or composition weaknesses need to be addressed long before the first year of college (Achieve, 2006). Improvements in student achievement and college preparation can be accomplished with

"curriculum alignment" (Jennings, 2002, p. 1) between the high school and college courses.

A cooperative culture is an important factor in improving student writing preparation for college. If high school educators work with college and business representatives, they could become more familiar with the specific academic needs of their college-bound students and be better prepared to address those needs in their classrooms (Achieve, 2006, p. 11). In fact, it has been noted that "educators say the need for remedial work is fueled largely by a lack of communication between high schools and colleges about what's important to know" (Newsome, 2007, p. 1). Rather than producing students who are unprepared for college and forced to take remediation courses, high school educators could learn from college educators what writing skills are needed at the college level. A study by Peter Hart Research Associates for the Achieve organization points out, "substantial proportions of high school graduates identify gaps in preparation for the skills and abilities expected of them today, and employers and college instructors offer more critical assessments" (2005, p. 3). College educators can provide insight into writing expectations, coursework, and a precise set of skill areas that are traditionally weak in first year students.

Educators at the high school level need to become more familiar with the specific academic needs of their college-bound students by working closely with college and business representatives and then begin to address those needs in their classrooms (Achieve, 2006). This belief fuels the current study where educators actively teaching freshman composition to students who just finished high school provided insight, via a

survey and discussion, into what writing skill weaknesses they see. The researcher used an online survey to gather data regarding what weaknesses these professors were seeing in their classrooms and what types of assignments students expected to complete. The data were analyzed to gain knowledge into what gaps are evident between what students need to know and what they actually know as writers at the college level. After receiving the survey replies, the researcher then met with focus groups from three of the universities that had taken part in the surveys. The focus groups provided more of an informal opportunity for the professors to discuss possible reasons for weaknesses, what they felt were automatic cues that students were unprepared, and suggestions for pre-college educators.

Problem Statement

Professors and business leaders estimate that four out of ten high school graduates are not ready to enter college or to move into a good job (Achieve, 2006, p. 3). A 2006 National Commission on Writing survey showed that "81 percent of employers describe recent high school graduates as 'deficient in written communications" (Alliance, 2007, p.1). "As a result, private companies spend an estimated $3.1 billion per year, while state governments are investing another $200 million, to provide writing instruction to their employees" (Alliance, 2007, p. 1). ACT scores from 2006 show that 79% of students beginning 4-year colleges are unprepared in four areas of course work, including writing (Jones & Jones, 2006, p. 1).

Colleges are required to provide remedial or developmental non-credited courses for students before they can begin their first year classes. Across the nation, two-year

colleges spend $1.4 billion every year on remediation classes to prepare students to either

continue their education or move into jobs (Capriccioso, 2006, p .1). During the fall of

2000, "public 2-year colleges reported that 63% of their students averaged a year or more

of remedial coursework and 38% of public 4-year college and university students

averaged a year or more of remedial coursework" (Plucker, Zapf, & Spradlin, 2004, p. 2).

Achieve, Inc., "created in 1996 by the nation's governors and business leaders to help

states raise academic standards so students will be ready to work or go to college"

(Achieve, 2007, ¶ 1), states,

> Higher education institutions, businesses, and students and families themselves
> are spending upward of $17 billion each year on remedial classes just so students
> can gain the knowledge and skills that they should have acquired in high school.
> Postsecondary remediation does offer a second chance to many students, but too
> often it cannot make up entirely for inadequate preparation in high school
> (Achieve, 2006, p. 6).

Areas of the Southeast "[spend] over $54 million each year to provide community college

remediation education for recent high school graduates who did not acquire the basic

skills necessary to succeed in college or at work" (Alliance, 2007, 9). By learning what

specific writing skills students entering college do not know, can secondary educators

better prepare graduating students to step into a job or a college classroom ready to meet

the future?

<center>Purpose of the Study</center>

From an examination of first year college-level writing professors' online surveys

and focus group discussions, this investigation attempted to ascertain what writing

weaknesses are dominant in students of first year college writing or English courses..

Freshman composition professors are uniquely positioned to pinpoint writing weaknesses

of first-year students; they also know freshman composition curricular expectations. High school administrators and instructors could institute curricular changes to better equip their students to write successfully at the college level.

Nature of the Study

In this study, the researcher gathered data that showed what students need to know in order to succeed in freshman composition classes. The writing skills that entering students need for university-level composition were also explored. This was a non-experimental mixed-method study. The quantitative portion of the study used a cross-sectional survey with a Likert-type scale to gather a large amount of data in order to derive conclusions regarding college writing preparation in order for high school English teachers to make correlations between the data and classroom curriculum (Creswell, 2003, p. 155). The population was stratified because the study involved professors who teach at least one freshman English course in which students are required to write essays (Creswell, 2003, p. 156). These courses could also include remediation courses for writing. A single-stage expert sampling was used to provide information from nine Southeastern colleges and universities. These colleges are predominantly small, private, and located in small cities. Many of the students came from rural areas. The survey questions attempted to identify the specific necessary writing skills required to work at the college level, and whether, according to the college professors, their students were adequate or lacking in each skill. The survey instrument was a computerized survey which was disbursed and returned via email. This was a modified survey, which the

researcher obtained permission to use for the study. The independent variables were the college and university professors. Each specific skill was a dependent variable.

For the qualitative portion of the study, the researcher interviewed three focus groups. These focus groups were made up of teachers who completed the surveys at three of the nine colleges. The purpose of the interviews was to gather information and ideas regarding entering college students not addressed on the survey. The qualitative information was written in a narrative format for the study. The qualitative portion of the interviews covered the following questions:

1. Do you feel that high school English departments and college freshman professors could do staff development each year to improve the situation?

2. What are suggestions you would make to high school teachers to help improve writing for entering students?

3. What reasons do you think are the causes of students being ill-prepared for freshman composition?

Research Questions

Quantitative Question: What are the specific writing weaknesses' totals and percentages college professors are seeing in freshman students' writing performances?

Qualitative Question: What do college professors perceive as the skill indicators for low performance of college freshman writing?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as they are used solely for this study.

Freshman: refers to those students who are in their first year of college after completing their high school studies.

Curriculum: refers to what topics are taught in a classroom. Often, schools and districts will provide teachers with a "curriculum guide" which lists topics expected to be taught. Some curriculum guides include lesson plans or directives on how to teach the topics provided.

English or Composition – These refer to courses that place a strong emphasis on writing and verbal skill content. Although they are structured around writing, it is understood that they may incorporate literature, media, and other types of communication into class content.

Remediation – For this study, remediation refers to classes or help that students who are unprepared for their first year college courses need before beginning freshman classes.

Writing Achievement – This term refers to a student's writing capabilities that may be above, below, or in the range of the student's grade level, age, or educational level. Skills that might fall under these capabilities include grammar, punctuation, organization, format, and style.

<div align="center">Assumptions</div>

For this mixed-methods study, it was believed that these nine Southeastern universities would provide a representative sample of the state's colleges. The researcher also believed that surveying 59 college faculty members who teach freshman courses would provide an excellent representation of the population of freshman college

educators across the state. It was also believed that all faculty members would be honest in answering their surveys. In the interview portion of the study, the researcher believed that the college professors would speak openly about their concerns. The researcher had a professional relationship with the department head of one of the universities where the survey was distributed. It was assumed that this relationship would not impact the way the professors filled out their surveys**.**

Delimitations

The surveys for this quantitative research study were emailed to university professors at nine universities in the Southeastern United States who were teaching at least one writing based course to freshman students. The surveys and data collection took place at the beginning of the 2008–2009 academic school year. All participants in the study were actively teaching at least one course at the time that they received the survey. The population set was the community colleges and universities in a state in the Southeastern part of the United States that provided post-secondary education to many high school graduates in the researcher's county. The members of the three focus groups were chosen by the colleges' English department chairpersons.

Limitations

As there are approximately 70 universities for the population within the researcher's state, including numerous branches of some of the larger universities, surveying a sample of nine colleges was likely too small to represent all universities in the researcher's state (South Carolina Information Highway, 2008). Because the researcher did not know the total number of professors teaching freshmen English across

the state, it was unclear if a sample of 25 surveys was large enough to represent the entire state. If 51 surveys for a sample size had been returned, this would have provided a 95% confidence level. The three focus groups, from three of the nine universities, were made up of three to five professors who completed the surveys. Given that it is impossible to know how willing the professors were to talk about their true concerns, the researcher was unable to guarantee that the focus group member provided adequate information.

Significance of the Study

The researcher focused on universities that many students in the researcher's seven county school districts choose to attend after finishing high school. Therefore, this study would be especially significant to high schools within these seven districts as well as other universities within the state. This information might also be of value to other states throughout the U.S. Once the study was completed, English departments at these high schools and their district offices were able to see what areas of college writing represented gaps in skills. Knowing this information could allow educators to change their English curriculum in order to better prepare their students for college courses.

.Implications for Social Change

This study is relevant because high schools and colleges in the researcher's area need to work more in conjunction with each other. Universities need to provide guidance to high school educators in order for them to improve high school curriculum. This study also provides an opportunity for educators at both levels to work as colleagues in a community of learning. Part of the survey questions the university faculty's interest in working together to provide better support and planning for students. Through this study,

the researcher hopes to provide incentive for high schools and colleges to do staff

development together in preparation for starting each academic year. This concept of

working together for the greater good has been promoted by Betances (1992) when he

discussed the need for a "collective vision" within schools and systems that enable

everyone to work together to attain what is best for the school, the community, and the

children (p. 2).

Summary and Transition

This research study was based on the knowledge that students are leaving high

school unprepared to succeed in freshman college writing courses. When students arrive

to college unprepared, most are placed in remediation courses for which they do not

receive credit but still must pay for as part of their tuition. The premise of the study is

that if secondary schools know college expectations for writing and what specific

problems freshman composition professors are noting in their students, high schools will

have a an opportunity to improve instruction. The continuation of this study document

includes a review of relevant literature supporting the study, an explanation of the

methodology the researcher used to gather data, and a detailed presentation and analysis

of the data, followed by a summary and conclusions drawn by the researcher.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining the literature dealing with college writing preparation, apparent

focal points comprise: (a) the theoretical framework, (b) statistics and noted weaknesses

in students arriving to college, (c) remediation at the college level, (d) college writing

expectations, (e) writing below the college level, (f) collaboration between high school

and university faculties, (g) issues in teaching writing, and (h) how groups are working to

improve student progress in writing and preparation. This review of the literature

surrounding these points encompasses statistics, varying points of view, and information

from researchers and studies which provides more insight into the need for students to be

better prepared to write at the college level.

Theoretical Framework

Educators, addressing the concern of ill-prepared freshman writing students,

believe many answers lie in the fact that faculties must work together to accomplish

writing goals. No one group of educators can be the only answer (Alliance, 2006; Cohen,

Michael, et. al. 2006; ICAS, 2002; Newsome, 2007). Changes must be made at the high

school level in order for students to be prepared for the advanced writing required in

college. Some, such as Jennings (2002), have made suggestions on how to make changes

in order to facilitate better prepared adults after graduation. Jennings believed that

answers may be found in the relationship between high schools and colleges (p. 2).

Educators at the secondary level need insight into what is expected in post-

secondary settings. Research can provide succinct knowledge of freshman writing

weaknesses to allow high school English teachers to make needed curricular and instructional changes. Olson (2006) noted that making policies consistent from pre-K through college would help (p. 19). This may even require making mutual financial decisions as noted by the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis at the University of Southern California (2007), which stated "school and community college districts, states, and the federal government need to develop a coordinated funding structure that enables practitioners to concentrate on program improvement" (p. 10). At this time during fiscal difficulties within our country, limited educational funds may keep districts from making curriculum or staff development changes which could possibly improve student writing.

Vygotsky (1996) stated, "Instruction is one of the principal sources of the schoolchild's concepts and is also a powerful force in directing their evolution; it determines the fate of his total mental development" (p. 157). Instruction provides needed mental growth so that students can become adults ready for the work force or continued schooling. "The difference between highly developed intelligence and elementary intelligence was sought in the relative number of mental representation and their connections serving those two forms of intellectual activity" (p. 206). In order for students to learn and remember material it is essential that they connect their learning and knowledge to real life (Vygotsky, 1996). Teachers continuously encourage students to aim for higher goals in part to prepare students for the future. Making students aware of writing expectations after high school graduation and having their teachers work with

them to become proficient in their skills will enable students to take control of their

learning.

Graduating high school students' inability to write at the needed college or work

level is also connected to language theory. Adkinson (2001) explained that "Vygotsky's

studies of children and their language development led him to develop a view of language

as an ever-changing dynamic process through which both the child's expectations as well

as outside feedback affects the language meanings the child holds" (p. 5). In other words,

children, along with adults, are continually connecting their lives and environments to

their thought processes and their words. It is a constant movement from the mind to life.

Atkinson states that "this enables humans to constantly refine their inner speech so that it

has increasingly greater power to explain the world they see around them" (p. 6).

Vygotsky (1996) pointed out that inner speech "does not merely accompany the child's

activity; it serves mental orientation, conscious understanding; it helps in overcoming

difficulties" (p. 228).

The connection of life, memories, things that happen each day, and people's

thought processes are how language evolves in their brains. Neurobiologists now theorize

how the brain processes language and how, just as Vygotsky believed, that language and

the outside environment are connected. Neuroscientists discuss language by "talking

about the ability to use words and to combine them in sentences so that concepts in our

minds can be transmitted to other people" (Damasio, 1992, p. 89). The importance of

thinking skills and good solid writing and began seriously writing at very young ages

(Pass, 2003, p. 38). Without their ability to "write well, they could not have conveyed

their ideas adequately enough for those ideas to be accepted" (p. 38). Thus, students at either the secondary or post-secondary level need to continually work to improve their language skills and advance their writing skills in order to adequately impart their ideas to others.

According to Yan and Slagle (2006), "college readiness emerged to be a serious concern and gained attention from policy makers and researchers recently. At this stage, this field is rampant with myriad ideas, claims, and strategies" (p. 13). Camacho and Cook (2007) questioned whether standardized testing was capable of judging students' college preparedness (p. 3). Data collected in 2005 but published by Alliance in 2007 showed that many college professors believed at least 50% of the students entering college were not prepared to write at the college level (p. 2).

"U.S. graduates' literacy skills are lower than those of graduates in most industrialized nations, and comparable only to the skills of graduates in Chile, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia" (Alliance, 2007, p. 1). The state of California Legislative Analysis Office tracks the number of students who enter college unprepared for writing. They have noted that from 1989 to 2001, the percentage of students unprepared for college writing rose from 38% to 46% (Fig. 4). Achieve (2006) reported that college professors and employers believe that 42% of the country's high school graduates are unprepared to work at the college level (p. 6). According to 2006 ACT scores "only two in ten (21%) met or exceeded the College Readiness Benchmark scores on all four ACT exams" (2006, p. 1).

The Nation's Report Card provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing exam was last given in 2002.It measured the writing skills of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders and translated their scores into three levels of proficiency: basic, proficient, and advanced. Across the three grades, only 22-29 percent of students scored at the proficient level, and only 2 percent were found to write at the advanced level (Persky, et al., 2003). In other words, 70 – 75 percent of students were found to be writing below grade level. (Alliance, 2007, p. 2)

Not only are college and university professors noting the problems with writing and other composition skills, but students have also recognized areas where their writing skills are weak. A recent survey showed that "39 percent–nearly two in five–of recent graduates who went to college after graduation said there were gaps in their high school preparation for the expectations of college. [Even 31 percent of the students who reported feeling extremely well prepared for college were required to take] at least one remedial college course" (McCluskey, 2005, p. 1).

Lumpkin (2001) noted that "at any level, good writing requires an acknowledgement of writing strengths and weaknesses by both student and instructor" (p. 1). She wanted to get students to work more collaboratively with her to see their weakness, improve their writing skills, and get an idea of what colleges and universities expect. She found that her students believed that four year colleges, relative to two-year or community colleges, expected students to be better prepared for college. Early in the project, it became clear that her students expected the writing to show many more weaknesses than strengths. In fact, one student turned at note in with her first draft which

stated "I know this is not up to par with the rest of the MTSU and Bryan College classes, but it is a start, and I am willing to work harder" (p. 1).

Lumpkin (2001) created a feedback sheet, showing both strengths and weaknesses, to address "purpose, audience, thesis, development, organization, and language usage" in each student's papers (p. 2). Through student peer group work, they improved on the six areas. Lumpkin noted that most students had problems with determining a purpose for writing. However, they recognized that no matter the type of college, students are similar in their strengths and weaknesses (p. 2). These students also found that they had more trouble writing to an audience of their peers (p. 3). Also, many students "were afraid to point out grammar errors since they were unsure of the mistakes themselves" (p. 6). On the other hand, the majority of students realized the importance of recognizing and correcting errors (p. 7). At the end of the project, Lumpkin felt that students gained "writing ability and experience" (p. 7) and that they were at the "beginning of writing maturity" (p. 7).

Olsen (2007) noted, "the failure to prepare many young people for high education is taking a toll on the U.S. rates of college enrollment and completion" (p. 1). In the top proportion of nations among adults who are 35 to 64 years old with college degrees, the United States is seventh in ranks for people who are 25 to 34 with a degree. Preparation and affordability are two of the main reasons students do not complete college (p. 1). Olsen further remarked:

> Despite the rhetoric about lifetime learning, attainment patterns look relatively conventional based on 2005 data from the U.S. Census Bureau. If Americans have not completed high school by age 19, or earned a bachelor's degree by age 23, they are unlikely to do so in future years. The vast majority of high school

students expect to earn at least a baccalaureate degree. But less than a third of those students achieve their initial aspirations. The gap between expectations and attainment grew more than fourfold between 1980 and 2002 (p. 2).

It is thus unlikely that most students who are unprepared for the work demands of college will ultimately finish their college programs.

Remediation

One of the predominant ways universities and colleges try to help unprepared students is the provide remediation courses. According to Attewell, Lavin, Domina, and Levey (2006), these remedial courses may also fall under titles such as "developmental education, skills courses, or college preparation courses" (p. 886) since many educators try to stay away from the remedial classification. Hindes, Hom, and Brookshaw (2002) reported that 46% of students who typically made B's in high school or finished with a 3.2 GPA in math and English had to take remedial courses for those same classes (p. 1). This estimate could be low since Achieve (2006) noted that "fewer than half the states told us that college remediation rates are publicly reported" (p. 27). Young's (2002) research also cites the National Center for Educational Statistics as providing that "first-year students at public community colleges are twice as likely to be enrolled in a remedial education course than their public four-year counterparts" (p. 4). Some colleges design new programs to bypass the non-credit courses and work into their classes credited prewriting courses (Huse, Write, Clark, & Hacker, 2005).

Hoyt and Sorensen (2001) found that many students placed into remediation courses at an urban state college with a high remedial rate had taken college preparatory classes in high school (p. 26). Their study "was conducted to determine how high school preparation affects remedial placement rates at Utah Valley State College" (p. 27). They

also found that many educators felt that students were ill-prepared for college in part because high schools did not have high enough academic standards. The educators believed that coursework and standards had been "watered-down" (p. 26). Ponessa (1996) noted that English high school instructors agreed with this viewpoint: "Our basic is kind of like remedial, and our so-called honors is more like a college-prep borderlining on basic...If we go strictly by the book, half of my honors class would have failed" (p. 1).

Hoyt et al. (2001) noted that in New Jersey only 27% of those entering college were proficient in verbal skills. Math also had a large number of remediation students (p. 27). Ultimately, Hoyt and Sorensen (2001) found that the rigor and quality of the high school education seemed to be a main factor in how prepared incoming college freshman were for the demands of college English courses. In response, many states have begun using standards and state tests to better gauge quality and success (p. 27). If states are able to determine which schools are producing more prepared students, then those schools could be used as models for other schools in an effort to reduce remediation rates.

Attewell et al. (2006) looked at which students took college remediation courses, how much remediation was occurring, and how remediation affected those students (p. 888). Kozeracki (2002) and Soliday (2002) noted that the issue of even offering remedial courses at colleges and universities has become a point of debate (p. 886). Attewell et al. noted that some educators believed that the presence of remedial courses and the acceptance of ill-prepared students into colleges and universities is a reflection of post-secondary schools not maintaining high enough admission standards (p. 886).

The value in remedial coursework since some students are academically strong in some fields have weaknesses in other fields. Attewell et al. (2006) also noted that there has not been a definitive answer to what comprises work at the college level. This is due in part to the fact that each college and university sets its own expectations and standards (p. 887). In fact, according to the National Educational Longitudinal Study (2000) about three-fourths (76 percent) of the Title IV degree-granting 2- and 4-year institutions that enrolled freshmen offered at least one remedial reading, writing, or mathematics course P. 1)..

Attewell et al. (2006) looked at which students took remedial classes before beginning their regular freshman coursework. A total of 52% were from low socio-economic homes. Of the students who took the most advanced high school classes, only 14% were required to take any remediation courses. Surprisingly, 32% who did not take advanced high school classes did not have to take any remedial classes. This shows that "weak academic skills or preparation in high school" (p. 899) is not the only possible reason why these courses are needed. This study also found that among students at four year colleges who took a few remediation classes, at least 50% graduated with a college degree. Also, graduation rates were not significantly reduced if remedial courses were taken at 2-year colleges (p. 906). Levin and Calcagno (2008) noted there is value in looking at the success of these courses.

Universities have used various methods to address writing weaknesses students have when entering post-secondary schools. The University of Minnesota, which takes in close to 1000 freshmen each year, requires that all first year students take "2 quarters of

freshman composition" (DelMas & Wambach, 1998, p. 3) no matter how those students scored on the SAT or college entrance tests. The faculty felt that every student should be "placed in a strengthened basic writing course" (p. 4). The university had some concern about whether students would be capable of passing this course and whether the 2 quarters would be "rigorous enough to be considered college level and therefore worthy of credit" (p. 5). DelMas and Wambach stated that one concern was whether two quarters were adequate preparation for writing in other college courses. The study found that the students who successfully completed these courses earned A's and B's in their upper level composition classes (p. 8). It is clear, in this instance, that requiring all entering students to take writing preparation classes helped those students to be able to complete their next classes. The University of Iowa has a similar two-course program. The stated purpose of these courses is to "help students better understand the university environment" (Sonnek, 2000, p. 3) and to prepare students for reading and writing at the freshman composition level.

Very little has been published about the types of skill deficits college composition professors see in freshman students. One of the pieces of literature addressing these issues comes from the state of California. Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates for California Community Colleges (ICAS; 2002) noted that "more than 50% of their students fail to produce papers relatively free of language errors" (p. 4). This has caused many colleges to be more strenuous in their pre-college testing and, in turn, has produced a proliferation of remedial writing classes. Failure to meet the standards needed for first year college classes causes an increase in total college tuition, which creates

excess unplanned expense for many students. The ICAS (2002) provided the following

input from college professors regarding student college preparation:

> Students must simultaneously exercise control over the language they use. To convey their ideas clearly and effectively, students must use varied sentence structures, choose appropriate vocabulary for an academic audience, and produce finished edited papers that follow Standard English conventions of grammar, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling and that are relatively free of errors. (p. 22)

To further emphasize the importance of language conventions, the ICAS (2002) noted

that California faculty gave the following levels of significance for requirements; 88% for

word use, 86% for overall mechanics, and 75% for spelling (p. 22). Hopkins (2002)

discussed a study where "out of 475 essays, 34% of the second drafts showed some

evidence of improvement through revisions, but 66% showed no evidence of

improvement" (p. 8). Rough drafts appeared to be similar in form and content to the final

draft. At the pre-college level, teachers often see students quickly read through their first

draft, make a few changes, recognize a few problems such as spelling errors, run-ons, and

fragments, and then copying to create a final copy which is still not correct. From the

educator's point of view, it appears that students are able to read a topic, write a draft,

correct, and write a final draft within an hour. However, once students get to college,

their inability to recognize and correct their mistakes becomes a major issue.

It is important that grammar and writing be addressed at different levels long

before college. Some colleges require "grammar competency tests of incoming students"

(Seamon, 2000, p. 6) to "deductions of two, three, five, or 10 points for factual errors,

misspellings, grammar, punctuation, style, or other 'unclear' errors" (p. 7). Bennett-

Kastor (2004) noted,

the poorest students often make an extraordinary number of errors which may seem to be trivial lapses in attention: words left out, homophones confused (their/there), apostrophes missing, and sentences which simply make no sense. Of particular note are abundance of misspellings. (p. 68)

Success at the high school level does not necessarily equate with success at the college level. Students may find they were exceptional students in high school, only to find that they struggle in their first-year college courses (Conley & Venezia, 2003, p. 15; Kendall & Snyder, 2005, p. 2). Young (2002) stated, "The complaint that many high school graduates are incapable of doing college-level work can be explained by the fact that there is often a sizable gap between the requirements needed for high school graduation and college admission" (p. 14). Some educators also believe that students who have taken AP English courses in high school may not be prepared for college writing (Hansen et al., 2006; Oxtoby, 2007). Sometimes even the state standards at one level influence the other level (McCrimmon, 2005). However, when one considers the number of states, high schools, and colleges in the United States, it is difficult to imagine all of these to be on the same page in regards to standards and curriculum.

DelMas and Wambach (1998) found that compared to the amount of work required in their high school writing homework, first year students believed college to be "much more difficult" (p. 9). Of those surveyed, 68% said that the college course was "much more" difficult than high school writing classes. Another 28.9% said they were about the same, and 3.7% said that the college course was *much less* difficult than high school. When comparing the amount of work required, 75.7% said college required *much more*, while 19.9% said it was *about the same*, and 4% said that college required *much less* (p. 9).

Achieve (2006) analyzed high school graduation exams from six states and found that the exams were not a good sample of college readiness. Rather, they more adequately showed what students had learned from their early high school years (p. 19 – 20).

> Most of these tests were given to students in 10th grade, so it is not surprising that they focused on early high school content. A few of the tests were given in 11th grade, and although they were more rigorous than the 10th grade tests, they still did not measure the full range of skills high school students need to learn to be ready for college and work. (p. 19 – 20)

While these tests "have their place (we) need to go beyond these tests. They will need a component of their high school assessment systems that measures the more advanced skills that postsecondary institutions and employers value" (p. 18). The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2008) noted that high school graduates' employers also notice these writing weaknesses.

Another reason for the writing weakness of high school graduates may be the limited amount of time spent writing in other classes relative to high school English class. Alliance (2007) noted that "very few teachers require their students to write more than a few hours per week, and two thirds of students say their weekly writing assignments add up to less than an hour" (p. 2). According to the ICAS, students may be unprepared because writing seems to be done almost solely in English class, as opposed to a "writing across the curriculum" (p. 20). Having high school English teachers shoulder the entire responsibility of writing instruction is not ideal. When looking at the high school English instructor's classes, Alliance (2007) wrote:

> It can be very time-consuming to read and respond to student writing, and given a teaching load of four or five classes of twenty to thirty or more students each, many teachers are reluctant to require students to write regularly or to produce more than one draft of their essays. For instance, imagine that a teacher were to

assign just two ten-page papers per year, each of them including a rough draft and just one revision. Even with a relatively light teaching load of a hundred students, this would require the teacher to read 4,000 pages of student text, in addition to teaching students about the composing process, guiding them through revisions, and helping them with grammar, style, logic, and organization. (p. 3)

Thus, it is not be surprising that, according to Alliance, "two thirds of [high school] students say their weekly writing assignments add up to less than an hour" (p. 3).

The ACT National Curriculum Survey of 2005-2006 showed a gap between what high school English and post-secondary teachers believed to be most important in student writing. In the survey, "of the top ten highest-rated writing characteristics, postsecondary instructors had six related to grammar and usage, while high school teachers had none" (p. 12). When looking at what high school instructors ranked as number one, they felt that "student ability to write an effective introduction and conclusion to a piece of writing" (p. 12) was most important, while "postsecondary instructors ranked this characteristic as 30th" (p. 12). Also in this survey, "postsecondary instructors ranked as '2' the student ability to punctuate the end of a sentence correctly; high school teachers ranked this characteristic 31st" (p. 12). Given the large gap between views of various writing instructors, it is not surprising that there is a skill level gap.

The problems revolving around composition can have a lifetime effect on members of society at every level. Plucker, Zapf, and Spradlin (2004) reported evidence from a 2003 survey that both colleges and employers listed "writing ability, grammar, spelling, and basic math" (p. 3) as serious skill deficiencies, which supports the concern many have about students' abilities to edit their compositions. There is an agreement then about the value of students being able to produce clear and impressive writing.

Within schools at all levels of education, there is an ongoing debate about whether to teach grammar, how to teach grammar, and how to teach writing that reflects a solid knowledge of grammar. Davis and Mahoney (2005) cited several authors (Blase, McFarlan, & Little, 2003; Perrin, 2003; Sams, 2003; Vavra, 2003) "several articles in the *English Journal* show a revival of teaching grammar and conventional English at the secondary level of education" (p. 5). When considering college English course expectations, grammar and writing must be addressed long before adulthood. At the high end of those expectations some elite colleges require "grammar competency tests of incoming students" (Seamon, 2000, p. 6) to "deductions of two, three, five, or 10 points for factual errors, misspellings, grammar, punctuation, style, or other 'unclear' errors" (p. 7). Considering the extent to which college English courses require accurate grammar and styled writing, all teachers dealing with composition, no matter what grade level, must address these issues.

Writing and grammar are usually taught in some form or another from the very beginning of a student's education. Hutchinson, McCavitt, Rude, and Vallow (2002) reported on a study of students in grades two, four, and eight. Teachers stated that at these levels students "had difficulty in learning and transferring grammar skills taught to their daily writing tasks" (p. 7). Factors outside the classroom also had an influence. Not only did they have difficulty connecting classroom grammar and mechanical skills to their writing, they had trouble understanding the difference between the language used in daily conversations at school and home and language used in standard English composition. It appeared that what students listened to from their peers and their parents

directly influenced their written language (p. 25). If a student spoke quickly and said the word *weather* when the correct word was *whether*, more than likely *weather* would be the chosen written word. Then even when proofreading the essay, the student will not notice the incorrect word. Yet Hutchinson et al noted that a number of teachers believed that students hear what is grammatically incorrect as they read over and review their papers. Like educators involved in this study, Hassan (2001) noted:

> There are scholars who support an implicit approach to grammar instruction, on the one hand, and argue that students will develop 'naturally' all the grammar competency they need to communicate effectively from exposure to comprehensible, meaningful linguistic input. (p. 9)

Hutchinson et al. (2002) also noted that this may be one reason why some teachers prefer to eliminate grammar instruction. Another reason is the students' intense dislike for learning the rules of grammar (p. 26). In this same study, middle school educators noted that "improper capitalization, incorrect punctuation, and run-on sentences" (p. 26) are problems that had been addressed by teaching conventions and providing numerous options for practice. However, even after these were implemented, students were still unprepared for written exercises. Their teachers believed that students did not understand the importance of editing and that many of them "lacked confidence in their own writing" (p. 27).

Educators debate the issue of teaching grammar in the classroom, they are nearly all in agreement that editing is a required skill (Howard, 2002, p. 9). Most states have specific expectations listed in state standards in regards to a student's knowledge base at each grade level. For example, according to the Mississippi Department of Education's Office of Instructional Development (2002), third graders must "edit writing to

conventional standards in mechanics and spelling" and must "use a variety of sentence patterns" (p. 31). Kindergarten through third grade students should know sentence patterns of "S + V and S + V + DO while grades four through eight should know S + V + IO + DO, S + LV + PA, and S + LV + PN" (p. 51). Students at the third grade level are also expected to use "accepted editing marks" (p. 46). There are numerous views on the best choices for English teachers to prepare their students; however, given the ongoing debate, the answer remains unclear.

Kist (2003) stated that "a balance must be achieved between 'content' and 'mechanics'" (p. 1). Educators have argued about the best way to engender a love of writing while at the same time providing the knowledge to correct written errors. For example, a large numbers of educators believe holistic scoring is the best way to encourage the writer, while others believe that in order for students to understand editing, they must be taught the specific rules of grammar. Davis (2002) presented a study where a college writing class was separated into two groups. A review of grammar rules was presented to one group, while the other group received no grammar rules. In focusing on their essays at the conclusion of the study, it was clear that the group which received the review showed markedly stronger writing and editing skills than the students in the second group (p. 1). Kapka and Oberman (2001) suggested that teaching grammar rules in an "isolated setting" (p. 34) of one specific class, such as Language Arts, is not conducive to students understanding grammar rules and how to use them in their compositions.

Johnson (2001) noted that through the use of classroom workshops, students could learn the skills needed to help each other through the process (p. 6). This approach gets students involved in more of the content and creative involvement in the editing process. Hopkins (2002) noted that some researchers believe this student centered writing workshop may work best. By encouraging students to find their own interests, choose their topics, and decide on how to present their ideas, they lose some of the fears and confusion about the writing process and the five-paragraph essay. Students who were weak writers and did not enjoy the task appeared to improve when they were able to write about "hobbies, computer games, favorite athletes, musicians, or television personalities" (p. 13). Kapka and Oberman's (2001) study of third and fifth graders, they termed this more open writing as *free-style*, view it as one of the probable causes of students having difficulty with their writing, and describe it as:

> It allows students to be creative and encourages writing as a "fun" discipline - but it doesn't necessarily focus on the nuts and bolts of writing: creating stories that have a beginning, middle and end, character development, and description. We also emphasize creativity at the expense of some crucial elements of good writing, such as organizational skills, focused writing, grammar, and spelling. These elements of good writing do not just naturally occur, they need to be taught. (p. 9-10)

Howard (2002) discussed the belief of numerous educators regarding peer editing. Some believe that if students do not know grammar rules, mechanical concepts, or have editing skills, they should have someone else edit their written compositions (p. 9). This attitude could hinder students from becoming quality writers. If, due to a lack of knowledge on the part of the writer, someone else always fixes the problems or corrects everything before the final paper is turned in, the non-editing writers may never learn these skills.

This also makes one wonder to whom the graded paper truly belongs if the writer is never held accountable for his own knowledge base. Peer editing can be a positive learning experience. Johnson (2001) noted that when peer editing is done as a cooperative experience, students writing improved. Knowing that their peers will read their words, make judgments, and write comments seems to inspire young people to accomplish more as writers.

When reviewing and trying different approaches to writing, sometimes an educator will "stumble upon an idea that works wonderfully within the composition classroom. Johnson (2001) had a number of high school students who were unable to successfully complete the written part of their state's exit exam. After attempting, to no avail, to help students reach the level of understanding needed in order to write a composition that would be given a passing score, Johnson decided to locate basic examples of good writing and bad writing. He also provided the students with the rubric that the state used to score essays. Once students saw what was expected on a good paper in comparison with the bad paper, they were able to make a passing grade on the state's writing test. His students also enjoyed using the state's rubric to determine how the scorers would judge their papers. From that point forward, Johnson's students became successful content writers with fewer errors. These exercises provided a positive motivation for the young people (p. 4). Hopkins's study (2002) also provided insight into teaching writing through imitation or modeling. When the teacher presented a correct model of the writing process, provided models at each step of the process, and modeled a step-by-step process on the overhead, the students was able to see and understand what

was expected in writing a composition (p. 15-16). However, once students were ready to edit and check for grammar difficulties, they peer edited the papers (p. 21). Here, too, editing errors were passed on for others to fix.

Using the internet to help the writing process is something some teachers have begun using. Believing that students would be motivated by things that interest them, Rowen (2005) used email and websites as writing tools. His students were provided multiple opportunities to write letters to authors, email students at other schools, share discussions with other students, and publish their writing via the Internet (p. 22). Rowen (2005) noticed that students were still prone to write in lengthy run-on sentences and making a number of grammatical errors. He then let them peer edit. After this, he checked over their writing before posting on the Internet (p. 43). However, it was unclear whether he posted with errors or only the corrected version. Hopkins's (2002) study further reinforced what many pre-college level English educators deal with each day; students who lack the knowledge and self-control needed to put the necessary effort into working on multiple drafts in order to complete a ready final draft. At times, students seem to be more interested in seeing how quickly the work can be finished as opposed to focusing on the quality of the finished product. Often the final draft is virtually unchanged from the rough drafts.

Even if students are willing to take the time to diligently work on perfecting their written drafts, a large number of those same students do not know grammar well enough to recognize and correct their errors so that their written work is correct (Seamon, 2002; Hutchinson et al., 2002). Hutchinson et al (2002) have suggested that if students read

their papers and listen to their own words, they will be able to hear where there are grammatical errors. However, relying on students to hear what is correct may not be the ideal solution in part because of the slang and fast rate of speech students use in their everyday lives.

The argument within the academia world about how to best teach English continues. For example, if one were to read Kist (2003), Davis (2002, 2005), Kapka and Oberman (2001), and Fitzhugh (2006), it would be clear that the dispute on what to teach and how to teach is not settled. Unfortunately, once researchers and educators choose a position, they become adamant about that belief. Both groups support their beliefs with research and classroom findings. Many schools still teach straight grammar or grammar in isolation where grammar rules are taught separately and then students work with that knowledge base to correct their writing errors. For example, the Mississippi Department of Education (2002) provides a curriculum guide to its teachers, where as early as Kindergarten, students are to know parts of speech (p. 51). Most pre-college educators make writing curriculum decisions based on their students' writing skills at the beginning of the year. The curriculum may change from year to year based on the skill level of that year's group of students. However, most educators agree that although many students are able to edit their papers adequately (although not exceptionally) in regards to content, they are not able to adequately correct errors in mechanics.

Most of the research on writing and composition focuses on new or old techniques that are used to generate student interest in writing. However, there is currently not enough published research about what teaching techniques are successful.

At times it appears that the published research is more concerned about generating student enthusiasm for writing than about how to write using Standard English. Therefore, a teacher is left to decide on their own about whether to focus on creating enthusiasm for writing or whether this approach makes teaching correct Standard English even more difficult. According to Zimmer (2004), "schools must transform their instructional practice to significantly improve student learning. Most waves of reform wash over schools but never change the deeper structures of school culture and instructional practice" (p. 1).

<div align="center">Improving Student Progress in Writing and Preparation</div>

In 2002, the College Board created the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges to work on improving students' abilities to have success at the college level and later in the work place (p. 7). The decision to create the commission was animated in part by the Board's plans to offer a writing assessment in 2005 as part of the new SAT, but the larger motivation lay in the growing concern within the education, business, and policy-making communities that the level of writing in the United States is not what it should be" (p. 7). In order to "create a writing revolution," (p. 3) the Commission created a document called "A Writing Agenda for the Nation" (p. 3 - 5) which encompasses excellent suggestions for state policies, increasing student writing in and out of the classroom, the need for technology use, and professional development. These writing suggestions from the commission provide a needed starting point for educators at different levels and professional positions. Enough variety fitting many issues provides a place to begin making big changes toward improving the nation's

writing. Outside of the technology suggestions, there are positive ideas which can be accomplished in classrooms and across districts without causing an unexpected financial burden.

High school and college educators need to make connections in order to reduce the need for remediation classes by improving writing skills. Thompson (2002) emphasized the need for college professors to make associations with English teachers below the college level. Professors in the English department at Illinois State University worked closely with high school teachers, and "the secondary teachers and community college teachers learned exactly what their students would be facing in a four-year college first-year writing course" (Thompson, 2002, p. 15). Thompson's research gave further support to the idea that collaboration should be a priority for educators at both levels. If high school teachers and college professors would work as a unit to discover where graduating students' writing difficulties lie, they could help increase the readiness for English classes among college freshman (Barnett, 2006; Jennings, 2002; Littleton, 2006; Thompson, 2002). Planning and implementing ways to support this collaboration is a growing need in communities of learning.

This literature review provides the insight that instruction plays a valuable part in the growth of students. High school educators need to have a better understanding of what college freshman composition teachers will expect for their classroom and also what problems they are seeing in entering students' writing. Making any needed changes in instruction, at the high school level, should help to improve student preparation. Communication between all parties plays a vital role in student success.

Literacy skills problems not only affect students at the college level, but also for those who choose to go into the job market following their secondary education. Some businesses ultimately send workers for writing remediation, just as so many new college students must take remediation before beginning their actual course work.

One step in beginning to make changes could include this mixed-method study. By surveying and talking with post-secondary educators who see first year students, it is possible for high school English teachers to receive another knowledge base needed to commence curriculum and classroom change.

CHAPTER 3:

RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

Many students are unprepared to write successfully in freshman composition classes. The mixed method design involved collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. This study focused on discovering what exact writing skill deficits freshman composition professors had identified among the students taking their classes and what precisely the professors expect students to be able to do in their first year writing classes. Initially, a quantitative survey was sent to professors at colleges and universities in the Southeastern United States.

After the surveys were collected, the researcher then interviewed focus groups to gain further insight to their views and to make sure any issues that were not on the surveys were addressed accordingly. "Focus Groups are sets of individuals with similar characteristics having shared experiences who sit down with a moderator to discuss a topic" (Hatch, 2002, p. 24). In this study, the researcher used a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, where one method (the qualitative focus group interviews) is used to further explain the findings of another method (the quantitative survey) (Creswell, 2002).The data from the surveys and the interviews were then analyzed to determine what were common freshman writing weaknesses and what writing expectations college/university professors had in the freshman English classes.

Research Design and Approach

This framework for this study was a mixed methods design using a sequential explanatory strategy. Creswell (2003) stated that

> the sequential explanatory strategy is the most straightforward of the six major mixed methods approaches. It is characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data and followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The priority typically is given to the quantitative data, and the two methods are integrated during the interpretation phase of the study (p. 215).

A quantitative research design alone using an experimental design was dismissed as a viable option for this study. According to Creswell (2003), "the basic intent of an experiment is to test the impact of a treatment (or an intervention) on an outcome, controlling for all other factors that might influence that outcome" (p. 154). Using controlled treatments with separate groups would not provide the information needed in this study. The sequential explanatory strategy also was not an option because in this method the qualitative portion is most important (p. 215). In this study, the quantitative data was most important because the professors provided the weaknesses and expectations of freshman students in the quantitative survey. Also, the concurrent triangulation strategy was not used because this study was not designed to make sure that two sets of findings were in agreement (Creswell, 2003). Thus, the sequential explanatory strategy was the best option given the research design.

The purpose of this study was to look at the writing weaknesses as identified by college and university freshman composition instructors in a Southeastern state. The students had just completed high school and had entered freshman composition classes. The quantitative survey data were collected first to provide the researcher with specific

writing skill weaknesses that freshman composition teachers see among incoming students. The survey also asked these professors to indicate how often they assign common types of writing assignments in their classes.

The rationale for using a survey first was because it would: (a) show a list of writing weaknesses, (b) provide details of the writing expectations of university instructors, and (c) be able to quickly assess and analyze the data. A Likert-type scale of *Never* (N), *Rarely* (R), *Occasionally* (O), or *Frequently* (F) was used for close-ended questions. Using this scale, an F = 4 points, O = 3 points, R = 2 points, and N = 1 point. Gay (1996) noted that when using this scale "a high point value on a positively stated item would indicate a positive attitude and a high total score on the test would be indicative of a positive attitude" (155).

The survey, which the researcher attained permission to use for the study, provided a list of specific skills that the college professors rated as being weaknesses they see in their freshman students' writing. The data from the surveys was then used to determine at what level each weakness occurred. The data showed what type of assignments are required of the freshman students.

The focus group interviews involved asking open-ended questions to a group of teachers at three colleges in order to get a better understanding of any issues and concerns they had the issues addressed in the quantitative survey they previously completed. The researcher then wrote a narrative about the information obtained during the interview. Merriam (2002) has noted that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context"

with the interpretive approach (p. 4). The qualitative portion of the focus group interviews supported Merriam's Basic Interpretive approach where "the researcher is interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon....and the outcome is descriptive" (p. 6).

The qualitative question was:

What do college professors perceive as the skill indicators for low performance of college freshman writing?

The discussions that took place during the focus group interviews to address this question were written in a narrative or descriptive type form. Their answers provided more depth and explanation about the professors' ideas and beliefs about why students are not prepared and provided insight into possible solutions to these problems.

When looking at focus groups, Hatch (2002) believed that they "rely on the interactions that take place among participants in the group to generate data" (p. 132) and these groups "capture the dynamics of group interaction" (p. 132). This makes for more meaningful data because focus groups allow participants to take the discussion in the direction that flows with their thoughts and ideas.

Creswell (2003) discussed the importance of researchers "stating a knowledge claim [which] means that researchers start a project with certain assumptions about how they will learn and what they will learn during their inquiry" (p. 6). Because the researcher wanted to learn from college and university professors about the writing problems of incoming freshmen, the knowledge claim of this study was based on social constructivism. Social constructivism, according to Creswell, involves the view that

individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subject meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of the researcher, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. The questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, a meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons. (p. 8).

The mixed method design involves "strategies that involve collecting and analyzing both forms of data in a single study" (Creswell, 2002, p. 15). The criteria this researcher used for choosing the mixed method design includes the point that, according to Creswell, the "mixed method design is useful to capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches" (p. 22). The quantitative and qualitative lend a good blend of solid data with more personal input from information gained via focus groups.

In this study, the researcher used a sequential explanatory design, where the qualitative focus groups elaborated on and expanded the findings of the quantitative survey. The closed-ended questions of the survey provided concrete details of writing skills in which students were weak and provided a list of student expectations for freshman composition classes. The survey could not include all the skill options that instructors identified in their classes. The focus group interviews allowed the instructors to provide more detail about the information they provided in the survey, and to discuss relevant issues that were not included in the survey. The implementation sequence was that instructors were sent their surveys, via the Internet, which gave priority to the quantitative portion. After surveys had been returned, the focus group interviews were

conducted. Data analysis, focus group transcription and narrative, and interpretation took place after the surveys and interviews were completed.
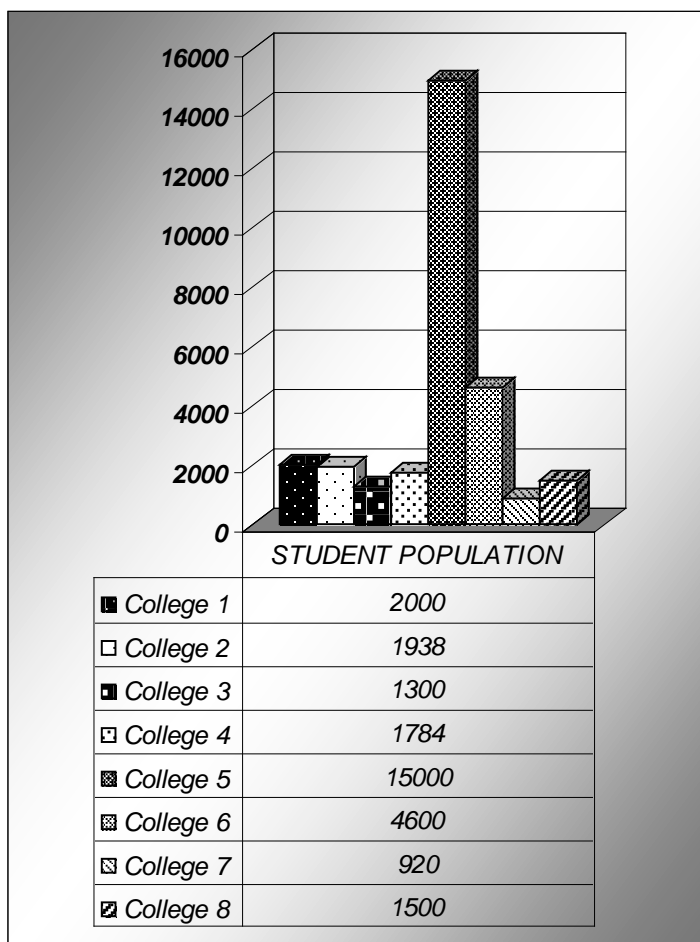
Settings and Sample

The population of this study was 59 Southeastern university or college professors from nine schools who taught at least one freshman English course, including remediation writing courses, in which students were required to write essays. All 59 professors were given the computerized survey. According to Pearson Education Inc. a sample size of 51 surveys was needed to provide a 95% confidence level (Survey Tool Kit, 2006). In an attempt to improve the number of survey returns, which was 13 after the initial two week period due date, the original email invitation and directions were sent again to faculty members. The due date for returns was extended for three weeks and 25 surveys in total were returned. As a result, an expert sampling of 25 professors from nine Southeastern universities provided information on a computerized survey.

The rationale for the selection of these colleges and universities was purposeful. The researcher chose these specific nine schools because they were the predominant schools chosen by students graduating from high schools in the seven school districts near where the researcher lived. These universities or colleges would provide the most useful information for schools and students within these seven school districts.

Overall, eight of the nine schools sampled provided four year programs, and six of the nine were private. Two of the nine were religious affiliated and two had student populations that were predominantly female. Overall, 73% of the colleges were made up

of non-commuter students. Student populations for the eight colleges and universities can be seen in the chart below.

STUDENT POPULATION	
College 1	2000
College 2	1938
College 3	1300
College 4	1784
College 5	15000
College 6	4600
College 7	920
College 8	1500

(Figure 1)

For the focus group interviews, three colleges were chosen to participate based in proximity to the researcher. Each focus group had a minimum of three participants made up of professors who had returned their survey to the researcher. These individuals were selected by the department head of each university, rather than being chosen by the researcher.

Methods

The professors were invited to participate through an email sent to each participant by the researcher. The email included the consent letter to be returned to the researcher. The e-mail contained a link to the survey, which was specifically designed for this dissertation using SurveyMonkey.com. The first page of the survey asked the participants to provide an electronic email signature of consent before they could continue. Participants were initially given two weeks to complete the survey. The researcher checked daily for survey returns and emailed a reminder to those who had not returned their surveys after two weeks. Given the low response rate, the researcher decided to keep the survey available for another two weeks following the initial deadline. The completed surveys were automatically sent back to SurveyMonkey.com. The researcher gathered the survey data from SurveyMonkey.com's website.

Instrumentation and Materials

The survey consisted of two sections. The first section asked professors to indicate how frequently they assigned their students each of 16 writing assignments. After the list of 16 assignments, there was an open box where professors could add items not included in the list of writing assignments. The second part of the survey asked the professors to indicate how frequently they witnessed students having problems with each of 21 writing problems. This section also included the open box for non-listed items. A copy of the survey is included in Appendix A. This survey was derived from one developed and used in a writing study by Johnson County Community College (JCCC) (Weglarz, 2002). The researcher received written permission to use the survey for this study. Permission releases are included (see Appendix B & C). Two systems were used

to keep track of the quantitative survey data. First, the survey data was collected by Surveymonkey.com as each participant completed the survey. The researcher checked each day for survey completions by signing in to member accounts at Surveymonkey.com. As each survey was completed, the researcher then moved the data into SPSS. The process of checking for survey responses and keying in the data from one computer program to another continued for four weeks, which was the last date surveys could be completed.

After the surveys were completed, the researcher downloaded the data from SurveyMonkey.com and then input the data into the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Windows Career Starter. The SPSS program was set up so that each research question was put in its own separate database. The 16 writing assignments were each assigned as a variable into SPSS and the answers, which provided choices using a 4-point Likert-type scale (with scores ranging from 1 = *never* to 4 = *frequently*), were keyed in for each variable. The same process was used when creating and keying in the 21 writing weaknesses.

The focus group interviews consisted of open-ended discussion questions designed to give the professors an opportunity to discuss assignments or skill deficits that were not listed on the surveys. It also gave them an opportunity to express ideas they had about the high school and college writing connection. The researcher strove to give the interviewees an open forum to address any issues they thought were relevant. According to Rubin & Rubin (2005), "qualitative research is not simply learning about a topic, but also learning what is important to those being studied" (p. 15). The format of the focus

group interviews provided an opportunity for the members to carry the discussions in a direction they wanted. One strength of a focus group is that it is able to take advantage of group dynamics that cannot be seen in individual interviews (Rubin & Rubin, p. 132). Focus group interviews were taped and transcribed. "A focus group is a group interview with a trained moderator, a specific set of questions, and a disciplined approach to studying ideas in a group context. The data from the focus group consists of the typed transcript of group interaction" (Janesick, 2004, p. 80). Hatch (2002) emphasized how important it is that the researcher be a good listener (p. 93). It is also important to protect the rights of each focus group participant; as such, names were not included in the written study.

Data Analysis of Quantitative Survey

For the quantitative data provided from the survey results, descriptive statistics are provided. "The purpose of descriptive statistics is to simplify and organize a set of scores" (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2005, p. A-49). The data the researcher wanted came from the list of 16 freshman student weaknesses and the list of 21 freshman writing assignments. The intent was to show what college professors are seeing, using totals and percentages, as writing problems and what different assignments students are required to write. For each of the items per question, absolute and relative frequency statistics were used to chart and analyze the data using the SPSS computer program. Also, the average frequency of writing assignment requirements and student writing problems were calculated by taking the sum of all ratings and dividing them by 25. Averages could range from 1.0 (meaning that all professors gave a *none* rating to that assignment) to 4.0

(meaning that all professors gave a *frequent* rating to that assignment). Finally, the

amount of times either a writing assignment or a student writing problem was noted as

being *frequen*t was calculated.

Data Analysis of Qualitative Portion of the Study

Using the transcription from the focus groups, the researcher used use the

following steps provided by Creswell (2003) to analyze the data.

1. Read through all the data. A first general step is to obtain a general sense of

    the information and to reflect on its overall meaning.

2. Begin detailed analysis with a coding process. Coding is the process of

    organizing the material into "chunks."

3. Use the coding to generate a small number of themes or categories.

4. The most popular approach is to use a narrative passage to convey the

    findings of the analysis.

5. A final step in data analysis involves making an interpretation or meaning of

    the data. These lessons could be the researcher's personal interpretation. It

    could also be a meaning derived from a comparison of the findings. It can also

    suggest new questions that need to be asked. (p. 191 – 195).

Using these steps as the guide, analysis of the qualitative portions was written in a

descriptive narrative.

The qualitative data from the focus groups came from the chunking of

information found during the transcriptions of the meetings. The researcher transcribed

each university's focus group interview. All three focus group participants were asked the

same questions. The guiding questions dealt with (a) what skills showed that students were ill-prepared for college writing, (b) possible causes for being ill-prepared, (c) suggestions to high schools to improve the situation, and (d) collaboration between schools.

Focus group discussion answers were chunked from the transcriptions into answers for each question after each meeting. Then the researcher took all of the answers for each question. The researcher used the chunks to generate a small number of themes or categories. Once answers were grouped, a narrative was written surrounding the questions and professors' replies.

The chunking was based upon the four questions. Themes were developed from comparative answers among the three universities. For example, on the question "What are suggestions you would make to high school teachers to help improve writing for entering students," all three of the university's had at least one professor who mentioned that students need to read more. This answer, because it appeared in more than one group, was considered a topic that was noted by various professors.

The final step in this data analysis involved making an interpretation of the data, which could be a personal interpretation, meanings derived from comparisons in the findings, or new questions to be asked (Creswell, 2003, p. 191-195). From studying the chunked data, skill indicators for low student performance seemed to be mechanics or grammar problems, higher level thinking, and research documentation. All of the university professors felt positive about working with high school teachers in some sort

of staff development; however, they all also noted that it seemed an unrealistic goal due to lack of time on the part of faculty members.

All typed data, including the survey data and focus group data, has been stored on the researcher's computer hard drive and also on two flash drives.

<div align="center">Reliability and Validity of Instrumentation</div>

The survey used in this research was previously designed and used by JCCC (Weglarz, 2002). It was employed to gather the same type of information and for the same purpose as those of the researcher in this study. JCCC wanted to know, from their English department teachers, what types of mistakes they were seeing in their students' writing. The school also was interested in finding out what assignments were required in the English classes. While JCCC predominantly used it to focus on their school's curriculum, this study used it to focus on multiple colleges and universities. This study's interest for the survey covered the two aspects of what freshman students writing problems were and what types of assignments those students must complete in their freshman composition or English courses. According to Creswell, the "three traditional forms of validity [includes] content validity [which questions] Do the items measure the content they were intended to measure?" (p. 157). JCCC wanted focused input from its instructors, and this same focused input was what this study's researcher needed for reliable data. The survey also met the construct validity which, according to Humbley and Zumbo (1996), when the scores' purpose can be used and can have optimistic consequences (p. 207- 215).

The interview open-ended questions were designed by a highly qualified (as

determined by national standards) trained educator with 25 years of teaching experience in the writing field. The interviewer (the researcher) was also qualified due to having been involved in preparing students at the middle school level for high school English and having helped prepare first year college students to continue their successful writing in college. This also created a potential bias for the researcher. In order to strengthen the credibility of the research, the researcher used a peer debriefer to "review and ask questions about the qualitative study" (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). In addition, two peer educators who teach writing reviewed the work and the researcher's interpretations of the data.

CHAPTER 4:

INTRODUCTION

This mixed methods study used the sequential explanatory strategy to evaluate the

types of assignments that college professors indicated they give in their composition

classes to freshman, as well as the writing weaknesses they commonly see among

entering freshman. The quantitative data collection was collected using a two question

computer survey that the participants received via an email link. There was a two week

deadline for the return via the Internet. Once the two weeks had passed, a second email

and invitation was sent, with the hopes of attaining more returned surveys. The deadline

was increased by another three weeks. After all of the surveys were returned, the

qualitative data was compiled through information provided by three focus groups. These

groups were made up of professors who had completed the computer surveys and taught

at three of the nine colleges. The quantitative survey data was the primary source of

information that answered the research questions, and thus was the most important part of

the study. The purpose of the qualitative data (presented in narrative form) gathered using

the focus groups was to support the quantitative information. In looking at both the data

from the surveys and the data from the focus groups, the researcher could see quite a

number of comparisons and contrasts in answers from the study participants.

RESULTS

Quantitative Data Analysis

Of the 59 professors invited to participate, 25 (42%) completed the survey. The

first question asked: "How often do you require our students to complete the following

writing assignments?" Tables 1 and 2 show the absolute and relative frequencies

(converted to a percentage) of each of the 16 writing assignments.

Table 1

Absolute Frequencies of Writing Assignment Requirements.

Requirement	None	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
Essay Exams	3	5	6	11
Article Reviews	8	2	8	7
Expository Essays	1	1	4	19
Lab Reports	2	21	1	1
Research Papers (5 pages or less)	2	3	7	13
Research Papers (6 pages or more)	1	2	8	14
Business Reports	4	15	3	3
Letters	7	6	10	2
Critical Analysis (critiques)	0	0	5	20
Outlines	2	4	7	12
Study Questions	4	6	7	8
Observation Logs	4	11	6	4
Journals	3	5	7	10
Creative Writing	10	5	5	5
Argumentative	1	1	2	21
Summaries	5	3	9	8

Note: $n = 25$ for all variables.

Table 1 shows the absolute frequencies of the types of writing assignments required in

the freshman composition or English classes. The 25 professors' surveys showed that

Argumentative essays (21/25), Critical Analysis writing (20/25), and Expository essays

(19/25) were the most frequently assigned writing requirements, with Research papers of

6 pages (14/25) and 5 pages (13/25) next in importance. Lab reports (21/25) and Business

reports (15/25) were rarely required, while Creative writing (10/25) appeared to not be a

required at all in some classes.

Table 2

Percentage of Writing Assignment Requirements.

Requirement	None	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
Essay Exams	12%	20%	24%	44%
Article Reviews	32%	8%	32%	28%
Expository Essays	4%	4%	16%	76%
Lab Reports	8%	84%	4%	4%
Research Papers (5 pages or less)	8%	12%	28%	52%
Research Papers (6 pages or more)	4%	8%	32%	56%
Business Reports	16%	60%	12%	12%
Letters	28%	24%	40%	8%
Critical Analysis (critiques)	0%	0%	20%	80%
Outlines	8%	16%	28%	48%
Study Questions	16%	24%	28%	32%
Observation Logs	16%	44%	24%	16%
Journals	12%	20%	28%	40%
Creative Writing	40%	20%	20%	20%
Argumentative (Persuasive Writing)	4%	4%	8%	84%
Summaries	20%	12%	36%	32%

Note: n = 25 for all variables.

Table 2 shows the percentage of writing assignments required by the professors. Persuasive writing (84%), Critical analysis (80%), and Expository essays (76%) were the three types of assignment rated most frequently. Creative writing (40%), Article reviews (32%), and Letters (28%) were the assignments most likely to never be assigned.
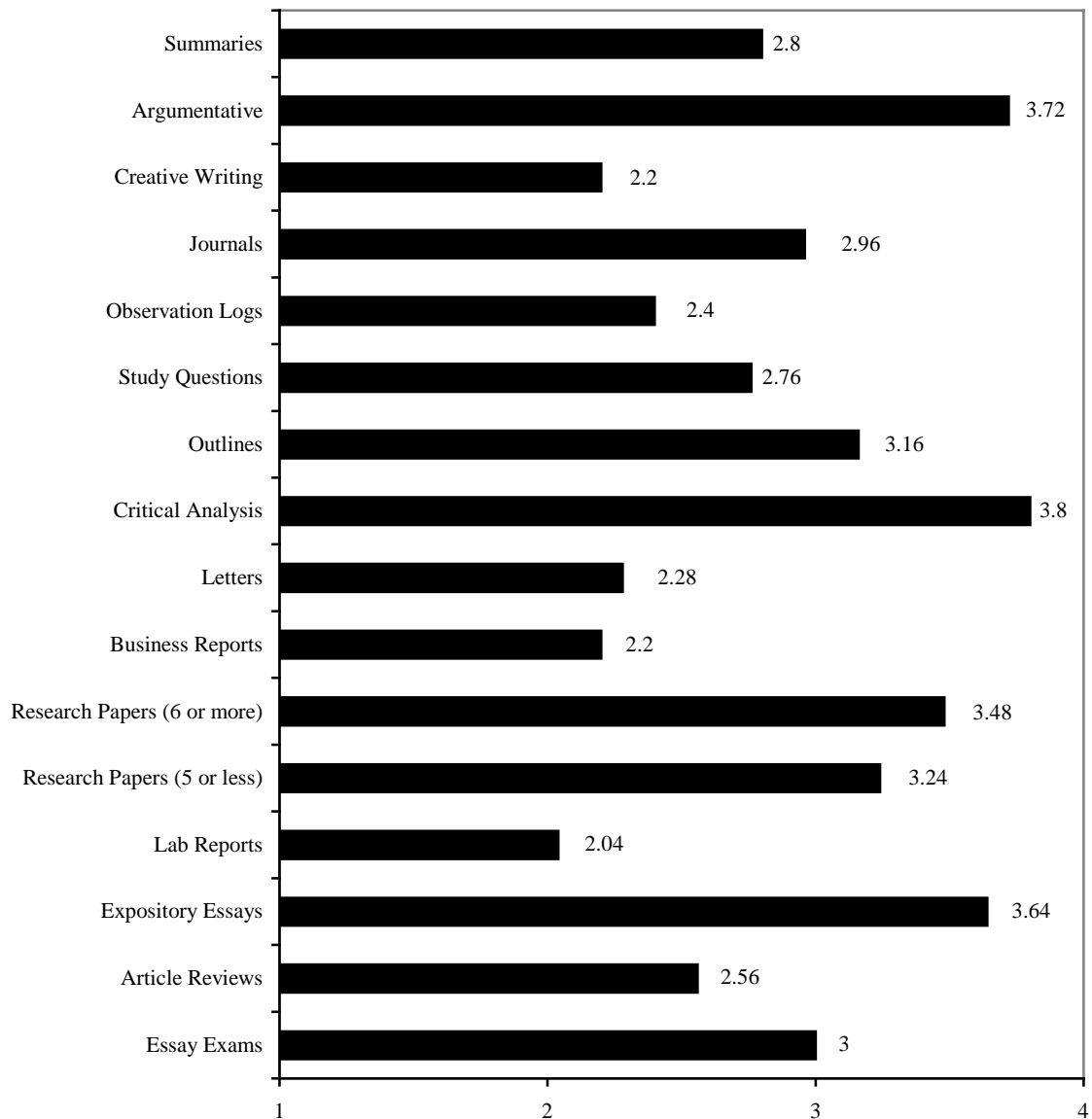
Figure 2. Average frequency of writing assignment requirements. Note. 1 = *None* , 2 = *Rarely*, 3 = *Occasionally*, 4 = *Frequently*; *N* = 25.

Figure 2 shows the average frequency of writing assignment requirements. Results showed that the three most common assignments were Critical Analysis (3.8/4), Argumentative (3.72/4), and Expository Essays (3.64/4). The least common assignments were Lab Reports (2.04/4), Business Reports (2.2/4), and Creative Writing (2.2/4).
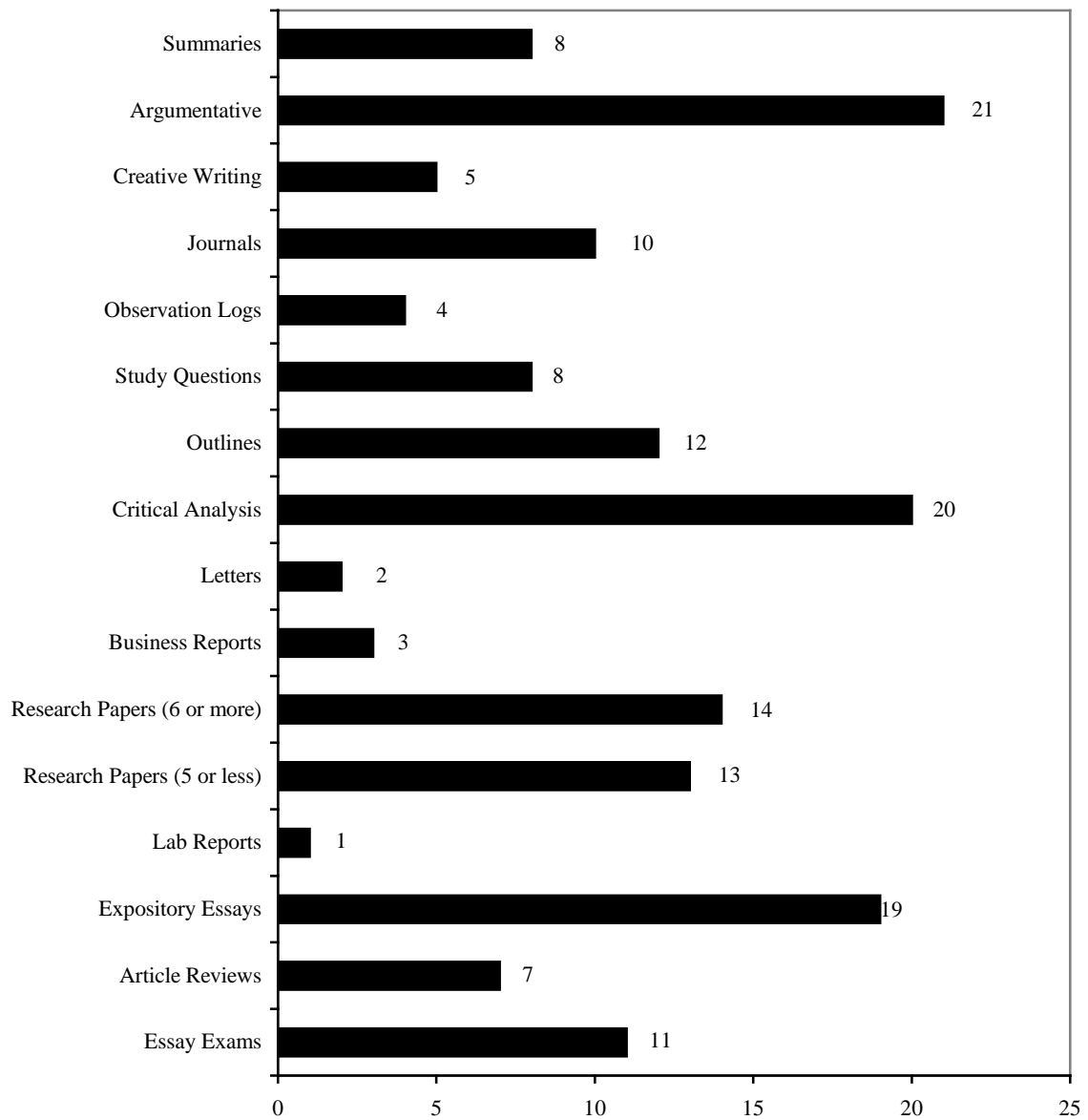
Figure 3. Number of times writing assignment requirements were noted as occurring

"Frequently" by Professors. Note. *N* = 25.

Figure 3 shows how often writing assignments were rated as occurring *frequently*. Those

most likely to be rated as frequent were argumentative (21/25), critical analysis (20/25),

and expository essays (19/25). Those least likely to be rated as frequent were lab reports

(1/25), letter (2/25), and business reports (3/25).

The second question asked professors about the most common problems they see in their students' writing. Tables 3 and 4 show the absolute and relative frequencies (converted to a percentage) of each of the 21 potential writing problems.

Table 3

Absolute Frequencies of Student Writing Problems.

Type of Problem	None	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
Organization	0	0	9	16
Narrowing a Topic	0	1	8	16
Supporting an Idea	0	0	8	17
Sense of Purpose	0	3	11	11
Audience Awareness	0	1	13	11
Tone	0	3	14	8
Originality	1	2	13	9
Coherence	0	0	11	14
Diction	0	0	10	15
Paragraph Structure	0	1	11	13
Sentence Construction	0	2	12	11
Grammar	0	1	11	13
Usage	0	1	14	10
Transitions	0	0	10	15
Revising	0	0	5	20
Research Skills	0	1	5	19
Punctuation	0	2	14	9
Spelling	0	2	17	6
Proofreading	1	1	7	16
Vocabulary	0	0	13	12
Documentation	0	0	5	20

Note: $n = 25$ for all variables.

Table 3 shows the absolute frequencies of the specific writing problems noted by the 25 professors from their freshman composition students. Documentation (20/25), Revising (20/25), and Research skills (19/25) were most frequently noted. Sense of purpose (3/25) and Tone (3/25) were noted as most rarely seen in student writing.

Table 4

Percentage of Student Writing Problems.

Type of Problem	None	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
Organization	0%	0%	36%	64%
Narrowing a Topic	0%	4%	32%	64%
Supporting an Idea	0%	0%	32%	68%
Sense of Purpose	0%	12%	44%	44%
Audience Awareness	0%	4%	52%	44%
Tone	0%	12%	56%	32%
Originality	4%	8%	52%	36%
Coherence	0%	0%	44%	56%
Diction	0%	0%	40%	60%
Paragraph Structure	0%	4%	44%	52%
Sentence Construction	0%	8%	48%	44%
Grammar	0%	4%	44%	52%
Usage	0%	4%	56%	40%
Transitions	0%	0%	40%	60%
Revising	0%	0%	20%	80%
Research Skills	0%	4%	20%	76%
Punctuation	0%	8%	56%	36%
Spelling	0%	8%	68%	24%
Proofreading	4%	4%	28%	64%
Vocabulary	0%	0%	52%	48%
Documentation	0%	0%	20%	80%

Note: $n = 25$ for all variables.

Table 4 shows the percentages of students' writing problems as noted by the professors. Revising (80%), Documentation (80%), and Research skills (76%) were the top percentages scored as frequent on the surveys. Sense of purpose (12%) and Tone (12%) were the highest percentages noted as rarely on the surveys.
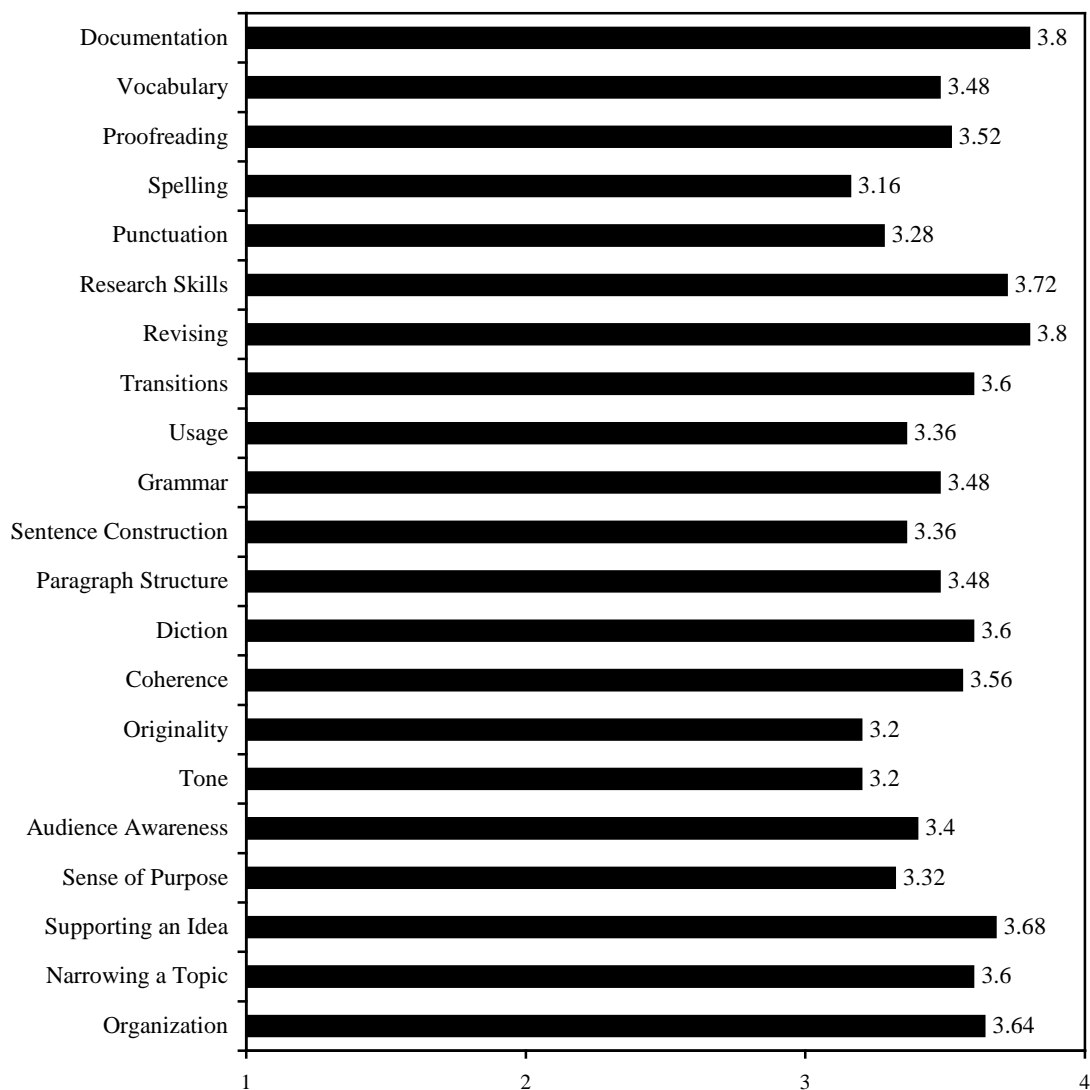
Figure 4. Average frequency of student writing problems. Note. 1 = *None* , 2 = *Rarely*, 3 =

Occasionally, 4 = *Frequently*; *N* = 25.

Figure 4 shows the average frequency of student writing problems. Results showed that

the three most common student writing problems were revising (3.8/4), documentation

(3.8/4), and research skills (3.72/4). The least common student writing problems were

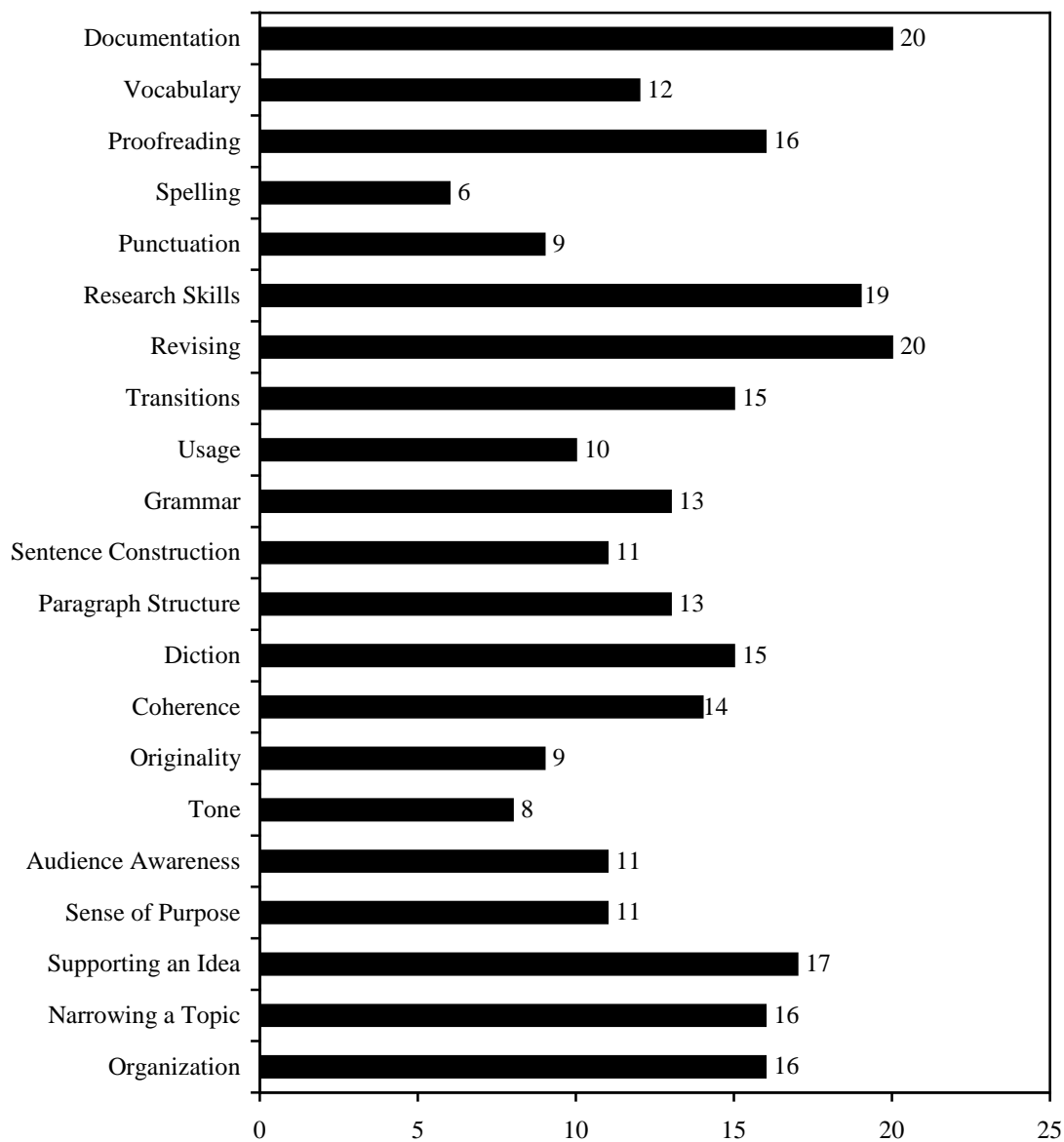spelling (3.16/4), tone (3.2/4), and originality (2.2/4).

Figure 5. Number of times student writing problems were noted as occurring "Frequently" by

Professors. Note. *N* = 25

Figure 5 shows how often student writing problems were rated as occurring *frequently*.

Those most likely to be rated as frequent were revising (20/25), documentation (20/25),

and research skills (19/25). Those least likely to be rated as frequent were spelling (6/25),

tone (8/25), originality (9/25), and punctuation (9.25).

In order to give professors an opportunity to add concerns or assignments which were not listed as possibilities in the survey items, the researcher added *other*, along with an empty content space which could be filled in by the educator. Few professors took advantage of this category; however the researcher noted these on the survey returns. Giving a blank for a category gives the research more substance by letting the professors add any needed content. Five out of 25 professors responded to the *other* category of writing assignments required on the survey. *Poetry explications* appeared twice, and *portfolios*, *blogs*, and *self evaluations* each appeared one time. Six out of 25 professors responded in the *other* category of student writing problems on the survey. "Difficulty with openings, thesis sentences, independent and critical thinking, and documentation" were provided by the professors as student problems.

The professors appeared to be able to differentiate which assignments they are more or less likely to use. They also, appeared able to differentiate between the types of problems students have frequently from those that occur less frequently. Since the data such as research skills and documentation both appeared frequently in the focus groups and the surveys, one can see that the professors are able to identify writing problems that they see in their freshman students' work. Also, items such as the research skills and documentation were mentioned as important in both the surveys and the focus groups. However, word usage, sentence structure, and diction were mentioned in the focus groups but were not as significant in the surveys. This could be because the focus groups were small in number in comparison to the 25 people who took the survey.

Focus Group Narrative

Qualitative Analysis

Three colleges within 100 miles of each other provided the three focus groups. One college was located in a small town. This four-year college served 920 students with a 14-to-1 student to teacher ratio. Set in a rural setting, most students live on campus, and the college has a large athletic program. The second and third colleges were located in the same town. One was a community college with a two-year associate's program where students often continued on to a larger four-year college. It also provided the community with skilled training for industrial jobs. This school served 5,000-7,500 students per year with no on-site housing. The third college was a four-year fine arts institution serving approximately 1,300 students per year. Many students lived on campus and the student population came from across the US.

On the beautiful tree-surrounded campus in a city with a population slightly under 285,000, the faculty members in the focus group were enthusiastic about their students and the subject of writing. The group discussion began by asking the instructors what they perceived to be the skill indicators for low performance of college freshman writing. The group spent a few moments thinking of their response. One of the members, obviously a professor who kept up with appropriate research, quickly began with the statement provided by recent research he had read, "The mistake that shows up most often is usage, diction." From there, the focus group discussed how "word usage" is a continuous problem for each of them.

Frustration was clear for one professor who stated, "I agree that word usage is a major problem. Even if I have addressed it with a specific student numerous times, I will sometimes still see the same exact error again." All three focus groups pinpointed these same recognized skill deficiencies. Focus group two and three reiterated that usage was a weakness: "Word usage and unclear sentences are a problem." One professor's declaration of "dreadful grammar" brought a smile and a sad shake of all of the heads in the room.

In looking at other skills that were problems for freshman writers, the professors pinpointed critical thinking skills. It was not that teachers thought that students were incapable of thinking about literature and writing; it was the level of thinking that concerned them. "The idea of the ability to think beyond and different ways of thinking about things. Then things such as levels of plot and character description. Those kinds of analyses and levels of thinking, the ability to ask questions, the foundational comprehension. I also agree with her that getting my students to think on a higher level is at times very difficult."

Discussion among all groups continued to lead back to writing and research. One professor stated that her students showed "minimal research and documentation skills." One professor at two of the different colleges stated that their students had not been required to write many essays, "if any" in high school. At first, some of the professors were slightly disbelieving when told by some students that they had not written a single paper in high school. However, as one of the professors stated, "Once I saw the papers, it was believable." Even though students seemed to not be writing enough in their high

school classes, the professors in all focus group were positive about high school educators. One even stated that he felt like "they are doing the best they can with the number of students in their classroom."

Once college professors were away from their students and their classroom work and worries, they quickly became quite contemplative, and at times, philosophical. This thinking mode was most evident when asked for their ideas on the possible reasons or causes for students being ill-prepared for freshman composition. In at least two of the groupings, there was silence for a few minutes. One dominant theme was that because of media today, television, video games, music, computers, and the like, students seemed to have lost the enjoyment of reading, and when students are not reading, their vocabulary was not growing at the required educational level for freshman composition. Nearly all professors agreed that lack of reading was by far a determining factor in students being prepared and on the level they need to be in order to be successful in college English classes. One even stressed that the books could be "anything they are interested in" instead of all classics. "Well-rounded" readers are what the schools needed to nurture.

During one of the focus group meetings, a faculty member talked about how students were capable of working in groups or cooperatively to accomplish a task, but when asked to do the same task alone, often students could not do the task. The professor stated, "Just because they appear to understand something within a group setting, it does not mean they truly understand and know what they are doing." She even noted that her son, approximately thirteen and in a school where she felt he was getting an excellent education, was constantly working in groups, and she had concerns about this.

One of the colleges was in a very rural area where many students were the first in their families to go to college. The professors here talked about how neither the parents nor the students seem to know what to do in terms of college, or understand how the system works, or even, as a parent, how to help or support the student. Because many of the parents did not finish high school, the professors felt that things like this contributed to students being "behind" before they ever entered their college. These professors spoke with a smile about how "down to earth" and friendly this college community was to students and faculty.

Oddly enough, at least two different professors in two different groups mentioned "texting," such as text messaging using cell phones. Verbal and written words appear to be influenced by the way students used text messages. Often they were unable to speak or write the correct words needed for clear written communication within the college classrooms. While this was distressing, most professors smiled at how the media has had such an effect on their students.

At all three universities, when the question "Do you feel that high school English departments and college freshman professors could do staff development each year to improve the situation" was asked, there came a sudden lull in the conversation. No one had any negative statement regarding whether this would be a good idea; in fact, everyone believed it "sounded" good, but no one had any idea how it could be accomplished. "Busy schedules, different school schedules, and no time" were among the reasons they felt staff development would not be a viable option. One of the most positive aspects of this question was that the smaller rural college finds the time and opportunity

to talk with and work with many of their local high school teachers. Working

cooperatively appears to improve the educators and the students.

CHAPTER 5:

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The researcher is an English teacher from a Southeastern part of the United States. As a veteran middle school and high school certified teacher with over twenty five years' experience, college preparation has played a vital part of the classroom curriculum. The researcher teaches in a county which contains seven separate school districts. This study held particular interest to the researcher after having spent a few semesters teaching English 101 and 102 as an adjunct at a local community college. Writing appeared to be a problem in some of these classes; therefore, the researcher felt that if districts and schools in the researcher's area considered the input of professors, any needed changes might occur within the system.

From an assessment of freshman college and university writing professors' online surveys and focus group discussions, this study sought to determine specifically what writing weaknesses prevailed in student work for individuals who had just completed high school and have entered first year college composition or English courses. Also, the composition professors noted the assortment of writing assignments that freshman students would be expected to complete in freshman composition courses. The directing conviction in doing the study was that if freshman composition professors were able to pinpoint the writing weaknesses of entering students and freshman classroom expectations, then high schools would have the information necessary to make classroom

or curriculum changes to better equip their students to effectively write at the college level.

The guiding quantitative research question was: What are the specific writing weaknesses' totals and percentages college professors are seeing in freshman students' writing performances. The guiding qualitative research question was: What do college professors perceive as the skill indicators for low performance of college freshman writing? The two survey questions were: How often do you require your students to complete the following writing assignments and How often do your students have writing problems in the following areas? The qualitative portion of the study was made up of three focus groups made up of teachers who completed the surveys at three of the nine colleges.

The purpose of the interviews was to gather information addressing any matters or points they had regarding entering college students which were not addressed on the survey. The qualitative portion of the interviews covered the questions: Do you feel that high school English departments and college freshman professors could do staff development each year to improve the situation? What are suggestions you would make to high school teachers to help improve writing for entering students? What reasons do you think are the causes of students being ill-prepared for freshman composition?

Results show that the three most common assignments were critical analysis and expository essays. Results indicated that the most common were revising, documenting sources, and research skills. The focus group results show that college professors feel high school students need to be reading and writing more and that the media

opportunities for young people have had, in their opinions, a somewhat negative effect on

vocabulary, usage, and writing.

Interpretation of Findings

The guiding quantitative research question was: What are the specific writing

weaknesses' totals and percentages college professors are seeing in freshman students'

writing performances. Descriptive analysis provided clear support for educators in terms

of weaknesses and required assignments. While the results from this study show that the

three most common assignments (those occurring most *occasionally* or *frequently*) were

critical analysis (20% *occasionally*, 80% *frequently*), argumentative (8% *occasionally*,

84% *frequently*), and expository essays (16% *occasionally*, 76% *frequently*), the least

common assignments (those occurring *never* or *rarely*) were lab reports (8% *never*, 84%

rarely), business reports (16% *never*, 60% *rarely*), observation logs (16% *never*, 44%

rarely), and creative writing (20% *never*, 40% *rarely*). There were some very relevant

assignments which fell between the most common and the least common. Research

papers (52% & 56%) of varying lengths and outlines were required by 48% of the

professors *frequently*.

Data collected in 2005 by Alliance (2007) shows that many college professors

believe at least 50% of the students entering college are not prepared to write at the

college level (p. 2). Results from this study also indicated that the most common (those

occurring frequently) were revising (80%), documenting sources (80%), and research

skills (76%). Those occurring least frequently (occurring *never* or *rarely*) were sense of

purpose (0% *never*, 12% *rarely*), tone (0% *never*, 12% *rarely*), and originality (4% *never*, 8% *rarely*).

There were writing problems, which fell between these two groups, and are still important issues to be addressed in composition classes. Organization, narrowing a topic, and proofreading (all 64%), supporting an idea (68%), diction and transitions (both 60%), coherence (56%), grammar and paragraph structure (both 52%) were frequently seen as composition problems. These percentages are significant enough for educators to address them in the teaching of composition. The Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates for California Community Colleges (ICAS; 2002) noted that "more than 50% of their students fail to produce papers relatively free of language errors" (p. 4). This has caused most colleges to be strenuous in their pre-college testing and, in turn, has produced the proliferation of remedial writing classes.

The guiding qualitative research question was: What do college professors perceive as the skill indicators for low performance of college freshman writing? Diction, research, and word usage were clear indicators that students were not quite at the level needed for college writing. The focus group educators felt that students need to be continuously reading, not only classics, but also just books that were personally interesting to the students. By reading, these educators felt that diction, word usage, and writing skills could be improved. They also felt that critical thinking or higher level thinking was a weakness. All of the college professors believed that working closer with high school educators could provide a benefit to both educator groups, but they were unsure how this could be accomplished. States are beginning to understand the depth of

the writing problem and are working to align kindergarten through grade twelve curriculum to what students must know to be prepared for college or work (Achieve, 2006, p. 9).

Writing weaknesses or composition weaknesses should be addressed long before the first year of college for all students across the United States (Achieve, 2006). One concern that continually came to the forefront in discussion was the fact they believed the onslaught of media in children's and young adult's lives had caused reading to possibly not be as important to the young people and have caused more writing difficulties for young people. Adkinson (2001) explained that "Vygotsky's studies of children and their language development led him to develop a view of language as an ever-changing dynamic process through which both the child's expectations as well as outside feedback affects the language meanings the child holds" (p. 5). In other words, children, along with adults, are continually connecting their lives and environments to their thought processes and their words.

What is needed, according to Alsup and Bernard-Donals (2002) is to "devise high school and writing curricula so that they are compatible and desirable for students who are planning to attend college" (p. 131). The practical application of this study is predominantly for high schools. English departments and their district offices would, if they chose, be able to see where, in terms of writing skills, many of their students leaving high school are ill-prepared for college. Provasnik and Planty (2008) noted that many community colleges are having to provide remediation for "mathematics, English, and writing ....to shore up the basic fundamentals..." (p. 11). English teachers could also know

what types of assignments their high school students need to become more familiar with in their day to day writing during school. In knowing this information, educators will be able to make any necessary changes in their English curriculum in order to better prepare their students for college courses. No one group of educators can be the answer (Alliance, 2006; Cohen et al., 2006; ICAS, 2002; Newsome, 2007).

Practical applications of the study's findings include using the data at both the district level and within both middle and high schools. Districts, often studying and making curriculum changes for classroom support such as curriculum guides, could used the data to list specific itemized skills for which the classroom teachers need to be addressing their classrooms. Teachers in middle school and high school classrooms could definitely take this study and when looking at how they teach writing, what skills are stressed in their lessons, and what long range plans they need to better prepare students for college and the work force, can make guided decisions on personal classroom curriculum and preparation.

Implications for Social Change

High school curricular developers could take the study's information and seriously begin making changes so that not only students, but their families, will begin to benefit from the changes. This study offers the possibility that high schools and colleges in the researcher's area can begin to work more in conjunction with each other. Universities have provided specific knowledge for high school educators to use in order to improve writing curriculum. Through this study, the researcher hopes to provide incentive for high schools and colleges to possibly do some staff development together each year in

preparation for starting each academic year. This concept of working together for the greater good is shown by Betances (1992) when he discussed the need for a "collective vision" (p. 2) within schools and systems which enable everyone to work together in attaining what is best for the school, the community, and the children.

Professors were able to list the types of assignments they will be requiring for freshman writing. Gaps in skills were identified, and classroom curriculum changes could be made to better prepare students for their first year writing. Tangible improvements can be seen when fewer students are required to take remediation classes before beginning freshman composition courses.

<div align="center">Recommendations for Action</div>

As the researcher, this study came about with the purpose of improving writing curriculum and providing relevant curriculum information from colleges which provide post-secondary education to the students who graduate from the seven districts within the researcher's area. Educators, using the data, could put more emphasis on the specific writing problems these professors are noting from incoming students. For example, many noted that research and documentation appeared to be something students were not ready for at the college level. The researcher, at present a middle school English/LA (Language Arts) teacher, will spend more classroom time on research writing assignments and making sure students feel more comfortable with documenting their sources. This could be followed through with more research and documentation practice for students at the high school level. Teachers from various departments, such as a history teacher and an English teacher, might work together on research writing assignments. The history

teacher could work with a history topic, research, and content, while the English teacher might focus more on the writing skills, documentation, and revision. From observing the study's results, it is further recommended that classroom teachers provide more student practice with the types of student assignments required in freshman composition courses.

The study and its results should be disseminated to these seven districts, along with being sent to those educators who were actively involved in the study. The researcher will be sending copies to the English department chairs at the participating colleges. Copies will also be sent, via email, to all survey and focus group participants. The study will also be sent to each district's curriculum coordinator. From there, district office personal could use the study's contents to provide more knowledge, possibly even provide staff development hours, to their middle and high school English teachers in the district. The researcher has worked with educators in the middle schools and high schools in the researcher's district. The study will also be disseminated to English departments at those schools. By working together, all personnel should be able to vastly improve the writing preparation of their students, thereby saving many families needed income.

Recommendations for Further Study

Many states could benefit from by looking at groups of colleges within each state in order to provide more information to each state's educators and students. Also, possible topics that need closer examination could include how writing is being taught at elementary, middle, junior high, and the high school levels. An examination of state curriculum guidelines or requirements in conjunction with most college writing requirements could look to align these curricular disconnects. Of particular interest in this

area might be whether college expectations are in line with the state guidelines or standards which educators are required to cover in the classroom. An examination of the reading and media habits of young people today, might show the amount of time students are spending, outside of the classroom, reading, playing computerized games, watching television as compared to reading.

Concluding Statement

Beyond the confines of the family, the nation is affected by having such large numbers of students ill-prepared for college. Alliance (2006) states that the economy of the United States would gain approximately $3.7 billion simply by "increasing the number of students graduating from high school prepared to succeed in college" (Press Center). In the economic climate of our country today, educators, at all levels, and families cannot afford to continue to have students unprepared to enter college freshman classes.

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APPENDIX A:

SURVEY

2. FRESHMAN COMPOSITION / WRITING
The purpose of this question is to show the writing expectations for the freshman students.

I. How often do you require your students to complete the following writing assignments?

NEVER   **RARELY**   **OCCASIONALLY**   **FREQUENTLY**
1   **2**   **3**   **4**

1. Essay exams: _____
2. Article reviews: _____
3. Expository essays: _____
4. Lab reports: _____
5.   Research papers (5 pages or less):   _____
6. Research papers (6 pages or less):   _____
7. Business reports: _____
8. Letters   _____
9. Critical analyses (critiques):   _____
10. Outlines: _____
11. Study questions: _____
12. Observation logs: _____
13. Journals: _____
14. Creative writing: _____
15. Argumentative (persuasive writing): _____
16. Summaries: _____
17. Other:_____

II. How often do your students have writing problems in the following areas?

NEVER	RARELY	OCCASIONALLY	FREQUENTLY
1	2	3	4

1. Organization: _____

2. Narrowing a topic: _____

3. Supporting an idea: _____

4. Sense of purpose (assignment goals): _____

5. Audience awareness (reader's needs): _____

6. Tone (writer's voice): _____

7. Originality: _____

8. Coherence (connectedness): _____

9. Diction (choice/use of words): _____

10. Paragraph structure: _____

11. Sentence construction: _____

12. Grammar: _____

13. Usage (appropriate language): _____

14. Transitions: _____

15. Revising: _____

16. Research skills: _____

17. Punctuation: _____

18. Spelling: _____

19. Proofreading: _____

20. Vocabulary: _____

21. Documentation (citing sources correctly): _____

22. Other:_____

(Survey is adapted from: Survey permission by: Weglarz, Shirley G. 2002. JCCC Faculty Writing Assignment and Needs Survey, 2001. Johnson County Community College. Overland Park, KS. Office of Institutional Research. (ERIC Document ED466872);

Jeffrey A. Seybert. Director of Institutional Research, Johnson County Community College. Overland Park, KS.)

APPENDIX B
SURVEY CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

October 10, 2007

I give consent to Susan M. Hughes to use the 2002 JCCC Faculty Writing Assignment and Needs Survey as part of her survey for her Walden University Doctoral Study. It is my understanding that she will only be using two portions of the 2002 survey, numbers 1 and 3, and will not be making changes to those two sections. She will also attribute authorship to JCCC and Mrs. Weglarz. Please see the Electronic Signature of Shirley Weglarz below:

ELECTRONIC SIGNATURE: Shirley Weglarz
DATE: 10/12/2007

APPENDIX C
SURVEY CONSENT FORM

I hereby grant permission to Susan M. Hughes to use the survey from

"JCCC Faculty Writing and Needs Survey, 2001" in her research for

her Ed.D with Walden University. Questions which do not pertain to

her research topic may be deleted. I grant this permission with the full

understanding that Susan M. Hughes will cite her survey source in her

final Doctoral Study work.

_____   _____
Signature   Printed Name

Director Institutional   4-16-07
_____   _____
Position / Title   Research   Date

Johnson County Comm. College
12345 College Blvd,
Overland Park, KS 66210
_____
Institute & Address

APPENDIX D
SURVEY CONSENT FORM

1. College Freshman Writing Survey: College Preparation

You are invited to take part in a research study of freshman students' writing difficulties and classroom expectations. You were chosen for the study because your college is one that many Spartanburg County students choose to attend after graduating from high school. My community research partners will be English department chairpersons from various colleges and universities in South Carolina. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be part of the study.

My name is Ms. Susan Hughes. I teach in Spartanburg County District Two and am excited about my Doctoral Study as a student at Walden University, where I am working on my Ed.D.degree.

My study's purpose is to ascertain, according to freshman composition professors, precisely what writing weaknesses are dominant in students who have just finished high school and have entered first year college writing or English courses. I hope that by viewing this study, high schools and districts will be able to make any needed classroom and/or curriculum changes in order to better prepare students for the rigors of college writing.

PROCEDURES / ABOUT THE PROJECT:
If you agree to join the study and once the study begins after IRB approval, the faculty email list will be used to send out an invitation to join the study. Those who voluntarily agree to be in this study will be asked to:
•Fill out a brief survey and return it to the researcher via email
•Return the signed and dated consent form with the survey. Typing your name at the signature place is acceptable.
•Possibly be a part of a Focus Group made up of three professors from your university who returned the survey. They would have the option of declining to be a member of the focus group. These educators will be interviewed as a group for approximately thirty minutes to one hour. The purpose of the focus group is to discuss any concerns that may not have been on the survey.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the study. No one at your university or college will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. If you feel stressed during the study you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
Risks: I believe the risks are minimal. Possibly a member of any focus group might feel pressured to answer in some way when meeting with other educators. The names of the participants of the study will not be published. The names of the colleges participating will appear in the document. Participants will have signed a paper acknowledging that names will not appear. Also, the information and data being collected regards classrooms and student writing. Therefore, most participants should not feel that the information is an intrusion on their privacy in any way.
Benefits: The participants will hopefully feel that if the study is published, high school English departments or other educators concerned with college preparation will take into account the student weaknesses seen by freshman professors and make any needed curriculum changes in order to better their high school students' preparation.

Compensation:
There will be no compensation for being in the study.

Confidentiality:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The names of the participants of the study will not be published. The names of the colleges participating will appear in the document. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the study.

> The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep by enabling you to print from this survey.
> Statement of Consent:**BY FILLING IN THE BOXES BELOW, YOU WILL BE GIVING CONSENT.Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.
> I have read the above information. I have received answers to any questions I have at this time. I am 18 years of age or older, and I consent to participate in the study.
> Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Legally, an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically.