The Impact of Undergraduate Education on Workplace Writing:
Are Students Ready to Write?

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In an increasingly competitive American job market, many have begun to question the value of college and university education. Are students receiving the training they need in order to write in the workplace? Are these higher education institutions placing enough value on practical skills, or is too much time spent on academic pursuits? Is the four-year degree still worthwhile, despite high graduate unemployment and rising student debt? The reason I chose to write about this topic is because the value of university education is so meaningful to me. Thus, the exigency for my research was to discover the mostly absent voice of the student perspective on university studies and how these studies prepared (or didn’t) prepare graduates for the workplace.

In addition, there is a recent push to change existing paradigms and shift college education toward the practical-skill-based realm at the expense of academic pursuits. However, colleges and universities maintain a larger societal mission to produce well-rounded, thoughtful, and academically curious citizens. Would this trade-off be worthwhile? One way to answer this question is to find out what graduates think about both the practical and academic. After all, students are the ones affected by these changes—shouldn’t their voices be heard?

**The American Job Landscape**

The decision to pursue a college or university education is one that most high school graduates make. Recent studies find that as of “October 2011, 68.3 percent of 2011 high school graduates were enrolled in colleges or universities” (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). Over time, “enrollment in degree-granting institutions increased by 11 percent between 1990 and 2000. Between 2000 and 2010, enrollment increased 37 percent, from 15.3
million to 21.0 million” (National Center for Education Statistics). Together, these figures indicate the increasing importance of higher education.

These trends are altogether unsurprising. The American job market is increasingly competitive, especially due to the recent economic downturn. The benefits of earning a college degree are well documented, and it is estimated that “a person with a Bachelor's degree will earn, on average, almost twice as much as workers with a high school diploma over a lifetime” (Earn My Degree.com). Thus, college education is seen as a path to better opportunity, pay, and prestige. However, there is increasing concern about the benefits of higher education. Students who “borrowed for college and earned bachelor's degrees in 2011 graduated with an average $26,600 in student loans” (Gallegos). These average debt amounts are only increasing. When coupled with an 8.8% unemployment rate for graduates, many have begun to ask whether or not a college degree is actually worthwhile.

**Employer Attitudes**

Perhaps the biggest problem graduates face in the American job landscape is increasing employer dissatisfaction. College and university graduates must be ready to meet the demands of their future employers. In almost all professional workplace environments, written communication is essential. Yet, written communication is a key area in which employers are increasingly becoming frustrated with new hires.

Recent studies have found that many employers are dissatisfied with the initial abilities of college graduates. A 2011 survey conducted by the Accrediting Council of Independent Colleges and Schools found that “only 7 percent of hiring decision-makers believe the higher education system does an ‘excellent’ job of preparing students for the
workplace” (Finklemeyer). In addition, of the 1006 employed professionals polled, “45 percent of these decision-makers indicated that most students would be better served by an education that specifically prepares them for the workplace” (Finklemeyer). Less than “10 percent of employers thought colleges did an ‘excellent’ job of preparing students for work” (Johnson). These professionals, who represent a myriad of industries, have indicated that finding the right applicant has grown harder over time, and that these applicants lacked adaptability and critical thinking skills (Johnson).

The lack of graduate preparedness for workplace writing is not simply a recent concern. In 2004, The College Board conducted a survey of 120 corporations. This study found that according to these companies, “writing is a regular part of the job for two-thirds of all employees” (Eatherington). With respect to workplace writing, “a third of all workers fall short of employers’ expectations in written communication skills” (Eatherington). Training employees on the job is not a viable option, as costs of “remedying deficiencies in writing costs American corporations as much as $3.1 billion annually” (Eatherington). Since these costs were estimated in 2004, it is safe to assume that the figures have only grown.

College graduates have incentive to change employer perceptions because they need these job opportunities. Employers want more skilled personnel with writing ability because these employees are more productive, prepared, and less costly. In order to achieve the goals of both of these groups, a paradigm shift may be necessary in regard to teaching college students how to write well. However, it is important to ask questions about the cost of an increased focus on practical skills at the expense of academic pursuits.
Many studies have surveyed employers about their perception of college graduates; however, less research has investigated how graduates feel about their education.

**Academic versus Practical**

Though it is easy to say that colleges and universities should devote more time and effort to directly preparing students with practical skills, such as workplace writing, this increased focus must come at the expense of other elements of university education. Traditionally, colleges and universities serve as “primarily vehicles for the preservation, development and transmission of our intellectual culture (scientific, humanistic and artistic)” (Gutting). Post-secondary education should be about more than simply preparing students for the workplace. What these institutions hope to achieve is the creation of well-rounded individuals, developing academic curiosity, intellectual capacity, critical thinking skills, and the ability to question the world, among other goals. Though these ends are admirable, the main concern with university education is the balance between cultivating these academic pursuits and more practical skills.

Regardless of whether or not the college education system needs a massive overhaul, there is some compelling evidence that reports changes in the academic and practical focus of colleges and universities could be positive. A 2011 study by the Social Science Research Council taken by 2,300 undergraduate students found that “45 percent ‘did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning’ during the first two years of college” (Toland). Most troubling was the finding that “36 percent of students demonstrated no significant gains in critical thinking, complex reasoning and written communication over all four years of college” (Toland). If a greater academic purpose of
university education is lost on many students, then there seems to be compelling evidence that an emphasis on practical skills may be worthwhile. Another study, which focused on employers and recent graduates, revealed that both parties agreed in the importance of providing students with real-world skills. However, these same students and employers also recognized additional academic importance and the need to create well-rounded graduates (Association of American Colleges and Universities).

My research into both employer attitudes toward recent graduates and the debate over the balance of academic versus practical learning left me just as conflicted as my sources. Generally, employers view graduates as relatively unprepared. This problem is only compounded by high graduate unemployment and debt. Therefore, the question must be asked: is college and university education worthwhile from a student perspective? How do recent graduates feel about their preparedness for workplace writing? In addition, did these students feel that they gained important skills from the academic aspects of university education? Because college students are the ones who will be most affected by changing the academic system, their voice should not be absent from this debate.

Methodology

The goal of my study was to ascertain information from college graduates regarding how their college education prepared them for workplace writing. Since the “measure” in this study is subjective analysis, I decided that the chosen students should be graduates with a few years of work experience. This way, subjects are more likely to have started a serious job or career. In addition, they have had time to discover what is expected of them in the workplace, and reflect on this information. The participants in my study all
graduated from college by 2008. Therefore, they have had over four years of post-college experience from which to draw. All of the study participants are acquaintances that attended Christopher Newport University, located in Newport News, Virginia.

Participants in the study were asked the following questions:

1. What was your undergraduate major?
2. What is your current occupation/job title?
3. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being unprepared, 10 being very prepared), how do you feel that undergraduate education prepared you for the writing that you do in the workplace?
4. What classes do you feel most prepared you?
5. What elements of workplace writing did college not prepare you for?
6. Overall, do you feel that your college education benefitted you in a practical way? If so, how?
7. Do you feel that college education was worthwhile in non-practical ways (were the academic aspects of college worthwhile or not)?
8. Knowing what you know now, would you have picked a different major? If so, what would that be?

Questions One and Question Two are designed to gather information about the choices that these students made in undergraduate education and the positions that they have subsequently taken after graduation. Question Three attempts to quantify how these students feel about how their university education prepared them for workplace writing. Question Four exists to find a correlation to what particular classes were deemed valuable in this aim. Question Five provides the ability for students to share what they feel was
lacking from university writing education. Question Six and Question Seven allow survey takers to explain the practical and non-practical benefits of college education. Finally, Question Eight asks survey takers to reflect on the choice of major program. The purpose of this question is to ascertain whether or not these graduates would have chosen a perceived “practical” major over their actual major in hindsight.

Overall, my hope was that I could use this information and anecdotal evidence to shed light on the often ignored student perspective. Not only does this information ask about the preparedness of students for workplace writing, but it also attempts to answer questions about the perceived value of university education in both a practical and an academic sense. I used the data from these surveys to answer questions about workplace writing preparedness, highlight classes that benefit students in a practical way, decipher the value of both practical and academic learning to students, and figure out if students regret their major choices. Through this comprehensive look, I hope to answer the question of whether or not university education is “valuable” to students.

Findings

A total of nine respondents were polled using the above survey. All of the respondents were between three and four years removed from undergraduate studies. The list of corresponding majors, current occupations, and 1-10 value of preparedness are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undergraduate Major</th>
<th>Current Occupation</th>
<th>Perceived Value of Preparedness (1-10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Clinical Recovery Associate</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy, Religious Studies</td>
<td>IT Security Analyst</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>Med Student</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Software Developer</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Literature</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Attorney</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>Police Officer</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
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<td>5</td>
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**Average Value:** 7.4

**Findings: Workplace Writing**

As seen above, the nine interviewed subjects averaged a value of 7.4 out of 10 when asked to rate how well undergraduate studies prepared them for workplace writing. This data provides a sharp contrast to the aforementioned perceptions of employers, who believe most recent graduates are unprepared for workplace writing. In response to Question Four, which asked interview takers to list the class or classes that most prepared them for workplace writing, the results were very mixed. Responses ranged from botany, chemistry, public speaking, philosophy, technical writing and professional writing. Though these classes seem diverse, philosophy, communication, and technical writing (along with professional writing) were the most mentioned courses that were perceived as useful and practical to these graduates.

It is important to point out that some of these scores are relative to the employment chosen by those interviewed. For instance, the history major, who later became a police
officer, wrote that “I would say that the writing that is required of me as a Police Officer is not very stringent. I can liberally use grammar and sentence structure with little to no repercussions.” Thus, he believes that his rating of a ten is deceptive in that his workplace writing demands are not very strenuous. It is difficult to decipher how prepared college education made this participant because he does not feel that college-level writing is required of him in his profession. However, this subject seemed to be the only real outlier in the study.

Participants were asked to list the elements of workplace writing that college did not adequately prepare them for. The most common perceived deficiency (found in six of the nine participants) was technical writing skills. These included “writing succinctly,” “writing emails,” “technical writing proposals, memos, presentations,” “logical versus emotive writing,” and “writing short synopsis.” All of these issues of workplace writing involve the ability to eliminate on wordiness and write in the professional manner that was expected of these individuals. The computer science major explained he lacked experience writing emails.

With emails you want to phrase your question, convey information, or pose a disagreement in as little text as possible while still coming across as well-written. All of the writing classes I took focused on posing arguments in essays that were at least a page long each. I could use a class on these skills.

In addition, another participant, the marketing major, explained that he felt that he was unprepared for technical writing, specifically “for proposals, business memos, presentations—it’s much different and more absurd than standard writing.” Graduates of programs such as marketing and computer science are expected to be immediately ready for professional and office environments. It is therefore noteworthy to view an absence of
key skills in the areas of office communication and technical writing for these more professional workplace-oriented programs.

Even in some of the other majors, a lack of professional writing ability was noted by participants. Despite indicating a “10” in terms of preparedness, the English literature major, who later became an attorney, wrote that “My workplace writing suffers a bit because my undergraduate education embraced my emotive writing style rather than forced me to use reason (that is, logic) when forming ideas.” The history major turned police officer indicated that writing a short synopsis was a difficult transition for him, stating,

Every paper I ever wrote for college needed to be a certain length, which favors writing that is more elaborate and verbose. It’s just not necessary for a police report. I never received a college assignment that said “write me a really good concise paper.” They just said, it must be X number of pages long.

Therefore, even among those who considered themselves very prepared for workplace writing because of their college studies, there remained issues with a transition from more wordy academic writing to more concise workplace writing.

Findings: The Practical versus Academic Debate

In addition to questioning the preparedness of students, the survey was designed to gain data about how students felt that they benefitted from college in other practical and academic ways. When looking at university education, it is important to acknowledge that there are other skills besides writing that students learn. Some of these skills are more practical, and directly translate into the workplace. Others are academic, and are based upon personal and intellectual growth.
The results of Question Six and Question Seven are by nature difficult to quantify. Since I asked students about both practical and academic skills they believed they learned, the results are inherently personal. In terms of practical skills, the participants listed learning and increasing skills of social interaction, organization, time management, professionalism, and communication. All of the participants surveyed believed that their emerging professional careers were benefitted from the practical side of university education.

Question Seven, which asked students about the perceived tangible aspects of college education, drew a variety of answers as well. Two respondents indicated that they could not point to any tangible academic benefits of college education. However, the most common responses came in the forms of increased critical thinking skills and ability to articulate ideas. In addition, multiple respondents indicated that they believed that college education allowed them to better engage with the ideas and viewpoints of others.

Yet again, one respondent in particular, the history major turned police officer, stood out in his viewpoints. He indicated that although he was incredibly cynical about college education, calling it “a rubber stamp,” he has come to realize that he was very wrong. Since he works around many individuals who did not receive a college education, this respondent expressed that from what he observed, individuals who did not attend college generally have trouble expressing ideas that are not widely accepted, stating that “people who don’t go to college are in a perpetual state of fitting in.” Though he still questions the value of individual assignments, he believes “the papers are asinine, and the lectures are boring and probably not useful in any practical application; but thank god you get rubber stamped.”
Because if you didn’t, you would likely be leading some purgatorial existence of high school level social behaviors.” Thus, this individual in particular perceived greater academic value to his university education.

The final question of the survey asked participants if in hindsight, they would pick a different major. Of the nine participants, three indicated that they would have picked a different program of study. Only one, the philosophy major turned IT security analyst would have picked a drastically different field of study based on his career path. In hindsight, he would have chosen information technology, because it “would have fast-tracked me in the career path I’m pretty sure I’m going to be doing the rest of my life. I didn’t figure that out until after college; partly because I had no mentor/instruction on how to figure this out.” The remaining individuals were either satisfied with their choice or would have chosen different programs for less career oriented reasons.

**Potential Issues**

It is important to point out the potential limitations of these findings. Though the data I was able to gather from survey takers was relatively substantial, the subject sample size remains on the small side. It is possible that a more comprehensive study would yield more complete results. However, in order to gain these results, a variety of college graduates from various schools and regions would need to be polled. It would also be interesting to separate the results by categories of ethnicity, gender, and program of study in order to draw stronger correlations.

**Conclusion**
When I set out to conduct this research, I would have guessed that my findings would have been very different than they actually turned out. There was a time when I was very critical about the benefits of college and university education. In many ways, I still am. Though a major in Writing and Rhetoric has many practical applications, most of the courses are highly academic as well. At times, I question whether the average student is benefitted by an academic-based education system. After all, most individuals will graduate with hopes of becoming a young professional, which in the United States tends to entail various forms of “white collar” office work. I have long believed that the majority of students would be better served by attending school for a shorter duration, with emphasis on computer skills, technical writing communication, and more day-to-day practical tasks (such as writing emails, proposals, and memos). My feelings were only reinforced by data from employers about employee preparedness. However, after looking at the results of my study, I have come to think a bit differently.

First, I believe that students may be more prepared for workplace writing than employers credit them for. Though the skills cultivated from writing a lengthy research paper may not directly translate to professional email correspondence, students are learning important writing skills through college courses. This is evidenced from the results that the average score of respondent’s workplace writing preparedness was a 7.4 out of a possible 10. Though many of the respondents indicated that they would have liked a bit more training in some practical elements (emails, memos, proposals), no one noted a particularly rough transition. If anything, it seems that many of the “missing” abilities of graduates could be rectified by introducing a mandatory course in workplace technical writing as part of a general education requirement track.
Second, I was surprised and encouraged by the list of practical skills that these college graduates listed. Aspects of social interaction, organization, time management, professionalism, and communication are not quantifiable skills that classes explicitly teach, but these skills are nonetheless critically important for young people to learn. While many students will never again write a ten-page paper about subjects such as world history, the ability to manage a deadline, organize information, and engage others are the underlying lessons which are taught. Therefore, it seems as though colleges and universities are achieving practical goals through academic work.

Finally, I found myself most surprised by the positive responses about the academic benefits of higher education. Almost all of the respondents could point to an increase in abilities and skills such as critical thinking and the articulation and entertaining of new ideas. However, it is important to point out that the results I collected suggest that students have a very different viewpoint about their preparedness than that of employers. While the attitudes of recent graduates are important, so are the views of the individuals and companies wishing to hire them.

It is difficult to decipher the reason for this disconnect. Perhaps the smooth transition for these nine respondents into the realm of workplace writing was not perceived as such by their respective employers. It is also possible that this group of graduates were specifically well-prepared from a mandatory course or courses at their university. Regardless, future investigation into the specific deficiencies that employers believe recent graduates possess would be incredibly useful in order to rectify this problem. With that information, it would be possible for colleges and universities to adjust
their curriculums accordingly. Without specifics, it is near impossible (and likely a poor decision) to drastically shift the focus of undergraduate studies.

The goal of most colleges and universities is to not simply create productive graduates, but intelligent, capable, and well-rounded individuals. The ability of graduates to think in new ways and investigate new ideas and possibilities is a critical part of becoming the type of person that higher education aims to produce. This academic focus was recognized by most of the survey participants, who pointed to personal growth in these areas. It is important for future investigations to attempt to determine the reason for the discrepancy in terms of the attitudes of recent graduates and employers in regard to workplace writing and general preparedness. While it is positive to know that recent graduates feel prepared, the attitudes of employers must change, or else the high unemployment rate for college graduates is likely to continue. In order to change minds, the source of the problem or problems must be identified.

Ultimately, my research in the areas of workplace writing, practical, and academic goals in college education has led me to believe that for the most part, higher education is working. What matters most of all is the voice of those affected by university education—the students. Though some changes seem to be needed in order to change employer perception of graduates, I do not believe that these changes should be radical. The simple addition of a mandatory general education course geared toward practical elements of workplace writing should be enough to ease the transition of graduates into the workplace. After all, skills such as writing acceptable emails are learned relatively quickly on the job. A semester of dedicated work should be sufficient to lay the groundwork for the majority of
students. What is clear is that increasing the focus on practical education in universities should not come at the expense of academic learning. Graduates have the rest of their lives to master the art of an effective memo, but skills such as critical thinking, questioning arguments, and cultivating intellectual curiosity should be honed at colleges and universities. Producing graduates without any semblance of academic skills would represent a far greater failure for both higher education and society as a whole.
Works Cited:


