Student Perceptions of Their Writing Skills: Myth and Reality

Mark G. Simkin
University of Nevada

Janna M. Crews
University of Nevada

Mary J. Groves
University of Nevada

There are many reasons why college-level students often do not possess college-level writing skills. This study investigates two of them: (1) students do not believe that good writing skills will be important to them in their careers, and (2) students perceive that they are already good writers (when in fact they are not). To test these hypotheses, demographic information is collected, self-ratings of writing ability, and three independent writing-skill assessments of 140 students. Ample evidence is found to reject the first hypothesis, and even more evidence to support the second one.

It was difficult to determine who was more surprised at the termination meeting—the employee or the boss. The new hire had a strong technical resume, enthusiastic references, and (theoretically) the skills needed to translate IT directions into the simple English prose required by the firm's customers. Yet the services director repeatedly found himself editing this individual's work, deleting whole paragraphs that said little, and wondering how a customer would react to the writer's confusing language. With corporate morale on the line and after sufficient warning, he felt he had no choice but to let the employee go (Gerencher, 1999).

It is difficult to find an employer that does not rate "good writing skills" as essential for both existing employees and new hires (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Wallace, 2004; Kelly & Gaedeke, 1990, McDaniel & White, 1993; 2004; Dillon, 2004; Jusino, 2005; Rowh, 2006). Similarly, it is difficult to find an accredited business program that does not recognize this need, and therefore does not require students to take one or more business communications classes (Riordan, Riordan & Sullivan, 2000). Finally, revisions to such certification examinations as the Uniform CPA exam or the addition

of a formal, "analytical writing assessment" component to the Student Aptitude Test (SAT) and Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) now formally recognize the importance of such skills (Noll & Stowers, 1998).

If both employers and educators recognize the importance of good writing skills, why do they continue to bemoan the lack of such skills? In a survey of 120 U.S. corporations, for example, the National Commission on Writing (a panel of the College Board) found that about a third of all employees wrote poorly (Dillon, 2004). This commission also estimated that businesses were spending over $3 billion annually on remedial writer training. Similarly, in a study on the performance of business communication interns on the job, supervisors rated intern performance related to writing skills the lowest among 11 performance areas (Sapp & Zhang, 2009)

How did it come to this predicament? The next section of this paper provides several reasons why many university students demonstrate poor writing skills. It also presents the hypothesis that students do not recognize their own writing deficiencies. To test it, a survey was devised and collected a set of sample data from the students enrolled in several classes at the university. The third section of this paper reports the results of this investigation. The last section of the paper provides a brief summary of the work and conclusions.

Why Can't Johnny Write?

Experts studying "the writing problem" in corporate America have proposed a variety of explanations as to why many Americans cannot write cogent prose. Some authorities blame the K-12 school systems, where "social promotion considerations" often outweigh academic deficiencies in passing students through the system (Mohl & Slifer, 2005; Parker, 2001). Others blame illiterate or uncaring parents, peer pressure to speak vernacular English, or a host of environmental factors. Time pressure can add to these problems, allegedly forcing communicators to sacrifice "quality" in the interests of "expediency."

What about the students enrolled in accredited colleges and universities? Surely here we should find an oasis of good writing skills. But that is not the case. Ashbrand (1986) noted, for example, that "poor writing" has been a weakness of graduating seniors for nearly 50 years—a sentiment echoed by Joseph (1989) and Bradney and Courbat (1998). More recently, Mark Bauerlain's book *The Dumbest Generation* (Penguin, 2008) provided further evidence of the writing deficiencies of college-level students.

Sadly, it appears that little has improved. A study by Tanner and Totaro (1998) for example, found that over 275 accounting educators in 43 states (and the District of Columbia) continue to be dissatisfied with the writing and verbal communications skills of the students in their schools—a satisfaction level that showed no improvement from a study conducted 10 years earlier. Jameson (2007) found that writing scores have remained stable over the last 30 years, but a greater proportion of students are entering higher education, resulting in a greater proportion of poor writers in college. It is easy to find potential explanations for this lamentable condition. One often cited reason is a lack of high-school training. Describing the students in her freshman

writing classes at the University of Maryland, for example, Jablon (2004) laments that many of her students "barely write on a high school level" and that she consequently spends much of her time teaching such remedial skills as basic grammar and English syntax, vocabulary "that students should already know," and verb conjugation. Underachieving college freshman, including those with high abilities, have reported that their high school experiences left them unprepared for college (Balduf, 2009).
Another possible explanation for the poor writing skills of university students is that it mirrors the decline of literary reading in the nation. In a comprehensive survey of 17,000 American readers, the National Endowment for the Arts found that, during the period 1982-2002: (1) less than half the adult U.S. population reads literature, (2) literary reading of young adults ages 18-34 has declined 18% (from 57% to 48%), and (3) literary reading of individuals with "some college" education has declined even more—a 20% drop (from approximately 73% to 53%). Those authors also note that "a cultural legacy is disappearing, especially among young people" and repeat the warning the foundation issued 20 years ago that "a rising tide of mediocrity [has] overtaken the school system and threatens a generation of students" (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004).

The inferior writing skills of university students can also be blamed on the common use of email and text messaging, in which "expediency" and "brevity" often take precedence over cogent, grammatically-accurate prose. Although it is possible to dismiss such writing as endemic to the subculture of emails or web logs, most faculty members can provide similar, if less extreme, examples of such communications from their students. The fear is that many students fail to distinguish between those situations in which good writing does not matter, and those venues in which it is very important.

Another explanation for the poor writing skills of some students can be traced to loopholes in university admissions policies, which often permit such individuals to enroll in advanced courses despite clear inabilities to write well. Although the entrance requirements at most such schools require minimal scores on the verbal portion of the ACT or SAT exams, many students can avoid these requirements by matriculating as junior-college transfers.

Yet another explanation for the poor writing skills of university students is that universities do little to enhance them. In an in-depth study of undergraduate student writing portfolios, Levelle (2003) found no significant improvements in writing quality between the subjects' freshman and senior year (several factors limit the results of this finding, including the study's small sample size (30 students), the relatively high scores of all the writing portfolios examined, the fact that the sample was drawn from a single university, and the fact that all the student participants were volunteers). This finding is further supported by Rachal, Daigle and Rachal (2007) who report that over half the college students in a 485-sample study had difficulty writing introductions and conclusions in their papers. The idea that "writing skill is an art and cannot be taught" bolsters this argument, as does the fact that few business schools require students to take more than one or two English or communications classes. But even here, it is important to note that most universities require students to merely pass these classes, not demonstrate that they have mastered the skills taught in them.

Large university class sizes may also help explain why today's students are often poor writers. High student volume can cause faculty members to ignore writing errors in papers or examinations, or lead them to use computer-graded examinations that contain no writing components at all (Bacon & Anderson, 2004). Furthermore, while faculty do make written assignments in non-communications courses, the authors found that students often object to grading rubrics that include assessments of the grammatical accuracy or cogency of their works. Then too, the promotion and merit criteria at many universities emphasize research and publishing, placing little rewards or even recognition for assigning or grading written student work in non-English classes. Finally, where instructors do assign written work requiring cogent prose, the assignments are often graded by graduate students who do not, or cannot, evaluate the writing skills demonstrated in the samples.

Student misconceptions about the importance of writing may also help explain why more of them cannot write well. Wallace (2004) noted, for example, that the many errors in student résumés and cover letters reflect the attitude that "good writing skills" are not important in those jobs not directly requiring them. He also mentions the common misguided expectation that new hires will have a good secretary to "fix" their mistakes. A study of 1,100 students by Hassel and Lourey (2005) supports the likelihood that students do not value good writing skills. Those authors suggest that apathy, grade inflation, and absenteeism all appear to contribute to a growing loss of student accountability and perhaps writing skills are among the casualties.

Crainer and Dearlove (2004) note that self-awareness can make a significant difference in the quality of written output. This suggests yet one more possible explanation for the lack of good writing skills among business students—the misconception that they are already good writers. Certainly there are good reasons for this. Most high schools require students to pass one or more English classes in order to graduate, most universities now require minimal scores on the verbal portions of SAT or ACT examinations to matriculate, and most undergraduate programs require writing samples on their admissions applications. If a student has received good grades in high school, met the minimum requirements on SAT or ACT tests, and been accepted in college, how can his or her writing skills be deficient?

A New Study

The literature on college writing skills suggests a number of interesting, testable hypotheses. The authors were particularly interested in two of them. The first hypothesis is that students do not believe "good writing abilities" will be important for their future careers. The second hypothesis is that students believe that they are already good writers, when in fact they are not. While the first hypothesis can be measured directly in a survey, the second requires more data. In particular, we wanted to compare student perceptions of their writing abilities with one or more objective measures of these skills. The null hypothesis is that student perceptions of their writing abilities are high, reflecting their natural writing abilities.

To test these hypotheses, a survey was used to gather information from the students in five separate, junior-level classes at a 15,000-student western university. A total of

140 students completed it: Twenty-nine students in a junior-level information systems class and 111 students in four sections of a junior-level business communications course.

Results: Demographics

Part I of the survey gathered demographic information about each student, including his or her age, gender, native language, major, and class rank. The student respondents were identified only by the last four digits of their student numbers. This allowed us to match individual perceptions with performance results. Table 1 summarizes this demographic information, which was obtained from the answers to questions 1 to 3 of the survey instrument. The average age of the respondents was 23.5. The oldest was 59 and the youngest was 18. In this sample, 69 were male and 70 were female. Most of the respondents (119 students) reported that English was their native language. However, 3 reported Spanish as their native language, 3 reported Japanese, and 4 reported Chinese. Ten respondents indicated some other language as their native language. Most of the respondents (119) were business majors, but a surprising number (21) were non-business majors. Finally, most of the respondents (92) were juniors, but 25 of them were seniors, 15 were sophomores, and 1 was a graduate student.

Table 1: *A Summary of Demographic Information of Survey Participants (Totals for some rows may not add to 140 because of non-responses)*

Question					
1A—Age	**Average**	**Oldest**	**Youngest**		
	23.5	59	18		
1B—Gender	**Male**	**Female**			
	69	70			
1C—Native Language	**English**	**Spanish**	**Japanese**	**Chinese**	**Other**
	119	3	3	4	10
2—Major	**Business**	**Non-Business**			
	119	21			
3—Class Rank	**Freshman**	**Sophomore**	**Junior**	**Senior**	**Graduate Student**
	0	15	92	25	1

Results: Students Believe That Good Writing Skills are Important to Their Careers

Questions 9 and 11 (Table 2) asked students how important they thought their writing abilities would be in the future. These questions test the hypothesis that another reason students might not write well is because they do not think "writing abilities" are important. The survey responses refute this hypothesis: students do recognize the importance of writing well. As evidence, in Question 9, 105 students thought that writing ability was likely to be "very important" to their careers, 35 thought it was going to be "somewhat important," and no one thought it was going to be "unimportant."

Similarly, 136 students answered "yes" to Question 11, indicating that their writing abilities were likely to affect the way others perceived their intelligence, knowledge, or other capabilities, while only 4 students answered "no" (that it would not). If students are poor writers, it is not because they think "good writing skills" will be unimportant to their future careers or to the way others perceive them.

Table 2: *Distribution of response to Questions 9 and 11 (Perceived importance of Writing)*

	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
9. Importance of Writing to Career	105	35	0
	Yes	**No**	
11. Writing affects how others will perceive your other capabilities?	136	4	

Results: Students Believe That They Are Good Writers

Question 5 asked each respondent to rate his or her writing ability using the categories "Excellent," "Competent," "Average" or "Poor." Table 3 provides a frequency distribution of answers to this question.

Table 3: *Distribution of Self-Rating of Writing Ability*

	Excellent	Competent	Average	Poor	Total
Writing Ability Self-Rating	15	79	41	5	140

The data in Table 3 provides some support for the hypothesis that most students believe they already possess adequate writing skills. In our survey, 15 students rated themselves as "excellent" writers, 79 students thought they were "competent" writers, 41 students rated themselves as "average" writers, and only 5 students—less than 4% of our sample—rated themselves as "poor" writers. Clearly, few of the students in our sample agreed with the general view that students lack good writing skills—at least when rating themselves.

Our survey asked several additional questions about student backgrounds, writing experiences, and perceptions of the importance of writing abilities in the future. Table 4 summarizes our findings. Question 7, for example, asked respondents if they thought that their high school classes "had prepared them to write well." This question relates to the claim that most students enter college thinking that they already possess adequate writing skills. The data suggest that a majority (82 students) think they do. However, 56 students answered "no" to this question.

Table 4: *Distribution of answers to questions 7, 8, and 10 of the survey (Totals for each row may not add to 140 because of non-responses)*

	Yes	No
7. Did high school prepare you for college writing?	82	56
8. Have past college courses improved your writing?	119	21
10. Has your writing been criticized by someone besides a teacher?	77	63

Question 8 of the survey asked respondents whether any college classes had helped them improve their writing abilities. A large majority of the respondents (119) answered "yes" to this question, while 21 said "no." At face value, a clear majority of the students in this survey thought that their college classes were helping them. Although we would like to think that a student's college experience, where writing skills are stressed across the curriculum, was a positive force in developing writing skills, it is difficult to place too much confidence in this result. Most of the respondents were enrolled in a business writing class at the time they answered this question.

Question 10 of the survey asked whether anyone other than a teacher had ever criticized the respondent's writing abilities. Our intent here was to examine to what extent students had received independent, critical feedback about their writing. Again, this question speaks to the issue of perceived writing ability because an absence of negative feedback is easily interpreted as positive feedback. A total of 77 students said "yes" (they had received criticism from others) and usually mentioned a family member, friend, or spouse as the individual providing the feedback. But a surprising number of students—63 of them—answered "no" to this question. This means that nearly 45% of students had never received negative feedback about their writing abilities from external sources other than teachers.

The vast majority of the respondents in our survey viewed themselves as decent writers—meaning that they possessed at least average writing capabilities—and most thought that they were better than average (i.e., classified themselves as "competent" or "excellent" writers). This study used three separate assessments to evaluate student abilities. First, we asked students to complete Part II of the survey instrument—a mini-test of the grammar and punctuation rules required in good writing. Second, we asked students to complete Part III of the survey instrument—a vocabulary test. Third, we gave each student a writing assignment. The following paragraphs discuss each of these measures in greater detail.

Results: A Grammar Test

The (15) questions in Part II of the survey instrument tested each respondent's writing and grammar skills. Most of these questions were taken from (Collinson et al., 1992) and tested three levels of writing mastery. First, students were asked to determine whether or not a given sentence contained an error. This allowed students to identify incorrect sentences as "bad" ones, even if they did not know what the errors were. Students could also indicate that the sentence was "correct" or that they "didn't know" whether or not the sentence contained an error. Second, students were asked to circle the error in each "bad sentence." This enabled us to distinguish between

those students who actually knew the location of a given error, and those who did not. Finally, students were asked to correct each mistake they identified. This third requirement enabled us to determine whether or not students knew what was required to fix each sentence.

Each tested a simple grammar rule. For example, Sentence 1 ("There were less visitors than usual.") tested whether students knew when to use "less" and when to use "fewer." Similarly, Sentence 2 ("The vehicle has it's own reserve power supply.") tested whether students knew when to use "its" and when to use "it's." Our favorite sentence was Sentence 9 ("If the baby doesn't thrive on whole milk, boil it."). Other sentences tested the respondent's understanding of the differences between "their" and "there," "between" and "among," and "affect" and "effect." The authors of the questions used in our study suggest that these are high-school-level grammar skills that college-level students should know.

Table 5 provides summary statistics for the first level of these grammar tests—a student's ability to identify whether or not a given sentence contained an error. For this test, the minimum score was "2" and the maximum score was "15" (a perfect score). The average score was 10.25—i.e., a score of about "two-thirds" or 67% correct. This result suggests that, if students are good writers, they achieve such a rating in spite of their knowledge of grammar rules, not because they know how to use such rules.

Table 5: *Sample statistics for the grammar portion (Part II) of the survey.*

	Min	Max	Range	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
Grammar: Number Correct out of 15	2	15	13	10.25	10	9	2.10

An interesting question to ask is how well the student self-ratings of their writing abilities mirrored the scores on their grammar tests. If students have a realistic idea of their writing abilities, these two items should be related—e.g., those students rating themselves "Excellent" should do well on this test, while those students rating themselves in categories less than Excellent should do incrementally poorer on the test.

Table 6 shows the distribution of student self-ratings of their writing abilities ("Excellent," "Competent," and so forth) classified by three levels of performance on the grammar test: "low" (8 or less questions answered correctly), "average" (9, 10, or 11 questions answered correctly), and "high" (more than 11 questions answered correctly)—ratings obtained from the professional instructor teaching this study's writing courses.

Assuming a null hypothesis that a relationship exists between self-ratings and this objective measure of writing ability, we performed a chi square test on these data. This analysis tests the closeness of matchups—i.e., whether the self-rated "excellent writers" performed excellently on this assessment, the "average writers" did average

work, and so forth. Although in general "quality writing" counts, in this test, it did not matter what the absolute scores were on this assessment, as long as the top scores were rated as "excellent," the middle scores as "average," and the lowest scores as "low." For the data at hand, we computed a test statistic of χ^2 = ".016" (with 6 degrees of freedom)—a statistical value low enough to reject this hypothesis at any reasonable alpha level. Stated simply, no statistical evidence to support the claim for a relationship between the student ratings of their writing abilities and the scores on their grammar tests was found.

Table 6: *Distribution of grammar quiz scores (Part II of survey) and self-ratings of writing ability*

	Low (2 to 8)	Average (9 to 11)	High (12 to 15)
Excellent	2	6	7
Competent	12	41	26
Average	8	28	5
Poor	3	2	0

Results: A Vocabulary Test

Many experts argue that "vocabulary" is an integral part of good writing skills (Wallace, 2004; Rowh, 2006). For example, the more extensive an individual's vocabulary, the more tools a person has for writing cogent prose and the more explicit and forceful such writing is likely to be. Accordingly, Part III of the survey instrument used 15 multiple-choice questions to test a student's vocabulary. The words used here were drawn from the "Word Power" section of recent issues of the Reader's Digest. Examples were "concave," "absorption," and "inoculate." Four of the words in this test were 2 syllables, five of these words were 3 syllables, and six of these words were 4 syllables. None of the words contained more than 4 syllables and, in our opinion, all were words that an instructor might reasonably expect college-level business majors to know.

Table 7 reports the results of this portion of the survey. Again, the low score was "2"—an abysmal score by any standard, but made particularly disappointing because the result cames from a multiple-choice test. The maximum score was "13" (out of 15), and the mean score was "7.2"—an average mark of about 50 percent.

Table 7: *Sample statistics for Vocabulary, Part III, of the survey*

	Min	Max	Range	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
Vocabulary: Number Correct out of 15	2	13	11	7.22	7.5	8	2.35

Table 8 shows the distribution of student self-ratings of their writing abilities (Excellent, Competent, and so forth) against three levels of performance on the vocabulary test: low (6 or less questions answered correctly), average (7 or 8 questions

answered correctly), and high (9 or more questions answered correctly). These ranges were adapted from the Word Power feature of Reader's Digest.

A chi square test of independence on this data resulted in a test statistic of 0.0001 (with 6 degrees of freedom)—a statistical value enabling us to reject the null hypothesis (that the ratings and test scores were related) at any reasonable alpha level. Thus, here too we find statistical evidence suggesting that there is no relationship between the student self-ratings of their writing abilities and the scores on an independent test of such abilities. This finding again supports the claim that most students are unaware of the deficiencies in their writing skills—in this case, vocabulary skills.

Table 8: *Distribution of vocabulary scores (Part III of survey) and self-ratings of writing ability*

	Low (2 to 6)	Average (7 to 8)	High (9 or more)
Excellent	5	3	7
Competent	19	30	30
Average	26	9	6
Poor	5	0	0

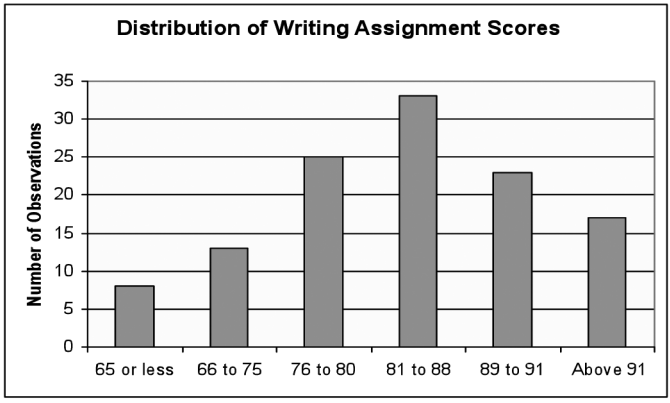
Results: A Writing Assignment

It can be argued that grammar and vocabulary tests are, at best, surrogate measures for writing ability—and perhaps weak ones at that. A more direct measure of writing skill is a grade on a writing assignment. Accordingly, we also gathered evaluation data for the scores for each of the five experimental classes.

A total of 119 students completed this assignment. The students in the IS class were required to write a short paper of less than 5 pages on a topic of personal interest. The students in the business communications classes had two, one-page writing assignments taken from Ober (2003). In both classes, each paper was graded using a standard evaluation sheet. Appendix A provides of a description of the assignment for the IS class and a copy of the evaluation form.

For these writing assignments, the maximum score was "30 points" (in the four business communications classes) or "27 points" (including a 2-point bonus in the IS class). As an adjustment, we converted all grades to percentages, using the grade on the five-page paper for the IS students and the average of the two grades on the 2 one-page papers for the business communications students. For these assignments, the average student score was 82%, the maximum score was 97%, the minimum score was 59%, and the standard deviation for these grades was 8.4%. Figure 1 provides a distribution of the scores.

Figure 1: *Distribution of scores on a writing assignment*



To test the hypothesis that a relationship exists between the grades that students received on this assignment and their perceptions of their writing abilities, the test first divided these sets of scores into the categories of "low," "average," and "high" levels of achievement. To get an approximately-equal number of scores for each level, it used boundary values of 80% and 88%. Thus, we classified students with scores of 80% or less as "low," those students with scores above 80% but less than or equal to 88% as "average," and those students with scores greater than 88% as "high." Then, for each category, it determined the number of students who had classified themselves as "Excellent," "Competent," "Average," or "Poor" writers.

Table 9 provides the results of our classification efforts. If a relationship between "writing ability" and "score on a writing assignment" exists, one would expect "excellent" writers to achieve mostly high scores on their assignments and "poor" writers to achieve mostly low scores. After combining the last two rows of Table 9 (to adjust for the small number of observations in the last row), the test computed a chi square test statistic of $\chi^2 = 0.083$ (with 4 degrees of freedom). This statistical value suggests that there is only an 8% chance that of a relationship between "writing ability" and "self-rating." This finding again supports the claim that most students are unaware of the deficiencies in their writing skills.

Table 9: *Distribution of writing assignment scores and self-ratings of writing ability*

	Low (Below 80.1%)	Average (80.1 to 88.0%)	High (Above 88.0%)
Excellent	2	4	6
Competent	21	25	22
Average	19	10	5
Poor	0	4	1
Totals:	42	43	34

Discussion

This study has focused on two possible explanations of why students are often poor writers. One reason is that they do not think "writing abilities" are important. But the evidence from two questions on our survey overwhelmingly refutes this claim. The data make clear that most students believe their ability to write well will also be important in their future careers, and that poor writing abilities negatively impact the ways others perceive such other characteristics as their intelligence or knowledge.

The other explanation examined here is that students already perceive themselves as decent writers. The survey confirmed this: 135 students (96%) rated themselves as "average" or above, while only 5 students (4%) rated themselves as "poor" writers. But if the students were good writers, they did not prove it on the assessments we used to measure their abilities. The average score on a grammar test was approximately 66%, and the average score on a vocabulary test was even lower at 50%. These were particularly disappointing scores given the high-school level of the questions. The students' best performance was on a simple writing assignment—an average of 82%. A caveat here is that this latter item was a take-home assignment, and there were no controls over outside help. Given their poor performance on the objective tests, it is also easy to wonder if the grading on these assignments was too easy—a potential confounding effect in our study.

Independent of the absolute level of the participants' performance, it is interesting to examine how closely our students' self-ratings tracked their actual writing abilities. Using our three performance measures and standard statistical procedures, we found no relationships. This means that, not only did students perform poorly on most of our assessments, they also seemed to have no realistic idea of their writing abilities as measured by such assessments.

Caveats

A number of considerations limit the findings of this paper. One is the fact that the study was conducted at only one school and with the students in only five (business) classes. Although the findings (e.g., that students have poor grammar and vocabulary skills) parallel earlier studies, we cannot claim that our survey participants or their skills necessarily reflect those of students elsewhere. On the other hand, this was a state school that enforces minimum enrollment requirements, including minimum GPA requirements from high schools. Further, in order to become a business major, a student must first take and pass nine pre-business core courses with a minimum GPA of 2.75. At least within the confines of these requirements, there is little reason for us to believe that the students participating in this experiment are not representative of their peers in other colleges across the country.

Another consideration involves the difficulty in accurately measuring a student's writing ability. Grammar and vocabulary tests are, at best, surrogates for such skills, and perhaps poor ones if the students taking them have no vested interest in the outcome. This might have been a problem here, although there is no evidence for it. To the contrary, for example, the writing samples used in this study were an integral part of the student coursework, and students were therefore motivated to do well.

Did the students do their own work? Again, there is no evidence to suggest that they didn't, and the wide range of scores on the writing assignment suggests that they did (Figure 1). Nonetheless, because this was an out-of-class assignment, there is the possibility that some of the papers were ghost written by others.

It is also possible to argue that the measures of student writing abilities were themselves unreliable, inconsistent, or in some other ways, flawed. This is a possibility, which is one reason three independent assessments were used, rather than just one, to measure them. The grammar and vocabulary tests in this study used carefully chosen questions drawn from independent, expert sources, and that the writing assignment was consistently graded by full-time, professional teachers also.

A related matter is the concern that the writing assignments did not measure "writing ability," even if they were graded professionally. Here, the assignment is best viewed as a writing sample that may not fully represent the abilities of the writers responding to it. It is also possible that the students might have performed better on their writing assignments if more of their final course grades had depended on the outcome, or (say) a hiring decision rested on the quality of their work.

A Suggested Solution

If students are generally unaware of their own writing deficiencies, a natural question to ask is "what to do about it?" Giving (and grading) more writing assignments in traditional business classes is one obvious choice. But the instructors at many schools receive little reward for such assignments and are therefore understandably reluctant to perform the extra work required by such a solution. The fact that nearly half the students in the survey had never received critical appraisals of their writing abilities outside the classroom suggests an alternate solution: peer reviews, in which students provide useful feedback to one another. Such an approach is consistent with the growing use of collaborative learning techniques in the college classroom, and appears to be a fruitful avenue for further research (Tran, Raikundalia & Yang, 2006).

A one-page grading form similar to the one used to assist students in this peer-evaluation endeavor may be useful also. As noted earlier, such an assessment mechanism helps ensure consistency if students grade multiple papers, and also may help a student overcome his or her reluctance to criticize a colleague's work verbally.

Summary and Conclusions

There are many reasons why college-level students often do not possess college-level writing skills. This study investigated two of them: (1) students do not believe that good writing skills will be important to them in their careers, and (2) students perceive that they are already good writers (when in fact they are not). To test these hypotheses, we collected demographic information, self-ratings of writing ability, and three independent writing-skill assessments of 140 students enrolled in various classes at the authors' university.

The evidence from the sample data refutes the argument that students do not believe writing skills are important. All (100%) of the survey participants thought that "writing ability" was likely to be "very important" or "somewhat important" to

their future careers, and 96% of these individuals indicated that their writing abilities were likely to affect the way others perceived their intelligence, knowledge, or other capabilities. Thus, if students are poor writers, it is not because they think "good writing skills" will be unimportant to their careers or to the way others perceive them.

A second objective of this study was to determine how students perceived their own writing abilities. A survey question provided a partial answer to this question. On it, the majority (135 students or 96% of the respondents) rated themselves as "average" or above, while only a tiny minority (5 students or 4% of the respondents) rated themselves as "poor." To determine the extent to which these ratings were accurate, three objective measures of these students' writing abilities—a score on a grammar test, a score on a vocabulary test, and a score on an actual writing assignment were obtained. The average scores on the first two assessments—66% for the grammar test and 50% for the vocabulary test—were disappointing both for their low values and the low skill levels required to answer the underlying test questions. Students did better on their writing assignments, achieving an average score of 82%.

Finally, the study searched for a relationship between the students' ratings of their writing abilities and their performance on these independent measures of these abilities. The statistical analyses found little or no relationship between the students' self-ratings and any of these measures. The simple conclusion is that students are unaware of their own writing deficiencies, and that their perceptions of their writing abilities were inflated.

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