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The Consequences of an Incomplete Foundation

INTRODUCTION

If we truly want to improve the writing rather than the writer, as writing center pioneer, Stephen North, so passionately reiterates in his writing center scholarship, then we must equip student writers with the basic tools necessary to realize this mission. We cannot rely on the previous educational institutions of the students that enter Trinity College, simply because each of these academic institutions teaches writing differently and supplies their students with different skills and approaches to writing. Colleges expect their students to enter their careers in higher education already with a solid understanding of how to produce a well-organized, well-articulated and properly formatted piece of writing. However, students at American institutions today come from a wide array of diverse educational backgrounds. Generally, this inherent diversity should make it difficult for these institutions to operate under the assumption that all of their incoming students possess the same preparation and skills required to succeed within each institution's defined parameters of success. However, this is rarely the case. We must, therefore, acknowledge and account for this educational diversity of incoming students at Trinity College and help bridge this gap in writing proficiency. I propose, that through the compilation and distribution of a collection of handouts that contain the many foundational

and basic skills needed to compete in the arena of collegiate composition, we can give Trinity students the vital tools they need to succeed as both students and writers.

EXPECTATIONS FOR COLLEGE WRITING

Generally, the transition from high school to college is quite dramatic for most students. It involves many substantial changes like becoming more self-sufficient and responsible, along with adjusting to a new place and a new community of people. College students are expected to be more independent than they may have been in high school, especially when it comes to academics. New college students are faced with the reality that their motivation to excel in their classes, in addition to the effort required to do so, must come from themselves rather than external support systems that they may have relied on in high school.

Colleges expect their incoming students to be able to engage with their coursework on a relatively independent basis. For writing, this entails an effective writing process that the student employs to plan, organize and execute their writing assignments. In college, when writing is expected to come as second nature, students who lack the tools to make this expectation a reality, like a defined and individualized writing process, will quickly realize that they are already behind. Little details that may have flown under the radar and went unchallenged in high school, for example, failing to cite a source correctly, are taken much more seriously at the college level, and can have serious consequences. It is expected that each student is able to independently support themselves through their academic assignments as their prior education has already prepared them to do so by endowing them with the necessary skill set to succeed in the realm of higher education. However, this

assumption is not always accurate. In 2001, it was reported that the California State University system “kicked out more than 2,200 students—nearly 7 percent of the freshmen class—for failing to master basic English and math skills” (Bettinger and Long 737-8). Students who are not equipped with the foundational skills of writing will shortly realize that they may be underprepared to compete with their peers at the college level.

TRINITY’S HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR WRITING

As Trinity College prides itself in being a small liberal arts college, it makes sense that the school would need to produce skilled and proficient writers in order to ensure that each student receives a truly well-rounded education. The mission of small liberal arts colleges like Trinity is to give their students a well-rounded education that includes, humanities, arts, natural sciences and social sciences. Integrated into every one of these paths of study is the act of writing.

In the 1980s, during the rise in popularity of the “writing-across-the-curriculum” movement, Trinity faculty put forward a new curriculum that emphasized proficiency in writing. In 1987, Trinity College implemented a Writing Proficiency Degree Requirement. The aim of this new curriculum was “To ensure that all students graduating from Trinity are proficient writers, able to write prose that is correct, clear, precise, orderly, well-argued, intellectually substantial, interesting, and appropriate to audience and purpose” (Dougherty 18). To achieve this daunting goal, the college committed itself to “maintain[ing] two special writing programs, one expressly for entering freshmen, and the other for all students” (Dougherty 18).

At Trinity College, specifically, writing is prevalent in every area of study. This can be attributed to the adoption of the “writing-across-the-curriculum” concept. Although there is definitely less of an emphasis on writing in some disciplines, Trinity students are unable to shy away from writing during their time at this institution. As a part of the general education distribution requirements, each student must take (and pass) two writing-intensive courses in order to be eligible to graduate.

Separate from the writing-intensive requirement is the writing foundational requirement. To intercept the students who either want or need to develop their writing skills and process before being completely thrust into the college experience, the college administers a guided writing assessment for newly enrolled students. The results of this assessment dictate whether the student will be placed in Rhetoric 103, College Writing. According to Trinity’s course catalog, College Writing places “emphasis...on helping students to develop their individual skills” (*Course Catalog*).

Factors that the college previously referred to that contributed to placement in College Writing are high school grade point average (GPA), previous English classes taken, strength of college application essay, teacher recommendations and the guided writing assessment. It is interesting to note that most students who would have been placed in College Writing based on these factors placed themselves in College Writing. In addition, many students, who based off of their guided writing assessments, were not required to take College Writing, opted to take the class because they felt underprepared to effectively write in college.

As previously mentioned, Trinity’s adoption of the “writing-across-the-curriculum” concept makes it virtually impossible for students to avoid writing during their time at

Trinity. According to Angela Valentino, Research Education Librarian and First Year Seminar Professor in Art History at Trinity, the greatest challenge for first year students is formulating “an articulate, provable thesis” (Burke and Kim). Professors who teach Humanities at Trinity considered “successful writing” to contain “a clear argument with varied forms of evidence and using proper diction” (Burke and Kim). These professors also noted that the students in their departments need the most improvement on writing introduction paragraphs, as they are usually fraught with “generalizations and cliches” and lack a clear statement of a thesis (Burke and Kim). For the Social Sciences, Benjamin Carbonetti, Professor of Political Science, International Relations and Human Rights, defined good writing as having a clear subject of argument, process of argument and evidence to support the argument. He stressed the importance of a clear introductory paragraph and proposed that there is usually a correlation between an “unclear” introduction and an “unclear” paper (Burke and Kim). As the introduction paragraph informs and directs the reader to the rest of the paper, it is essential that it be written with the utmost clarity. For Numeric and Symbolic Reasoning, Diane Zannoni, Professor of Economics and Econometrics, urged that students must state the main point of their argument clearly in the introduction and use the body of the essay to prove this point. For the Writing Proficiency requirement, Cynthia Butos, Professor of College Writing, First Year Seminar along with other writing courses, asserted that papers must be “thesis, evidence and analysis driven” (Burke and Kim). She noted that many papers she sees are comprised of too much summarization and redundancy, oftentimes in place of a much-needed analysis. For Natural Sciences, many professors belonging to Trinity’s Chemistry

department described the most crucial aspect of scientific writing to be a clear and understandable analysis of the presented data.

Overall, Trinity Professors across the disciplines seem to agree that clarity is paramount in college writing. The need to effectively and efficiently express one's thoughts and ideas is an indispensable skill in succeeding as a writer in college, and according to Trinity faculty across the curriculum, is often lacking.

AFFECTED STUDENT POPULATIONS

It is important to remember that not all cultures approach writing in the same way, and a student's native culture has a significant impact on his or her writing. Each culture has unique linguistic and grammatical elements, in addition to cultural beliefs and practices, ultimately resulting in each culture developing its own unique rhetoric and style of writing. Although many international students may be enrolled in American academic institutions, it cannot be assumed that all of these students have been educated in the American style of academic writing.

Since 2004, there has been an increase in enrollment of international students in undergraduate American colleges. Just between the school years of 2009-10 and 2010-11, new enrollment of international students increased 6.5 percent. (Nan 51)

Chinese international students comprise the majority of these international student populations on college campuses in the United States. From 2009 to 2011, the population of Chinese undergraduate students in the United States increased 42.7 percent (Nan 51). This statistic rings true at Trinity College, with the largest percentage of our international student community hailing from China as of 2015 (Stebbins 1).

The Chinese style of writing differs in many ways from the American style of writing. As described by Frances Nan, Chinese writing follows a spiral pattern, whereas American writing follows a linear pattern. The spiral pattern of writing encourages writers to “talk around” the main point before eventually arriving at the “center” (Nan 54). These papers will slowly build their way up to the thesis, while American style papers that follow the linear pattern will begin the paper with the thesis statement. With this rather indirect style of writing, Chinese writing can be considered “writer friendly” since it is the responsibility of the reader to determine the meaning of what the author wrote, whereas the American style of writing can be considered more “reader friendly” as the writer is more direct in leading the reader to the point (Nan 54).

In Chinese high schools, the only English writing that is introduced is taught within the context of standardized testing. This means that students whose only experience of English writing is from preparing for the TOEFL or SAT are at a significant disadvantage when entering American colleges, simply because the skills required to excel on these exams do not necessarily translate to what is needed for college writing. The TOEFL exam calls for a 500-600-word paragraph response to a prompt to be written in just 30 minutes (Nan 53). The SAT requires students to compose a five-paragraph essay in response to a specific prompt within the timeframe of 50 minutes. Preparing to excel in this type of testing is not necessarily good preparation for writing papers in college as it lacks time for proper planning, clarity, introduction of evidence and utilization of the writing process. In fact, many of these students are considered to underprepared for writing argumentative and analytical essays in college (Nan 53).

The Chinese style of writing is also known to place a certain importance on the student's ability to quote famous sources, without necessarily crediting the original author, as is demanded in the American academic style of writing (Nan 54). This is another aspect of writing that tends to differ with the culture. There are noticeable differences in how varying cultures view and relate to intellectual property, and how this matter is dealt with within the realm of writing. Within American academia, stealing intellectual property without properly attributing credit to the original author is condemned as plagiarism. Most universities take charges of plagiarism quite seriously and can oftentimes result in disciplinary action. Without explicit instruction regarding plagiarism, many students are at risk of plagiarizing (Powers 77). It is therefore imperative to clearly define what qualifies as plagiarism in American academic writing, as this is not a universally shared notion.

It is quite easy to see how a student educated in the Chinese style of writing would face many potential challenges when writing papers for professors who are expecting the assignments to be written in the American academic style of writing. Whether it is a lack of clarity, incorrect location of the thesis statement, or practices that are reminiscent of plagiarism, it is clear that many students have not been provided the tools necessary to adapt their familiar writing styles to fit what is expected of them at their American academic institutions. If it has been established that high schools in China do not prepare their students to write in the manner required of students at American institutions, then steps need to be taken rather than unfairly shepherding these students into classes in which they are not prepared to succeed.

Students who come from the United States and were schooled domestically also contribute to the population of underprepared writers seen entering colleges today. Even

within the United States, there is a great amount of diversity when it comes to education. With public and private schooling, different levels of funding and many other factors, kindergarten-12th grade education in the United States is far from uniform. Many institutions lose sight of this educational diversity and make dangerously broad assumptions about their student populations. For instance, a college may assume that every member of its incoming class possesses the same foundational writing skills. In order for this assumption to ring true, every member of this college's incoming class would have had to receive the same prior education, which is never the case. Therefore, it is quite detrimental when institutions make such broad assumptions since it completely ignores the diversity of students and their educational backgrounds.

In my first semester of working as a Writing Associate at the Trinity College Writing Center, I have encountered several students who lack the foundational skills required to write a decent college paper. For instance, one of my appointments involved a student bringing in an English paper containing more words from the novel's author than her own. The student showed some familiarity with the concept of block quoting, as it was formatted nearly correctly, however, the student had basically block quoted an entire page from the novel. When I asked how much of the quote was actually essential to the integrity of the argument, the student pointed to a single sentence imbedded within the quote. I explained that though evidence is vital to any strong argument, a passage of this size would immediately overwhelm the reader and would likely distract from whatever point is being proven. It would be more efficient to isolate what I like to call the "meat" of the quote and paraphrase the rest with one's own words. This also puts more responsibility on the student writer to elaborate on the piece of evidence and provide an analysis, ultimately

connecting its importance to the proof of the thesis by providing a clear reason as to why and how the piece of selected evidence proves the point.

Another inherent problem encountered in this same essay was the lack of any sort of introduction before simply dropping the quote. Many students with whom I have worked in the Writing Center do not realize the importance or even the existence of quote integration. I will often find a quote standing on its own, lacking any sort of method of introduction into the broader piece of writing. I inform the student writer that this practice is very confusing to the reader since it is unclear how the quote pertains to the rest of the paper, where the quote came from, and if it is a quote from a novel, the context of the quote.

As briefly touched on before, essays lacking proper analysis of introduced evidence are also quite common at our Writing Center. One cannot simply introduce a piece of evidence without explaining its relevance and proving its merit in regard to the argument of the piece of writing. It has also been noted that a difficulty of many ESL students lies in the inability of differentiating between summary and analysis (Powers 77). Analysis is arguably one of the most important aspects of a strong paper, as it is necessary to prove how each piece of evidence is used to prove the thesis.

Another common trend I have noticed among the students that I see in the Writing Center is confusion about what a thesis statement should accomplish. This is a feature of college writing that cannot be ignored, as it is at the core of any convincing piece of writing. Without understanding the function of a thesis statement and how to construct one that is appropriate for the length of the assigned paper, students will struggle a great deal while writing in college.

The most common areas of improvement that I have encountered in my experience as a Writing Associate are therefore quote introduction, block quoting, paraphrasing, quote analysis and thesis construction and strength.

FOUNDATIONAL WRITING SKILLS NECESSARY FOR SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

There are many skills that make up the foundation needed to be a successful college writer. I argue, that without these skills, students will find it nearly impossible to achieve success as writers in competitive college environments. It is therefore necessary for all student writers to possess these skills by the beginning of their college careers. These fundamental skills are thesis formulation, quote integration, quote analysis, paraphrasing and writing strong introductory and concluding paragraphs.

In order to write an effective thesis statement, the student must first understand the purpose of this statement, along with how to test its strength and location of placement. Writing a paper with a weak thesis can be both difficult and a waste of time. Another key aspect of thesis construction is determining its appropriate width. A thesis that is too general is regarded as broad, whereas a thesis that is too specific is regarded as too narrow. A strong thesis is also evaluated on the grounds of its scope—is the width of the thesis statement appropriate for the desired length of the paper? Did the writer bite off more than he or she could chew? Or conversely, did the writer's thesis limit the length and depth of the argument? A good thesis is one that is broad enough to encompass the entire argument while still remaining narrow enough to maintain focus on the original point.

An understanding of proper quote integration is also required of a successful college writer. This includes knowing how to properly introduce relevant quotes and pieces of

evidence, how to analyze and connect evidence back to the thesis statement, deciding how much of a quote is appropriate to include, and paraphrasing. Without mastering these basic concepts of quote integration, student writers minimize their chances of academic success in college writing.

Lastly, the ability to write strong introductory and concluding paragraphs is a critical feature of any strong piece of writing. Understanding the function and expectations of these opening and closing paragraphs is essential to producing compelling, thought-provoking and meaningful essays.

WRITING PROFICIENCIES AT TRINITY COLLEGE

One would expect that a highly selective small liberal arts college, such as Trinity College, would pride itself in producing skilled and extraordinary writers. If this was not the case, one would, at the very least, expect for a school of Trinity's stature to produce competent writers. It is with great shock, disappointment and regret that I share the fact that many enrolled students at Trinity have writing proficiencies that the College classifies as "unsatisfactory" or "adequate".

Every year, Trinity administers a writing assessment to the first year and junior classes. Every student, regardless of class year, receives the same essay prompt, and is given ample time to produce a short essay. Students are made aware that this sample of writing will not culminate in a grade but will be used to help the school track overall and personal student progress in the area of writing.

The rubric that is used by faculty to evaluate these pieces of writing focuses on the categories of content,¹ structure,² language,³ and overall quality of the essay. The rubric uses a numerical scale ranging from one to four to evaluate the writing:

(1): “unsatisfactory writing”

(2): “adequate writing”

(3): “good writing”

(4): “excellent writing”

In 2016, a sample of 262 writing assessments (n=262) were double read by Trinity faculty. Of these essays, 15% were given a rating of 1 (unsatisfactory), 41% were given a rating of 2 (adequate), 35% were given a rating of 3 (good), and only 9% were awarded a 4 (excellent). This data proves that there is a gap between what is expected from student writers at Trinity and what is actually observed. The fact that 56% of the essays from this sample fall below what the College considers to be “good writing” is quite unfortunate, and highlights the phenomenon that exists at Trinity and beyond.

To allow for the most consistent results, the reading committee was trained in what was generally to be considered an example of each numerical rating in order to ensure the most uniform grading method unbiased by personal opinions of each professor. It should be noted that many students do not take this assessment very seriously and therefore apply less effort than they would on a graded assignment. However, these essays are still indicative of a student’s writing style and process, at least to a certain extent.

¹ main idea, analysis/argument, evidence/examples, and voice and audience

² paragraph organization, introduction, transitions and conclusion

³ spelling and punctuation, documentation/format, word usage, and grammar and syntax

IMPORTANCE OF BRIDGING THE GAP

It is essential to the success of college students everywhere that this gap in writing proficiency be bridged. Students must master these foundational writing techniques prior to their arrival at institutions of higher education in order to stay afloat and not fall behind. How can students produce meaningful pieces of writing if they have not yet acquired the skills to fully and properly express themselves? This is a seemingly impossible task, which demonstrates the urgency and importance of spreading this crucial skill set to college writers. This gap must be bridged, especially since colleges do not take responsibility and interject upon the discovery of these missing pieces of educational foundation. Rather, colleges seem to have no problem in letting these students fall through the cracks and graduate as inadequate writers. In the real world, there are several implications to never acquiring these fundamental writing skills. In most professions that require a college degree, an expectation of being a proficient writer exists. Especially if a student is coming from a liberal arts college, a type of institution that emphasizes the importance of graduating well-rounded students that are competent in writing, a future employer is likely expecting a proficient writer.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO BEGIN BRIDGING THE GAP

As previously stated, I propose that in order to begin bridging this gap, writing centers should acknowledge the problem at hand, and at the very least, distribute a packet composed of clear, accessible handouts that cover the foundational writing skills. Since these skills are not taught in colleges, as students are expected to have already mastered them as a result of their previous education, this packet will give the students, who either

lack or must improve upon these skills, an opportunity to do so. This packet will also clarify to students what is expected of their writing at the college level. This packet should be available to all students, especially those who are just beginning their college careers and perhaps are unsure of what to expect.

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