Wait Until You Get to College... Transitions from High School to College Writing

Cindy Olson and Anne O'Meara

CINDY: After 30 years of teaching high school English, I find myself plagued by the same questions: What do colleges and universities expect of their entry-level students in terms of writing ability? Am I preparing students adequately for those expectations? How have those expectations changed over time?

I am equally plagued by the fear that I have lost touch with what college writing is all about these days. It's been a long time since I was an undergraduate, and although I have had several opportunities to reconnect with college writing as a graduate student and teaching assistant since then, I have never had the opportunity to have a real dialogue with college instructors about what they think of the writing skills of their entry-level students.

In 2001 I had the good fortune to attend the NCTE conference in Milwaukee, where I heard Dr. Edward Kearns from the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley address this very topic. He surveyed instructors at UNC about the kinds of writing they assigned and how they evaluated it. The common sense and pragmatism of this study really appealed to me.

Since over 85% of the students who graduate from the high school where I teach will go on to post-secondary education, and since at least half of those students will attend the "hometown" university—Minnesota State University, Manka-

to—it seemed a good idea to me to have a similar dialogue with MSU professors.

My good fortune continued when Anne O'Meara from the MSU English department responded to my query in January of 2005. Since then, we have had a very productive conversation about just what that transition from high school to college writer means.

ANNE: I began teaching in junior high school where I taught 7th and 8th grade English among other things. Later, I went back to graduate school and was a teaching assistant as I worked on my doctorate. I taught all kinds of composition—the first and second course in college composition as well as upper-level writing courses in writing for the sciences, writing for the social sciences, and writing for the arts. When I was hired as a composition specialist at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I trained TAs to teach Composition 101 and occasionally taught various graduate courses for middle and secondary school teachers in the theory and practice of teaching writing. In the last several years, my attention has turned more to college teaching and faculty development in writing across the curriculum. So it had been quite a while since I had thought about high school writers.

When my department chair asked if I was interested in answering Cindy's inquiry, I really was. I thought that high school had changed a lot since I had been around teachers there and since my own sons had graduated. Talking with my nieces and nephews made me curious. I wondered what kinds of things would help students like them make a smooth transition into college writing and make them want to write well there.

The Study

We met and brainstormed questions we wanted answered—questions to help us understand how "the other half" lives:

Purpose

- How independent are high school and college writers in conceiving and executing their writing assignments?
- What types of writing do high school and college writers typically do?
- What are the strengths of high school and college writers?
- What are the areas of concern expressed by high school and college instructors?
- What are the key assessment concerns of high school and college instructors?

Design

Surveys

At the university, we enlisted the help of our technology team who helped us launch a Zoomerang survey, inviting responses from college instructors of all 100-level courses (except Composition 101) and college instructors of 200-level writing-intensive courses. We asked them to identify their rank, department, and whether they assigned more writing in their classes than short answers on exams. If the writing required in their classes went beyond this, we asked them to continue with the survey and tell us about the kinds of writing assignments they made, including the length of papers and the number of drafts; the ways in which they assisted students with their writing and research processes; the methods and criteria they used for evaluation; and their experience dealing with plagiarism. Ninety-six college instructors completed the long survey.

We gave the same survey to all high school teachers at two area high schools. Fifty-four high school instructors completed the long survey.

Focus Groups

After studying the data from the surveys, we conducted

focus groups. The focus groups with college instructors included two groups: composition instructors in one, and instructors from other disciplines in the other. The high school focus groups included instructors in several inter-disciplinary professional learning communities (PLCs). For the past several years the district-wide focus for the PLC groups has been to study writing practices across the curriculum.

Data

The 45-item Zoomerang survey took the form of positive statements with Likert-type response choices. For example, one question was about types of writing the instructor assigned:

I assign reaction or response papers.				
Not at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always

The data we report here is the sum of the "Often" and "Almost Always" responses.

The data we include in the boxes below represent the sum of the percentages of instructors choosing the "often" and "almost always" responses.

We also include in the boxes quotations from the focus groups and from relevant articles in print. For the amount of attention student writing receives in the press, there is not a great deal of scholarly writing and research about the transition from high school to college writing.

Discussion: Surveys

Kinds of Assignments

Our first question concerned the types of writing assignments given to high school and college students. We wondered about assignment genres, topic choice, and page limits.

Assignment Genres		
	HS	**College**
essay exams	40%	38%
informal writing	48%	46%
summaries of readings	21%	17%
creative writing	33%	11%

Assignment Genres		
	HS	**College**
reaction/response	20%	43%
analysis	15%	44%
research papers:		
informative	16%	30%
analytical	24%	29%
argumentative	13%	19%

ANNE: There is a large crossover in kinds of genres that have to do with writing to learn. About equal percentages of college and high school teachers assign informal writing (46% and 48% respectively), essay exams (38%, 40%), and summaries of readings (17%, 21%). The differences emerge in the genres where independent thinking, particularly analysis and synthesis, is called for, writing in which the student is to take a stance in relation to the course material. A greater percentage of college than high school instructors assign analysis papers (44%, 15% respectively), reaction or response papers (43%, 20%), and research papers of various kinds: informative (30%, 16%), analytical (29%, 24%) and argumentative (19%, 13%). These findings seem developmentally appropriate, but do point to a leap that students must make when they move from high school to college.

CINDY: The crossover surprised me, and rather pleasantly in some respects. As a staunch supporter of research pa-

pers, I was pleased to see they are still a mainstay of the college experience. The issue of whether or not high school students should be assigned research papers is an ongoing discussion. On the one hand, high school teachers note accurately the onerous task it is to lead students through the research process. Often class sizes and time restrictions make this virtually impossible. Teaching students how to gather information, synthesize it, and formulate a sound thesis is labor-intensive work. However, this is perhaps a result of what some of the other data show: the significant differences in the amount of reaction/response and analytical papers. It leads me to believe, first, that we at the high school level need to do much more in critical analysis than we currently do, and, second, that perhaps if we did, the research process might be smoother. In other words, it seems to me that, developmentally, something is lacking in critical thinking and analytical skills that makes the transition from high school to college writing more problematic.

Topics of Assignments

	HS	College
select own topic	31%	42%
assigned topic	28%	42%
choice within genre	35%	49%

CINDY: Anne and I mulled over this data for a while before we came to any theories about it. Here we have some distinct differences. The significant differences in topic autonomy reflect the differences in clientele and the ability of students to work independently as well. The most frequent strategy in high school is the topic choice within a genre (35% compared to 49% in college). Thirty-one percent of the high school teachers reported having students choose their own topics while 28% report "often" or "almost always." assigning a topic. My experience leads me to believe that choice within a genre is most popular because it combines the best of the other two strategies: the freedom of choice tempered with some structure so students have some direction. I know that most of my students struggle when given

complete control over their topic choices. Most appreciate some place to begin, although they are resistant to strict prescriptions.

I had to rely on my own experience to come up with an explanation for the high school results. When I assign writing, students usually balk at being "prescribed" a topic. Their experience in English classes has been based heavily on personal writing; writing more formally in third person is something with which they are less comfortable. However, they also balk at being given free rein. Having complete autonomy in topic choice is uncomfortable for many reasons, but probably mostly because they have a limited sphere of experience and interests upon which to draw. This ties in directly to observations on the part of both high school and college teachers about the depth and breadth of the reading their students do or, more accurately, DON'T do. Consequently, my students like some parameters to their writing topics. They are happy to choose on their own within a prescribed general topic area or genre.

ANNE: The data here mystified me. I thought that college teachers would give students much freer rein in the choice of topics. My explanation for the data we received is that college teachers often have students analyze a particular article, situation, or work of art according to a given framework then being studied. Sometimes teachers have students choose their own object to analyze but specify the framework or genre (analysis, comparison etc.) to be used. All of these other assignments could be considered "specifying the topic," even though they require a great deal of critical, independent thinking, more than "assigning the topic" would seem to represent.

Page Limits

	HS	College
1 page or less	35%	29%
2–4 pages	23%	49%
5–7 pages	3%	16%
8–10 pages	0%	8%
11 and up	0%	8%

CINDY: The page limits data didn't really render any surprises. I would expect to find longer page requirements at the college level. Students tackle more complex writing assignments in college, which logically necessitate longer discourse. At the high school level, students find themselves writing shorter papers but probably writing more frequently. Although we didn't ask this in the survey, it might be interesting to note the total numbers of papers required in courses at each level. Shorter papers are theoretically less time-consuming to assess, although that's not always the case. Longer papers take a tremendous level of focus that is not very prevalent in high school writers. My guess is that paper reading and evaluating consumes more time at the high school level because the class load is usually larger, less time is given to teachers for paper work, and papers tend to be more problematic and require closer attention.

> "Students must be able and willing to take responsibility for engaging with the course materials … [In high school] students were expected (and accustomed) to simply follow directions and do their best to meet the teachers' expectations … The college writing classroom, on the other hand, resisted such a stance actively."
>
> Peter Kittle,
> "It's Not the High School Teacher's Fault."

Instructor's Support of Writing

Next we investigated the kinds of support offered to writers in high school and college writers, including modeling of processes and discussion of writing in class, the number of drafts required, and types of feedback provided during the writing process.

Instructional Support		
	HS	**College**
Model research	51%	46%
Model writing process	49%	41%
Use exemplars	41%	28%
In-class writing	52%	20%

Numbers of Drafts		
	HS	**College**
1 draft	62%	70%
2 drafts	56%	36%
3 or more drafts	21%	11%

[NOTE: These figures include "sometimes" as well as "often" and "almost always."]

Conferences and Feedback		
	HS	**College**
Required with instructor	15%	22%
Required with student peer groups	45%	26%
Required revision after written instructor feedback	31%	27%

ANNE: My immediate impression from the data on instructional support is that college instructors in lower-level courses expect their students to be in charge of their own writing and their own writing processes. Many expect that when students complete Composition 101, they should be ready to write independently. Less than half "often" or "almost always" model writing or writing techniques in their classes and only one draft is required by 54% of instructors. Revising after instructor feedback, conferencing about writing with the instructor, or conferencing with student peer groups is required by less than

27% of the instructors. Students can, of course, seek out instructors or friends to give them feedback, but unless they take the initiative, they will be left to their own devices in most cases. My guess is that as they get into their majors, they may get more help on writing in their discipline. College instructors, like high school instructors, have many students and many demands on their time. In major classes, where instructors and students share a knowledge base as well as various purposes for writing (lab reports, incident reports in social sciences etc.), talk about strategies for writing is more integral to coursework.

> "Only ten weeks separate a twelfth grader from a 'thirteenth' grader. These two and a half months are metamorphic ones, but, essentially, the 18 year-old who graduated from high school in June is the same young adult navigating the maze of first-year college orientation in August."
>
> Herb Budden, Mary B. Nicolini, Stephen L. Fox, and Stuart Greene "What We Talk about When We Talk about College Writing."

CINDY: I certainly expected to see more autonomy at the college level, and our data reflect that. In high school, student autonomy is also greatly impacted by the diversity of the clientele. We deal with a huge range of ability levels. Some of our students are not college-bound; if they are not, they tend to have many more achievement issues that necessitate additional support—access to technology and to remedial writing and reading help, for example.

ANNE: One surprise for me, in understanding differences in the high school and college settings, was the difference in students that Cindy alludes to. Although we college professors think we have a wide spectrum of self-motivation and work

ethic, our range is quite small compared to that range in high school. Most of the students at MSU are paying their own way through jobs and loans; they want to succeed. Most of those who are insufficiently motivated at the time drop out. As students select majors, they join what could be called "discourse communities;" they share knowledge, ways of analyzing and evaluating, and even a specialized language in some cases. College teachers can assume a much more homogeneous audience in terms of goals and motivation.

CINDY: Students at the high school level also tend to have a very utilitarian view of education, seeing their coursework as a means to earn credits and ultimately to earn a diploma. They are more inclined to stick with the familiar—strategies that make them feel secure and don't require stepping out of their comfort levels as do higher-level thinking tasks. Consequently, it is no surprise to see that high school teachers use models of process and products more frequently than do college instructors. The most notable difference is in the amount of writing done in class, an amount that is necessary to provide the kind of support needed and to compensate in part for the lack of time to conference. High school students need much more assurance that they are "doing it right."

The irony is that although students are expected to work more independently at the college level, they do have much more access to their instructors for support. College instructors have regularly scheduled office hours during which they are available to conference with students about their papers. High school teachers have no such thing. If conferencing occurs, it is on the fly, either a few minutes grabbed in class with a roomful of students present or squeezed in before or after school around extracurricular activities and meetings. Clearly if high school students need more instructional support for their writing – and it is evident they do – we should be building that time into our daily schedule.

In 1999, the NCTE wrote composition class size recommendations, citing research showing "significant" achievement increases in classes of fewer than 20. Yet rarely do we find this

to be common practice in the real world.

> "No football coach in his right mind would try to teach 150 players one hour per day and hope to win the game on Friday night. No, the team is limited to 40 or 50 highly motivated players, and the coach has three or four assistants to work on the many skills needed to play the game. The 'student-teacher' ratio is maybe 15:1. But the English teacher—all alone—has 150 'players' of the game of composition (not to mention literature, language, and the teaching of other matters dropped into the English curriculum by unthinking enthusiasts)."
>
> John C. Maxwell, quoted in
> "More than a Number: Why Class Size Matters."

Evaluation of Writing

Finally, we examined the priorities of instructors in high school and college as they evaluated student writing.

Evaluation Priorities

	HS	College
Spelling and punctuation	83%	73%
Complete, coherent sentences	80%	76%
Organization	75%	75%
*Introduction and conclusion	74%	
*Paragraphing	73%	
Idea development/evidence	72%	75%
Grammatical correctness	72%	74%

Evaluation Lesser Concerns	HS	College
*Introductions and conclusions		46%
Word choice	45%	45%
*Paragraphing		42%
Manuscript preparation	24%	30%
Range of abstraction	33%	26%

CINDY: Here I was pleasantly surprised to learn how in sync the high school and college instructors we surveyed were. A college instructor friend of mine once told me, "Even the most brilliant paper can be marred by excessive technical problems. They get in the way of those brilliant ideas as much as if they were blotches of mud." I always liked that analogy. That being said, I'm also glad to see that these are not the only high priorities. Organization is a very high priority, although it's interesting to note some differences in interpreting just what that term means. At the high school level, we do focus a great deal of time on the structure of a paper, which is why the five-paragraph theme is so widely used. It is a formula that works for students who have difficulty sorting their ideas. It helps them differentiate between a thesis and supporting arguments. We do, however, see the five-paragraph essay as just a starting point and not the be-all and end-all of rhetorical structure. Ultimately, we want them to convey their ideas in a logical, coherent manner and to break away from any pat formulas.

ANNE: I'm very happy to see that our evaluation priorities are so similar. As the data show, organization and idea development are two of the top three among college teachers. They are also very high among priorities of high school teachers; the focus on paragraphing, introductions and conclusions as well as the conventions of English seem entirely appropriate as well for high school students. The big gap between percentages

for the top five or six concerns and the lower ones—a drop from 72% to 46%—is a clear indication of agreement on the priorities.

My guess is that high school and college teachers mean different things by "organization" and "idea development/evidence," but that is probably very appropriate. I think the important thing is to continuously point out to students that they are writing to communicate ideas clearly to an audience. At whatever level of study, students need to see writing as something more than repetition of ideas presented in class or displays of correctness. These are necessary starting points, but not sufficient places to stop. As some of the college focus group instructors remarked, students shouldn't just "clean up" their writing when revising. In revising students need to pay particular attention to their (evolving) purpose and the ideas. They need to see writing as something they construct.

Focus Group Discussions:

Although the survey data were interesting, in all honesty we found it much more enjoyable to talk to our colleagues than to look at numbers. It's something we just don't ever get the chance to do and we thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Although we talked separately to our high school and college colleagues, we were very surprised at the common concerns expressed. Problems identified and discussed by both groups centered around reading and research skills.

ANNE: To me, shoptalk about teaching is very interesting. I feel somewhat ashamed to say this (because it is so boring to people outside the profession), but I do think it's really interesting, especially when teachers are talking about teaching the same class. How people teach, what they notice about their students, how they think students learn—all these are quite fascinating topics. The interminable shop talk is one of my best memories of being a TA, so I was really happy to be at the focus groups with the volunteer university teachers. It was really heartening to hear the teachers from other disciplines (Women's Studies, History, Urban Studies, Philosophy) so engaged in stu-

dents' writing problems. I hadn't realized it, but I guess I thought English teachers were the only ones who thought about writing problems in detail. These teachers noticed the same problems we English teachers always discuss: lack of close reading, not enough evaluating of sources, and problems with thinking through ideas and then writing articulately about them.

The English TAs (our second focus group) were treading more familiar ground—English 101—but again it was very interesting to hear how they characterized their students: they're really willing to learn, to experiment, and they are enthusiastic, but they want a pattern to plug into and are reluctant to take off on their own or to take a stand. The TAs also identified problems: students need to be able to distinguish between fact and opinion, to think critically, and to see how an argument is working on the page.

The two focus groups noticed a lot of the same problems and were so upbeat about the importance of trying to find a better way to address them. Occasionally the conversation took a "tangent" (from the "official" purpose of information gathering), and people exchanged ideas about how they had tried to address problems. It made me think we could all use more of these conversations from time to time to keep us energized about our field.

CINDY: I was very encouraged by what I heard in the university focus group sessions. Certainly as a high school teacher, I felt somewhat intimidated initially—not because I felt any inferiority, but because I expected to take some flak about the preparation—or lack thereof—of entering college students. That was absolutely not the case. What I found were individuals who were very engaged in the teaching of writing regardless of their disciplines, and who were very interested in discussing what we all could do to help our students succeed. As Anne said, we saw a number of common concerns emerge, and, most importantly, a desire to continue our dialogue on a regular basis.

Reading

CINDY: One thing that seems to have eroded from the high school curriculum is critical reading. It's not that we high school teachers don't try to address this, but it is becoming increasingly more difficult to integrate it into what we do because we see such a need for basic comprehension instruction. Many of my colleagues see this as a societal issue. Reading is not something that many people do for recreation anymore. Even some of our brightest students report not enjoying reading or not doing much of any reading outside of what is required in a class.

> "… many students report that they do not read regularly at all, and when they do, they often find reading to be boring … These responses suggest that reading is not an integral part of many entering students' communications experiences."
>
> John Pekins
> "A Community College Instructor Reflects on First-Year Composition."

This lack of reading is one reason we have reinstituted Silent Sustained Reading in our school. At first it was difficult to get kids to take part, but now that we've been at it a few years, I am seeing less resistance. In fact, it is not uncommon to see many students carrying around their SSR books all day and reading them when they have a spare minute in a class. Sometimes they get so involved in their books that they read them in class when they should be paying attention to the lesson. That's a delightful problem.

This delightful problem is tempered somewhat by the choice of materials. I'm not sure students are equipped to make the best decisions about what to read, although I know the research shows that any reading is better than no reading. My school provides the local newspaper for each classroom, and I

am always glad to see how many students will pick it up and read it. However, many of them report not getting the local newspaper at home.

HS Reading Concerns

"Many are quick readers, but they don't comprehend the information. They only get bits and pieces that do not fit together. It often reflects that they don't understand the author's intentions."

"Students who read a lot are much better critical thinkers."

"Poor readers can't express themselves, can't explain in depth."

"I find myself having to spoon feed the information too often because they have trouble comprehending."

ANNE: Perhaps the most surprising thing to me in this research was the adamant discussion of college students' poor reading skills. Reading isn't something that college instructors naturally tend to think about, but it is becoming a major concern.

College Reading Concerns

"They don't write like readers. They don't appear to read writing that will help them; that is, models of good writing."

"Reading comprehension is a problem. They don't recognize that something is an argument, don't distinguish an argument from information or an opinion."

"They don't seem to have a sense of the author's opinion when they are reading."

College Reading Concerns

"They have difficulty assessing material they're critiquing, looking closely at WHAT and HOW the argument works."

"They don't critically reread their own work."

ANNE: It appears that college instructors need to be much more explicit in their discussions of reading strategies and spend some class time assessing and addressing students' reading skills. Teachers in both college focus groups—the composition teachers and the teachers of courses outside of English—spoke about this problem in several areas, which boiled down to the students' inability to understand WHAT is being said (the content), HOW (recognizing the presentation and argument strategies being used), and WHY (recognizing and questioning both the content and the strategies). This inability to read well also shows up in student writing both in terms of how they put their own writing together (a lack of models to call on) and in terms of their ability to read their own writing critically—to re-read, assess, and revise effectively.

"… the time has arrived for first-year composition instructors to become more knowledgeable about the reading process and its applications to the process of writing college compositions."

John Pekins
"A Community College Instructor Reflects on First-Year Composition."

Research

According to both high school and college instructors, research problems were closely related to reading problems. Ad-

ditionally, students had problems finding, evaluating, and using their sources well. Electronic sources were a big area of concern.

> "… as novices, most freshmen have neither the tools to pry open their sources nor the familiarity with them to ask "why" questions rather than "what" questions. They tend to summarize and describe."
>
> Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz
> "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year."

College Research Concerns:
finding sources

"Students are generally very adept at navigating the Internet, but they have a great deal of difficulty using more sophisticated search tools and databases."

"They don't think of synonyms or alternate search terms."

"They don't use hard copy sources."

College Research Concerns:
evaluating sources

Lack of ability to determine the quality of websites

Source credibility

They use the first hit on Geocities, Wikipedia, Google

"Wikipedia! If I see one more paper using this source, I'll scream."

College Research Concerns:
evaluating sources

"It's not Wikipedia itself; it's the mindlessness of using it. I want students to make more responsible choices in their research."

College Research Concerns:
using sources

"An insecurity in understanding text leads students to cut and paste information without citation, accidentally or intentionally."

"Citation conventions are a problem."

"You have to keep asking for elaboration, have them keep looking for it."

ANNE: I was surprised at the vehemence of the focus groups about the use of Wikipedia—and it didn't matter if it was high school or college instructors. Everyone had the same complaint. Wikipedia is often the first hit when something is googled, and students, for all their technological savvy, don't stop to think about where the information comes from. It looks official. If we teachers thought about how many hits we go through when we google something (I certainly don't go through very many), I think we might be a little more sympathetic and may be able to offer some realistic methods we use to get to the more reliable sources. We are all in information overload, so we need to focus on better research strategies to find what is needed (for example, creating better search terms), to identify good sources, and to use those sources effectively as support in the writing. There seemed to be so much agreement about the pervasiveness of research and reading problems that it's probably not enough to just point strategies out; we need to adjust our teaching, so that the

time spent matches the importance we attach to these parts of the research process. This is not an easy task in high school or college. It is slow, meticulous work. But it's especially important, as we combine our efforts in teaching research and reading along with writing, to help students select the important points and visualize the arguments they see in the articles they have found and then elaborate on the information they cite and show how it supports the point they are making. The teachers in the focus groups felt that it was necessary to persuade students that this kind of painstaking work is worthwhile.

CINDY: The research process is so overwhelming to high school students, and it's overwhelming for the instructors who try to teach it. My colleagues and I see huge issues with students being able to critically evaluate sources. A social studies teacher told me, "One of my students wrote a paper claiming there were some 350 million homeless shelters in the U.S. His source was some 8th grader's website." I hope this is an extreme example, yet my own students also tend to ignore the evaluation process in favor of simply accessing the information. When they find something, they want to use it, whether it's reliable or not. We also see Wikipedia as a huge problem, but I don't see this as any different than the problem we had years ago when students simply summarized entries from encyclopedias they accessed easily on the library bookshelf. Today is much more complex, though. We have so many sources of information in so many different formats. It is a real challenge to teach students how to maneuver their way through this plethora of information. Add to that the technology gap that is becoming more and more of an issue with needy students who simply don't have the access that their fellow students have. They don't have the luxury of spending all kinds of time learning to navigate the Internet. We have a real obligation to level the technology playing field.

Looking Forward

ANNE: Another surprise for me as we were conducting this research is the extent to which NCLB and college entrance

tests negatively impact high school curriculum and teaching. It now appears that colleges may have a similar challenge. Recently in the *New York Times Magazine*, there is an article, "No Gr du te Left Behind," which considers the recent move on some fronts to extend standardized testing to college. It is easy to say, as proponents often do, that teachers—in high school as well as college—object to these tests because the tests will find them out. The tests will show that they are not doing their jobs and need to be "held accountable." It is hard to argue with such an audience that these tests are poor measures of actual critical thinking and writing skills. It is even harder to argue that they are, in fact, destructive because they leech away instructional time that should be devoted to the teaching and learning of the very skills they purport to assess. If an institution's funding or ranking or reputation is dependent on student performance on these kinds of tests, the institution will make sure that students know how to perform adequately on the tests.

A student learning outcome that states "Students will perform adequately on NCLB (or NGLB) tests" is certainly, however, a short term goal of questionable educational value. Completing a 30 minute written essay on "My Favorite Food" or even "Creativity" is not a good indicator of one's ability to perform research (to read, analyze, critique, and synthesize sources for a particular project) or to convey complex information strategically or persuasively to a given audience. The time spent teaching test-taking strategies for such a short-term goal detracts from the already scarce time allotted for teaching the tasks we have outlined above. It would be better for the test evaluators to spend the extra time it would take to read essays composed in a more natural situation that more accurately demonstrate student abilities to research, read, and write. Even this essay testing situation, though, is unlikely to address the further problem that students see no reason to perform for test givers with the abstract mission of ranking their school for funding or marketing purposes.

I've gotten on the soap box here and don't want to close without making a plug for the value of continued conversations

between high school and college teachers on how best to help students continue learning to read, write, and research effectively.

CINDY: My colleagues and I have talked extensively about how our curriculum has been plundered because of the demands of standardized testing. As Anne said, the topics in the writing tests tend to be of dubious value when we consider what information we want these tests to give us. For many students standardized testing is a daunting experience; for others, it is a mere inconvenience. Both situations reinforce over-dependence on the good old five-paragraph essay format. For the first group, it's something they can rely on and feel comfortable about; for the second group, it's a quick formula that's easy to follow. Students know it works, and they are leery about breaking out of the pattern.

In an ideal world, we would remind ourselves that the more students write, the better they write. We would recognize that class size has a direct impact on how much we can have our students write. We would acknowledge the benefit of writing conferences. In this ideal world, we would assert the need for writing teachers to have manageable class loads and ample time for conferencing and reading student work.

I am encouraged, though, that in my district writing has become a comprehensive goal. The administration has begun to support a "writing across the curriculum" initiative which I believe has tremendous potential. Students are starting to see writing as an integral part of every class, not just English class. Teachers are being given support to learn how to teach and evaluate writing in their disciplines. It is vital that we English teachers do our part to support this initiative. It is vital that we have opportunities to work side by side with our content area colleagues to continue our dialogue about writing instruction.

As the world economy continues to change and we see even greater demand for highly skilled, articulate workers, we will have to provide support for the increasing numbers of students who go on to post-secondary education. We can't do this without a continuing dialogue with our counterparts in higher education.

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