

A Case Study Exploring the Connections between Locally Defined Writing and Student Engagement: Toward a “Think Little” Model for Assessment and Accountability

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ABSTRACT

WPAs are positioned to provide valuable perspective on local and broader assessment and accountability conversations, and can also contribute to the larger understanding of what writing is and how it operates. This article reports on an exploratory case study that conducts an extrapolation inquiry looking at connections between writing, evaluated in a local context through a campus-wide, junior writing portfolio, and student engagement, measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement. The article advocates for WPAs to use assessment data from local contexts as a way to document the complexity of postsecondary writing.

We are going to have to gather up the fragments of knowledge and responsibility that we have parceled out to the bureaus and the corporations and the specialists, and put those fragments back together again in our own minds

—Wendell Berry, “Think Little” (76–77)

INTRODUCTION

Connections between the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and writing are often framed through the lens of accountability. Recently, Paul Anderson et al. detailed a large-scale study examining the relationship between writing and engagement across multiple institutions, an important perspective in the current assessment and accountability climate. Their study provides a high-level view of what students report learning across

multiple disciplines and institutions, and provides evidence for the value of writing and engagement practices in postsecondary settings. George Kuh, one of the creators of NSSE, states “student engagement . . . has emerged during the past fifteen years to become one of the most important ‘organizing constructs for institutional assessment, accountability, and improvement’” (“Conceptual and Empirical Foundations” 5). In “What is NSSE?,” Charles Paine et al. explain NSSE’s definition of engagement as “a construct that represents the degree to which (1) students devote time and effort to educationally purposeful activities, and (2) schools, programs, and teachers organize curricula to support and encourage students to devote time and effort to these activities (267). Additionally, Charles Paine details the work of the CWPA/NSSE Consortium, a collaboration which created twenty-seven additional writing-focused questions administered with the regular NSSE survey to establish writing-specific benchmarks comparable across institution types. Addison and McGee note that such data provide “more information on writing instruction in the United States [and] also an understanding of the extent to which engaging in certain types of writing instruction measures up to NSSE’s benchmarks” (152). However, all of the NSSE survey questions (including the twenty-seven Consortium items) are self-reported student responses about their connection to and engagement with writing. NSSE results do not reflect actual writing performance. Paine et al. offer valuable suggestions for how WPAs might use NSSE data in their work, but the use only considers writing and engagement data parallel to each other, and never in direct relationship.

Often, WPAs aren’t positioned to participate in such large-scale research projects. In this paper, I want to turn attention to opportunities WPAs have to explore how local assessment data—often arising from classroom settings—can be used to explore local definitions of writing, which also contributes valuable perspective to the larger understanding of what writing is and how writing works. In particular, I report on an exploratory case study of how writing—assessed and defined in a local context—relates to student engagement—assessed and defined by NSSE, a construct with high value for and within writing programs. Examinations of local definitions of writing against external measures help illuminate how writing operates in natural settings. Such an analysis is considered extrapolation inquiry as detailed by Diane Kelly-Riley and Norbert Elliot in “The *WPA Outcomes Statement*, Validation, and the Pursuit of Localism.”

In an essay from 1969, naturalist author Wendell Berry reflects on the tendency of large social movements to stall, and asserts that

for too many they have been the fashionable politics of the moment . . . undertaken too much in ignorance . . . too much simplified . . . powered . . . by impatience and guilt of conscience and short-term enthusiasm, and too little by an authentic social vision and long-term conviction and deliberation. For most people those causes have remained almost entirely abstract . . . [with] too little personal involvement, and too much involvement in organizations that were insisting that *other* organizations should do what was right. (69)

Berry warns of issues that become “public cause[s], served by organizations that will self-righteously criticize and condemn other organizations, inflated for a while by a lot of public talk in the media” (70). He argues that the solution to this disconnect is to “think little,” to take direct and specific action toward solving problems. For Berry, planting a garden is a more meaningful act that does more “to solve [a problem] than any bureaucrat who is talking about it in general” (78). Certainly, for WPAs, assessment and accountability represent the Big Issues of which Berry warns. Chris Gallagher notes that assessment is a daily reality for WPAs with multiple guises: “politics and pedagogy, burden and opportunity, threat and promise, weapon and tool” (29). The assessment and accountability mandates result from broader, national political initiatives that suggest that students aren’t learning enough in college (see Arum and Roksa’s *Academically Adrift*) and other national conversations that politicize the ills and problems of public education.

As Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington observe in “Responsibility and Composition’s Future in the Twenty-first Century: Reframing Accountability,” accountability efforts tend to define writing—and other constructs—in very limited ways. They argue “writing is narrowly conceived, sometimes as grammatical correctness or, more recently, as the reproduction of particular interpretations or modes” (74–76). As a result, the complexity of writing is seldom captured in materials or reports that respond to assessment and accountability mandates. Similarly, the domain of engagement also has been narrowly defined. Michael Olivas argues that “the rise of the [Surveys of Student Engagement] was spawned in the tidal wave of the [No Child Left Behind]-related ethos, where assessments matter at all levels, including structural didactic shifts, such as the widespread use of instructional technology, asynchronous learning, and web-based teaching” (2). Alexander McCormick states that “accountability is accomplished by the marketplace—that is, the response of students and their parents—which rewards and punishes institutions based on publicly reported performance information” (98). In other words, writing and

engagement exist in politically charged contexts, and writing programs experience these pressures at multiple levels.

Gallagher observes that WPAs occupy unique terrain from which meaningful assessment data can be drawn and conclusions can be made, and, in this paper, I advocate that a “think little” approach can be used effectively by WPAs to respond to problems observed in local, institutional, and broader assessment and accountability efforts. It’s important that WPAs don’t conflate Adler-Kassner’s and Harrington’s caution about narrowly defined constructs of writing with localness, because writing practices within our local contexts represent a great deal of diversity and variety. For local inquiry, it’s important to include writing that comes from unique situations of instructional settings.

Our WPA work requires us to be attentive to the accountability context, but we also are stewards of writing enacted in multiple, complex sites. Brian Huot, Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O’Neill, and I assert that local definitions of writing situated within instructional contexts should be the primary focus within an assessment and accountability frame. In “Standards, Outcomes, and All that Jazz,” Kathleen Blake Yancey describes how the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition was deliberately articulated in terms of common areas for learning rather than specific levels of performance. This nuance is important. Rather than reporting how well we meet an arbitrary and external level of performance, the terms we have set for ourselves in the Outcomes Statement invite us to investigate the ways our programs and students meet our common goals through differentiated levels of performance. As a result, WPAs should document the local varieties of writing, and it’s important to demonstrate these local yields by virtue of considering what is produced in instructional settings. There is an inherent tension within our work to quantify and measure what students can do, but we also need to expand and explore broader notions of writing in the academic and public realms.

CASE STUDY: CONSIDERING WRITING THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

In “The *WPA Outcomes Statement*, Validation, and the Pursuit of Localism,” Kelly-Riley and Elliot argue for the need to consider extrapolation evidence related to writing performance in writing programs by posing three questions:

1. How does . . . writing . . . relate to other measures of writing?
2. What methods can be used to examine the nature of the relationship of the given model to related ones?

3. What methods can be used to expand the construct model so that its relationship to robust measures may be increased? (102)

Looking at writing in particular contexts defined in relationship to other learning outcomes helps build more complex views of writing. Extrapolation is “defined as the extension of [a] limited representation [of a construct] to the full range of performances in the target domain” (92). In other words, extrapolation inquiry considers the variables within and external to writing that help give it shape. For WPAs, empirically based inquiry offers one way to explore and answer extrapolation questions. A common approach for empirically based extrapolation inquiry explores postsecondary writing ability in terms of performance on standardized measures, such as the SAT and ACT, and then subsequent writing performance in first-year writing curricula through course grades. In 2008, Ernest Pascarella et al. used extrapolation techniques to explore how engagement benchmarks related to other measures that support behaviors of “quality of undergraduate education.” Precedence has been established using these techniques for both writing and engagement, and extrapolation inquiry often considers different measures at relatively close, but distinct points in time. Often data used in extrapolation inquiry must be drawn from staggered points because of the nature of the timing of the administration of various assessments.

Study Description

My study took place at a large, public research university in the Pacific Northwest that has maintained a mostly constant presence on the list of *U.S. News and World Report’s* “College Rankings Writing in the Disciplines Academic Programs to Look For.” The institution touts that it robustly promotes writing throughout the entire undergraduate experience, stating that writing happens in every department on campus, and documents such in biennial reports about the institution-wide, junior-level Writing Portfolio assessment. Evans and He observe “papers submitted for the Portfolio came from nearly every program at the institution” (48). The institution has a writing-rich undergraduate curriculum with embedded writing requirements throughout all areas of study; writing assessment requirements at the entry and junior levels; and a writing center that supports writers through small group and face-to-face tutorials.

Situating this study in the junior-level writing portfolio assessment allows for exploration of a broader definition of writing—one that goes beyond the traditional conception of WPA work as something limited to first-year composition, and encompasses a multi-disciplinary perspective. The domain of writing is explored in relationship to data about stu-

dent engagement reported as students prepare to exit their undergraduate study. The junior writing portfolio is comprised of an impromptu essay and three course papers written for college courses that have been approved by the original instructor for inclusion in the portfolio and serves as a mid-career placement test (see Haswell and Wyche). An expert-rater system for evaluation—one that relies on teachers' classroom expertise about student and classroom expectations to make direct placements into Writing in the Major courses—is used to evaluate the portfolios (Smith; Haswell).

Faculty members approve course papers originally written in their classes for submission in the Writing Portfolio. The original course instructors evaluate the papers as Acceptable or Outstanding, and this part of the evaluation informs the assessment process. Broadly stated, faculty make one of three decisions: the writing in the portfolio demonstrates a need for supplemental support in Writing in the Major courses; the writing demonstrates readiness to enter into the curriculum unassisted, or the writing demonstrates with a level of quality worthy of recognition beyond acknowledgement of readiness for the upper-division curriculum. Evaluators decide on a range of options for assessment—from needing supplemental writing instruction to deeming the writing exceptional. The actual assessment is communicated in words—Needs Work, Acceptable, Distinction—since the purpose of the assessment is to ascertain instructional needs or accomplishments.

For a WPA, their institution has likely participated in the administration of NSSE at some point in time. NSSE developed out of Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education" and emphasizes "student faculty contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning" (Kuh, "Conceptual and Empirical Foundations" 5). The scope and impact of NSSE is impressive. In 2014, 355,000 first-year and senior students attending more than seven hundred colleges and universities completed the survey, and the surveys were first administered in 1999. NSSE partners with institutions to facilitate decision-making about undergraduate practices and policies to make decisions about program improvement. In particular, the NSSE website touts more than five hundred examples of how "faculty, staff and others can use NSSE results almost immediately to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience" (Kuh, "Conceptual Framework"). There are customizable reports by institution type, size, student-level, and other demographic indicators. In "What Is NSSE?," Paine et al. detail additional background on NSSE and ways in which WPAs can use that data to understand and improve their programs.

The general NSSE survey includes several questions or survey statements related to writing. I identified common groupings, and organized writing-related survey items into six categories: individual writing process, collaborative writing process, interaction with faculty, mental process, length of assigned papers, and educational expectations.

Research Questions

I wanted to explore the relationship between the definition of good writing enacted locally through the required, university-wide, junior-level writing portfolio assessment and engagement as articulated through several questions on the main NSSE survey. I adapted my research questions from the three previously articulated extrapolation questions (above), and the following questions guided my research:

1. What is the relationship between student engagement (defined by the NSSE) and writing (defined within a locally developed, university-wide, junior-level writing portfolio assessment)? In other words, how does writing relate to other measures that quantify writing?
2. What can exploratory techniques reveal about ways in which the six areas relevant to writing on NSSE account for writing performance in the local writing portfolio assessment?
3. What does an expanded view of writing say locally about writing on campus and more broadly?

Methods

I collected archived data of student writing performance assessed in the junior-level, university-wide writing portfolio at a large, public research university in the Pacific northwest and the students' senior-year NSSE responses on the 2004 or 2006 surveys. I worked with the institution's Institutional Research Office to get an archival data set of 2,180 records. Random samples were drawn from this larger set for analysis, and the individual sample sizes for each analysis are reported. The main sample included 42% males and 58% females. Also, 80% of students indicated that English was their first language; 6% indicated that they spoke another language other than English; and 14% did not report their language background.

Since my project focused on extrapolating writing scores to engagement scores, I used scores that were administered as closely together as possible. The junior Writing Portfolio is supposed to be a rising junior exam completed at around sixty credit hours, but in practice, students submit it much

later. According to He and Evans, 65% of students who completed the Writing Portfolio in 2003–2006 did so as rising seniors or later. Additionally, senior-level NSSE questions ask students to recall their undergraduate experiences, so their recollections on these senior surveys include the time during which they compiled and submitted their writing portfolios. Given the exploratory nature of this study to identify trends, these two points in time seemed reasonable to investigate.

Writing and Engagement Scales

Extrapolation inquiry often requires analyzing measures that have different scales. Survey questions on NSSE are phrased in Likert scale statements convertible to 4- or 5-point numeric scales. These statements ask students to comment on frequency (how much or how often). On the 2004 and 2006 NSSE survey questions, I identified six writing behavior–related categories: individual writing process; collaborative writing process; student–faculty interaction; mental activities; length of writing; and educational expectations. Table 1 lists my groupings of writing-related behaviors and individual variables represented as statements on the survey of 2004 or 2006.

For writing, a numeric scale presented more of a challenge since the writing portfolio is assessed using a two-tiered, expert-rater process that makes assessment recommendations geared directly toward a course or instructional decisions. The first tier combines the classroom instructor’s assessment of the individual course paper with faculty assessment of impromptu exams; at this point, many of the portfolios are deemed ready for the Writing in the Major courses, and have no further evaluation. Portfolios that are evaluated as potentially weak or potentially very strong move on to the second tier of evaluation. A Writing in the Major faculty member assesses portfolios at the second tier to determine whether the student needs additional help with the M-course requirements or not, or whether the student has submitted an exceptional Writing Portfolio or not (Haswell, “Two-Tier Rating System”). The rating process asks faculty to make placements directly into the curriculum rather than assign a number to represent an arbitrary value. In the Writing Portfolio, a Needs Work rating means that the student’s writing demonstrates a need for additional writing instruction concurrent to the Writing in the Major course; an Acceptable rating indicates a student’s readiness for Writing in the Major course work; and an Outstanding rating means that the student’s writing is superior as he or she enters the Writing in the Major course requirements.

Table 1
Study Grouping of NSSE Items Related to Writing Process

Writing Behavior Grouping	Specific NSSE variables from 2004 or 2006 survey
Individual Writing Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepared two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in • Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources • Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussion or writing assignments • Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions
Collaborative Writing Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worked with other students on projects during class • Worked with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments • Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary) • Used an electronic medium (listserv, chat group, internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment
Student-Faculty Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Used email to communicate with an instructor • Received prompt feedback from faculty on your academic performance (written or oral) • Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations
Mental Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from your courses and readings so you can repeat them in pretty much the same form • Analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components • Synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships • Making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions • Applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
Length of Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more • Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages • Number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages
Educational Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing clearly and effectively • Thinking critically and analytically

In order to explore how writing and engagement interact, I needed to convert the writing results to a numerically based scale. Given that my study was exploratory in nature, I converted the nine possible configurations of writing portfolio scores to represent a numeric scale, as there is a logical hierarchy to the range of possible scores. The combinations of the assessments of the impromptu evaluation with the overall results determine the placement on the hierarchical scale (see table 2).

Table 2
Study Scale and Original Writing Portfolio Rating

Study Scale Conversion	Tier I: Timed Exam + Evaluation of Course Papers	Tier II: Overall Rating
1	Needs Work	Needs Work
2	Acceptable	Needs Work
3	Needs Work	Acceptable
4	Acceptable	Acceptable (No further review)
5	Acceptable	Acceptable (Reviewed by faculty)
6	Distinction	Acceptable
7	Acceptable	Distinction
8	Distinction	Distinction (Not reviewed)
9	Distinction	Distinction (Reviewed by faculty)

In other words, a one, the lowest point on the scale, represents a student who earned a Needs Work rating on the impromptu exam portion of the writing portfolio, and on the overall course papers. The highest point of the scale, a nine, is an impromptu exam deemed outstanding, and upon further review of the course papers earned a Distinction rating by faculty evaluators. While a timed exam can be evaluated as Needs Work, and later the entire portfolio can be evaluated as Distinction, such moves are rare, and represent outliers. My sample did not include any such portfolios. Additionally, this analysis only included the evaluation of the portfolios as a whole, rather than an analysis of the individual portfolio components. The

nine-point scale also provided adequate distribution in order to do a meaningful analysis.

Statistical Procedures

I used a technique called statistical stepwise regression to investigate how the six areas of engagement may contribute to writing performance. There are a variety of regression techniques available. According to Barbara Tabachnick and Linda Fidell, “standard multiple regression is atheoretical—a shotgun approach” (143), and “statistical (stepwise) regression analysis is a technique that focuses on “model-building rather than model-testing” (144). Statistical stepwise regression can determine how much one domain can be explained by other variables in a separate domain. In this case, I was interested in seeing how much engagement (as self-reported by seniors on the NSSE survey) could be accounted for in writing quality demonstrated in the university-wide writing portfolio assessment results. This type of analysis is commonly done in empirical research to explore how different domains border and overlap with each other, and it’s a technique that can establish a causal relationship. This technique is primarily used in exploratory research, and other regression methods can be used once the initial analysis is completed if the researcher wishes to follow up on the findings.

Findings

The first research question considered the relationship between student engagement and writing, and specifically considered how writing related to other variables that quantified writing within the six NSSE categories. The following tables detail the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations for the six groupings of engagement variables with the writing portfolio score.

Table 3
Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Correlations for Individual Writing Process Variables (measured 1–4, $n = 474$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Portfolio score	Wrote multiple drafts	Integrated information	Included diverse perspectives	Used ideas from other classes
1. Writing portfolio score	4.18	1.71	—	-.014	.032	.095*	.067
2. Wrote multiple drafts	2.38	0.94		—	.329**	.207**	.223**
3. Integrated information from various sources	3.29	0.74			—	.465**	.317**
4. Included diverse perspectives in assignments	2.70	0.87				—	.294**
5. Used ideas from other classes in course	2.86	0.76					—

Correlations are significant at * $p = .05$. ** $p = .01$ (1-tailed)

Table 3 details that the Writing Portfolio score had a weak, but significant correlation with inclusion of diverse perspectives.

Table 4
Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Correlations for Collaborative Writing Process Variables, ($n = 474$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Portfolio score	Worked with other students	Worked outside of class	Tutored students	Used electronic medium
1. Portfolio score	4.18	1.71	—	-.097*	-.111**	.097*	.000
2. Worked with other students on projects	2.32	0.81		—	.317**	.046	.133**
3. Worked outside of class	2.76	0.87			—	.242**	.166**
4. Tutored students	1.91	0.92				—	.145**
5. Used electronic medium to do assignment	2.73	1.01					—

Correlations are significant at * $p = .05$. ** $p = .01$ (1-tailed)

Table 4 details that the Writing Portfolio score had a significant weak and inverse relationship to working with other students on projects and working outside of class. In other words, assigning students to work outside of class and/or working with other students seemed to be related in a negative way to writing performance. The experience of tutoring students also seemed to have a positive relationship to writing performance.

Table 5
Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Correlations for Student-Faculty Interaction Variables and Writing, ($n = 474$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Portfolio score	Emailed faculty	Faculty feedback	Worked hard
1. Portfolio score	4.18	1.71	—	.034	.062	-.061
2. Emailed faculty	3.22	0.80		—	.226**	.275**
3. Received feedback from faculty on academic performance	2.66	0.75			—	.273**
4. Worked hard to meet faculty expectations	2.54	0.84				—

Correlations are significant at $*p = .05$. $**p = .01$ (1-tailed)

Table 5 details that no significant correlations existed between student-faculty variables and writing quality.

Table 6
Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Correlations for Mental Ability Variables and Writing, ($n = 474$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Portfolio	Memorize	Analyze	Synthesize	Evaluate	Apply
1. Portfolio score	4.18	1.71	—	-.011	.050	.055	.066	.079*
2. Memorize	2.98	0.89		—	.201**	.097*	.129**	.058
3. Analyze	3.25	0.75			—	.582**	.443**	.442**
4. Synthesize	2.93	0.84				—	.559**	.487**
5. Evaluate	2.84	0.89					—	.507**
6. Apply	3.22	0.86						—

Correlations are significant at * $p = .05$. ** $p = .01$ (1-tailed)

Table 6 shows that a weak but significant correlation was found between Writing Portfolio results and Apply. In other words, asking students to apply information seemed to be related to improved writing quality.

Table 7
Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Correlations for Amount of Writing Variables and Writing, ($n = 545$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Portfolio	Small	Mid	More
1. Portfolio score	4.14	1.76	—	.007	.085*	.186
2. Small (<5 pages)	3.35	1.09		—	.394**	.138**
3. Mid (5–19 pages)	2.70	0.96			—	.383**
4. More (>20 pages)	1.58	0.81				—

Correlations are significant at * $p = .05$. ** $p = .01$ (1-tailed)

Table 7 details a weak correlation between writing 5–19 pages and writing quality (.085, $p < .05$). Writing quality seems to be positively related to the length of writing assignments that fall between 5 and 19 pages.

Table 8
Means, Standard Deviations, and Inter-Correlations for Educational Expectations Variables, ($n = 542$)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Portfolio	Think critically	Write clearly
1. Portfolio score	4.25	1.69	—	.086*	.145**
2. Think critically	3.22	0.75		—	.564**
3. Write clearly	2.97	0.86			—

Correlations are significant at * $p = .05$. ** $p = .01$ (1-tailed)

Table 8 shows that the expectations for writing clearly and thinking critically had weak and significant correlations with Writing Portfolio scores.

The second research question explores how variables within these six engagement areas account for writing quality. The first question considered how the variables related to each other, but relationship doesn't equal causation. In other words, this question explores the extent to which the writing portfolio score can be attributed to the engagement variables using the statistical stepwise regression technique. Finding a significant regression equation between writing and variables in the engagement areas suggests that the writing and engagement affect each other more directly.

Four of the six areas for writing had statistically significant regression equations between writing quality demonstrated in the writing portfolio and engagement variables in the six categories. In other words, four of the six engagement areas included variables that seemed to have a direct effect on the quality of writing demonstrated in writing portfolios. First, for individual writing process, inclusion of diverse perspectives accounted for a small, but statistically significant amount of writing quality. In collaborative writing process, three variables significantly accounted for writing quality at small, but statistically significant levels. Both out of class work and group work had an inverse relationship to writing quality. In other words, writing portfolio scores were lower in portfolios where students reported more out of class work and/or group work. Also, the experience of tutoring accounted for a small yet statistically significant amount for writing quality. In other words, the experience of tutoring had a positive effect

on writing quality. Writing assignments that required 5–19 pages in length also contributed a small yet statistically significant amount toward writing scores. Finally, students' perception that the campus held the expectation for students to write clearly also contributed a small yet statistically significant amount to writing quality. Details about those equations are included in the appendix.

The third research question considered what an expanded view of writing says locally about writing on campus and writing more broadly. Again, this study uses a broader definition of writing enacted in multiple genres across multiple disciplines at the midpoint of an undergraduate curriculum. Student papers submitted in portfolios include lab reports, case studies, first-year composition assignments, research papers, and group projects, and, as such, the papers represent a multiplicity of what good writing might look like in various disciplines. The relationship between writing and engagement isn't particularly strong, and may reflect the kinds of writing assignments that many faculty may give, which emphasize more information exchange or verification that students have learned the course content than interaction with materials on higher-order levels. These findings are also positive in that the results from this study include writing from classroom settings in all of their complexity, and evidence suggests that certain writing-related engagement behaviors seem to promote and can directly affect writing quality.

Discussion

Given that writing and engagement are separate domains, it's not surprising that the relationship between the two here very is weak, although it is compelling and interesting that there seems to be a causal relationship between the two. As a point of comparison, Ernest Pascarella conducted a similar analysis between learning represented on standardized tests (SAT, ACT, and COMPASS) and student engagement reported on the NSSE in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, and he reported no link between student engagement and learning represented by standardized tests. In other words, the domains Pascarella used were narrowly defined constructs for learning, which Adler-Kassner and Harrington suggest do not and cannot represent the complexity of student learning. In contrast, this study found evidence that the broadly defined domain of writing situated within a writing-rich curriculum was affected by certain engagement behaviors. Complex representations of writing—coming out of instructional settings—provided a viable way to account for the more narrowly defined domain of student engagement.

The findings in this study validate existing writing research and scholarship. Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz's Harvard study of undergraduate writers documented that students felt their writing got better and they learned content more deeply when they had to write about topics, noting they were no longer "academic tourists" to the content (131). In this study, writing quality seems to be positively influenced by having students write about diverse perspectives and write lengthier papers (5–19 pages), and by students feeling like the institution expects them to write effectively. Anderson et al. concur that "the presence of writing in coursework enhances student participation in deep approaches to learning and also their perceived gains in learning and development as defined by the acquisition of practical competence, personal and social development, and general-education skills" (202). They also argue that the move to apply and integrate diverse sources is important: "In general, assignments that involve interactive writing processes, meaning-making writing tasks, and clear writing expectations appear to be associated with engagement in higher-order learning, integrative learning, and reflective learning activities" (231).

The value of wrestling with other perspectives and helping students on their writing also has been documented in other writing research. Janet Emig's landmark essay on writing to learn strategies corroborates the importance of using writing to help students figure out what they think about diverse topics. Research into the takeaways for undergraduate tutors is also unfolding. Harvey Kail argues that "undergraduate [peer writing tutors] work in the fraught but intellectually rich middle spaces between the formal curriculum, student culture, and individual learning" and he and his collaborators Bradley Hughes and Paula Gillespie have documented in "What They Take with Them: Findings from the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project" the rich intellectual experiences that undergraduate tutors seem to take from working with other students. Such experiences also seem to translate into tutors' own writing. While the NSSE questions don't distinguish the type of tutoring, the study site has an active writing center that supports the writing-rich curriculum through face-to-face and small group writing tutorials.

There are limitations to this exploratory study. The study intentionally included writing from a variety of courses, and does not adhere to strict experimental controls to control for variability. (Again, this is an intentional design decision). The subject matter is local, so the findings for this campus are not necessarily generalizable to other settings. Likewise, NSSE has its share of criticism as an instrument. Michael Olivas argues that NSSE's psychometric rigorousness is mostly based on internal report, and not the result of careful and rigorous external scrutiny. Alicia C. Dowd,

Misty Sawatzky, and Randi Korn raise concerns about the ways in which the psychometric definition of engagement does not work due to construct underrepresentation for first-generation and students of color on the NSSE. Likewise, Stephen R. Porter questions the widespread practice of using self-report surveys for college students for anything—using NSSE as an example—as college students are notoriously unreliable reporters of their own experience. In terms of extrapolation inquiry, though, studies rely on imperfect instruments. NSSE is the best available instrument to conduct this inquiry.

The convergence of these two domains affords an important perspective. Chris Gallagher argues that WPAs need to take up the mantle of writing assessment, as it

is our purview; we have substantial expertise in it by virtue of our scholarship *and* by virtue of the work we do every day with teachers and students. We need to recognize, claim, and celebrate the expertise we already have, even as we acknowledge the need to acquire, or to call on partners to provide, further expertise. In other words, WPAs ought to embrace *writing assessment leadership*. (32)

Our expertise is local. As Gallagher notes, a WPA is positioned to engage assessment in multiple ways, and there are several ways to go beyond the limited framework of engagement defined within the context of assessment and accountability.

A “think little” approach allows WPAs to document variety locally and illuminate their unique contexts, thus adding to more expansive views of writing. Several composition researchers have documented important ways that the complexity of writing and engagement go beyond assessment and accountability. In *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*, Christopher Thaiss and Terry Zawacki detail robust ways to view academic writing, which they define as

any writing that fulfills a purpose of education in a college or university in the United States. For most teachers, the term implies student writing in response to an academic assignment, or professional writing that trained “academics”—teachers and researchers—do for publications read and conferences attended by other academics. In this second sense, “academic writing” may be related to other kinds of writing that educated people do, such as “writing for the workplace,” but there are many kinds of workplace writing that would rarely be considered “academic”. . . . (4)

Thaiss and Zawacki argue that the “‘engaged writer’ has been persistent, open-minded, and disciplined in study; has reason dominant over emotion

or sensual perception, and imagines a reader who is coolly rational, reading for information, and intending to formulate a reasoned response” (12). The engaged academic writer, they argue, exists within “disciplinary discourse communities and disciplines themselves [that] evolve and change in response to a complex range of variables, including the motives underlying their production, the contexts in which they are produced, and the institutional and ideological agendas that help to shape both motive and context” (18). A WPA is positioned to support and facilitate such development. In this sense, WPAs can apply Thaiss and Zawacki’s notions of writing and engagement to curricula and professional development programs that prepare teachers of writing. Likewise, their definitions of engaged writers can help us understand the range of possibilities to shape the educational experiences provided for students in our writing courses.

WPAs can move beyond reporting assessment data or considering engagement as an end or an outcome, and can look at ways that we can fulfill the aspirational definitions of engagement that purposefully exceed limited definitions of engagement. In their introduction to *WPA as Citizen Educator*, Shirley K Rose and Irwin Weiser detail the role of engagement in WPA work possible through postsecondary writing study, writing curricula, and community partnerships, and distance themselves from the definitions of engagement by assessment of student behaviors. They define engagement as a “commitment to sharing and reciprocity . . . [envisioning] partnerships, two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table” (9). They argue that engagement is “not simply a rhetorical strategy, but a rhetorical framework that names the civic action to which [the WPA authors of their collection] have committed themselves and their work” (13). Rose and Weiser argue for an expanded notion of engagement that serves institutional and community ideals. They consider how writing programs develop curricular engagement activities that are consistent with a “commitment to sharing and reciprocity . . . Philosophically, engagement . . . becomes an underlying principle of higher education, not simply a contribution to student success” (2). Rebecca Lorimer and David Stock’s bibliography, “Service Learning Initiatives: Implementation and Administration,” provides direction for continued WPA exploration in this realm. These examples of expanded notions of writing and engagement invite us to consider these domains more complexly, and can result in multi-dimensional conceptions of writing and engagement.

Finally, while assessment and accountability are unlikely to go away, the ways in which WPAs respond to those mandates can result in broader, more meaningful ways that we can understand student learning. This project serves as a model for ways WPAs can explore how writing relates to other

domains using our local situations as our sites of inquiry. We can learn a great deal about students, writing, and other broadly defined ability areas as we respond to local assessment and accountability mandates. In the process, we may be able to make those mandates more meaningful for our programs and the faculty and students who occupy them.

Gallagher states that “WPAs should take seriously the political and rhetorical potential of publicly claiming our considerable scholarly and experiential assessment expertise” (29). This paper has offered one way in which WPAs can use empirical inquiry to explore and document learning more locally. Certainly, there are myriad methodologies to conduct such inquiry. To leverage our expertise in assessment, we can begin to construct the meaning of writing from the ground up—from classroom settings into program assessments and beyond. Using our local assessment information to compare to external measures—like the National Survey of Student Engagement—can help illuminate a multi-dimensional image of undergraduate writing and other broader competency areas in which we are invested. These types of efforts help WPAs respond to myriad assessment demands. However, we can and should move beyond the simple reporting of information and look outward to ways to expand the influence and scope of writing in its multiple iterations. Such exercises also help us think about broader implications of what we do within our classrooms and programs, and ways in which we can reach beyond them.

A place to start would be to look at local institutional priorities. Adrianna Kezar and Jillian Kinzie found a strong connection to student engagement and local context as articulated by the unique institutional mission:

The data presented demonstrate that policies and practices did indeed differ based on unique institutional mission and institutional type/mission . . . the individual, distinctive mission of a campus appears to impact more policy and practices related to student engagement and success than the broad institutional mission related to institutional type. . . . (169)

Additionally, a WPA can look to see whether there are current efforts underway to improve certain learning areas. Colleges and universities in certain accrediting regions are required to come together around the improvement of specific learning areas, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Quality Enhancement Projects, for example. In these instances, institutions organize collective efforts around the improvement of particular learning areas—critical thinking, reading, service learning, analytic reasoning, and so on. A WPA could meaningfully contribute to those efforts by exploring their relationship to writing. Many institutions

have adopted one or more of the sixteen Association of American Colleges and Universities' VALUE Rubrics as ways to assess learning within their general education programs. Other professional organizations, such as the Association of College and Research Libraries, have articulated guidelines and standards to help assess information literacy. These backyard, "think little" approaches will help document the diverse, unique, and varied landscapes in which WPAs work, and can keep the terms for reporting assessment and accountability information rooted in classrooms.

For WPAs, this type of project opens up some exciting possibilities. We can start to think about writing more broadly, and the ways writing is enacted across our campuses and beyond the constraints of first-year composition. What are the sites in which writing happens for students, and what are ways that campuses can look in their own yards to document writing in its variety? It's important to identify the structures that support writing at our local sites—even if they aren't as highly articulated as the site of this study. Writing can be embedded in important sites across the undergraduate experience, and WPAs can say something about that, and we can see how writing overlaps with other domains to help shed light on the complexity of postsecondary writing.

APPENDIX: DETAILS FROM THE STATISTICAL
STEPWISE REGRESSION ANALYSIS*Individual Writing Process*

A stepwise regression analysis was calculated to account for the variability of students' writing quality based on their responses to engagement survey items that included preparation of two or more drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in; working on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources; including diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussion or writing assignments; and putting together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions. A weak, but significant correlation (.095, $p < .05$) existed between Writing Portfolio score and Diverse Perspectives. A significant regression equation was found, $F(1, 472) = 4.265$, $p = <.05$, with an adjusted R^2 of .007. Students' writing quality was equal to $3.674 + .186$ (Diverse Perspectives) where the criteria variable was measured from 1 to 4. The variable was significant. The effect size was small, with the adjusted R^2 at .007 ($n = 474$).

Collaborative Writing Process

A stepwise regression analysis was calculated to account for the variability of students' writing quality based on their responses to engagement survey items that included working with other students on projects during class; working with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments; tutoring or teaching other students; and using an electronic medium (listserv, chat group, internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment. Weak and inverted correlations existed between assigned group work ($-.097$, $p < .05$) and out-of-class work ($-.111$, $p < .01$), and a weak but positive correlation existed between tutoring and writing (.097, $p < .05$). A significant regression equation was found, $F(2, 471) = 6.890$, $p < .01$, with an adjusted R^2 of .024. Students' writing quality was equal to $4.477 + -.279$ (outside-of-class work) + .246 (Tutoring) where the criteria variables were measured from 1 to 4. The variables were significant. The effect size was small, with the adjusted R^2 at .024 ($n = 474$).

Student-Faculty Interaction

A stepwise regression analysis was calculated to account for the variability of students' writing quality based on their responses to engagement survey items that included using email to communicate with an instructor; receiv-

ing prompt feedback from faculty on academic performance (written or oral); and working harder than they thought to meet an instructor's standards or expectations ($n = 474$).

Mental Activities

A stepwise regression analysis was calculated to account for the variability of students' writing quality based on their responses to engagement survey items that included memorizing facts, ideas, or methods from courses and readings to repeat them in pretty much the same form; analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components; synthesizing and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships; making judgments about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions; and applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations. No significant regression equation was found ($n = 474$).

Length of Writing

A stepwise regression analysis was calculated to account for the variability of students' writing quality based on their responses to engagement survey items that included number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more; number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages; and number of written papers or reports of fewer than 5 pages.

A significant regression equation was found, $F(1, 543) = 3.923$, $p < .05$, with an adjusted R^2 of .005. Students' writing quality was equal to $3.723 + .155$ (5–19 pages) where the criteria variable was measured from 1 to 5. The variable was significant. The effect size was small with the adjusted R^2 at .005 ($n = 545$).

Educational Expectations

A stepwise regression analysis was calculated to account for the variability of students' writing quality based on their responses to engagement survey items that included writing clearly and effectively; and thinking critically and analytically. A significant regression equation was found, $F(1, 540) = 11.621$, $p < .01$, with an adjusted R^2 of .019. Students' writing quality was equal to $3.397 + .287$ (Writing Clearly) where the criteria variable was measured from 1 to 4. The variable was significant. The effect size was small with the adjusted R^2 at .019 ($n = 542$).

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