

Writing Outside of Class: The Untapped Potential of Students' Non-Academic Writing

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Students compose copious amounts of writing outside of school, but they do not always see its relevance to their academic work. Based on survey data (n =138), our study presents students' self-reported gains from their non-academic writing experiences and their learning (or lack thereof) from their non-academic writing struggles. We argue that students' non-academic writing experiences have untapped potential as sources of transferable writing knowledge and suggest that building discussions of students' non-academic writing into academic contexts can support the development of student writing expertise and a deeper culture of writing on campuses. We conclude that writing programs have the opportunity to enhance faculty development, and hence student achievement, by drawing on the value of non-academic writing to students' development as writers overall.

I've learned much more about writing from positions of leadership outside of class than inside class. Inside classes and for academic purposes, I am writing as a student, but outside of class I learn how to effectively write as a leader within the community. . . .

I've learned [from my non-academic writing] how to balance formal and informal language and structure for work that isn't purely academic so that a variety of readers can relate to the material. . . .

I would say that the writing I do outside of academia requires more editing than the pieces that I do inside the classroom. My non-academic writing has taught me the importance of proofreading, as well as taking time away from pieces before going back and revising.

—Excerpts from student survey responses

Writing programs of various stripes—including first-year writing programs, writing centers, student support services, and writing across the curriculum initiatives—aim to support student writers as they move between various contexts of writing. These include academic contexts, both for general education requirements and in the disciplines, and sometimes professional writing situations, such as for job applications, internships, and future

careers. To help writers develop rhetorical dexterity, writing programs often form curricula or offer services to emphasize rhetorical awareness, writing processes, metacognition, and revision. However, writing programs, broadly conceived, still rarely take into account the copious writing that students compose outside of their academic or co-curricular requirements. Six years ago, our institution, Elon University, embarked on its own Writing Excellence Initiative (WEI), our university's Quality Enhancement Plan, in an effort to transform the culture of writing across our entire campus—both academic and beyond. The goals of this initiative are to enhance student, faculty, and staff attitudes and behaviors toward and practices of writing broadly conceived, including academic, professional, extracurricular, and self-sponsored writing, as well as visual, aural, and multimodal writing. This initiative fit well with some scholarly WAC conversations pointing to the need for writing programs to “stretch beyond the curriculum and campus” by making new institutional connections within the academy and beyond (Parks and Goldblatt 600) or by making “writing an important component of student internships and co-ops, field studies, and service learning projects” (Blumner, Eliason, and Fritz 29-30). However, Elon's initiative was unique in its response to research that emphasizes the importance of students' *non-academic writing* to their gains in rhetorical sophistication and overall growth as writers (Cleary; Roozen, “From Journals” and “Tracing Trajectories”; Rosinski; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). In the words of Elon University's WEI, our institution made a commitment to recognize the “entire educational experience,” including the writing students “undertake on their own, without any formal connection with the university” (Writing Excellence Initiative 18). That is, the initiative pledges to acknowledge not only academic writing within the curriculum, but also the writing students compose beyond the curriculum.

This article focuses on this non-academic student writing slice of our Writing Excellence Initiative by reporting on a survey that gathered data on the out-of-class writing that students compose, what they report learning from this writing, and the potential connections between their academic and non-academic writing lives. After reviewing the scholarship surrounding non-academic writing of students and describing our data collection methods, we present and discuss our survey results in the following categories:

- Students' non-academic writing: what students compose outside of class;
- Students' learning from their non-academic writing, including self-awareness, process knowledge, writing abilities, and audience adaptation;

- Students' responses to their non-academic writing struggles;
- Untapped potential: learning from struggles and successes in non-academic writing.

As the above categories suggest, this article presents data that shows students' non-academic writing is alive and well, and that students already learn a good deal from their writing beyond the curriculum. Indeed, the opening epigraphs present a sample of students' self-reported learning from their non-academic writing experiences, including the importance of crafting one's own ethos, ways to vary their writing style for a given audience, and writing process strategies. Our study indicates there are rich opportunities to help students reconsider their non-academic writing struggles as a way to grow rhetorically and suggest that administrators and faculty could do more to help students connect their non-academic writing struggles and successes to their curricular writing. We argue that if writing program administrators fail to recognize students' vast array of writing experiences beyond the academy, and they do not attune writing faculty to the richness of students' non-academic writing experiences, they are overlooking powerful opportunities to help students transfer writerly knowledge and practices between academic and non-academic contexts. We conclude by sharing some examples of how our institution has expanded faculty development programming and community celebrations of non-academic writing to highlight the value of this kind of writing in all of our lives.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: NON-ACADEMIC WRITING IS PROLIFIC AND VALUABLE

Recent scholarship on transfer and students' rhetorical educations demonstrates that a significant amount of college students' learning about writing comes from their out-of-school writing experiences (Alexander and Jarratt; Brent; Cleary; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, and Otuteye; Pigg et al.; Michaud; Moore et al.; Roozen "Comedy Stages," "From Journals," and "Tracing Trajectories"; Rosinski; Shepherd; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). As members of what Kathleen Blake Yancey calls "the writing public" (298), students compose various texts—including emails, grant proposals, websites, and speeches—beyond their curricular commitments. The research team behind the Stanford Study of Writing, which collected samples of students' academic and non-academic writing over the course of their five-year study, reports being overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of students' extracurricular compositions (Fishman et al. 29). Studies of students' self-sponsored writing, such as Jessie Moore et al.'s "Revisualizing Composition," demonstrate that col-

lege students write prolifically outside of school, for purposes ranging from entertainment to participation in public life (Pigg et al.; Moore et al. 7).

While mobile and hand-held devices may have altered and/or accelerated the ways students write beyond the curriculum, digital technologies did not initiate their prolific writing in extracurricular spaces. David Russell's research on the history of writing in the disciplines illustrates that the "extracurriculum" (Gere) was thriving in colleges in the nineteenth century, and many students reported learning more from their extracurricular involvement in literary societies than from their coursework (44-45). Indeed, Jonathan Alexander and Susan Jarratt's more recent research on student activists demonstrates "how little of [their] education the students attributed to learning acquired or even encountered in the classroom" (540). As a result, the authors argue for giving non-academic writing a central role in future research: "future studies of rhetorical education should encompass the curricular and the cocurricular, the formally sponsored and the self-sponsored, as mutually informing resources" (542). For similar reasons, Elon's Writing Excellence Initiative chose to capture information on the types of non-academic writing students compose, whether they learn from that writing, and also whether (and if so, how) it complements their curricular writing.

We recognize that, by using terms such as *beyond the curriculum*, *non-academic*, and *out-of-school* writing, our WEI and this study run the risk of insinuating false distinctions between students' integrated "streams" (Roozen, "Comedy Stages") of writing activity. Certainly, these labels are imperfect; after all, the significant scholarship that informed our WEI, and this study, suggests that these types of writing are deeply interconnected and interanimate one another. Kevin Roozen's multiple studies of writers' self-sponsored literacies illustrate that students' "self sponsored and school sponsored" writing are not "separate streams of literate activity" but are crucially integrated and mutually informing ("Comedy Stages" 100). In "From Journals," Roozen argues that Angelica's private, reflective writing plays an important role in academic and professional writing contexts (566). He puts forth a similar case in "Tracing Trajectories." Doug Brent's study of co-op students takes an approach related to Roozen's in that it emphasizes the connections students notice between their co-op writing and their wide array of academic and life experiences. Likewise, Marsha Curtis and Anne Herrington's study of students' writing development during their college years supports Roozen's claim that personal writing should not be considered "separate" or an island unto itself (88).

Studies that ask specifically about transfer between academic and non-academic writing contexts urge writing professionals to pay close attention

to non-academic writing as an influential part of college students' rhetorical educations (Cleary; Michaud; Rosinski; Shepherd; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). Here, we understand transfer to mean the conscious or intuitive adaptation, integration, or transformation of writing practices, approaches, or strategies to serve new or alternate communicative ends (Anson and Moore; Brent; DePalma and Ringer; Nowacek; Yancey, Robertson, Taczak).¹ In her study of adult students, Michelle Navarre Cleary writes,

these students move, often daily, between writing at work, at school, in communities, and at home. To ignore how writing in these contexts influences how students write for school is to necessarily impoverish our understanding of our students, their writing development, and the possibilities for transfer. (661)

Michael Michaud's study of adult student Tony suggests that he draws on a mix of his workplace writing and reading experiences to write an academic position paper for a general education course. Paula Rosinski likewise demonstrates that students have heightened rhetorical awareness in their non-academic and self-sponsored writing, and argues that writing instruction in academic writing spaces might facilitate transfer by asking students to reflect and draw on rhetorical strategies they use in self-sponsored writing. In his study of students' digital and multimodal composing practices, Ryan P. Shepherd also makes a compelling case for the importance of helping students to bridge the gap between their wealth of digital composing practices and their classroom writing. It is crucial that educators help students draw these connections, he argues, because "creating a connection is the primary obstacle when facilitating learning transfer between in-school composing and out-of-school digital and multimodal composing" (110), and students stand to gain significantly if they are able to see the relevance of their out-of-class writing.

Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner's *The Meaningful Writing Project* also points to the importance of paying attention to students' non-academic literacy practices (134). Although 94% of the seniors who participated in their survey indicated that their most meaningful writing project was curricular (108), the survey did specify in multiple places that the students could select a project that was not assigned for a class.² Indeed, one of the six students profiled in their study, Leah, identified her most meaningful writing project as a "family-oriented out-of-school task" that "gave her a certain power over her experiences and a way to convey those experiences to a real audience" (47). Specifically, Leah wrote an article for her family newsletter about her experiences working as a volunteer with pediatric burn victims in China (48). She got "tangible, positive feedback"

from relatives and had opportunity to connect with a real audience, her family (48–49). Like many other students in *The Meaningful Writing Project* study, Leah explains that this project is meaningful for her in part because it contrasted with her previous experiences: “In contrast to . . . school-based tasks,” the authors explain, “the writing Leah did for her family newsletter allowed her to connect to a passion and be creative” (47). These distinguishing characteristics made the non-academic project a fulfilling experience for Leah in ways that her academic projects were not, further highlighting the potential value of non-academic writing in students’ lives.

The research on the importance and relevance of students’ out-of-school writing is copious and compelling. As we developed our Writing Excellence Initiative, this research made it impossible for us to ignore the non-academic experiences that inform students’ academic writing pursuits. In this way, our Writing Excellence Initiative, and this corresponding study, underscore and extend Steve Parks and Eli Goldblatt’s claim that “we should imagine our [WAC] project as one that combines discipline-based instruction *with a range of other literacy experiences* that will help students and faculty see writing and reading *in a wider social and intellectual context* than the college curriculum” (585–86, emphasis added).

While the above scholarship argues clearly for the inclusion of students’ non-academic writing in writing research, it stops short of detailing exactly what students, in aggregate, report learning from the writing they do outside of school. What specifically do students learn from their non-academic writing, and what happens when they struggle in their out-of-class writing pursuits? Our research moves beyond smaller-scale and case studies to discern in a systematic way what a larger cohort of students write outside of school and what they report learning (or fail to learn) from that writing. Below, we extend the scholarly focus on the importance of students’ non-academic writing to report on exactly what students claim to learn from their successes and struggles with out-of-class writing, and the ways they might stand to gain more from this writing.

METHODS

The goal of our IRB-approved study³ was to understand the extent to which students at our university engage in non-academic writing for personal, professional, and extracurricular reasons; what they learned (or not) from these types of writing; and whether or not they believe these different ways of writing inform one another. We expected that this data could provide us with a better understanding of the entirety of students’ writing lives, which in turn could help us develop ways to enhance the culture of writing on our

campus. We conducted our study by surveying current undergraduate students at our institution about their non-academic writing. We chose to conduct this study by survey in order to capture broad brush-stroke information about the types of writing students compose and to look for patterns among what they report learning from these types of writing.⁴

Survey Questions

Our survey questions asked about students' non-academic writing beliefs and attitudes, writing practices, writing successes and struggles, and final products and genres. In sum, the survey asked 18 questions, four of which were open-ended and the rest of which were multiple choice (see appendix A). Our survey included questions about the following:

- What writing do students compose beyond what is assigned for their curricular requirements?
- What do students learn from their non-academic writing, whether through its success or failure?
- Do students perceive their non-academic and academic writing as informing one another?

The questions were based on principles outlined in our Writing Excellence Initiative as well as questions asked by recent studies, such as *The Meaningful Writing Project*, "Revisualizing Composition" (Moore et al.), and other previous studies of students' writing across contexts (Lindenman; Rosinski). One of the affordances of using a survey was that we were able to ask similar questions as previous studies, thereby joining ongoing conversations, while at the same time being able to include questions unique to our institutional culture. We found that the primary constraint of a survey was the same one as is common to this methodology, namely, the inability to ask follow-up questions when faced with interesting or provocative responses. For example, we found that students often kept journals, wrote opinion pieces and profiles for online outlets, and maintained blogs while studying abroad, but we were unable to ask follow-up questions about whether practicing these types of writing led to different attitudes toward writing in general or their writing lives in particular. We were also unable to ask clarifying questions related to our questions about the failure of non-academic writing pursuits. We chose to use the term *failure* because we were interested in learning from students about unsuccessful non-academic writing ventures—products that themselves did not succeed—rather than process-related struggles. However, *failure* may have been too strong and laden a term; students may have been hesitant to associate themselves with

failure in even a small way. Were we to conduct this study again, we might include a question that instead asked students to discuss writing that they would characterize as simply unsuccessful or that they felt didn't work as well as they hoped.

Survey Distribution

We distributed our Qualtrics survey by sending email invitations to student and faculty leaders of a wide range of social, athletic, and academic groups. These included the Ultimate Frisbee Club, Women's Volleyball, Men's and Women's Club Tennis, Ballroom Dance, DanceWorks, InterVarsity, and Student Alumni Ambassadors, as well as Honors, Undergraduate Research, and the Writing Center. We distributed to this diverse array of groups to reach students in both academic and non-academic contexts and as a way to assemble a broad picture of student practices and beliefs/attitudes toward their non-academic writing. The email invitation asked faculty to forward the survey to students in the programs they managed and asked students to forward the survey to members of clubs and organizations they led. The invitation also encouraged students to forward the survey to other student groups in which they participated. One of the authors of this article sent the survey link via email to her two first-year writing classes (each with 18–20 students) as well. We also advertised this survey by posting a description of it, along with the survey link, to our Center for Writing Excellence social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and a university-wide webpage for sharing community information (*Today at Elon*, formerly known as *E-Net*). Because we posted the survey link and description on social media, and encouraged faculty and students to forward the email invitation to additional groups, we are unable to report the exact number of students who were invited to take the survey (there are about 6,000 undergraduates at our mid-sized private university). All students who completed the survey were offered the opportunity to sign up for a drawing to win one of ten \$20 Amazon gift certificates.

Completed Responses and Demographics

A total of 138 students submitted surveys and we have complete demographic information for 127 of those students. Of those 127 students, 87% identified as female and 13% as male. According to credit hours, 8% of participants are first-year students, 21% are sophomores, 25% are juniors, and 47% are seniors. The most commonly represented majors among participants in our study are Psychology, Journalism, and Strategic Communications majors, which reflects the popularity of these programs at our

university.⁵ Several other majors were also well represented (five or more respondents per major): Political Science and Policy Studies, Accounting, Public Health Studies, English, and Biology. The average GPA of survey respondents was 3.7, which skews higher than the campus average at the time of 3.3. While we do not argue our data is representative, we do believe our findings provide a deeper understanding of student writing beyond the curriculum that is relevant at many colleges and universities.

Qualitative and Quantitative Data Analysis

Our survey included four open-ended, qualitative questions, and for each of these we used emergent coding to develop codes from the data itself. Our five coding categories corresponded roughly to our open-ended questions (with two for the question related to students' pride): Learned from Non-Academic Writing, Why Meaningful, Why Failed, What Proud, and Why Proud. Each of these categories contained four to nine codes. We coded each individual survey response one (and only one) time per coding category. For instance, for a student's response to the question of why their selected non-academic writing experience was meaningful, we applied one and only one of the following five codes: Communication or Connection, Professional/Future Development, Real World, Reflection/Processing/Self-Expression, or Other (for the complete codebook, see appendix B). We revised the codes collaboratively until we were able to separately code subsets of the data with interrater agreement of at least 80% (Cohen's kappa) before proceeding. Using this process, we divided up these qualitative questions, coded individually, and then double-checked each other's originally assigned questions as a way to determine reliability and validity. The remainder of the data is based on five-point Likert scales and multiple-choice survey responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our survey confirms and extends scholarship that suggests college students' non-academic writing lives are alive and well (Alexander and Jarratt; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, and Otuteye; Pigg et al.; Lindenman; Moore et al.; Roozen "Comedy Stages," "From Journals," "Tracing Trajectories"; Rosinski; Shepherd; Yancey). Indeed, 87% of our survey respondents somewhat or strongly agree that "writing is an important part of my non-academic life" at college, and 85% of respondents indicate that they put moderate, significant, or very significant effort into their non-academic writing projects (45% say they put in significant or very significant effort, and 40% say they put in moderate effort, for a total of 85%). In addition to finding their

self-sponsored, extracurricular, and professional writing projects important and worthy of effort, students indicate that these projects are meaningful to them as well. Seventy-two percent of survey respondents somewhat or strongly agree with the statement, “I have written something meaningful during my time at Elon that was not assigned for class.” Our analysis suggests that students’ reasons for finding these projects meaningful share some common features with the predominantly curricular projects featured in *The Meaningful Writing Project*: they feature engagement, especially with the self (and future self), and they address topics or issues about which the writers feel passionate (Eodice, Geller, and Lerner).⁶

The results and discussion below present and examine students’ engagement with non-academic writing. This includes the types of writing they compose, their perceived gains from out-of-school writing experiences, and the potential value of their non-academic writing struggles. We report on many ways that student’s non-academic writing supports their learning and growth and discuss ways that we (as writing program administrators) might more effectively tap or leverage students’ non-academic writing to maximize its value.

Non-academic writing: what do students write outside of school?

To frame our discussion of what students report learning and whether (or how) they report struggling, we first report the types of writing that students compose in non-academic spaces. Consistent with Stacey Pigg et al.’s “Ubiquitous Writing” and Shepherd’s “Digital Writing,” our study found digital writing, particularly texting and emailing for social coordination, to be pervasive in the lives of college students. Indeed, nearly all survey respondents report writing text messages, emails, and social media posts, with only slightly fewer on image-based social media platforms (such as Instagram and Snapchat) than text-based or multimodal social media platforms (such as Twitter and Facebook).⁷ Our survey asked students to distinguish between the types of writing they compose most frequently in three non-academic domains: writing for personal reasons, writing for extracurricular activities, and writing for professional purposes (see Reiff and Bawarshi; Rounsaville, Goldberg, and Bawarshi 102–03). Students tend to text and use social media more often for personal reasons, such as personal correspondence and communication, whereas email is distributed more equally among personal, extracurricular, and professional domains. Students compose significant amounts of non-academic writing beyond their digital correspondence and social media as well, including journals/diaries,

letters (longhand), speeches, proposals, and posters/flyers/infographics (see table 1).⁸

Table 1

Types of writing across domains, listed in order of frequency.

Personal	Extracurricular	Professional
1. Texting/SMS Messages	1. Email	1. Email
2. Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)	2. Texting/SMS Messages	2. Presentations or Speeches
3. Image-Based Social Media (Snapchat, Instagram, etc.)	3. Poster/Flyer/Infographic	3. Proposal (for grant, project, etc.)
4. Email	4. Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)	4. Texting/SMS Messages
5. Diary or Journal Writing	5. Presentations or Speeches	5. Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)
6. Letters	6. Image-Based Social Media (Snapchat, Instagram, etc.)	6. Essays/Reports
7. Creative Writing (poetry, fiction, lyrics, etc.)	7. Proposal (for grant, project, etc.)	7. Letters
8. Reviews (such as for Amazon, Yelp, books/movies)	8. Articles	8. Poster/Flyer/Infographic

What students learn from non-academic writing: personal learning or growth, process knowledge, writing abilities, audience adaptation

When asked (in an open-ended question) what they learned from their non-academic writing, students reported learning mostly transferable concepts or understandings, rather than “rules” or conventions associated with a particular type of writing or unique writing scenario. Interestingly, much of this learning came in the form of learning about oneself, such as enhanced self-understanding and time/life management abilities (see figure 1).

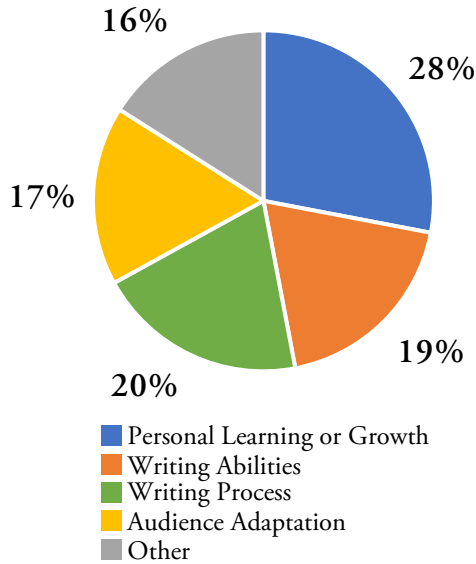


Figure 1. What students report learning from non-academic writing

The largest category for “what I learned from non-academic writing,” reflecting 28% of all responses, includes three types of personal learning or growth: self-reflection (intrapersonal growth), time/life management skills, and increased attunement to one’s passions. Self-reflection (intrapersonal growth) was the most prevalent of these three components. Reflecting the findings from the Stanford Study of Writing (Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, and Otuteye 230), many participants in our study report composing ample amounts of personal, reflexive writing and extol the therapeutic value of that writing, journaling in particular. For instance, one participant wrote that, through her non-academic writing, “I’ve learned about who I want to be as a person,” and another wrote, “I’ve learned about myself, my beliefs.” Students in our study report frequently on their strategic use of writing for personal reasons. One noted, “Writing helps me to organize and understand my thoughts/ideas, which can aid in problem solving.” Another explained, “I use a lot of non-academic writing for personal wellness, whether that is journaling, listing upcoming activities, etc.”

Respondents also report the value of writing to organize daily life (time/life management skills). For example, one student wrote, “Lists are truly lifesavers. Write everything down and keep your lists organized so you never forget anything.” Others wrote about how writing can help with time management, in particular: “I’ve learned a lot about budgeting time

appropriately and maintaining a consistent schedule” and “it is important to carve out your own time to do assignments that don’t have as specific of a deadline as most school-assigned writing has.” Other students indicated their non-academic writing helped them gain self-awareness with respect to their passions or interests. One noted, “From my non-academic writing, I’ve learned the importance of letting my passion come through. This isn’t always what is asked for in academic writing, but it is the foundation of my non-academic writing.”

After intrapersonal growth and increased self-awareness, students frequently reported improving their writing process (20%). Those who commented on process often discussed ways to manage the labor of writing: “I’ve learned the importance of continuing to make progress, even if it’s slow,” one said; another wrote, “having something is better than having nothing. You can’t edit what you don’t have.” Others noted the importance of seeking out feedback; for instance, “it is also important to have other people look at your writing.” Some students remarked on how they had to develop more independence and accountability in their writing processes for non-academic writing projects. One wrote, “I’ve learned how to rework and revise my own work without the help of a professor.” Significantly, some students contrasted these practices directly with their curricular writing endeavors. One claimed (as stated in the epigraph), “the writing I do outside of academia requires more editing than the pieces that I do inside the classroom. My non-academic writing has taught me the importance of proofreading, as well as taking time away from pieces before going back and revising.”

Many students (19%) claim that writing for non-academic reasons improves their general abilities as creative thinkers and effective communicators. One noted, “I’ve improved my discipline and writing skills,” and another said her non-academic writing helped her learn “how to have a voice that is informed, fair, and articulate.” Twelve students (9% of the total) indicated that their writing beyond the curriculum has helped them learn how to express themselves, be creative, or develop a personal voice.

The fourth-largest area of self-reported growth was rhetorical: students claimed to increase their understanding of audience and their ability to cater their writing to a specific audience (17%). Most of these students wrote some variation of the following: “I’ve learned how to phrase things for distinct audiences and how to target it to the group that I want to address” or “I have learned how to appeal to my audience and get my readers’ attention.” These 17% of respondents explained that “different writing styles . . . appeal to popular and/or professional audiences.” One explained that “I like to review books on GoodReads and through writing and read-

ing others' reviews, I've learned the importance of writing to your audience." Many of these respondents directly contrasted their audience awareness in out-of-school writing spaces with the lower emphasis on audience in curricular writing situations. For instance, one wrote, "sometimes if you are writing for a high stakes audience you tend to put more work in than you would if the teacher was the only person reading it." These students' responses corroborate Rosinski's finding that students "showed more rhetorical sensitivity to audiences in their digital self-sponsored writing" than in their academic writing (272).

Why I failed: Learning from non-academic struggles

Literature on transfer suggests that some writers who "encounter a *critical incident*," defined by Kathleen Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak as "a failure to meet a new task successfully," may nonetheless go on to "use that occasion as a prompt to rethink writing altogether" (112). Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak argue that "setbacks motivated by critical incidents can provide the opportunity for conceptual breakthroughs" (120) and help writers "retheorize writing in general" (5). The authors profile student Rick, for example, whose struggles to compose a lab report that met his instructor's assignment expectations eventually led him to re-see genres as flexible and "develop a more capacious conception of writing" (124). Like Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak, we think it likely that critical incidents, or writing struggles, have the potential to "prompt learning in ways that perhaps no other mechanism can" (135). With so many non-academic writing experiences under their belts, students might be in a position to learn (or learn more) from their writing challenges in non-academic writing spaces. Indeed, our survey results suggest that when students report "failing" in their non-academic writing, 65% of respondents articulated a reason why they failed—the first step toward developing greater awareness and perhaps retheorizing writing, broadly speaking.

For those who could articulate why they thought they struggled or failed in a non-academic writing venture, there were they articulated reasons: rhetorical considerations (14%); process, time, or motivational issues (43%); and the writing itself (43%) (see table 2).

Table 2

Top three reasons why non-academic writing “failed,” according to survey respondents

Why non-academic writing venture failed	Percent
Rhetorical considerations, usually related to audience	14%
Issues related to lack of time; or problems with process or motivation	43%
Writing itself was “just bad” (e.g., problems with organization, bad ideas, ineffective wording)	43%

Fourteen percent of this cohort claimed that their extracurricular writing failed because of rhetorical concerns, usually related to audience. For instance, one student wrote, “As an RA, I write a lot of emails. Often, they are not read, so I try to make them somewhat fun and interesting, but that doesn’t work. I’m honestly still trying to work out how to write emails that will be read and comprehended and remembered.” Another respondent wrote that her “blog post” failed because it “was not written for the correct audience.” These respondents indicated that they were at fault for misreading their audience or being unable to craft their writing in a way that appealed to their target audience. Forty-three percent of respondents attributed their failure to lack of time, motivation, or effort or a rushed or inadequately staged writing process (in these cases, they claimed they knew what they were supposed to do, but they didn’t do it). They made comments such as “I lost motivation to finish it” and “Upon reflection, I could have spread the writing process over several days instead of six hours.” Finally, the remaining 43% of respondents claimed that their writing itself was just bad: some claimed their ideas were not strong, others claimed their writing was unorganized or badly designed, still others claimed they worded things poorly. One wrote, “My essay on [the] deliberation of life turned out to be more pretentious than I expected and I am not pleased with it.” Another commented, “I created a community newsletter during my internship that was not extremely effective, mainly because of the volume of information I was asked to include . . . I imagine that the content was overwhelming for residents of the community when we distributed it.” These rationales for failure do not guarantee that the students could do a better job given the opportunity. But if tapped for further reflection, they may.

It is possible that the students whose non-academic writing was unsuccessful would not have developed this awareness had it not been for the very tangible uptake (or in many cases, lack thereof) of their out-of-class writing ventures. In the case of curricular writing, when the teacher is often the central audience and source of feedback (Melzer), the student might attribute their shortcomings to the assignment, subject, or instructor idiosyncrasy (Thaiss and Zawacki). In the case of students' non-academic writing inadequacy, however, students were likely to see the demonstrable effect of their writing choices.

Untapped potential: Learning from non-academic writing

While there are many ways that students' non-academic writing may already contribute substantially to their writing growth, there are several ways that students' writing beyond the curriculum remains an untapped resource. Sixty-five percent of students in our study claimed to be aware of why their non-academic writing "failed"—but 35% either did not know why their non-academic writing failed (only that it did) or did not think they had ever failed in an out-of-class writing context. About a third of this subset of students offered evidence of their writing's failure in lieu of an explanation for why it failed. For instance, one student wrote that her "Facebook post to get donations for Relay for Life" failed because "no one donated." Likewise, a student wrote that her job application failed because "I did not receive a job offer" and another wrote that her scholarship applications failed because she "didn't receive them." We see this time and again: students report the evidence of the failure but do not mention the reason for the failure. One student reported that her journaling failed because it "failed to comfort me, and instead deepened my sadness"; another claimed that the grant she wrote failed because "it did not get accepted for funding." These students answered the question of "why did [your non-academic writing] fail?" by describing exactly how it failed to help them achieve their intended outcome—that is, by citing a failure of uptake. They did not explain what exactly about their writing, process, situation, or other factors contributed to the text's lack of success.

Some survey respondents combined the reason for failure with evidence of failure. For instance, one explained that her article "about a fair trade chocolate company" for Spoon University (a website dedicated to food writing, by and for college students) failed because "it lacked a lot of interesting anecdotes and it was very plain. It did not get that many page views." Her response, like many, includes both the proof that the document was not successful ("it did not get that many page views") along with the ratio-

nale for its failure (“it lacked a lot of interesting anecdotes and it was very plain”). While we cannot know, it is possible that without the tangible lack of uptake—as demonstrated by “lack of page views”—the student might not have taken the time to think through the reason for its inadequacy, or might have considered it a success. This is an area for further thought: if students recognize that something did not work, that is a worthwhile first step, but it is not enough. Those engaged with students in curricular writing contexts might be able to tap students’ understanding of non-academic writing struggles to better display principles of effective writing, persuasion, or rhetorical awareness. Reflecting on why their out-of-school writing did not succeed and brainstorming potential improvements could be an important step in encouraging similar reflection and action in academic writing situations.

Another area where students’ non-academic writing falls short of its potential, however, is in students’ perceptions of its relevance to their curricular writing tasks. While 60% of survey respondents report that “the writing I do in my classes helps me with my non-academic writing” (37% indicated it helps “a fair amount” and 23% indicated it helps “a great deal”), only 49% of respondents indicate that “the writing I do for non-academic reasons helps me with the writing I do for academic reasons” (with 30% noting “a fair amount” and 19% “a great deal”). While neither number is overwhelming, the fact that only slightly less than half of respondents believe their non-academic writing experiences help them in curricular spaces is a missed opportunity. As we discuss above, in the same survey, participants named what they learned from their writing in outside-of-school spaces; this included learning about the self (i.e., self-reflection, time/life management skills, and increased attunement to one’s passions), the importance of the writing process, increased capabilities as creative thinkers and effective communicators, and the ability to target writing to particular audiences. These are largely transferable practices and abilities. There is more that can be done—at the faculty development and the curricular level—to help students transfer this learning from their non-academic writing into their curricular writing and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Our research into the non-academic writing of students confirms Brent’s claim that “We as writing teachers are not the sole and perhaps not even the main source of students’ rhetorical education” (589). While we are not suggesting that academia should colonize students’ non-academic writing for its own purposes, we do argue that first-year writing and WAC pro-

gram administrators, writing faculty, and writing center directors have rich opportunities to more explicitly tap the wide-ranging writing lives of students. Many students have active and diverse non-academic writing lives which could be referenced in a wider range of curricular contexts, to remind students both that they are writers already and that they have experiences on which to draw. For example, for those implementing WAC initiatives or directing first-year-writing programs, we recommend faculty development that encourages integrating metacognitive discussions in the classroom about writing beyond the curriculum, as it plays a crucial role in what students are learning about writing and themselves as writers. Likewise, writing center directors could ask consultants to talk with students about ways their non-academic writing might be a relevant source of transferable knowledge. It is possible that students may resist reflecting on or learning from their non-academic writing, either because they think faculty find it unimportant or because they have learned (from popular culture, academia, etc.) that outside-of-school writing is not valuable (Rosinski). But given our conclusions about students' experiences with non-academic writing—that they may learn academic writing behaviors and ways of thinking, self-awareness and time/life management, writing processes that support creative thinking and effective communicating, and the ability to adapt to different audiences—we argue that building such discussions into academic contexts can support the development of student writing expertise and a deeper culture of writing on campuses.

It is also important to note that when talking with students about their non-academic writing, we should encourage them to learn from their outside-of-school writing struggles as well as their successes. As noted above, among students who could articulate the reasons a piece of writing did not succeed, many of them explained that their piece of writing failed because it did not elicit the desired response or reaction from its audience. However, many did not explain the causes of their document's failure (see Sheriff). This gap provides an opportunity for growth. Like Daniel M. Gross and Jonathan Alexander, we advocate for closer attention to rhetorical failures and how they may be a "crucial component of our educational lives" (288). To do this work, students could be asked to analyze closely an out-of-class document that was not successful as a way to strengthen their rhetorical savvy. A next step might even be to ask students in a writing class to revise a failed non-academic document and imagine various alternatives. Writing program administrators might consider sharing the research on non-academic writing with faculty, to encourage them to take students' experiences with non-academic writing into account as they design their writing assignments. For example, student attention to how real audiences

react and respond to their non-academic writing could highlight to faculty the value of designing writing opportunities for genuine, outside-of-the-university audiences.

While our Writing Excellence Initiative has strived to recognize students' non-academic writing, there is still more we can do. Thus far, our Writing Across the University program has expanded faculty development programming and community celebrations of non-academic writing to increase awareness of its pervasiveness and value in all of our lives. We have also created a celebration of students' non-academic writing through an annual multimodal writing contest, with special categories for writing composed while working in a Student Life division (such as Elon's News Network or Campus Recreation) and for internships. We have encouraged students engaged in extracurricular and self-sponsored writing projects to attend write-ins and writing boot camps offered on campus. Moving forward, however, we see the need to increase our attention to this vital part of students' writing lives. We could do more to collect and celebrate students' copious non-academic writing; for instance, we could link to student blogs, articles, and other self-sponsored writing from our Center for Writing Excellence website and encourage other non-academic units on campus to do the same. Another area for future growth is enhanced faculty development, such as expanding the non-academic writing component at our annual Summer Writing Institute to encourage faculty across the disciplines to design writing activities or assignments that explicitly ask students to draw on their writerly knowledge (especially of less successful pursuits) in out-of-class writing situations. Ultimately, our study shows that students are exercising their rhetorical savvy in a varied array of writing contexts, including a wide range of beyond-school spaces. Writing professionals and teaching faculty ought to pay closer attention to this writing, because it is narrow-sighted for us to think we are the sole or even most influential factor in students' rhetorical education, because students are drawn to this type of writing and find it meaningful, and because this writing beyond the university is very much relevant to the curriculum.

NOTES

1. We recognize that the term transfer is complicated, often mistaken to mean the direct application or movement of knowledge, strategies, or dispositions from one context to another, and we follow writing scholars who understand the concept to be much more complex. For five (among many) useful discussions of the complexity and problematic nature of the term transfer, see Anson and Moore, DePalma and Ringer, Nowacek, Shepherd, and Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak.

2. For instance, the Meaningful Writing Project survey Question 5 asks “For the writing project you have chosen as meaningful, was it required as a course assignment or was it not connected to a course?” (149).

3. Our research study, “Elon Students’ Self-Sponsored and Non-Academic Writing” (#17-217), was approved by the Elon University IRB on March 26, 2017.

4. While our survey helped us gain broad-stroke knowledge of students’ perceptions, it could be expanded in future studies to include discourse-based interviews and/or writing sample analysis (e.g., Lindenman; Reiff and Bawarshi; Shepherd).

5. While two-thirds of these most commonly represented majors are writing-focused, they are not rhetorically-oriented and instead value a specific disciplinary way of writing; therefore, we are not concerned that having so many student respondents from these majors has skewed our data.

6. Students’ reasons for finding their non-academic writing to be meaningful also differ in notable ways. For instance, and most likely because many of the projects students discuss are self-sponsored, students are less likely to discuss the importance of having agency; students automatically have significant agency in most of their non-academic writing projects. Students were also less likely in our study to discuss researching to learn as a key feature of what made their non-academic writing meaningful (Eodice, Geller, and Lerner 65).

7. It is possible that students report slightly lower use of image-based social media platforms not because they actually use them less frequently but because they are less likely to associate these social media apps with “writing” (e.g., Rosinski, Shepherd).

8. Some genres (and metagenres) students compose outside of class map cleanly on to curricular projects: speeches and presentations are frequently assigned across the disciplines and in general education courses, and proposals are regular precursors to research papers and long-term projects, for example. The one-to-one correspondence of genres (or metagenres) is not where we are most likely to locate the possibility of meaningful opportunities for transferable learning, however, and might even be the site of many “assemblage” and “remix” errors (see Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak).

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY

Elon University Students' Non-Academic and Self-Sponsored Writing

This survey asks about your **non-academic writing**. By non-academic writing, we mean any writing you do for **personal, professional, or extracurricular reasons**.

1. I write for reasons other than my academic classes [scale: Never, Infrequently, Sometimes, Often, Very Frequently]
2. The non-academic writing I do is for (mark all that apply)
 - Professional reasons (job, internship, etc.)
 - Extracurricular activities (student organizations, clubs, athletics, etc.)
 - Personal reasons (journaling, creative writing, etc.)
 - Other (fill in):
3. Indicate what kinds of writing you do for non-academic reasons (check all that apply): [three checkboxes were provided for each of the item in the list below: "Personal Reasons," "Extracurricular Activities," and "Professional Reasons"]
 - Email
 - Articles (such as for *Odyssey*, *Pendulum*, *Mic*, etc.)
 - Poster/Flyer/Infographic
 - Reviews (such as for Amazon, Yelp; or books/movies)

- Video (such as script or storyboarding)
 - “How to” or Instructional text (such as on blog or video)
 - Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
 - Image-based social media (Instagram, Snapchat, etc.)
 - Diary or journal writing
 - Proposal (for grant, project, etc.)
 - Presentations or speeches (such as for job, stand up, formal occasion, etc.)
 - Letters
 - Essays
 - Blogging (fashion, area of interest/expertise, etc.)
 - Texting/SMS messages
 - Creative Writing (poetry, fiction, lyrics, etc.)
 - Other
 - Other
 - Other
4. I believe writing is an important part of my non-academic life at Elon. [scale: Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Strongly agree]
5. I have written something meaningful during my time at Elon that was not assigned for class. [scale: Strongly disagree, Somewhat disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Somewhat agree, Strongly agree]
6. Why was it meaningful?
7. The amount of effort I have put into non-academic writing projects at Elon is [scale: Very little, Little, Moderate, Significant, Very significant]
8. The readers of my non-academic writing are (mark all that apply): [three checkboxes were provided for each of the item in the list below: “Personal Writing,” “Professional Writing,” and “Extracurricular Writing.”]
- Friends
 - Family
 - People interested in topic/issue
 - Advisor or boss
 - Colleagues or peers in organization
 - General Internet audience
 - Unknown
 - Other

9. I enjoy working on writing projects that are not class-related. [scale: Never, Infrequently, Sometimes, Often, Very frequently]
10. I participate in writing-related groups or events (such as writing contests, poetry readings, stand up, speeches, etc.) at Elon. [scale: Never, Infrequently, Sometimes, Often, Very frequently]
11. I value the writing I do for non-academic reasons. [scale: Not at all, A little, Somewhat, A fair amount, A great deal]
12. The writing I do in my classes helps me with my non-academic writing. [scale: Not at all, A little, Somewhat, A fair amount, A great deal]
13. The writing I do for non-academic reasons helps me with the writing I do for academic reasons. [scale: Not at all, A little, Somewhat, A fair amount, A great deal]
14. I use writing strategies (such as brainstorming and revision techniques) that I learned in class for my non-academic writing. [scale: Never, Infrequently, Sometimes, Often, Very frequently]
15. I use writing strategies I learned outside of school (through non-academic writing) to complete academic writing projects. [scale: Never, Infrequently, Sometimes, Often, Very frequently]

The following three questions ask you about writing that was *not assigned for a class*.

16. Please describe an example of a piece of writing that you have worked on that was not for a class and that you **valued or were proud of**. Why?
17. Please describe an example of a piece of writing that you wrote outside of class that failed or did not work as well as (or in the way that) you hoped. Why?
18. What would you say you've learned from the **non-academic writing** you've done during your time at Elon?

APPENDIX B: CODEBOOK

Proud and Why

- **Facilitated Connection.** Helped author connect personally with another person, family, or group; or helped facilitate interpersonal or personal connection between others.
- **Cared about Topic/Issue.** Author is passionate about the topic, believes in importance of issue or topic.
- **Communicated Effectively.** Author believes document was well writ-

ten, stated things clearly; did a good job communicating its points to its intended audiences.

- **Achieved Outcome.** Document enabled author to gain admission to graduate school, win scholarship, win contest/award, get job or internship offer, earn position, etc.
- **Got Attention.** Document got a lot of hits online, reached wide audiences, was successful on social media, had a lot of viewers; many people read document, document got positive feedback from internet audiences/readers, etc.
- **Process or Express.** Writing helped author work through experience or thought; writing successfully conveyed feelings or emotions about something.
- **Other.** Author expressed other reasons for being proud, e.g., learned a lot, learned from the process, enjoyed it, collaborative, put in a lot of effort, etc.

Failed and Why

- **Rhetorical Considerations:**
 - *Audience Problems.* Document directed toward wrong audience, author misread audience.
 - *Couldn't Switch Gears.* Author wrote in too much of an "academic" style, didn't make document fit the situation.
- **"Just Bad."** Piece was badly written (no particular reason given why, necessarily, "just bad"); not well done.
- **Process and Time Problems:**
 - *Lack of Motivation, Time, or Effort.* Author didn't follow through, didn't have enough time, didn't feel obliged to do it, didn't put in enough effort.
 - *Process Problems.* Rushed process; did not proofread, did not seek input, did not draft or brainstorm thoroughly, did not take the necessary time.
- **No Failure.** Author did not write something non-academic that failed.
- **Evidence of Failure.** Student did not explain why document failed, but did offer evidence of failure.
 - *Intended Outcome Not Achieved.* Author did not win grant, did not get into school, did not get internship/job; document did not fundraise or advertise effectively.
 - *Lack of Attention, or Criticism.* Document had no hits, minimal readers, did not "catch on"; no one liked or shared it

on social media; author never sent it, never showed anyone; received criticism from audience.

Learned from Non-Academic Writing

- **Personal Learning or Growth:**
 - *Self-Reflection and Growth.* Learned about oneself; e.g., I learned about myself as a person, I reflected on who I am and what I value.
 - *Time and Life Management.* Learned how to write efficiently, how to get things done without external deadlines, life organization skills.
 - *Passion.* Helped writer discover and engage with personal passions.
- **Writing Process:**
 - *Process Strategies.* Gained abilities related to (or learned importance of) revising, editing; learned value of seeking help/advice, etc.
 - *Value of Practice.* Learned that practice makes you a better writer.
- **Audience Adaptation:**
 - *Audience.* Author learned how to shift styles for different audiences.
 - *Types of Writing Relevant for Career.* Learned about genres or types of writing that will help in professional world.
- **Writing Abilities:**
 - *Creativity.* Gained abilities related to voice or creative expression.
 - *Improved Communication/Writing Skills.* Writing or communication skills got better as a result of this project or experience; learned importance of clear communication.
- **Other.** Learned something that does not fit under any other code.

Why Meaningful

- **Communication or Connection.** Author made personal connection by communicating with others or connecting with family, friends, or groups.
- **Professional/Future Development or Success.** Helped author get internships, jobs, or admission into schools; helped author succeed in professional spaces; documents include job apps, admissions materials

for grad schools, job letters, cover letters, emails for work purposes, professional materials, scholarship essay, etc.; focus is on personal/professional gain rather than others' gains.

- **Real World.** Document has external audience, real world goal/challenge, wide audience, and reached readers (**not** for application purposes); helped author gain real world experience, emphasis is often on goals for others; key factor is importance of real world audience.
- **Reflection, Processing, or Self-Expression.** Writing used to process emotions or situation, express experiences, reflect on self or situation.
- **Other.** Student states it is meaningful for reasons other than those listed in the other codes; could include that goal itself is laudable; organization, issue, cause, or topic matters to the student; outcomes could benefit others or society.
- **None.** Student goes out of their way to say they had no meaningful non-academic writing experiences.

