



The Writing Lives of College Students

Revisualizing Composition Study Group
A WIDE Survey and Whitepaper
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Summary of Findings

This white paper reports initial findings from a Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center study entitled *Revisualizing Composition: Mapping the Writing Lives of First-Year College Students*. These initial findings are drawn from a survey of students enrolled in writing classes at a sample of US postsecondary institutions.

Writing practices and technologies have changed considerably over recent years. Given these changes, we know that contemporary college students are highly literate, but we lack clear and comprehensive portraits of how writing works in their lives. The primary aim of this study is to generate a large and uniform data set that leads to a better understanding of the writing behaviors of students across a variety of institutions and locations. Working from the assumption that students lead complex writing lives, this study is interested in a broad range of writing practices and values both for the classroom and beyond it, as well as the technologies, collaborators, spaces, and audiences they draw upon in writing. Initial findings include the following:

- SMS texts (i.e., texts using short message services on mobile devices), emails, and lecture notes are three of the most frequently written genres (or types) of writing
- SMS texts and academic writing are the most frequently valued genres
- Some electronic genres written frequently by participants, such as writing in social networking environments, are not valued highly
- Students' write for personal fulfillment nearly as often as for school assignments
- Institution type is related in a meaningful way to the writing experiences of participants, particularly what they write and the technologies used
- Digital writing platforms—cell phones, Facebook, email—are frequently associated with writing done most often
- Students mostly write alone, and writing alone is valued over writing collaboratively

These findings, along with others reported in this white paper, shed light on the writing practices and values of contemporary college students. In particular, these findings point to the pervasiveness of writing in the lives of our participants and the importance of hand-held devices like mobile phones as a writing platform.

Our findings also raise a number of questions related to how students experience, use, and value new writing technologies and environments in the larger context of their writing lives. We hope the findings in this report raise questions for further research and scholarship.

About the Survey

This report is based on the findings of a survey (n=1366) distributed to students enrolled in a first-year writing class during April-June of the Spring 2010 semester. Students at seven institutions completed the survey (Elon University [Elon, North Carolina]; Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne [Ft. Wayne, Indiana]; Lansing Community College [Lansing, Michigan]; Leeward Community College [Pearl City, Hawaii]; Michigan State University [East Lansing, Michigan]; the University of North Carolina at Pembroke [Pembroke, North Carolina]; the University of Texas at El Paso [El Paso, Texas]).

These institutions represent a range of institution types according to the Carnegie classification system, including Research University, very high activity, Michigan State University; Research University, high activity, the University of Texas at El Paso; Master’s Colleges and University, Medium, Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke; Master’s Colleges and Universities, Small, Private, Elon University; Associate’s Public Rural-serving, Large, Lansing Community College; and Associate’s Public 2-year Colleges under 4-year Universities, Leeward Community College. Of the 2110 students who began the survey, 1366 completed it, for a completion rate of 65% (see Methodology for more details).

The survey asked for demographic information and included a series of questions related to what participants write. Participants were first asked to identify types of writing that they do based on a list of 30 writing types. Then participants were asked to rank order the five types of writing that they do most often. Next they were asked to rank order the types of writing that they value the most. For each type of writing, participants were asked to detail why, where, with whom, for whom, and with what technologies they typically write. The meaning of “writing” in this survey included a wide range of practices, from lists to research papers to texting to multi-media compositions.

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Section 1: What are students writing in and out of school?

1.1: SMS texts, emails, and lecture notes are three of the most frequently written genres.

The genres—or types—of writing that participants report writing most frequently are SMS text messages, emails, and lecture notes. Texting and emailing were ranked highly by participants when asked to identify all of their writing practices and by participants when asked to rank their most frequent writing practices. This finding reinforces common perceptions that texting and email have become commonplace writing practices. This finding also highlights the importance of the phone as a platform for writing. However, in highlighting the importance of a practice like texting, this finding may challenge other common perceptions of what counts as “writing.”

Beyond the Data: Cell phones: The New Pencil for Personal Life?

Cell phones have become a prominent writing technology for students for self-sponsored writing. Students use phones most often for SMS texting, but they also use them for a range of other digital writing, including emails, status message updates, instant messaging, and comments on status messages or posts. Cell phones are also frequently used for lists, and even occasionally for academic genres including lecture notes, reading notes, research papers, academic papers, and outlines. We have had students report using their phones to compose academic essays.

When considering the simple ranking of writing practices, we find that 91% of participants selected texting from the thirty choices available of all writing that they have done, and 78% said that texting was one of the five kinds of writing they do most often. In fact, nearly half of all participants (46%) indicated that texting was the kind of writing that they performed more than any other. A greater percentage of participants overall (94%) selected email as a type of writing practice they had performed in the past, but fewer placed it within their top five types of writing done most often (57%), and less than ten percent selected it as the genre they write the most (9%).

A number of academic writing practices were highly ranked, which is not surprising given the participants and sampling approach. 78% of

participants selected lecture notes as a type of writing they have done, while 93% and 82% chose research and academic papers respectively (meaning, in turn, that almost 7% and 20% respectively report having not written academic or research papers).

We utilized a statistical weighting method for the ranked lists of most frequent and valued writing practices for our findings that accounted for the placement of a given writing practice somewhere in the top 5 listings for frequency and value. We believe that this method provides a stronger measure of both frequency and value. When considering the weighted ranking of writing practices, the top 10 most frequently written genres are as follows:

1. Texting
2. E-mail
3. Lecture notes
4. Academic paper
5. Research papers
6. Lists
7. Instant messaging
8. Comments on status messages or posts
9. Status message updates
10. Reading notes

We see in this list a range of traditional academic genres along with types of writing that we think of as “helpers” for larger tasks (e.g., notes). We see as well a number of genres that are a function of networked communication technologies. They have a clear place in the writing lives of these participants.

1.2: As expected, students frequently write traditional school genres including academic papers and research papers.

The top five most often used types of writing include the academic and research paper, as well as more informal types of writing that often support the academic and research paper such as lecture and reading notes, lists, and even email and texting. Additional inquiry is needed to explore how, whether, and how often the more informal types of writing are used (or not) to support traditional school writing such as the academic and research paper.

1.3: Several digital genres are written by almost all participants, but several others are practiced by less than half of participants

As described above, half of the ten genres that participants report writing most frequently are digital genres. Along with email and texting, which we detail above, instant messaging was practiced by 83% of participants, and status message updates (65%) and comments on status message updates (75%) were likewise prominent, indicating the importance of social media in the writing lives of these participants. However, other types of electronic communication were not as pervasive. Chat rooms had been utilized previously by just over half of all students. A total of 49% of participants reported writing for websites, and 39% of students reported writing for blogs.

1.4 Gender is a relevant factor in what students write but in a limited number of genres

For many types of writing, gender is not significantly related to frequency in our sample. For the fifteen genres where gender is significantly related to frequency, only three categories skewed male, and only one of these in a strong way: websites, with over half of males (53%) and less than half of females (45%) reporting writing this genre. The other, business writing, was reported by 25% of males and

20% of females. Female respondents were significantly more likely than males to use academic “helper” genres: outlines, reading notes, lecture notes, and lists.

Section 2: How do students value the writing they do?

2.1: SMS texts and academic writing are the most frequently valued genres.

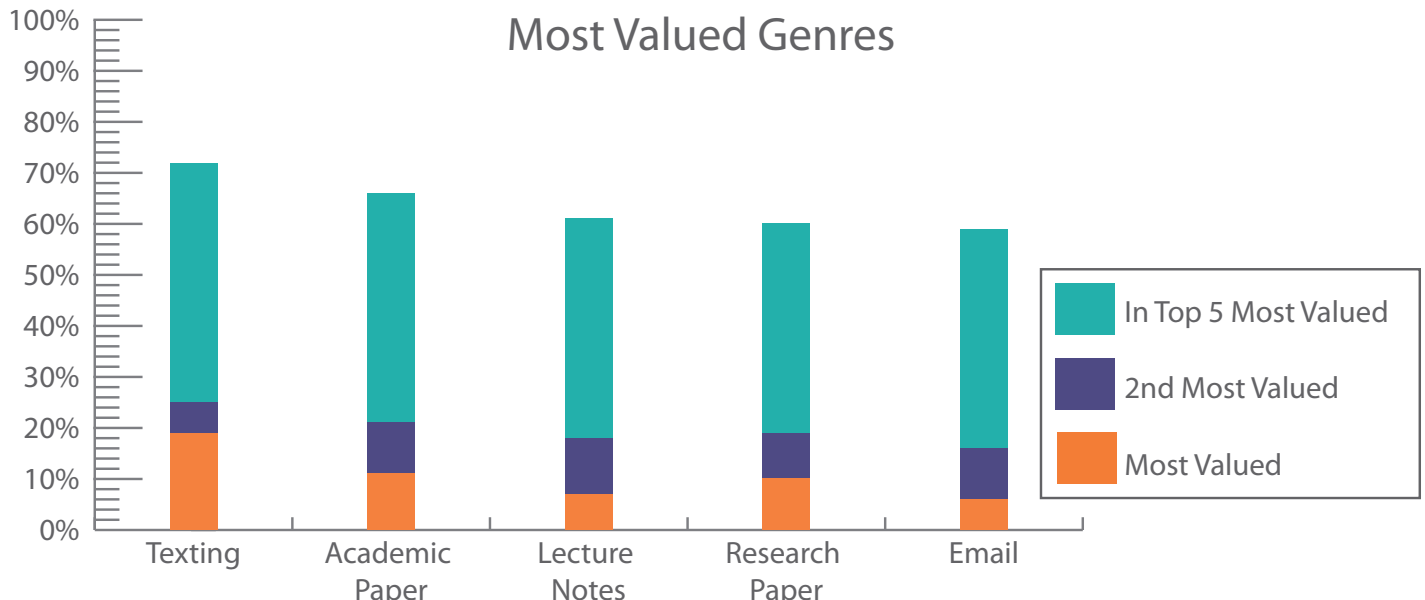
Participants were asked to rank how they valued 30 genres of writing by selecting the five most valuable types of writing to them. When considering the simple ranking of writing practices, we find that students ranked the following five genres most frequently as one of their top five most valued: Texting (47%), Academic Paper (45%), Lecture Notes (43%), Email (43%), and Research Paper (41%).

The weighted scores for value results in the following list of most valued genres of writing:

1. Texting
2. Academic Paper
3. Lecture Notes
4. Research Paper
5. Email
6. Resume
7. List
8. Letter
9. Journal/Diary
10. Forms

Figure 1: Display of top five most valued genres based on un-weighted rankings.

School-sponsored genres are valued highly by survey participants: academic paper and research paper ranked second and fourth, respectively. Lecture notes ranked third. As figure one indicates, 21% of participants ranked academic papers as their first or second most valued genre. 19% of students ranked research

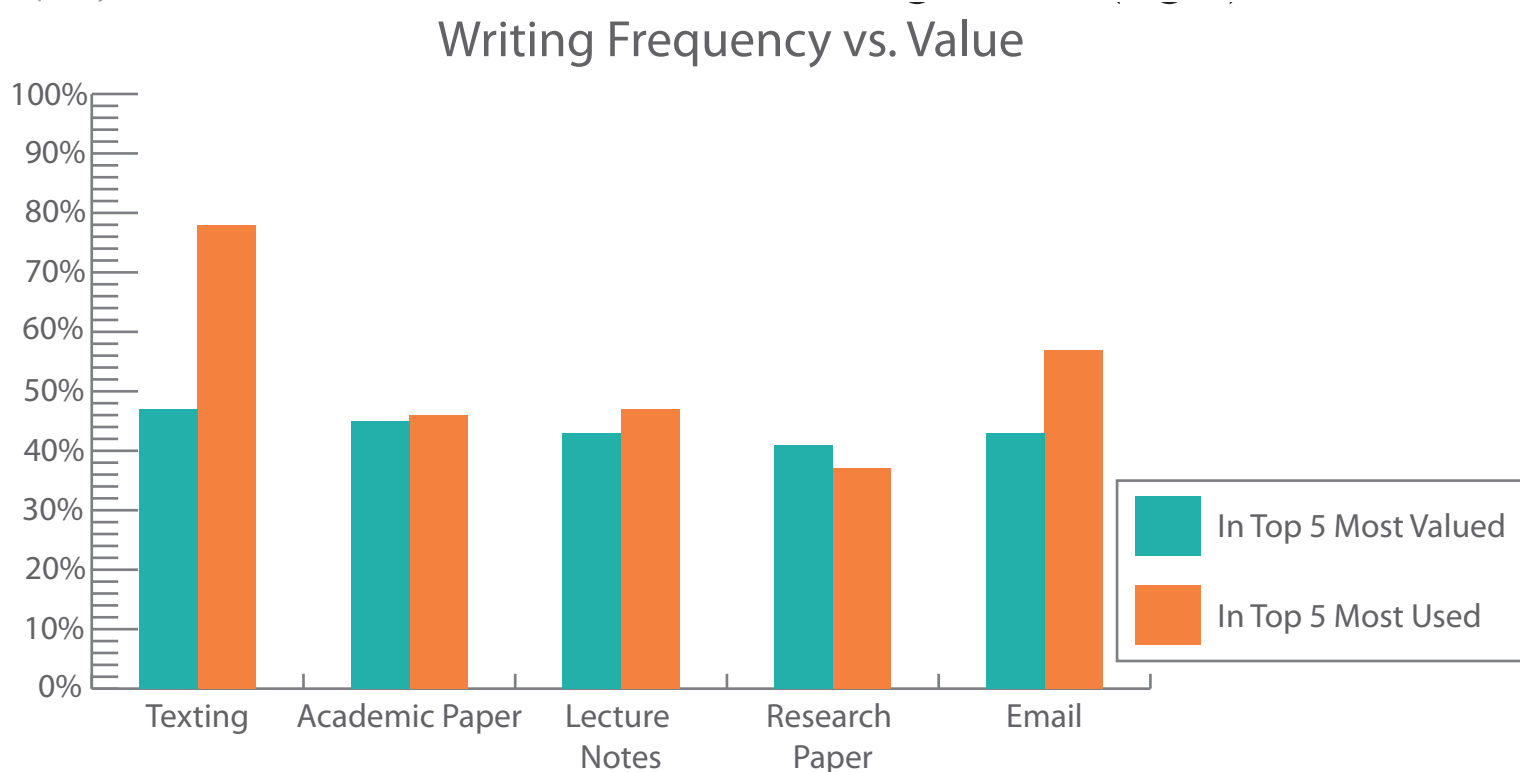


papers as their first or second most valued genre. Finally, for those who selected lecture notes, 19% of participants ranked lecture notes as their first or second most valued genre.

2.2 Some less frequently written genres are valued highly by student writers.

Among the ten most valued genres, four genres are valued highly but written relatively infrequently. Resumes ranked 6th for value, but 20th for frequency. Journal/diary ranked 9th for value, but 12th for frequency. Letters ranked 8th for value, but 14th for frequency. Finally, poetry ranked 12th for value, but 15th for frequency.

Figure 2: Top five most valued genres compared with their frequency numbers



2.3 Some electronic genres written frequently by participants are not valued very highly.

There are a number of electronic genres that rank higher among participants for use than for value. Notably, while texting ranked as most valued and most frequently used among all genres, participants do not value this form of writing at the same level that they practice it. As Figure 2 indicates, while 1049 participants (78%) selected texting as one of their top five most frequently used genres, only 641 participants (47%) ranked it in their top five most valued genres. Similarly, email was the second most frequently used genre (776 students, 57%), but it ranked 5th for value (586 students, 43%).

Several electronic genres which are used frequently did not rank in the top ten most valued. Comments on status messages or posts in social software environments were ranked 8th for frequency but ranked 21st for value. Instant messaging ranked 7th for frequency but 15th for value. Finally status message updates were

ranked 9th for frequency, but 18th for value.

Section 3: Do students from different institution types compose and value different kinds of writing?

3.1 Institution type is a meaningful predictor of the writing experiences of participants.

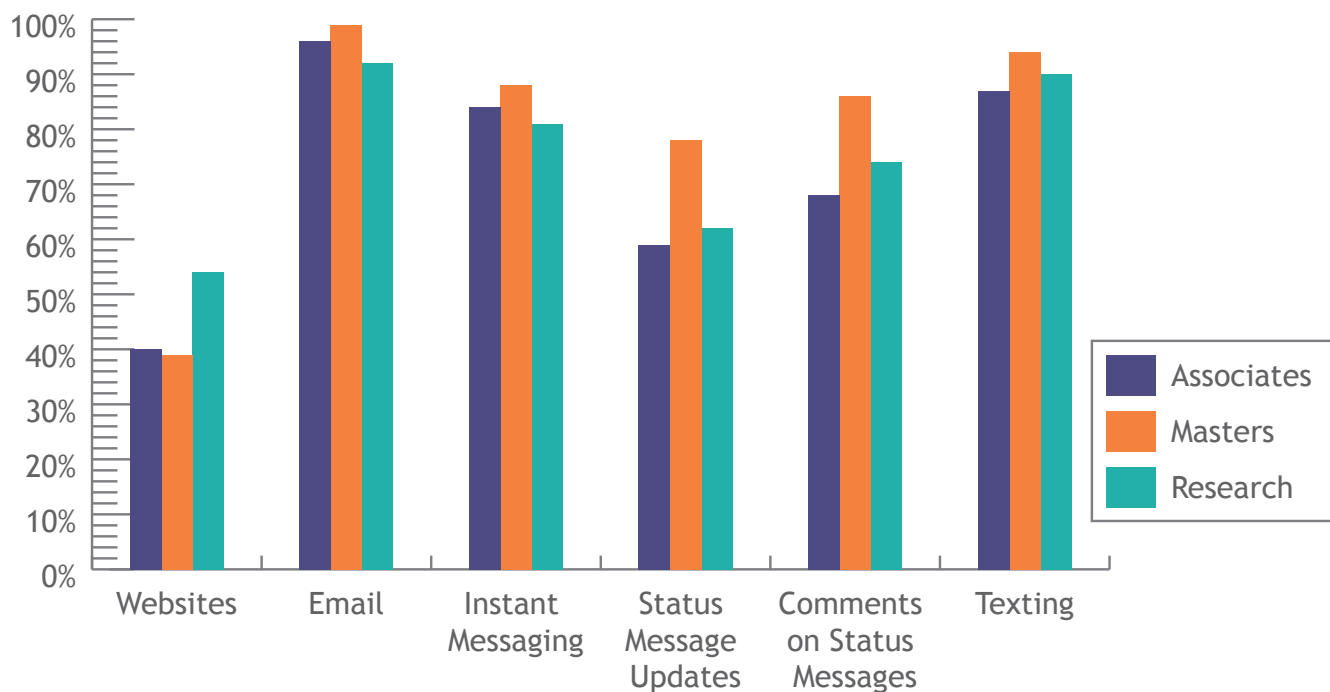
In our sample, institution was statistically significant in predicting what genres participants at different types of institutions had written. Participants who attended research universities were significantly more likely than participants from Master’s or Associates institutions to have engaged in play/screenwriting and website writing. Survey participants who attended associate-granting institutions were significantly more likely to have written cover letters. Participants who attend master’s-granting institutions were significantly more likely to have written many genres, including academic genres (academic papers, research papers, lab reports), helper academic genres (reading notes, outlines, lecture notes, peer responses), digital genres (texting, status message updates and responses, emails, instant messages), and more (poetry, journal, lists, letters, forms).

Figure 3: Percentage of students at each institution type reporting having written digital genres. Relationships shown are statistically significant.

3.2: Use of digital genres differed across institution types.

Each institution type was significantly more likely to write a set of particular digital genres. Master’s University students were most likely to use email at least once, followed by Associate’s College students and then Research University students. More participants enrolled in Associate’s Colleges used chat rooms, but these participants were least likely to make status updates or comment on status

Ranking of Digital Writing Genres Across Institution Type



updates. Participants enrolled in Master's Universities were most likely to email, use instant messenger, write status message updates, comment on status messages, and to text. Participants enrolled in Research Universities were most likely to write for websites and least likely to use instant messenger. These findings suggest that we need further investigation into how students at different kinds of institutions incorporate digital genres into their writing lives.

Section 4: Why do participants write what they write?

4.1: Participants are most often motivated by the need to complete school assignments.

Beyond the Data: Facebook...meh

Our results show that Facebook is used frequently among first-year college students, and they use it to write a broad range of genres. The reasons why students do not report valuing this writing as highly are unclear, but it likely means that when faced with a list of types of writing, they still attach a lot of value to traditional print forms such as research papers and academic writing vs. shorter, born-digital forms such as status messages and instant messages.

Most of the writing students report doing on Facebook is directly related to interpersonal messaging. Though many think of social networking platforms as places where people write indulgently about themselves, our survey shows participants who more often comment on the posts and status updates of others than post things to their own profile. They also use Facebook to send messages: texts, IM, and email. Participants also report using the platform for writing everything from lists to screenplays to poetry.

Half (50%) of all frequently written and most valued genres were associated with writing for school. 97% of participants reported that one of their most valued or most often completed genres was done to fulfill a school assignment.

4.2: Participants write for personal fulfillment nearly as often as for school assignments.

Nearly half (44%) of all valued and frequently written genres were associated with personal fulfillment. 93% of participants said that one of their most valued or most often completed genres was done for

personal fulfillment. This finding is especially interesting given the fact that participants were solicited through academic avenues (e.g. college email addresses, course websites) and sometimes took the survey in college classrooms, where we might expect them to focus on school-sponsored motivations for writing.

4.3: Participants associate their writing with entertainment, civic participation, and for their jobs much less often than for school or personal fulfillment.

After writing for school and personal fulfillment, writing for entertainment was the next most frequently identified motivation for the writing participants do most often and value most highly. Almost a third (31%) of the most frequently written and most valued genres were associated with entertainment. Writing for civic participation (16%) and writing to fulfill the requirements of a job (12%) were associated much less frequently with participants' writing. Notably, although writ-

ing for civic participation and for the job were related less frequently to most of the types of writing participants identified, over half of students associated these motivations with at least one of their most frequent or valued kinds of writing. 61% of participants reported writing for civic participation at least once among their most often written and valued genres, and 55% reported writing for the job at least once, suggesting that these motives are present in the lives of many participants, even if less pervasively.

Section 5: What are participants writing with particular technologies?

5.1: Participants who associate particular technologies with at least one of their most frequently or valued genres use that technology frequently.

Figure 4: Percentage of students who associated each technology at least once with the writing they do, and the percentage of students who associated each technology with a most often written genre

	% Used at Least Once	% Most Often Used
Word Processor	90%	91%
Notebook or Paper	89%	94%
Cellphone	86%	98%
Pencil	80%	92%
Email	76%	90%
Facebook	67%	95%

As Figure 4 shows, 90% of participants associate word processors with at least one of their most frequently or valued written genres. Word processing technologies are used most often to write academic or research papers, but they also are used often for outlines, lecture notes, and emails. Users also rate word processing technologies as the technology most often associated with their most valued writing (79%).

5.2: Blogs, Twitter, and Wikis are not used by many participants, but among those participants who use these technologies, they are used frequently.

In contrast to how often they are associated with writing done most often, these technologies are only moderately or minimally associated with valued writing. This inverse relationship may reinforce the popular perception that a small percentage of people write the majority of blog, twitter, and wiki posts. This data also suggests that use of these technologies is not age specific or always connected to or influenced by writing in a school setting.

Blogs, Twitter, and Wikis are not used by many, but among those who use them they are used often

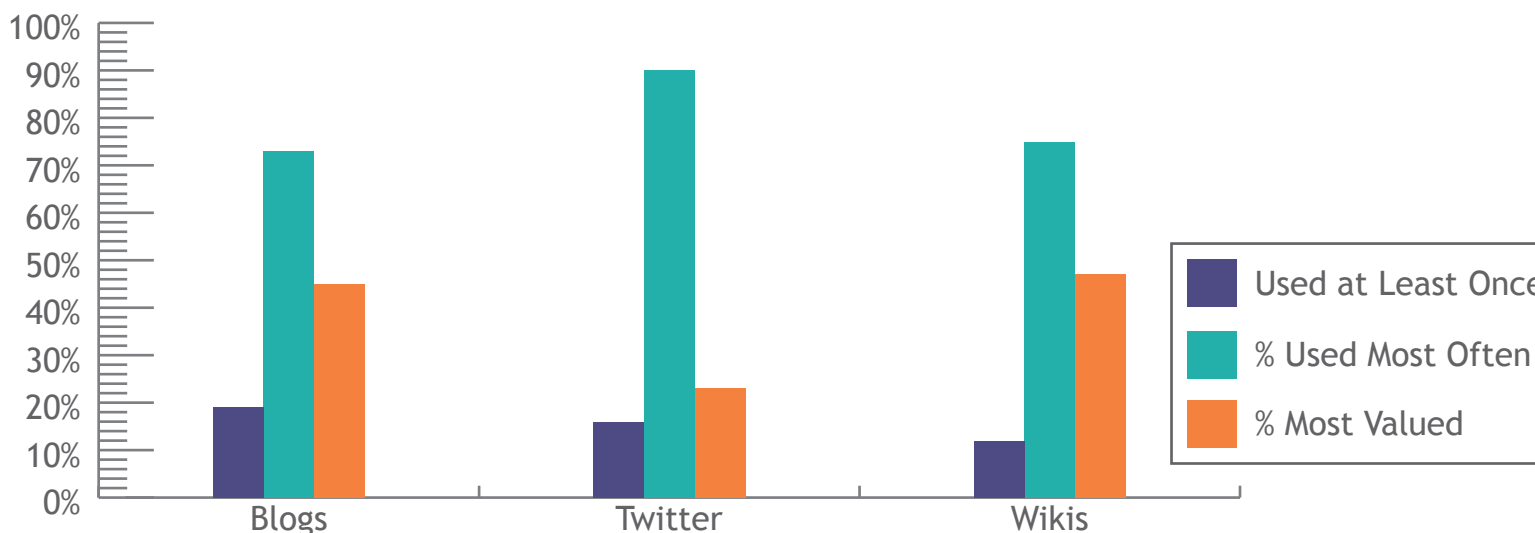


Figure 5: Percentage of students who associated each technology at least once with the writing they do, and the percentage of students who associated each technology with a most often written genre

Section 6: With whom are participants writing?

6.1: Participants do much of their most common and valued writing alone.

While participants write with friends or classmates, writing with these two groups is not valued nearly as much as writing alone.

6.2: Only 245 participants report collaborating with writing center consultants for their most valued or frequently written genres (one of the lowest ranked collaborators, behind only “Other”).

Beyond the Data: Students are often writing alone and for personal fulfillment motives. But what does this mean?

Our findings suggest that students are doing a great deal of personal writing. They report writing alone and for personal fulfillment quite often. We hope that this finding helps us better understand the nature of personal writing for contemporary students. While they are often doing personal writing, we do not think that this writing is always private. For example, students are frequently writing alone when using cell phones, though they are frequently using them to connect to others through texting and social media platforms.

When compared with all of the other types of collaborators, the fewest number of participants worked with writing center consultants while writing their most frequent and valued genres. Among those participants who report working with writing center consultants, they list it as their least used collaboration. Further, participants identified collaborating with writing center consultants as least valued (second only to “Other”).

6.3: Writing with work colleagues is reported less often and not highly valued.

Collaboration Type, Value & Frequency

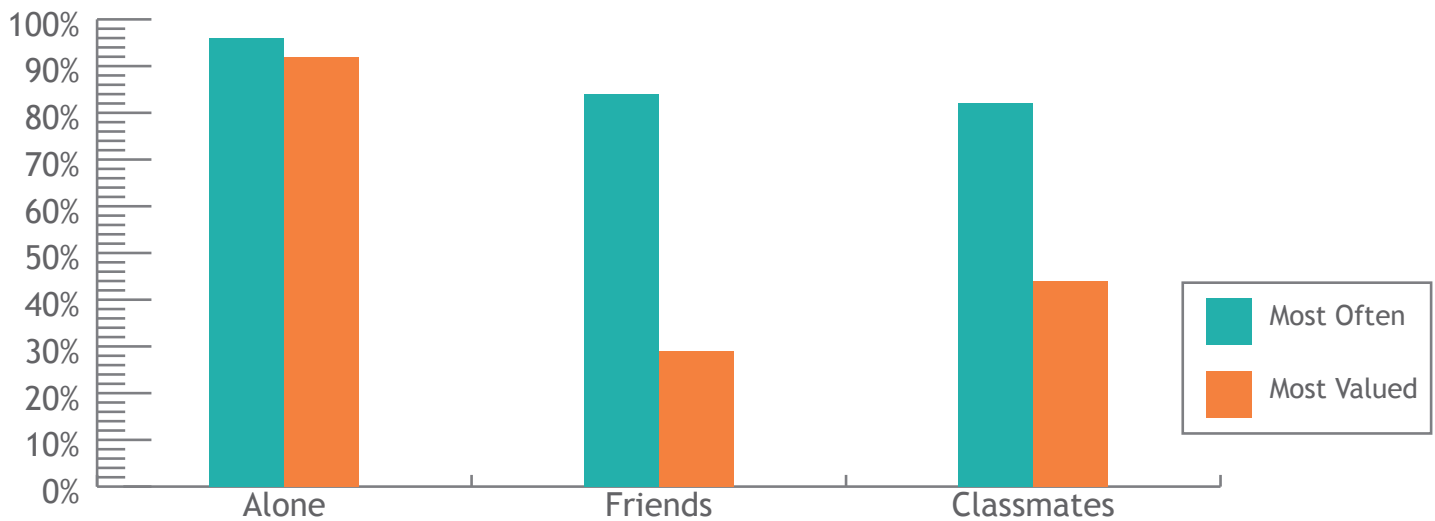


Figure 6: Percentage of students who associate each collaborator with their most frequently written and valued genres.

38% of participants report collaborating with work colleagues to write at least one of their most frequent or valued genres. While 33% associate work colleagues with one of their most often written genres, only 12% of participants associate it with a most valued genre.

Methodology

Sampling

In this study, we constructed a purposive, stratified sample in an attempt to match the demographic profile of US college students (those enrolled in both four-year and two-year institutions in 2010). We identified institutions for recruitment that had enabled us to construct a reasonable sample of US institutions of higher education. With regard to data analysis, in order to arrive at the findings in this report, two similar tests were utilized. Fisher's Exact Test was used to determine relationships between variables when possible (i.e. when results formed a 2x2 contingency table). Chi-square tests were used in all other situations. Results were considered significant at the .05 level.

Our sampling resulted in the following profile:

- **Age:** The vast majority of participants (90%) were a "traditional" age for US institutions of higher education (18-23). Half of all participants were 19 years old, indicating that they had enrolled in college immediately after graduating from high school.
- **Institution:** 58% of participants attended a research university, 20% of participants attend a master's granting institution, and 11% of partici-

pants attend a community college.

- Race and ethnicity: 43% of our sample was non-white, with 5% Black, 28% Hispanic, 8% Asian, and 2% Native American

Comparison to Race and Ethnicity Profiles of Students in Higher Education

Demographics Comparison for the WIDE Study and National Center for Education Statistics Studies

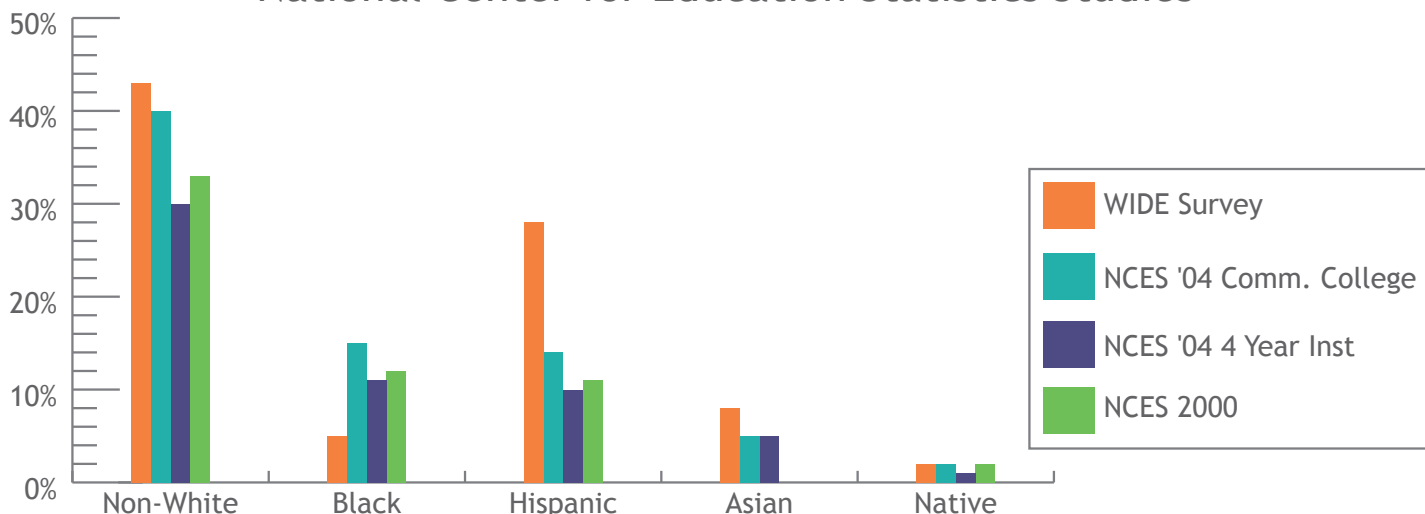


Figure 7: Race and ethnicity breakdown for Revisualizing Composition and two National Center for Education Statistics Studies.

To further assess our sample, we compared the demographic data of those completing our survey with both the 1999-2000 and the 2003-2004 “National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions” report issued by the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

The 2003-2004 version of the NCES report included a special focus on two-year institutions, and so in its 2004 report of demographic data the center breaks out community colleges and 4-year institutions. The table below shows how our sample compares with the NCES numbers:

As Figure 6 shows, we likely oversampled Hispanic students and, to a lesser degree, Asian students. We under sampled African American students. That our sample includes a slightly higher percentage of non-white participants than the NCES demographic profile of college students reflects a concerted effort on our part to construct a diverse student profile. The participation of the University of Texas, El Paso and Leeward Community College, respectively, contributed in large measure to the numbers in all of the minority population categories above with the exception of African American students. For future surveys, we should focus more carefully on ways to sample African American students at a level consistent with their numbers in the overall demographic profile (12-15%).

Survey Distribution

Distribution methods varied by institution based on local IRB recommendations. The survey was distributed via email to all students in first-year composition classes at Michigan State University, University of Texas, El Paso, and Leeward Community College. At Lansing Community College and the University of North Carolina, Pembroke, writing program faculty who teach first-year composition were contacted via email with the online survey link and distributed the survey link to students enrolled in their courses, some of which included first-year business and technical writing classes. At IPFW, the survey was distributed to all students enrolled in any writing course during the spring of 2010, including advanced writing and technical writing students, and a majority of students enrolled in first-year and intermediate composition courses. At Elon University, the survey was sent via email to all first-year students who matriculated in 2009 and were still enrolled in Spring 2010.