Making College "Worth It" – Season 1, Episode 1

Preparing for Workplace Writing

Sydni Brown (00:04):

Welcome to Making College Worth It, the show that examines engaged learning activities that increase the value of college experiences.

Jessie Moore (00:11):

In each episode, we share research from Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning and our international network of scholars. We explore engaged learning activities that recent college graduates associate with their financial and time commitment to college being worthwhile.

Sydni Brown (00:25):

I'm Sydni Brown, a rising senior majoring in communications design and strategic communications with minors in poverty and social justice and leadership studies at Elon University.

Jessie Moore (00:36):

And I'm Jessie Moore, director of Elon's Center for Engaged Learning and a professor of professional writing and rhetoric.

Sydni Brown (00:41):

In this episode we'll focus on writing, specifically how students can prepare for workplace writing while they're still in college. We'll talk to professors Amanda Sturgill from Elon University, Neil Baird from Bowling Green State University, and Stephen Macharia from Strathmore University in Kenya. They recently collaborated on an international, multi-year study of alumni perspectives on how college prepared them for writing in the workplace.

Jessie Moore (01:07):

In a 2021 national survey of recent college graduates, 64.5% indicated that writing effectively was very important to their day-to-day life. Nearly 80% indicate that they had developed their writing skills at least somewhat while in college, but that leaves 20% who may have benefited from additional opportunities to prepare for workplace writing. Let's hear our panelists ideas for understanding and closing that gap.

Stephen Macharia (01:40):

My name is Stephen Macharia. I'm a lecturer at Strathmore University and I also work as the head of the Writing Center at that university. I teach communication skills, a course that is taught to first year students at the university to help them in writing at the workplace.

Amanda Sturgill (02:01):

Hello, I'm Amanda Sturgill and I am an associate professor of journalism at Elon University and I was interested in learning about alumni workplace writing in part because we train our alumni to be workplace writers. That is the career that they're going into, but we typically train them for sort of the

mass audience portion of their writing and not as much for within the office within the newsroom kind of part of their writing. And so I wanted to learn some more about that.

Neil Baird (02:26):

Hi, my name is Dr. Neil Baird. I'm an associate professor of English from Bowling Green State University, where I direct our university writing program, which is responsible for first and second semester composition courses. My primary research agenda is in writing transfer, which is how writers adapt their prior writing knowledge, experiences and skills when writing in new situations. And so it made a lot of sense to follow up that study with learning how early-career alumni write beyond the university and draw on all that they've learned in college and outside of college in order to do that work.

Jessie Moore (03:11):

Can you tell us a little bit about your participants? Who did you survey and interview?

Amanda Sturgill (03:17):

We did a combination of methods. We started by issuing surveys to alumni of our own programs. One of the things that was a real strength about our project was the diversity of institutional contexts that we had. So we had a liberal arts university, my own university, Elon, here in North Carolina, about 7,000 students and strong professional programs. The students we did interview were out of the professional programs there. We had a technical university in the Czech Republic. We had a liberal arts college in Kenya, and then we had a research-1, high research activity, public university in the United States. We all did talk to alumni from our own programs as a part of that.

Neil Baird (04:02):

And out of that survey we were able to follow up for extended interviews with three participants from our universities. We engaged in a literacy history interview and then engaged in some discourse-based interviews where we had them bring a piece of writing that they were extremely proud of, and another piece of writing which they felt needed a little bit of work or they had some problems with. From my institution, the three participants... First was Faye. She was someone in film studies looking to leverage that work to be a major content designer for a zoo. Kate, which was a MFA in creative writing looking to leverage that work for a nonprofit cancer organization as a major gifts manager. And then my third participant was Jackie, who was a campus police officer.

Stephen Macharia (04:58):

I surveyed three of my former students, that is alumni of Strathmore University, who work at different places and who are at different stages of... They're early-career stage workers at different places.

Amanda Sturgill (05:12):

Some of our other participants worked as software engineers, worked in human resources. We had one journalist, a couple of others who worked in nonprofit kind of PR. So we had a nice variety of different types of participants.

Jessie Moore (05:26):

And that variety seems like it would really help then as you're talking about broad-based findings, that it's not specific to any one discipline but would be applicable to young alumni in multiple workplaces.

Amanda Sturgill (05:40):

Yeah, well, it was interesting because we were able to both leverage those differences, but also to see similarities. So we were able to find both of those things in the context of our data.

Sydni Brown (05:53):

And I think it definitely helps as well having all those different participants when you start speaking to the college students who may not see why writing is as important in their field or what they want to go into. So I guess based on that study, what would you like college students and the people who support them to know about early-career alumni's experiences with workplace writing?

Neil Baird (06:13):

I think one of the things that we try to do in analyzing our data was just try to identify what kind of writing knowledge our participants are bringing forward into their first professional positions. Based on that analysis, we found that a lot of them are bringing forward what we call heuristics, which we define as rules of thumb. Just as an example, it might be when writing a newspaper article, you might lead with the most important thing that an interviewee has said to capture attention. What we found was that heuristic was one of the primary kinds of knowledge about writing that our participants were bringing forward, but rather than be static heuristics that don't change, our participants really had to have them be dynamic and be willing to change those heuristics and have them be adapted and transformed because what they sensed was that there's a gap that exists between writing for college and writing for work. The heuristics that they were bringing from college didn't necessarily fit all the time with what they were doing at work, and they needed to adapt those heuristics and change them in order to get them to work.

(07:35):

So I guess that's one thing I would share is the need to be ready to transform and revise what you've learned in college in order to make it work in your early professional careers.

Stephen Macharia (07:54):

Early-career writers need to know that the world is diverse and the skills they learn at the university are not necessarily sometimes consistent with what they expect at the workplace. But what we teach at the university is for students to be able to maneuver and to survive at diverse workplaces based on the skills that they learn in school. So the expectation that most people have is that in college we teach exactly what is expected at the workplace. That could be the situation or not. It depends on the kind of workplace where students work, and as I said, those places are diverse. So we teach students to be flexible and to apply different skills at different context.

Amanda Sturgill (08:44):

Another big thing was the fact that workplace writing for quite a few of our participants was more of a group project than they imagined that it would be. That they were expected to not just communicate with other people, but actually work with other people in the production of the writing that they were doing. And that was something that didn't always come easily to them as they transitioned from the college environment. I think the idea that we have in higher ed of do your own work and you're going to do your work and I'm going to assess your work and those kinds of things, doesn't really help them when they get out and they spend a lot of time figuring out how to work productively with other people, how to take criticism from other people, those kinds of things.

Neil Baird (09:26):

College really emphasizes the individual doing your own work. But if there are a group project, it kind of becomes more cooperative than collaborative where, all right, you go off and do this chunk, you go off and do this chunk, you go do this chunk and we'll bring it all together and turn that in. And a lot of our participants said, "No, it's very different. I'm sitting here writing in Google Docs, and then sometimes another colleague or coworker, even a supervisor, will come in and write over what I just wrote. And that was incredibly frustrating. I didn't know how to handle that kind of collaboration." So yeah, I think there's something to what Amanda says, there's just a different... Writing is always social, I think, but there's a different way. It's social when you're writing at work that a lot of our alumni didn't have heuristics that prepared them for that kind of work.

Amanda Sturgill (10:20):

They also had varying ability to apply parts of their education to later writing tasks. As I said, I teach in a journalism program, and so most of the kinds of things students are learning in our classes or specific skills to producing journalism, so how to ask questions, how to write things, those kinds of things. One of the things that was really cool for me, because even though I'm in one of the professional schools at Elon, I think I'm one of the people in the school of communications who is the most excited about the fact that our students take 75% of their hours in liberal arts and sciences. Was hearing my students being able to talk about things like the research skills that they got in their arts and sciences classes and how they were able to bring those to bear in those writing tasks after they graduated.

Jessie Moore (11:05):

That's really exciting to hear from my perspective in the arts and sciences too, that they're making those connections.

Neil Baird (11:10):

One of the things that we had discovered among our four institutions is that I think Elon in the ways that their curriculum is set up, really situates students to be able to do that kind of work. Whereas at my institution where there isn't kind of an upper division writing requirement or experience, students were invited to do that work. Well, really, there isn't a suggestion that that work is going to be needed. And so there're asked to do that kind of adaptive work on their own without any kind of support.

Sydni Brown (11:45):

Yeah, that's something that I definitely have come to appreciate about being a student at Elon is just how many different opportunities I have to practice different skills. It's like just within my major, it's just such a wide variety of stuff that I'm able to do. And then talking about preparation for students outside of college, having to work more collaboratively, it is very interesting, even just within my group projects, how different it must feel going out of that. Having to write everything together at the exact same time is something that I've never experienced. What can students do to make the most of their college writing experiences as preparations for those future writing responsibilities?

Amanda Sturgill (12:25):

I'm not sure this is the responsibility of the student or if it's the responsibility of the faculty member, but I do think that by the time students graduate, they should have a deep understanding of the process of writing, not just the product of writing, but the process of writing. And that needs to be reinforced in the projects that they're creating. From a student perspective, I guess I would say, trying to resist the urge to

divide and conquer on projects where there's more than one person working on it. That's a hard urge to resist because I know students are very busy and they're very strategic and all of those kinds of things, and it seems kind of dumb and pointless sometimes to have to work together in the ways that you have to, but there's a reason why it would be better to do that.

Neil Baird (13:09):

So along those lines, just thinking about the amount of collaborative writing that our participants were doing is students might have to seek out that kind of experience or opportunity on their own because a lot of times the writing that's taught in class is kind of, you need to do it individually so that you get an individual grade. So it might mean seeking out opportunities to write and collaborate with your faculty members outside of classes. It might mean seeking out an internship or apprenticeship. Sometimes the collaborative writing might be in kind of things you're doing outside of school, such as writing for a student organization or writing about work. And those are equally valuable experiences to learn from and draw on. A lot of times when we are thinking about the experiences that we might use in the future, we always think about school, but writing for a social school organization or writing for work that you might be doing at the same time you're in school might provide you with that collaborative experience.

Stephen Macharia (14:18):

Another thing they can do is to learn different tools, supports such as maybe online tools that they can use at the workplace. That is how they can prepare themselves.

Amanda Sturgill (14:30):

Another thing that could be helpful could be looking for feedback from different kinds of sources. As an example, when I teach media writing, which is sort of our basic writing class for usually first year students, there's a point in the semester where I always tell my students, "I want you to take this thing that you're writing and I want you to go and read it on the phone to your grandmother and see if she can understand it." They don't think I literally mean that, but I literally mean they should do that because one of the things that would help you to adapt to your writing context, and in particular the collaborative writing, is your ability to take and understand feedback from a wide variety of people. So people who are your peers, people who are your superiors, those kinds of things.

(15:11):

I would say seeking additional feedback and then trying to make good use of the feedback that you get from your faculty members. That the feedback that they're giving you is not just the grade at the end, but there's other stuff in there that you could take and look at and try to learn from so that you do better the next time.

Neil Baird (15:26):

And to build on what Amanda's saying, I think there's a need to learn how to identify the person who has the writing knowledge and expertise that you need to grow as a writer, because not all people have the same kinds of knowledge. And in college it's typically the instructor, the person teaching the course who has that experience. But when you're at work, a supervisor might be a supervisor because they have leadership skills, but they might not have that writing expertise that's going to help you. So learning how to identify who has that writing expertise and to be able to ask the questions and seek out the experiences to continually develop and learn as a writer, I think is a key skill to develop as well.

Sydni Brown (16:18):

Yeah, definitely. And I think it's very good. I feel like Elon students are in a unique position where they have the ability to connect with different faculty besides just the people within their majors to be able to get those different writing skills that they may be looking for.

Neil Baird (16:31):

And it's not easy as well. The police officer in our study mentioned that, "Gosh, I came out of college and I knew how to write to an audience, but when I am a police officer, I have six different lieutenants, and all of them seem to have six different ways that you want to write their police reports. And so I have to adapt the way I write police reports according to the lieutenant that's on shift that time." So sometimes it's not easy identifying that person with the writing expertise that can help you develop as a writer.

Sydni Brown (17:11):

Yeah, definitely. Thank you guys for answering that question. A lot of good tips for everybody, including me. It's really going to help. That was a lot of good information about how students should do those things. But next, why should students be interested in making the most of their college writing experiences? I feel like that's always something that college students are always thinking is why I'm doing these things and what am I going to get out of it?

Amanda Sturgill (17:34):

One thing that we heard from several of our participants was the idea that their skill as a writer was a way that they ensured that there was some justice and fairness in the world. So the police officer, for example, if they do a bad job on their police report, that can affect the whole outcome of an investigation. The news reporter, the same way. That if he did a good job reporting things and he covered all different angles of the story, it might make things more equitable for some people. In a lot of cases, the writing that you do, even the workplace writing, even if you're just sending emails, that can really make a difference in your life or the life of other people. So I think it's worth it for that reason.

Neil Baird (18:10):

Yeah, and it's hard to see that in school because unless you are in a class that has a service learning component or a really intense client-based component, you're really just writing for the instructor and the writing stays with the instructor and it receives a grade. And that's the goal of a lot of school writing is to demonstrate that knowledge, to get that grade to move on to the next writing situation. But gosh, like Amanda says, for a lot of our alumni, writing matters and writing does something in the world.

(18:42):

Our participant, who is a major gifts manager for a nonprofit cancer organization is a prime example. If she had to learn how to rewrite and adapt her experiences as a creative writer in order to write these donor letters, but also had to... It's really interesting. We were working with her during the pandemic and how do you get people to donate money to a nonprofit organization to help out with cancer when folks are struggling themselves? For her, there's a major kind of advocacy about her work that wasn't necessarily a part of her college experience, and it became really, really important for her. And she really engaged in her writing because she knew the amount of money that her letter solicited would directly benefit cancer survivors such as herself.

Sydni Brown (19:38):

What are some resources that you would recommend students take advantage of to start their college writing experience?

Amanda Sturgill (19:46):

Let's start with your professor. I spend a lot of lonely hours in my office waiting for students to come by and talk to me. I'm thinking I'm actually going to require that or offer extra credit for it or something next semester. But often we have a lot of knowledge and we're here and ready to help you individually with some of the problems that you're having. What we saw a lot from our respondents was that they carried forth with them from school that if you have a novel writing task, you should Google for an example and then make your writing like that example. They kind of learned to do that in college, I think because they weren't taking advantage of the resources that were already there on campus. So your professor would be a good place to start.

Neil Baird (20:21):

Yeah. And not just a professor in your writing courses, but identifying individuals that are doing the kind of work that you want to do and learning how to talk to them about their writing and the kinds of questions that you might ask them, learning how to solicit examples of the kinds of writing you'll be expected to do from them. And sometimes there's an observational component. If you're a police officer, one of the ways that you can learn how to write a police report is to do ride-alongs with other police officers and to observe them doing that work. And so I guess learning not so much it's a resource, but I guess a way of thinking about writing that you're always going to be learning and growing as a writer. It never stops. So developing a set of tools such as being able to interview people, being able to collect samples and look at them and being able to observe in really effective ways that will help you continue to learn and adapt and become better writers in the future.

Amanda Sturgill (21:32):

You can also learn from other students. This is something that I see a lot in my field. When students go to work in student media, for example, usually it's the older students who are teaching the younger students a lot of different things. But you can see that same thing, for example, in lab sciences where you could go and talk to the graduate student who is working in your lab and ask them about the writing tasks that they're doing and how they'd approach them. I think you could do that in a lot of different fields.

Stephen Macharia (21:55):

I could have answered this question differently had it been asked about six months ago. But today I would say that they need to acquaint themselves with AI tools starting from ChatGPT to Bard AI. There are so many tools for writing, proofreading, and all that that they can rely on. Sometimes one may argue that such tools kill creativity, but that is where we are as a world. And going forward, it'll not be possible for people to navigate workplace writing if they do not have access to such tools. So that's what I would say. AI tools, whichever they are.

Neil Baird (22:44):

Writing is a kind of tool used by humans to solve problems. And tools are always in the process of being adapted and revised in order to do that work better. And writing is no exception. So certainly you want to ask questions, learn from people to learn about the expectations for writing and the situation that you're going into, but keep in mind that sometimes the expectations for writing in that situation need to

change itself or themselves in order to really improve the work of the tool of writing in that situation. So there's a need to transform yourself in your own prior experiences and knowledge with writing, but there's also a need in order to be able to transform the writing situation and the expectations for writing in that situation in order for writing to really make a difference in that context.

Amanda Sturgill (23:36):

I have a random thought, but I'm going to throw it in while I'm thinking of it because I did want to mention it. I was kind of the fish out of water in the CEL Seminar that we're talking about here, because I don't come from writing studies, which is its own field. And so in order to participate in the seminar even I had to be willing to raise my hand and ask the dumb question sometimes, right? When you say this word, I know this word in one context, but I don't know it in your context. When people talk about writing in workplace settings, it's often very different from the way we talked about it in school. And in order to be successful in making those transitions, you do need to be willing to ask those questions.

Jessie Moore (24:10):

And none of them were dumb questions. They all moved the conversations forward and were really helpful. So Amanda, you mentioned earlier that there was... You started to say that there was something that was the responsibility more of faculty than of students. And so I'm wondering what can colleges and their faculty and staff do to help students prepare for their future workplace writing?

Stephen Macharia (24:36):

What colleges need to do is to make their students learn to be flexible. So instead of teaching them some skills that are going to be irrelevant at the workplace within no time, they need to teach them how to find materials, how to find sources that can help them, and how to use those sources. When we interviewed students in the data collection we were doing, we learned that much of what they do at the workplace has been self-taught, but they needed some background knowledge on how to seek or to search for that information. So what we need to teach now at the workplace are skills on how to use different support, how to use different tools for different tasks, that is what they need to learn.

Neil Baird (25:29):

I think for my institution, and I think faculty can build this in the curriculum and as well as their individual courses, but a lot of my participants said they learned how to do writing in this way in their college experience. "When I got into my first professional position, it didn't line up, and so I had to revise and adapt a lot of what I've learned. And I wish I had some experience that taught me how to do that." Whether it's a course near the end...

(26:03):

For example, the MFA in creative writing that found themselves writing business letters for the nonprofit organization. She said, "Gosh, I wish I had a course that helped me understand how to transform what I know about voice and writing characters to helping me identify what the business character is, the ethos is. I wish I had something that taught me all of the workshopping I did. How do I transform that social activity into working with a supervisor?" There's just not something that bridges those experiences. And so it could be a course that they take near the end, or at least I think faculty can build that in through reflection. You've learned these things. Do you imagine doing that in the future? How might you have to adapt or how might you go about the process of adapting this knowledge and just reflect in those ways? So I think there needs to be either some kind of course or assignment that encourages students to make those connections and to be thinking in these ways about writing.

Amanda Sturgill (27:15):

I think a good place to start would be to do what we did in this study and talk to your own alumni about how they're using writing in the workplace, just so you can understand what the issues are and possibly bringing alumni into your classroom so that they can talk about that with your students. At some point... We actually have a list of implications and recommendations from a presentation we did on this. So some of those things are making it more obvious that writing is occurring, I guess, when students are using writing and things, describing a lab report, not just as keeping a record of your findings, but as a communication task, for example. But also trying to focus on what we call metacognitive strategies so that students can think about their own thinking as they're approaching a task, and then being able to think about, what did I learn before? What has worked before? What's different here? Those kinds of things so that they can address those new contexts.

(28:09):

I will say the work that we did on this project largely changed the way I teach an entire course now. So I teach a kind of mid-level course on writing for an audience for our media analytics students. So these are students who want to take data about audiences and then translate that to business people essentially. As a result of having worked in the seminar and heard from alumni about the kind of things that they're asked to do, I spend time in that course teaching about how to write collaboratively, how to essentially project manage a large writing assignment, those kind of things, which otherwise, I think in the past I would've just said, "Well, this is what a good one looks like, so make it like that." But attending to those process details, however that's appropriate in your field, I think is really important.

Neil Baird (28:54):

Yeah, I can't underscore the importance of talking with alumni. It was probably one of the best parts of the seminar for me is just sitting down and seeing their writing, having them talk with me about their writing. It was awesome. And for the director of the MFA program at my institution, I can't give them the alumni that I was working with because of institutional review board requirements and the need to protect that person's confidentiality. But I continue to stress talk with your alumni, learn from them, learn what they're experiencing. They're not all just going off and writing short stories and poems. They're doing this really incredible interesting work and talk with them about how they're adapting and what they would've liked to have seen happen, and have that influence your curriculum and what you do in your courses.

Jessie Moore (29:44):

That's all. Awesome. Thank you very much. Sydni, do you have any follow up questions for our guests?

Sydni Brown (29:49):

No, not really. I just thank you guys for all the insightful information. Yeah, I think it's going to be really helpful for a lot of students all across the board in all types of different majors to be able to hear this and just know that they can do a lot more with the stuff that they are learning and just be more confident about taking their skills outside of college.

Neil Baird (30:09):

Yeah, for sure.

Jessie Moore (30:10):

So thank you for your time today. We really appreciate it.

Neil Baird (30:12):
Thank you. It was fun.

Amanda Sturgill (30:12):
Good to see everyone.

Sydni Brown (30:12):
Thank you so much.

Jessie Moore (30:24):
Sydni, as I think about our conversations with these scholars from a faculty and staff perspective, I think it's really important for universities and colleges to develop a better understanding of the types of writing that their alumni are doing so that they can create opportunities for students to practice that writing. And we also heard a little bit about the ways internships and other work integrated learning experiences offer a chance for students to practice workplace writing while they still have support from college faculty and staff. So a little bit safer environment to try things out and still get some feedback. What were some of the things that stood out to you that you think students should be thinking about?

Sydni Brown (31:02):
Something that stood out to me that I think students should be thinking about, just thinking about my time, my experience in college and what writing means for that is to just take it, I guess, more seriously when you're thinking about writing. And it's very easy to wonder why you're learning specific things in school. I feel like everybody thinks that no matter how long they're in school, they're like, "Why am I doing this?"

(31:29):
But I think especially if universities are offering that insight into what their alumni are doing with their writing after college, that students should take that information and use it to their benefit, especially where they still have support from faculty. Because sometimes writing is very hard and I think personally, I feel like I'm a good writer. I don't like to write as often, but I think that knowing that a lot of that can come back into my work in the future is very important. And to know that I have the opportunity here to develop my skills is important. So I think students should just take advantage of the time that they have to get better at something that they may feel like they're not as good at.

Jessie Moore (32:10):
I love that insight. Thank you. Once again, I'm Jessie Moore.

Sydni Brown (32:18):
And I'm Sydni Brown. Thank you for joining us for Making College Worth It from Elon University Center for Engaged Learning.

Jessie Moore (32:24):

To learn more about how college students can prepare for workplace writing, see our show notes at www.centerforengagedlearning.org. Subscribe to our show wherever you listen to podcasts for more strategies on making college worth it.