Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

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ELON UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR Engaged Learning

ADAPTABILITY AND LEARNING TO WRITE AS A LIFELONG PROCESS

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Each of the chapters in this section examines how writers draw on and adapt previous writing experiences and strategies as they learn to write across their lifetimes in different contexts. While each chapter takes its own unique focus, several themes run through each of them, including the variety of personal, professional, and civic writing in which participants engage beyond the university; the ways in which identities are impacted by writing practices; and the realization that experience with academic writing is not the only or even most important factor in becoming a successful writer beyond the university.

> *"In talking with students about collaborative writing, instructors should not simply focus on 'group work,' in which students are assigned roles for finishing a research project. Rather, remind students of the serendipitous ways in which writing with others can develop over time—often with significant emotional investment and relationship building that is fluid." (Chapter 1)*

In chapter 1, "Collaboration as Wayfinding in Alumni's Post-Graduate Writing Experiences," Karen Lunsford, Carl Whithaus, and Jonathan Alexander conducted focus groups with alumni from three US institutions to examine the alumni's writing development through collaborative writing experiences in and across professional, personal, and civic contexts. Highlighting the role of both intentional

and unintentional moments of collaboration, the researchers offer the concept of wayfinding to describe the writers' increasing awareness of their own growth as writers over time. When mapping participants' reflections on their writing development, the researchers note the importance of the wide variety of non-academic genres and practices that impacted their growth, the range of signposts that helped participants come to understand their development, and the complex interactions between writing and identity formation.

> *"SSWTL [self-sponsored writing to learn] techniques extend beyond writing fluency and domain knowledge; our research participants taught us that writing to learn is a lifetime practice people use to formulate and negotiate their personal, professional, and communal identities. Writing, in these cases, is an affordance of everyday life, one that bridges the mundane to the most fundamental levels of what it means to live." (Chapter 2)*

In chapter 2, "Writing to Learn Beyond the University: Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing," Jennifer Reid, Matthew Pavesich, Andrea Efthymiou, Heather Lindenman, and Dana Lynn Driscoll (a 2019–2021 research team) used online surveys and video/phone interviews to capture the extraordinarily diverse kinds of self-sponsored, non-obligatory writing that occurs in non-academic spaces. The US-based researchers argue that while people engage in a great deal and variety of self-sponsored writing (defined as writing done beyond the requirements of work or school), its impacts on other kinds of writing beyond the university have been ignored. In particular, participants reported using what the researchers call "self-sponsored writing to learn" outside of school and work spaces to make meaning, understand experiences, and develop their identities across their lifetimes. While the boundary between self-sponsored and obligatory writing often blurs, the use of self-sponsored writing to learn is a strategy participants turned to repeatedly across different personal, professional, and civic contexts. As part of their efforts to

understand non–obligatory writing, these researchers also developed a taxonomy of its functions and purposes.

> *"Across the university, students have multiple opportunities to practice writing for academic conventions, but assignments that require students to write to a specific recipient, rather than the teacher or a general reader, offer students much-needed practice in adapting writing to specific audiences and purposes. Writing for 'real' audiences, in turn, also increases the likelihood that students will have opportunities to practice writing a range of genres in varied media, including visual genres." (Chapter 3)*

In "Understanding Alumni Writing Experiences in the United States" (chapter 3), the researchers use a US national survey of college graduates and data from three studies at two US universities to develop both a broad picture of the writing alumni engage in and also a more detailed snapshot of their writing beyond the university. The national survey data examines how well alumni believe their college experiences prepared them for writing after graduation. The institutional studies by Julia Bleakney, Heather Lindenman, Travis Maynard, Li Li, Paula Rosinski, and Jessie L. Moore report on details that help us understand the national survey by examining how specific institutional efforts—such as writing initiatives, writing majors, internships, undergraduate research, and cocurricular experiences—helped prepare alumni for the writing they find themselves doing after graduation. This chapter offers insights into the writing lives of alumni beyond the university, including the genres most commonly written; the college writing experiences and high-impact practices they draw upon to write successfully beyond the university; the ways in which college prepared them well and failed to prepare them well for writing after graduation; and self-reported gaps in their writing preparation as well as opportunities for improving curricula for better preparing future alumni.

Taken together, the three chapters in this first section offer valuable evidence that alumni, as lifelong writers, draw upon and adapt college writing experiences and strategies in powerful ways to make meaning, develop their identities as writers, and understand the situations in which they find themselves so they can respond successfully through writing. The chapters offer insight into the curricular features of alumni educational experiences—including high-impact practices, writing majors, internships, and cocurricular experiences—that helped them become adaptable writers, as well as avenues for curricular improvement. Specific writerly practices—such as writing to learn and reflecting on one's collaborative writing experiences—are also identified as particularly important strategies for successful writing beyond the university. Faculty from across the disciplines, staff from across campus programs, and administrators from different kinds of institutions will find the chapters in this section helpful if they seek to understand and perhaps revise educational experiences at their own locations to support the lifelong writing development and writerly adaptability of alumni.