

# Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners  
for Lifewide Writing

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and Paula Rosinski*

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Elon, North Carolina  
[www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org](http://www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org)

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## CHAPTER 3

# UNDERSTANDING ALUMNI WRITING EXPERIENCES IN THE UNITED STATES

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As staff and faculty strive to prepare students for the writing they will compose beyond the university, educators need a better understanding of what that “beyond” looks like. What are alumni writing in their daily professional, personal, and civic lives? How well did their different college experiences prepare them for those writing tasks? Alumni studies are a significant source of information to answer these questions. This chapter presents data from a national survey of college graduates to provide a perspective of what alumni in the United States write beyond the university. We then use data from three institutional studies—two at Elon University in North Carolina and one at Florida State University—to illustrate what these writing experiences look like for alumni from these specific institutions. These snapshots explore how institutional efforts like campus-wide writing initiatives, writing majors, and other campus writing experiences (e.g., writing for on-campus jobs, writing for student organizations, etc.) prepare students for writing they’ll encounter as alumni.

Some alumni studies have sought to extend research on the transitions writers make into the workplace (e.g., Anson and Forsberg 1990; Beaufort 1999) by addressing how prepared alumni feel to

make these transitions and how well they feel their college experience prepared them (Baird and Dilger 2017; Maynard, forthcoming). Other studies of alumni writers were motivated by specific institutional concerns and a desire to assess, update, or improve the effectiveness of majors or curricula (Cosgrove 2010; Melzer and Pickrel 2005; Perelman 2009; Weisser and Grobman 2012). These studies used surveys, a method identified early on as valuable for studying workplace writing (Anderson 1985), activity theory (how writing occurs within a system—such as how an individual writer operates within a work context, with colleagues, and with existing documents or artifacts), or direct analysis of workplace writing. However, all draw from an individual institutional context, even though the alumni writers referenced a wide variety of curricular and cocurricular experiences in these studies. Other scholars conducted more focused research into the workplace writing of graduates of technical and professional communication programs, using surveys to conduct nationwide studies of alumni writing (Blythe, Lauer, and Curran 2014) or surveying alumni of multiple schools and managers of technical communication departments while also analyzing the participating schools' curricula (Whiteside 2003).

Another group of researchers have sought to further understand complex workplace writing experiences, observing writers' practices, analyzing their writing, and offering in-depth descriptions of their writing experiences and practices and the beyond-the-university contexts in which they write (Lauer and Brumberger 2019; Alexander, Lunsford, and Whithaus 2020). Across these studies, the authors find writers showing adaptability, drawing on prior knowledge or anticipating the need for new knowledge, and composing or creating content in new ways (Bleakney 2020). Our own studies discussed in this article similarly recognize alumni's varied writing experiences and their need for adaptability and flexibility when transitioning from college into the workplace. We briefly summarize the studies below and share additional details about them on the book's website.

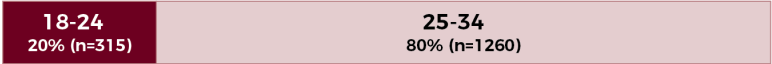
## National Survey of College Graduates (July 2019)

In July 2019, Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning and the Elon Poll conducted a national survey of recent US college graduates ( $n=1,575$ , ages 18–34) to explore how they experienced high-impact educational experiences and to learn about how college had prepared them for workplace writing. The study, “High Impact Undergraduate Experiences and How They Matter Now,” used an online, opt-in sample to reach the target population (Elon Poll/Center for Engaged Learning 2019). The online resource for this chapter, “[Understanding Alumni Writing Experiences: Research Designs](#),” includes more details about the target population and the sampling method for this study. Figure 3.1 provides demographic information about the participants. In this chapter, we focus on their perceptions of writing after college.

Most participants (83%) believed college had prepared them well for the work-related writing they have done since graduating. In addition, nearly 64% indicated that writing effectively was very important to their day-to-day life, with 82% reporting they had developed their writing skills in college. The survey did not ask participants to report their major or their current field of employment, so these results reflect a more holistic look across majors and professions. Recent college alumni compose a variety of genres, or types of writing, with email their most frequently written genre (70% reported writing emails weekly). Other frequently written types of writing include client correspondence (36% write it weekly), reports (32%, weekly), social media (31%, weekly), memos (30%, weekly), instructions (25%, weekly), project management documents (25%, weekly), teaching materials (25%, weekly), and web content (25%, weekly).

Although most graduates felt well prepared for this writing, they still noted challenges. Twenty percent of participants indicated that “writing a type of document I had not encountered before” was the biggest writing challenge they had encountered since graduating, followed by “adapting to my readers’ expectations and needs” (biggest challenge for 16%). In responses to an open question

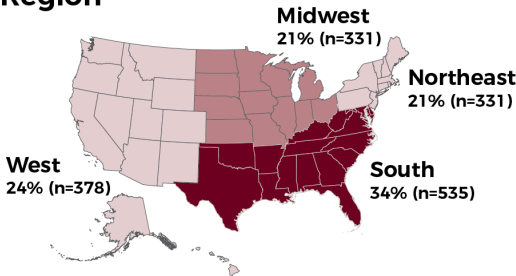
Age



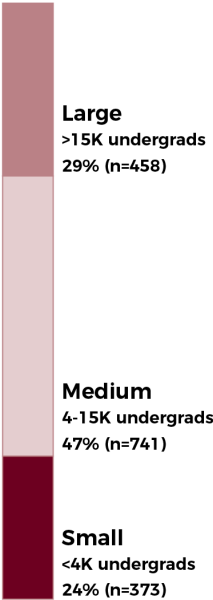
Gender



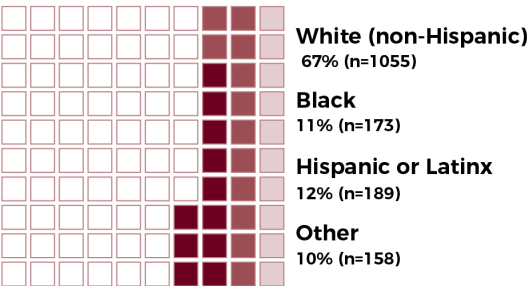
Region



Size of College



Race and Ethnicity



Vector map of the USA with states from [freevectormaps.com](https://www.freevectormaps.com)

Figure 3.1. Demographics for 2019 Center for Engaged Learning/Elon Poll survey

about how college could have better prepared them for writing in the workplace, participants wished they had encountered more opportunities to practice writing for “authentic” or “real” audiences and purposes beyond typically practiced academic genres. Their responses suggest that—even though graduates felt generally prepared for writing after college—alumni do not feel as well prepared to adapt their writing strategies for unfamiliar writing contexts.

The institutional snapshots that follow illustrate what these writing experiences and challenges look like for alumni from two specific US institutions.

### **Institutional Snapshots**

Using data from three institutional studies, these snapshots explore how institutional efforts like campus-wide writing initiatives, writing majors, and other campus writing experiences (like writing center consulting positions, internships, or undergraduate research) prepare students for writing they'll encounter as alumni. Although some co-authors collaborated on more than one of these studies, leading to similar question sets as we refined survey instruments based on our prior research, the national survey and each of the institutional surveys were conducted independently.

#### **Elon Alumni Study Summary (October 2017 & August 2018)**

The overarching goal of Elon's Writing Excellence Initiative (WEI), launched in 2013, was "to establish writing as a key characteristic of an Elon education, one that is recognized by students, alumni, graduate programs, and employers as leading to exceptional writers" (Elon University 2013, 69). Our survey-based study investigated one slice of the WEI: how Elon alumni perceive Elon's contribution to their ability to succeed as writers in their lives after graduation. Using the same set of questions, the researchers separately surveyed two cohorts of Elon alumni: those who graduated before the implementation of the university's Writing Excellence Initiative (classes of 2000–2013) and those who graduated after Writing Excellent Initiative implementation at Elon began (classes of 2014–2018). This study gathered data on:

- the genres alumni write in their careers, personal lives, and civic engagement
- how and in what ways Elon prepared alumni effectively for their post-graduation writing responsibilities
- how the university could have better prepared alumni for writing in their careers
- the challenges faced by alumni in their post-graduation writing

The online survey, “Writing After Elon: Assessing the Writing Experiences of Elon Graduates” was distributed by the Office of Alumni Engagement to all Elon graduates from the specified class years in an email invitation signed by the university provost. The 2000–2013 alumni cohort (n=541) was surveyed in October 2017 and the 2014–2018 cohort (n=435) was surveyed in August 2018. Overall, the demographics of the respondents reflect the demographics of the university as a whole.

Among those who graduated before the implementation of the WEI, 85.43% somewhat or strongly agreed that Elon prepared them well for the writing they were required to do for their careers post-graduation. Among those who graduated after the implementation of the WEI, 89.66% report feeling prepared for writing in their careers post-graduation.

### **Rhetorical Training Summary (Fall 2019)**

Our research sought to understand the kinds of rhetorical training that most help students be successful writers when they graduate and move into their professional lives, recognizing that all students have multiple—ideally cumulative—opportunities for rhetorical training. We define “rhetorical training” as the coordinated curricular and cocurricular experiences that immerse students in writing for different audiences, purposes, and contexts—from writing-intensive courses, to internships, to campus jobs in administrative offices, to consulting in the writing center. We recruited both student (n=88) and alumni (n=45) participants through email- and social media-based convenience sampling, inviting students and alumni affiliated with writing-intensive majors/minors and on-campus jobs, as well as snowball sampling, asking our contacts to forward the survey to others who might have had similar writing-related experiences. Although we oversampled English majors (n=23) in relation to the current distribution of majors on campus, our participants include majors from all three branches of the College of Arts and Sciences and from all three undergraduate professional schools at the university. Additional demographic information about the participants is included in the online resource for this chapter,

### “Understanding Alumni Writing Experiences: Research Designs.”

We discuss findings from the student responses elsewhere (Bleakney et al. 2021), focusing in this chapter on a deeper dive into alumni responses.

The survey asked participants to identify their most often written and most valued types of writing, explain the rhetorical situation in which they composed them, and describe their writing process. Participants were not required to answer all questions, leading to different rates of participation across the questions.

In survey responses, alumni described both writing in a wide variety of genres (with texting and emails the most frequently written and also, for email, the most valued) and their robust writing processes that incorporated multiple drafting and revision steps, peer or supervisor feedback, and collaboration. They talked about how the most important thing they learned was how writing expectations vary by audience and genre, followed by the importance of conciseness and revising and editing their work. Finally, alumni pointed to specific degree programs or their comprehensive undergraduate education, inclusive of cocurricular and extracurricular rhetorical training, as preparing them for workplace writing. When considering email, for example, alumni noted how on-campus employment and internships or co-ops served as important preparation.

### Florida State Study Summary (Fall 2017 and Spring 2018)

The Florida State University alumni study was focused on graduates of the university’s Editing, Writing, and Media (EWM) concentration, taking a discipline-specific approach in order to understand the impact of sustained undergraduate education in writing and rhetoric on alumni lives. The goals of the project were three-fold:

- Determine if and how students’ prior education, experiences, and literacies influence their undergraduate experiences within an undergraduate writing major;
- Identify undergraduate academic, cocurricular and/or professional experiences that shape alumni writing lives;
- Determine if and how those undergraduate experiences influence alums’ post-graduation writing lives, encompassing their

academic and professional experiences as well as the scope of their current writing activities.

The study's survey was distributed via email to all graduates of the EWM program, using alumni's last known email addresses received with permission from the Florida State University Foundation; we also relied on convenience sampling, recruiting colleagues and program faculty to distribute the survey via targeted emails, LinkedIn messages, and posts on Twitter. The survey garnered 174 complete responses, yielding a 14.7% response rate. The survey covered five broad areas, including:

- Demographics
- Reasons for enrolling
- Professional trajectories following graduation
- Current writing activities, including processes and genres
- Quantitative ratings of the EWM program, keyed to programmatic outcomes

The survey's final question asked whether alumni would be willing to participate in an interview. From that pool of potential subjects, six alumni completed semi-structured interviews asking about their current writing tasks and processes as well as their undergraduate experiences in the program, having them articulate the perceived influence of the EWM program on their experiences in college and current writing lives. These alumni's writing transfer after graduation is discussed in-depth elsewhere (Maynard, forthcoming), but briefly, the data suggest three overarching findings: alumni's identities as writers and prior writing activities influence their decisions to enroll in a writing major; the coursework and internship requirement of the EWM program contribute to alumni's concurrent and subsequent transfer within and beyond the university; the EWM program shapes alumni's writing lives by helping them develop rhetorical metacognition, allowing them to compose in the range of genres and media necessitated by their professional writing.

## Cross-Cutting Themes

### Trends around Genre

All three institution-specific studies included survey questions about commonly used genres. Similar to Blythe, Lauer, and Curran (2014) and Weisser and Grobman (2012), digital multimodal genres remain prominent, with email, presentations, and web content frequently reported across sites. Table 3.1 highlights these similarities across the studies, as well as some interesting differences, including the relative frequency of field-specific genres, e.g., legal documents and business writing.

Although the differences among the studies reflect the varied survey designs, they still help us better understand the writing lives of alumni. The national survey and the Elon Alumni Study included participants from an array of professions, giving us insight into frequently used genres *across* disciplines (e.g., client correspondence, reports, teaching materials). The Elon Rhetorical Training Study and the Florida State University study focused on alumni who had writing-intensive experiences during college—either as students in dedicated majors or minors or in concurrent employment or student organization contexts. These alumni might have a natural affinity for writing, pursue more personal writing (e.g., journals or diaries), and seek professional careers with more varied writing opportunities. The alumni in the Elon Rhetorical Training Study, for instance, report writing in a variety of web genres—websites, blogs, microblogs, and image messaging (e.g., Instagram photos and captions). The Florida State EWM alumni report using more multimodal genres and more genres associated with publishing or production. The findings of the two studies on alumni's increasing use of digital and multimedia genres are also consistent with Blythe, Lauer, and Curran's study of professional and technical communication alumni in 2014.

Collectively, these wide-ranging studies have implications for teaching and mentoring college writers—whether in the classroom or in cocurricular contexts—to better prepare them for writing beyond the university. For instance, given the prevalence of email and

|   |   |  |  |   |
|---|---|--|--|---|
|   | CEL/Elon Poll<br>National Survey<br>of Recent College<br>Graduates  | Elon University<br>Alumni Study  | Elon University<br>Rhetorical<br>Training (Alumni<br>Participants)   | Florida State<br>University Editing,<br>Writing, and Media<br>Alumni  |
| Similarities<br>(Shared across<br>2+ studies) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Client correspondence</li><li>• Email</li><li>• Reports</li><li>• Social media</li><li>• Teaching materials</li><li>• Web content</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Client correspondence</li><li>• Email</li><li>• Reports</li><li>• Presentations</li><li>• Teaching materials</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Email</li><li>• Journal / diary</li><li>• Presentations</li><li>• Web Content</li></ul>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Emails</li><li>• Journal / diary</li><li>• Presentations</li><li>• Reports</li><li>• Social media</li><li>• Web content (blogs)</li></ul> |
| Distinctions                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Instructions</li><li>• Memos</li><li>• Project management documents</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Grants/ proposals</li><li>• Legal documents</li></ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Business writing</li><li>• Creative nonfiction</li><li>• Image messaging</li><li>• Lists</li><li>• Texting</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Copywriting</li><li>• Fiction</li><li>• Graphic design</li><li>• Layout</li><li>• Photography</li></ul>                                   |

Table 3.1. Similarities and Distinctions in Commonly Used Genres across Studies

presentations in alumni's writing lives, regardless of their professions, college students would benefit from more opportunities not only to practice these genres but also to receive intentional instruction and timely feedback on them. Similarly, scaffolded opportunities to learn more about writing web content and for social media during on-campus employment, while participating in student organizations, or in classroom contexts might better prepare alumni to use these frequently written genres more effectively.

### **How Is College Preparing Students to Write Beyond the University?**

Despite the varied methodological approaches of these local studies, they each prompted students and alumni to identify some common academic and cocurricular experiences that were formative in their development as writers. In the Elon Rhetorical Training and Florida State studies, respondents indicated that writing-related majors and minors most contributed to their development as writers, including discipline-specific coursework in advanced writing, rhetoric and visual rhetoric, and creative writing workshops. The broader Elon Alumni Study identified both courses and projects that shaped graduates' current writing, including cross-disciplinary senior seminar courses and courses in business communication and media writing. Additionally, regardless of discipline, participants in that study valued two types of projects: sustained, mentored writing experiences requiring multiple drafts and revision—including undergraduate research projects and theses—and client-based projects that had writers address real non-academic audiences. Beyond writing-related majors and minors, and academic courses and projects, participants in all three studies named a range of formative cocurricular experiences, including writing for campus clubs/organizations, internships, and on-campus jobs such as writing center consulting. Table 3.2 presents this range of experiences, highlighting academic programs, courses, projects, and cocurricular work that participants in each study identified.

In their open-ended and interview responses, participants in each study expanded upon these academic and cocurricular experiences,

|  | Elon Alumni Study  | Elon Rhetorical Training   | Florida State  |
|--|--|--|--|
| Academic Experiences (Programs, Courses, and Projects) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Senior seminar</li><li>• Undergraduate research</li><li>• Business communication</li><li>• Media writing course</li><li>• Multi-step, process-focused writing projects</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Advanced writing courses</li><li>• Writing-related majors and minors</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Advanced writing courses</li><li>• Rhetoric courses</li><li>• Visual rhetoric courses</li><li>• Creative writing workshops</li></ul> |
| Cocurricular Experiences (On- and Off-Campus)          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Client projects</li><li>• On-campus jobs</li></ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• On-campus jobs</li><li>• Writing center consulting</li></ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Internships</li><li>• Writing center consulting</li></ul>  |

Table 3.2. Range of Writing Experiences across Studies

providing insight into how their classes and cocurricular activities better prepared them for their writing after graduation. Overall, participants indicated that these experiences helped them to practice different genres and writing styles, to cater their writing to different audiences, and to be more intentional in their writing processes.

We see these various intersecting experiences at play in a response by a participant in the Elon Alumni Study, who describes her long-term research project as a valuable experience that shaped her writing knowledge and prepared her for writing in her career. “The entire project,” she writes, “which spanned three years, demanded writing proficiency for a number of genres: grants, literature reviews, proposals, presentations, abstracts, transcripts, and essays/articles.” She explains that this project entailed ongoing and long-term support from a professor-mentor, who read and provided feedback on her work continuously: “During the thesis writing process, my faculty mentor willingly read and revised new sections every week, offering detailed feedback that directly addressed my strengths and challenges as a writer.” The long-term and highly mentored nature of this project was key, as were the “required semesterly reflections,” which kept the student on track and promoted metacognition. “Having a single professor review my work over a three-year period was highly productive, seeing as he knew best what I needed to improve, refashion, or cut based on my writing style and capability,” the student wrote, and she appreciated the extent of this involvement: “It was comforting and rewarding to have a professor invest valuable time in cultivating my intellectual development.”

Participants in the Florida State study also described their increased attunement to audience and genre. For example, a student who took a writing workshop said the experience “was useful in terms of understanding how you write, and having the teacher and your classmates write you feedback, but then also learning about how other people write, their style, and maybe picking up someone’s good habits that you can incorporate into yours.” Similarly, another FSU alum says that her coursework

changed the way she writes based on her understanding of audience: “Between advanced writing, rhetoric, and visual rhetoric . . . all my classes . . . influenced how I write; I can’t go back to how I wrote before those classes. . . . They’ve developed my ability to write and kind of read what I’m writing in a different lens other than just my personal lens.” And a third participant describes how the program prepared her to be able “to write different ways; so we’re writing a press release to the local news—that looks totally different, and it’s formatted on paper differently than it would be writing online. There’s so many different things that go [into] writing in those different [spaces]; you have to change your writing style because you can’t write one way for all of those methods.”

Another theme that emerged across the studies is the value of participants’ metacognitive reflection on their writing processes, their writing choices, and the power of effective writing. Alumni across the studies recognized how they developed thoughtful writing processes that contributed to their success as writers. For example, an alumnus who participated in the Elon Rhetorical Training Study and who graduated with a professional writing and rhetoric major explained that from their coursework, “I learned that the process is just as important as the product. Retrospectively, I’ve realized that strong writing is a skill that many professionals don’t have. It’s an incredible asset that I’m fortunate to have developed.” When discussing the importance of their writing processes, alumni across the studies also noted the importance of soliciting feedback from audiences, given that writing is a kind of social action, a means to get things done. As another alumnus from the Rhetorical Training Study who majored in professional writing and rhetoric and creative writing said: “Writing is functional. Even when we write creatively, we aim to answer questions and solve problems. Also—good writing is not an isolationist exercise. Most, if not all, pieces of good writing have many pairs of eyes and hands on them before they are published.”

### **Gaps in Preparation/Opportunities for Enhancement**

The studies also identified gaps in students' preparation for writing and opportunities for future curriculum enhancement. Despite participants' discussions about their preparation to write for different audiences and purposes and to develop their writing processes, alumni in both the Elon Alumni Study and the Elon Rhetorical Training Study identified three writing challenges they experienced since graduation:

1. How to adapt to readers' expectations and needs.
2. How to write a new type of genre.
3. How to write concisely and directly.

The Florida State study similarly found gaps between alumni's school preparation and their actual workplace writing in terms of writing in new genres, especially those engaging the visual and requiring unfamiliar composing technologies—making genre the most common challenge faced by alumni across the studies, including the national survey conducted by the Elon Poll and Center for Engaged Learning. In general, students need more preparation in genre writing, audience adaptation, writing concisely, visual composing, and writing technologies. The findings suggest opportunities for enhancement in curriculum design to include more genres, audience adaptation, connections between class and out-of-class writing experiences, and additional media/composing technologies, especially those engaging visual elements of design.

### **Implications**

Collectively, these alumni studies inform our recommendations for how program and campus-wide initiatives can support graduates' writing beyond the university. Faculty and staff who teach and mentor student writers, whether inside the classroom or in on-campus employment and other co- and extracurricular contexts, should provide students opportunities to write for varied audiences 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.

Writing assignments and tasks also should vary in genre and style. Across several of our studies, alumni noted challenges with writing concisely. While not incompatible with writing for academic audiences, when course-based writing consists primarily of end-of-term papers or other long, academic projects, writing concisely and directly might not be the focus of attention, particularly if students are focused on achieving minimum word counts. Integrating a few short assignments for authentic audiences can help students practice organizing their ideas clearly and succinctly—while also offering alternate assessments of students’ learning than afforded by an end-of-semester term paper. At the same time, our studies also suggest that multiple-term projects that give students agency, like mentored undergraduate research projects, have lasting value in students’ development as writers. As the quotes above illustrate, these larger projects often integrate practice with multiple genres for real audiences and require students to engage in multiple iterations of recursive planning, drafting, and revision. This type of engagement with stages of the writing process also matters. Alumni expressed appreciation for practice managing extended writing projects and learning how to engage with feedback while revising.

Program directors and other university administrators can facilitate these efforts to support writers’ development throughout their careers and lives beyond the university by making writing a college-wide commitment. *Writing across the university* initiatives—an evolution of previous writing across the curriculum (WAC) or writing in the disciplines (WID) efforts—signal to all campus members that preparing writers is not simply a curricular initiative. Student employment, internships, co-ops, residence life, and other student life spaces all function as sites of writing and should have an active role in supporting writers’ development. Alumni in our

studies expressed appreciation for writing majors and minors and for writing-intensive courses and internship requirements in their majors (e.g., media writing, business communication), but they also highlighted long-term, mentored experiences (e.g., student employment in writing centers and other spaces, undergraduate research) that provided opportunities for contextualized writing for specific audiences and purposes, including disciplinary audiences. As university administrators implement these recommendations on their campuses, they should look to—or hire for—writing studies expertise both to support professional development for writing across the university efforts and to increase the availability of writing courses, minors, and majors taught by writing experts.

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