Summary of Business Survey for Writing Across the Curriculum

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Background and method for study

In response to the Writing Across the Curriculum Program’s question “How can we better prepare college students for writing in the workforce?” I created a survey to connect their pedagogical writing goals to real world experience, using my knowledge of WAC’s program and my experience in working seven years with entrepreneurs in the non-profit and for-profit sectors. Beginning in 2012, I interviewed and surveyed twenty business owners, executives, and key business leaders. Diverse businesses included retail stores, local chains, manufacturers, construction and realty, healthcare and law offices, marketing firms, independent consultants, corporate food providers, hospitality and tourism based businesses, and nonprofits. Three-quarters of research participants were located in the High Country Region in towns like Boone, Blowing Rock, West Jefferson, Sparta, and Wilkesboro, while others were located in Asheville, Charlotte, and one in Los Angeles. I asked each participant the following questions:

- What types of writing do you and employees do in your business?
- What writing skills are lacking in the emerging workforce that need special attention?
- What writing issues need to be addressed in your employee base?
- What advice can you give to college level educators on what writing topics need to be taught?

Results

Every business I spoke with uses many forms of writing. Many business people write daily in the form of emails, memos, proposals, reports, website materials, online social communications, blogs, thank you letters, notes, meeting minutes, presentations, newsletters, and marketing materials. Some businesses use writing through technical reports, proposal responses, claims, dispute resolutions, spec books, style guidelines, letters of introduction, grant requests, RFP generation, and by transposing written and spoken information into a concise and easy-to-understand written summary. While many different forms of writing are necessary in businesses, often the same general rules apply.

When asked about writing issues within the emerging workforce and within their employee base, most participants noted a lack of spelling, grammar, sentence structure, flow, and other basic writing skills, along with the need to be able to transform communications to speak to the intended audience in a professional manner. Most participants noted frustration with cryptic texting language and unprofessional attitudes that some of the emerging workforce seem to hold and demonstrate regularly. Others believe young people
are not reading and writing enough to practice good writing habits and rely on technological tools like spell check too much. Overall, it seems young people don’t always value the importance of basic writing skills and communicating clearly with intention and respect towards the audience.

Research participants provided many suggestions for writing educators, but most followed similar themes around teaching writing basics and audience concerns. Participants noted the importance of writing frequently, as there is no substitute for practice, proofreading, professionalism, and decorum and convention, especially writing differences between generations. No matter when these skills are being taught, this study has shown that writing and other communication skills are assets valued by many businesses. Strong writing skills make businesses stronger.

Sample responses

"Specifically, being able to organize thoughts and present them with passion, 'bells and whistles' is a valued asset here."

"We’re constantly striving to do a better job in delivering our message to consumers and customers in a fashion that is concise and engaging."

"Spelling is also very important in the medical world where one wrong letter could mean the difference between life or death, literally."

"The kids we hire directly out of college initially seem to have a difficult time adjusting email tone as it relates to variance in the receiver. I would never ask that a contractor be addressed in an unprofessional manner, but the tone of the request is almost always delivered in a much more conversational fashion, then we would to a client. Unfortunately, this usually is a trial-and-error type formula that results in an annoyed client every few months."

"Now a days, it’s typical for grant RFPs to have word limits, so the grant writer must convey the most important and relevant information, in an easy to understand format, in a dazzling way that sets them apart from the dozens or even hundreds of other applicants, and within the perimeters set by funders."

"Being able to write a good letter that is personally signed is a competitive advantage that’s not being done anymore."

Recommendations

WAC will provide this information on its website and through workshops to its network of community colleges through the Writing Across Institutions program it sponsors, to the Rhetoric and Composition Program and WID faculty throughout the university, and to those involved in shaping undergraduate and graduate writing curriculum. As Appalachian focuses on helping students find jobs after graduation, it’s clear that strong writing credentials will support that initiative.