Problem Statement

Although it is widely agreed that college readiness is an essential goal of effective K-12 education, there is anything but consensus over what constitutes college readiness. The most traditional definition involves simply avoiding remedial placement and succeeding in credit-bearing introductory college courses (ACT, 2007); however, for others, the role of non-cognitive factors (e.g. motivation, self-efficacy) (Nagaoka et al., 2013), knowledge of college procedures (e.g. financial aid, course registration), and behavioral and cultural expectations should also factor into definitions of college readiness (Hooker & Brand, 2010). And what constitutes college readiness for writing proves to be equally contested. The traditional notions of college writing readiness focus on demonstrating basic literacy skills (Greene & Forster, 2003) and key cognitive strategies (e.g. interpretation, problem solving) seen as applicable to writing (Conley, 2008). According to these definitions, college-level writing means simply an ability to use the writing process (i.e. drafting, revising, editing) to produce clear, coherent texts that demonstrate correct grammar and usage (Conley, 2008).

For many writing studies experts, however, preparedness for college-level writing cannot be reduced to such straightforward definitions. In an effort to better define what constitutes college writing readiness, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (NWP) put forth a framework describing eight habits of mind in addition to several rhetorical skills associated with college readiness as it pertains to writing (Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, 2011). While some have critiqued the Framework (Hansen, 2012; Duncheon & Tierney, 2014), others (e.g. McComiskey, 2012) have found it to be a helpful bridge between the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the CWPA outcomes. Having a well-informed understanding of what constitutes college writing readiness is necessary in order to implement practices and
policies that are effectual rather than counterproductive. Based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress’ (NAEP) 2012 writing assessment, an exam designed to gauge the extent to which students are prepared for postsecondary writing, only 27 percent of twelfth grade students demonstrated college–level writing proficiency (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), suggesting a gap that exists between secondary and postsecondary standards. Not only is this an issue of academic readiness, but it is also one of social equity: the data show that students of color and those from low-income backgrounds are disproportionately more underprepared for college–level coursework in comparison to their White, higher income counterparts (Complete College America, 2012).

Given the current conversation surrounding what constitutes readiness for college writing, the implications of such definitions for both policy and practice, and the number of high school graduates who are underprepared for college–level coursework, it is essential for educators, researchers, and policymakers to resist overly reductive notions of this multifaceted concept and gain a richer understanding of how best to prepare young people for the complex literacy demands of postsecondary education. For policies built upon simplistic definitions about what is good writing and how to make students “college ready” may inadvertently exacerbate rather than address this problematic gap between secondary and postsecondary standards.

College writing readiness is not only an area of research interest for me, but also a problem that I have faced as a teacher. In my work as both a high school English teacher and an instructor of beginning college writers, I have seen this gap first–hand. While not a new phenomenon, the current policy landscape, with its push toward standardization and a K–16 pipeline, does underscore the urgency of grounding notions of college writing readiness in sound theory and research on writing development. In order to provide such a foundation, we need a deeper understanding of the answers to the following questions: How is college writing readiness or
preparedness defined and understood? To what extent are high school graduates prepared for college–level writing? What factors seem to affect college writing readiness? What is understood about students’ development as writers from secondary to postsecondary educational contexts?

Preliminary Review of Literature

Conventional Definitions of College Readiness

In addition to data gathered by NAEP, college entrance exams provide a sense of student readiness for college–level literacy demands. ACT college readiness benchmarks in each major subject area aim to assess the likelihood of students experiencing success in that corresponding college course. That is, students who meet the benchmark score have about a 50 percent chance of earning a B or better or a 75 percent chance of earning a C or better in that respective content area college course (ACT Research and Policy, 2013). According to the ACT National Profile Report (2017), only 27 percent of students tested met the benchmarks in all four content areas – English, math, science, and reading. Forty–nine percent scored below proficient in ability to understand complex texts, and 35 percent failed to meet the college readiness benchmark in writing (The Condition of College and Career Readiness, 2017). Persistence rates along with rates of students requiring remedial/developmental courses are other conventional measures of college readiness. Of the students who began college in fall of 2015, over 25 percent did not persist into their second year either at the same or a different institution (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2017), and among beginning college students, over 50 percent entering two–year schools and nearly 20 percent entering four–year schools must take developmental courses to develop their reading, writing, or math skills prior to beginning credit–bearing coursework (Complete College America, 2012). Low–income and minority students are disproportionately more likely to need these courses, and it has been shown that almost 4 out of 10 community college students enrolled in remedial classes drop out before completing the
courses (Complete College America, 2012), providing further evidence that this lack of preparedness is not merely an academic issue but also one of access and equity. There are many factors that may contribute to low persistence rates among students, yet academic preparedness has been shown to be the greatest predictor of obtaining a bachelor’s degree (Achieve, 2004).

**Sociocultural Frameworks and Changing Conceptions of College Writing Readiness**

While retention and persistence rates along with data gathered from national and high-stakes assessments provide some sense of student preparedness for postsecondary writing, these measures alone provide only a superficial picture of the problem, one that focuses primarily on the cognitive skills and strategies that traditionally have been associated with college readiness. Research into the sociocultural dimensions of writing and literacy, however, complicate these conventional definitions and measures of college readiness that primarily rely on a cognitive framework. A voluminous body of literacy research reveals how a purely cognitive perspective can tacitly (or overtly) endorse deficit discourses that misjudge the reasoning abilities of those from nondominant linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Alvermann, 2001; Purcell-Gates, 2004). The implication of these deficit discourses is that the community or home-based literacies of minority students must be overcome or suppressed in order for them to acquire the discourse practices valued by educational institutions, practices that reflect the dominant cultural norms of White, middle-class society (Paris, 2012). Combating this deficit thinking, then, means recognizing and integrating into curriculum and instruction the “funds of knowledge” that students bring with them to school-based literacy contexts (Moll et al., 1992). Approaches associated with disciplinary literacy, which foreground the literacy practices of disciplinary communities and apprentice students in developmentally-appropriate activities that reflect those practices, represent another way that literacy research has sought to understand the social contexts within which reading and writing take place (Moje, 2015; Learned, 2016).
The work of many composition scholars echoes this emphasis on the sociocultural dimension. The introduction of open admissions policies in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought students into college classrooms across the U.S. who previously may not have considered postsecondary education an option. These changes made urgent the need for composition instructors and scholars to understand the obstacles basic writers encounter when “trying on” the language of academic discourse for the first time. Bizzell (1992), for instance, has critiqued Flower and Hayes’ (1981) cognitive process theory of writing for the way that it implies that writers’ difficulties are evidence of cognitive deficiencies that prevent their setting of goals appropriate to a particular writing task rather than evidence of a lack of familiarity with the conventions of a given discourse community. Similarly, Bartholomae (1986) points to the struggles of such writers as characteristic, not of cognitive deficits, but of the challenges associated with appropriating the ways of thinking and language practices of a disciplinary community while being an outsider to that community. Shaughnessy (1977) even goes so far as to say that the “keys to [basic writers’] development as writers often lie hidden in the very features of their writing that English teachers have been trained to brush aside with a marginal code letter or a scribbled injunction to ‘Proofread!’” (p. 5). That is, the errors themselves can point to a basic writer’s wrestling with new linguistic forms, structures that the writer knows his or her audience (i.e. instructor) expects but that he or she does not yet have the dexterity to stitch together seamlessly. The errors, seen in this light, foreshadow and demonstrate the growth (Shaughnessy, 1977). And according to Carroll (2002), even students whose high school GPAs and SAT/ACT scores, conventional measures of college readiness, indicated they were sufficiently prepared for college struggled in their encounter with diverse writing tasks and genres even into their upper–level academic major courses, suggesting that “writing proficiency”
depends upon the complex interplay of contextual factors that these traditional measures cannot capture.

The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (2011), referred to previously, seeks to give guidance to schools and teachers regarding instructional approaches that encourage college-readiness for writing, approaches that provide more authentic purposes and audiences for writing and help to develop students’ “rhetorical flexibility” (p. 7). The document identifies habits of mind, such as persistence and metacognition, along with skills, such as critical thinking and knowledge of conventions, deemed necessary for success in postsecondary education (Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, 2011). Some, however, have expressed resistance toward, what they see as, the framework’s assumption that effective college-level writing amounts to the successful acquisition of certain thinking and composing skills without regard for the sociocultural contexts in which such literacy practices exist (Duncheon & Tierney, 2014). According to Duncheon and Tierney (2014), to meet the needs of diverse students, we need a sociocultural framework for writing that resists deficit thinking and oversimplification, for only that kind of understanding will better speak to the challenges that low-income, first-generation college students often confront.

More recently, a group of scholars in rhetoric and composition have collaboratively compiled a set of concepts they see as central to the teaching and practice of writing. These so-called “threshold concepts” of writing studies, the “concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice” (p. 2), represent an alternative way of conceptualizing success in postsecondary writing (Adler–Kassner & Wardle, 2015). Unlike a “learning checklist,” which takes complex principles and attempts to distill them down for the purpose of creating an easily manageable assessment tool, threshold concepts insist on the sometimes messy, nonlinear nature of learning (Adler–Kassner & Wardle, 2015, p. 8) and
intentionally resist the tendency of outcomes–oriented statements to locate learning at the end of important experiences as opposed to at all points along a winding path (Adler–Kassner & Wardle, 2015). The thirty–seven threshold concepts are organized into five categories: writing as 1) a social and rhetorical activity, 2) a response to situations through recognizable forms, 3) a process of enacting and creating identities and ideology, 4) a continual learning process, and 5) an (also always) cognitive activity (Adler–Kassner & Wardle, 2015). This lens calls for a shift in perspective on college writing readiness for both students and instructors, for the framework presents writing proficiency as context–bound and inextricably connected to the discourse norms and practices of a particular community or discipline as opposed to a monolithic thing acquired in K–12 schooling or first–year composition courses. Seen in this light, college writing readiness becomes more about fostering in students an awareness of how different contexts require writers to call upon, reformulate, or revise prior knowledge in order to meet the demands of new situations.

_Empirical Studies on Writing at the Secondary and Postsecondary Levels_

Despite widespread agreement among K–12 and college faculty regarding the importance of students writing for a variety of audiences and purposes (ACT National Curriculum Survey, 2016) and the CCSS’ emphasis on such writing tasks (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017), college instructors have reported a decline in recent years in the number of students who are college–ready. In 2009 and 2012, 26 percent of college instructors reported that their students were in the top half of a four–point scale denoting their degree of readiness while only 16 percent reported the same degree of preparedness in 2015 (ACT National Curriculum Survey, 2016). Additionally, while teachers report a stronger emphasis on constructed–response (e.g. short answer and essay) as students progress through grade levels (ACT National Curriculum Survey, 2016), research on actual classroom writing practices over the past few decades suggests that the
vast majority of writing that secondary students compose is not extended in nature (i.e. requiring a paragraph or more) (Applebee, 1981; Applebee & Langer, 2011). In comparison with an earlier study (i.e. Applebee, 1981), Applebee and Langer (2011) found that, while students are writing more in all content areas than thirty years ago, most of that writing is mechanical (e.g. note-taking, fill-in-the-blank, etc.) with teachers reporting that only 19 percent of writing tasks are extended. So, although teachers at all levels seem to agree that students must learn how to write for diverse audiences and purposes, this recognition has largely not translated into ample writing tasks at the secondary level that require actual extended composition, the kinds of writing activities that are necessary to cultivate the writing proficiencies emphasized in the CCSS (e.g. developing and supporting claims and writing for different audiences and purposes) and at the postsecondary level (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, 2011).

Research in rhetoric and composition has helped to reveal some of the areas of struggle for beginning college writers. Studies have shown that students can experience difficulty navigating the specific social contexts of each course as they seek to understand the expectations of instructors and how those expectations mirror those of the disciplines (McCarthy, 1987; Carroll, 2002). Walvoord and McCarthy (1990) have shown how beginning college writers struggle in areas such as using appropriate discipline–specific methods to support positions and address audiences and managing the complexities of certain rhetorical tasks (e.g. considering diverse perspectives, addressing counterarguments). While it may seem natural to locate reasons for student difficulty in either the students themselves (e.g. lack of preparedness or competence) or in the instructor (e.g. inadequate instruction or curriculum), much research on first-year college writers shows that student difficulty often emerges out of a complex web of factors and interactions that cannot be isolated into discrete categories (Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990;
McCarthy, 1987; Sternglass, 1997; Carroll, 2002), and the social dimensions of the classroom, specifically the functions of texts and roles of students and teachers, strongly influence both student understanding of the purpose of writing and student performance in that particular course (McCarthy, 1987; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Carroll, 2002).

Applebee and Langer (2009) have found that about 40–percent of high school seniors report never (or rarely) having been asked to write a paper requiring three or more pages (as cited in Addison & McGee, 2010), and Wilcox (2015) found that tracking placement can determine the kinds of writing practices classrooms encourage, with instruction in lower-performance tracks focusing on mechanical writing tasks as opposed to instruction in higher-performance tracks which more heavily emphasized analysis and synthesis through writing. Addison and McGee (2010) also found that types of writing instruction differed significantly between college-bound and non-college bound students, suggesting that the tracking system may be contributing to the persistence of the achievement gap. And while large-scale studies of writing instruction in U. S. secondary schools indicate that teachers in all content areas over the past few decades have increasingly emphasized a process-oriented approach¹ to teaching writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Applebee, 1981), Addison and McGee (2010) suggest that what constitutes this approach for teachers remains unclear. That is, although teachers say that these writing practices are important to their classrooms, their enactment of such practices may differ considerably. Others suggest that the high-stakes assessment culture surrounding writing and writing instruction, in which writing functions solely as a vehicle for displaying knowledge that has been gained, rather than as a way of deepening, complicating, or extending what is known, actually can impede writing development (Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). It is no wonder, then, given the fact that many secondary students do not gain much experience in composing

¹ an approach that differs widely in practice yet in theory conceptualizes writing as a generative and recursive process through which writers can reflect on and revise their work to enhance its rhetorical effectiveness
extended pieces of writing, that beginning college writers experience difficulty in the areas identified by Walvoord and McCarthy (1987). Despite the challenges, however, that can confront students who arrive at college significantly underprepared, if given sufficient time and appropriate tools, these students can cultivate the practices necessary to succeed (Sternglass, 1997; Carroll, 2002).

Studies on writers’ development shed light on the instructional contexts that help to encourage such growth. Bazerman et al. (2017) have noted that most longitudinal studies on writing development span early childhood and the college years; therefore, they call for further research that moves across grade levels, particularly at the primary and secondary levels. Britton et al.’s (1975) classic study of writing development in secondary school analyzed over 2000 student texts from sixty‒five secondary schools with particular attention to how students’ abilities to write for different audiences and purposes develop over time. They ultimately defined the development of writing proficiency as the ability to produce effectively not a particular type of text but rather diverse texts and found that students can struggle more as they begin to consider more of the complexities of composition and as they begin to perceive disciplinary differences in writing practices (as cited in Carroll, 2002).

Herrington and Curtis’ (2000) longitudinal case study of four students in their first three semesters of college reveals the importance of students finding a “sponsoring institution” within and out of which they feel compelled to speak. According to Herrington and Curtis (2000), “Discourse communities can function as sponsoring communities of people and discourses that help link a personal with a social identity and private with public projects. Teachers can help make that link between private and social identities by presenting students with an image of identity and possibility” (p. 375). They found that the teacher plays an important role in helping students bring personal knowledge into meaningful dialogue with the sanctioned knowledge of
the academic disciplines. In general, Herrington and Curtis (2000) highlight a few factors that assisted students in developing as writers: time, drafting and revising, readings, and explicit instruction and critical reflection on discourse conventions.

In her 6‒year longitudinal case study of four college writers, Sternglass (1997) also speaks to the way that students grow as writers over time. This group of students became increasingly aware of the role that writing played in their deep engagement with course content. In particular, the students all, at different points and in different ways, came to understand the importance of translating complex concepts into their own language, moving from fact gathering to more analytical stances, and adjusting to the demands of new contexts (Sternglass, 1997, p. 289). And Carroll’s (2002) 4‒year longitudinal study of 20 students at Pepperdine University came to similar conclusions: the students in the study did not merely improve their “academic writing” over time (as some singular skill that can be learned once and for all and applied across contexts), but they expanded their repertoires to include new and diverse written forms as they encountered situations in which they had to transition into new roles within contexts characterized by distinct norms and ways of knowing. When students struggle to transition into these new roles as writers that require more complex texts than they feel ready to produce, growth can happen as they develop new skills, particularly when supported by more experienced mentors (e.g. teachers, peers) (Carroll, 2002).

**Directions for Future Research**

While there is a small (yet significant) body of work on how college writers develop over time, there is a dearth of such studies at the secondary level that follow students over the course of multiple semesters, much less multiple grade levels. And although plenty of studies consider the impacts of specific instructional interventions on student writing, few studies explore how students develop as writers across the curriculum of secondary school or across the transition
from secondary to postsecondary school, including the instructional dynamics that support and constrain that development. Such knowledge is vital to understanding more fully which instructional contexts encourage young people’s growth as writers and how those within these contexts understand and measure that growth. Empirical studies on college writing development consider how students develop as writers throughout their college careers (Sternglass, 1997; Carroll, 2002; Herrington & Curtis, 1990), but do not consider, as some composition scholars have noted (i.e. Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011), the writing knowledge and practices that students bring to their first-year composition courses from their secondary school experiences.

I would like to engage in this kind of research on writers’ development in secondary school and at the transition from secondary to postsecondary school. Some potential research questions might include: How do students develop as writers across academic content areas from their last semester of high school to their first semester of college? Which pedagogical strategies that are common in secondary writing instruction best address established parameters for college writing readiness, as described in the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (FSPW)? How do common pedagogical practices in secondary classrooms influence college writing readiness? To what extent do secondary students develop the habits of mind associated with college writing readiness (as described in the FSPW)? Exploring questions such as these may lead me to the approaches of case study or ethnography and any of the following methods: interview, document analysis, survey, and/or observations. Research shows that composition, when calling upon more than simplistic rote forms, requires writers to engage in higher order thinking as they defend positions and analyze texts, extending and complicating what they know through the writing process (Langer & Applebee, 1987; Sternglass, 1997; Graham & Perin, 2007). We lack, however, a deep sense of how, at the secondary level, adolescents and their teachers use writing practices and processes to facilitate this kind of learning.
References


doi:10.1177/0013124514549831