

# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>The Meaningful Writing Project</i>	<i>xi</i>
1 The Meaning of the Meaningful Writing Project	3
<i>Infographics</i>	25
2 Agency and the Meaningful Writing Project	33
3 Engagement and the Meaningful Writing Project	55
4 Learning for Transfer and the Meaningful Writing Project	81
5 Meaningful Writing Happens When . . .	108
6 Some Conclusions	130
<i>Appendix A: Student Survey</i>	<i>141</i>
<i>Appendix B: Student-Recruitment E-mail</i>	<i>152</i>
<i>Appendix C: Undergraduate and Graduate Research Assistants</i>	<i>153</i>
<i>Appendix D: Student-Interview Questions</i>	<i>154</i>
<i>Appendix E: List of Codes</i>	<i>157</i>
<i>Appendix F: Faculty-Interview Questions</i>	<i>158</i>
<i>References</i>	<i>161</i>
<i>About the Authors</i>	<i>167</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>169</i>

# 1

## THE MEANING OF THE MEANINGFUL WRITING PROJECT

### INTRODUCTION—WHY MEANINGFUL WRITING?

*Normally, I don't have the opportunity to write about a topic I'm interested in. Also it gave me a chance to be creative with format and wording.*

—Electrical engineering major

*I was able to pick a topic that speaks to me related to government on a personal level as opposed to working toward the professor's topical expectations.*

—Government and politics major

*This is a subject that is important to me and that I chose independently. Hopefully, this will help me with my future employment as well.*

—Environmental science major

When asked to describe the most meaningful writing projects they wrote as undergraduates, over seven hundred seniors across three very different institutions—a private, urban Catholic university (undergraduate enrollment: ~15,700); a private, urban university known for experiential learning (undergraduate enrollment: ~17,400); and a public R1 institution (undergraduate enrollment: ~21,000)—told us stories of the powerful roles writing plays in their personal, academic, and professional lives. These stories are at the heart of *The Meaningful Writing Project: Learning, Teaching, and Writing in Higher Education*; our research is grounded in students' experiences and the many ways they make meaning of those experiences.

Our effort to better understand students' meaningful writing experiences draws, in part, on Herrington and Curtis (2000), who recommend that writing researchers “look across writing tasks and across the curriculum at the range of kinds of tasks we set for students, and at how students use this writing” (85). We took up this charge in the primary research questions that motivated our work:

- What are the qualities of meaningful writing experiences as reported by seniors at three different types of institutions?
- What might students' perceptions of their meaningful writing experiences reveal about students' learning?
- What might faculty who offer the opportunities for students to gain meaningful writing experiences conclude about the teaching of writing in and across the disciplines?

To address these questions, over a two-year period of data collection and another two years of analysis, we engaged in a variety of strategies we describe later in this chapter. Our analysis of the data consisted of identifying patterns of similarity and difference within and across student participants and faculty responses, a grounded-theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) we believe yields new understandings of student learning and the contexts and teaching methods in which it thrives.

In brief, here's what we found: meaningful writing projects offer students opportunities for agency; for engagement with instructors, peers, and materials; and for learning that connects to previous experiences and passions and to future aspirations and identities. Students described the power of personal connection, the thrill of immersion in thought, writing and research, and the satisfaction of knowing the work they produced could be applicable, relevant, and real world. Faculty who teach courses in which meaningful writing takes place often deliberately build these qualities into their teaching and curriculum, expressing their goals and values for writing through specific practices.

We came to these findings through a process at times fraught with methodological, practical, and analytical challenges. But we also felt great excitement as we learned about students' meaningful writing and learning experiences. We will offer a detailed description of our research methods in this chapter, but we want to note here why the concept of meaningfulness is important to us and how we developed it in this project.

Because all three of us are engaged in the enterprise of supporting writing at our universities—and have made careers in doing so, both in writing centers and in writing-across-the-curriculum programs—in designing this project we worked to keep a big-picture question in mind: what kinds of writing experiences are undergraduate students really having? However, rather than collect a list of assignments and students' texts in response to those assignments, we wanted to learn whether undergraduate students found their writing experiences rewarding,

instructive, significant, or meaningful.<sup>1</sup> We chose to ask about *meaningful* writing and invited students to name and describe a meaningful writing project even if it had occurred several semesters previous to our asking (and students could offer this description with ease, it seems, although no one had ever asked them before) but also to describe *why* a project was meaningful. This question was remarkably generative. In order to call something *meaningful*, we must have an opportunity to reflect on its significance to us or to make meaning through reflection (Yancey 1998). Over seven hundred students told us they truly understood the question as they focused on what was meaningful for *them*—not for their parents, instructors, or employers.

Students' accounts of meaningful writing run counter to the narratives dominating discussion of higher education—not only currently but historically (e.g., the “Johnny can’t write” phenomenon of the 1970s and its periodic reoccurrences). One view is that students are “academically adrift” (Arum and Roksa 2011), reporting less time spent reading and writing than their predecessors, and those who make it to graduation face dim job prospects and crushing levels of student-loan debt (Grafton 2011). At the same time, more and more pressure is on institutions to assess outcomes, whether driven by outside accreditors, legislative mandate, or program improvement.

This strong narrative of crisis and the assessment methodologies used at all levels of education, however, often leave out the study of “incomes” (Guerra 2008) or an understanding of what students bring to their learning experiences and the important meanings they might derive. To date, few studies of students' writing across the disciplines, especially on the scale of what we have done, have made it a concurrent goal to consider how students use (or do not use) those “funds of knowledge” (Moje et al. 2004) or how they “repurpose” out-of-school knowledge (Roosen 2009, 2010) in disciplinary learning and writing.

In terms of book-length studies, Beaufort (2007), Carroll (2002) Herrington and Curtis (2000), Sommers and Saltz (2004), and Sternglass (1997) have each shown in longitudinal research that writing is essential to the ways students form identities as fledgling members of their disciplines. Similarly, Rebecca Nowacek (2011) presents an in-depth study

---

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, no one thus far in writing studies or English studies has centered their research around meaningfulness, but we did find one reference from *English Journal*. Esther Hess Close (1936) published a two-page set of steps to develop “meaningful communication” and included a step for students to choose themes based on “individual student interests”—an earlier version of what we recommend when we say in a later chapter “tap into personal connection.”

of “transfer” for students in a particular interdisciplinary program, but each of these monographs focuses on single institutions or even a single student and does not feature the scope and depth of data we offer. Dan Melzer (2014) investigates writing syllabi and curricular materials from institutions across the United States but does not feature students’ perspectives. An online report, the Stanford Study of Writing, led by Andrea Lunsford (2008), does ask questions about students’ out-of-school writing, languages, and work experiences, but findings will likely be very different from what we learned from our study’s targeted institutions, where significant numbers of the student population are multilingual, international, and/or first-generation college students—many of whom are studying in professional programs such as engineering, pharmacy, legal studies, and nursing. Many of these students live off campus in discourse communities different from, yet closely related to, those they engage in on campus.

Understanding students’ writing performance as a developmental process is essential, even when viewing that writing reflectively, as our study does. Previous studies of students’ undergraduate writing experiences describe students’ relatively uncertain moves from their experience of first-year composition to the disciplinary requirements of writing in their majors (Carroll 2002; Haswell 1991; Hilgers, Hussey, and Stitt-Bergh 1999; Sternglass 1997) and writing postgraduation (Beaufort 2007). Barber, King, and Baxter Magolda (2013) tell us that “developmentally effective experiences [that] respect students’ current meaning making and simultaneously invite students to consider new perspectives” (889) lead to faster and stronger gains in self-efficacy, or “self-authorship,” as they call it. If the goal of higher education is, in fact, to foster a self-actualization (Maslow 1967), certain personally significant experiences must occur.

We also know the impact of these meaningful experiences extends beyond graduation. In their 2014 report on more than thirty thousand college graduates, *Great Jobs, Great Lives*, researchers found that “well-being” in the workplace was directly related to several undergraduate experiences (“Great Jobs, Great Lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report” 2014). Such engagement was independent of the type of institution: “Where graduates went to college—public or private, small or large, very selective or not selective—hardly matters at all to their current well-being and their work lives in comparison to their experiences in college” (6). Graduates specified undergraduate experiences that contributed most strongly to their current workplace well-being:

- I had at least one professor . . . who made me excited about learning.
- My professors . . . cared about me as a person.
- I had a mentor who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.
- I worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.
- I had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom.
- I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while attending [college]. (10)

The first three items are perhaps most relevant to what we report in this book (though many projects students chose as meaningful were semester-long efforts). In terms of those three, Gallup/Purdue (“Great Jobs, Great Lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report” 2014) reports the following: if an employed graduate recalls having “a professor who cared about them as a person,” one “who excited them about learning,” and if “they had a mentor who encouraged them” to pursue their dreams, the graduate’s odds of being engaged at work more than doubled. But only 14% of all college graduates strongly agree that they had support in all three areas” (10).

As we describe in subsequent chapters, students in our study report engagement with instructors and peers, passion for the subjects they wrote about, personal connection with those topics, and a belief that their meaningful writing projects would connect to future writing. In short, meaningful writing completed as an undergraduate may very well produce well-being postgraduation and in a future workplace.

#### **METHODS TO INVESTIGATE STUDENTS’ MEANINGFUL WRITING**

Rather than marginalize the description of our methods to an appendix, we offer the full story here, not simply to ensure readers that we engaged in RAD research—or what Richard Haswell (2005) describes as research that is replicable, aggregable, and data supported—but to emphasize that in qualitative research of this sort, dispositions of researchers, questions asked, methods of data collection and analysis, and the writing up of that research are intertwined in what Wendy Bishop (1992) describes as “author-saturated texts,” or “those that acknowledge their constructedness” (152). What we offer next are the stories of that “constructedness.”

#### **STUDY ORIGINS**

We began the Meaningful Writing Project almost ten years ago when we were at three different institutions—Clark University (Anne),

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Neal), and the University of Kansas (Michele). We each had long worked in writing centers and writing-across-the-curriculum programs and had already spent many hours talking about how students experienced writing across their undergraduate years at each of our institutions. In 2004 Anne completed a small pilot study (Geller 2005). Using thirteen short-answer questions, she prompted students to reflect on their experiences reading and writing during their first year. The responses to one question, “Describe a writing assignment from this year that seemed valuable to you. Why do you feel this writing assignment was valuable? (Be specific.)” are reported in “Students’ Experiences of Meaning-Centered Writing and Reading” in *Meaning-Centered Education: International Perspectives and Explorations in Higher Education* (Geller 2013).

In 2005 we used that pilot study to develop a Meaningful Writing Project research proposal that looked very much like the research we report on in this book. We applied for a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Research Initiative grant that year but did not receive an award, in part, we imagine, because our institutions would not allow us to submit our grant without a very high percentage of costs taken up by grant overhead. After institutional moves to our current positions, we decided we still were committed to the questions of our research and revised our proposal: “Seniors Reflect on Their Meaningful Writing Experiences: A Cross-Institutional Study.” We received funding from the 2010–2011 CCCC Research Initiative in January 2011 (and this time our new institutions did not request that we build in overhead costs) and combined this funding with institutional research support and program funds at each of our universities in order to complete surveys and interviews with students and faculty and spend two years on data analysis.

#### DEVELOPING AND ADMINISTERING THE STUDENT SURVEY

Once we had funding, we knew we did not have enough time to begin our data collection with the graduating class of 2011, so we set out to be ready to survey and interview the class of 2012. From spring 2011 through fall of that year, we developed our survey and IRB protocol. We also had to decide how to delineate seniors. For example, a student could graduate after three years or could be in a five- or six-year undergraduate program. We decided to target students who were on track to graduate with an undergraduate degree in May 2012. At each of our institutions, this group also included students in specialized programs such as the six-year accelerated pharmaceutical doctoral degree.

At the heart of our survey are two open-ended questions (see app. A for the complete survey): “Describe the writing project you found meaningful. What made that project meaningful for you?” However, we also asked students to offer information in several additional areas: (1) a range of demographics (e.g., major and minor, language proficiency, GPA in major and overall); (2) the class in which their meaningful writing project took place, whether that class was in the major, an elective, or a general education requirement, who the instructor of the class was, and when they were enrolled; (3) whether or not they had previously written anything similar to their meaningful writing projects and whether they imagined they would write similar projects in the future (open-ended responses were invited for each of these questions); (4) the ways their experience of their meaningful writing project was or was not in accord with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) writing questions, which we describe more fully in chapter 3.

Through fall 2011 and spring 2012, the Institutional Research Office at SJU offered feedback on the content of our survey and hosted it online. In fall 2011, we also piloted our survey questions with seniors who were writing center consultants at each of our institutions and then revised the survey questions based on their responses and their reflections on the experience of taking the survey. Determining the best ways to present our multilayered approach to this study (recruiting seniors to complete a survey and be interviewed and asking seniors to name the faculty member we would then invite to take part in the research) to each of our institutional review boards and coordinating IRB approval at three institutions took months. In addition, each of our three institutions disseminates many annual student surveys, especially carefully timed senior surveys, and we had to coordinate the dissemination of our survey within the calendar of those surveys. We invited a total of 10,540 seniors (NEU = 2,414; SJU = 1,982; OU = 6,144) to take the survey from mid-March to mid-April 2012 (see app. B for recruitment e-mail from NEU), and for their participation they were entered in a drawing to receive either a \$50 gift card or meal credit.

We closed the senior survey with 780 responses, or a 7.4 percent return rate. After removing partially completed responses, we ended up with 707 surveys, or a final return rate of 6.7 percent. While this rate of response is too low to allow for generalizing to larger populations (a point we take up later in this chapter), the accumulated data from 707 open-ended survey responses was considerable, giving us a great deal to make sense of over the following two years of analysis.



In the process of reading through to make certain we had complete data, we also realized twenty-eight students had gone out of their way to complete the entire survey in order to say they had no meaningful writing projects during their undergraduate careers. We take up the substance of these responses in chapter 2. Also, one complete response was offered in Pig Latin (excerpted in our epigraph)—with a link to an online translation site included in the survey answer.

### UNDERGRADUATES AS CO-RESEARCHERS

From the time we conceived of this research, we knew we wanted undergraduates to participate as co-researchers (one of our models was Susan Blum's 2009 method reported in *My Word: Plagiarism and College Culture*). Our reasoning here was that we could think of no better way to capture the perspective of undergraduates—and to value those perspectives—than to have undergraduates play a key role as co-researchers, particularly as interviewers. This was not a matter of our own unease with research interviewing—we've long used that method in our research—but we knew seniors would communicate with their undergraduate peers in ways they would not communicate with us, and our highest priority was to cultivate and honor undergraduates' perspectives.

The first stage of this process was to invite undergraduates to interview the graduating seniors who gave us their follow-up contact information in their survey responses. At SJU, Anne invited writing center consultants to participate. At NEU, Neal recruited undergraduate English majors. At OU, Michele invited students in a first-year seminar focused on undergraduate research. At each of our institutions, we also collaborated with a graduate student who took part in the interview training session and helped coordinate interview times, collected consent forms, and uploaded digitally recorded interviews and reflection sheets (see app. C for a complete list of undergraduate and graduate researchers who took part). We asked the undergraduates who volunteered to complete an IRB training module for certification, read two short qualitative research articles about interviewing (Bogdan and Biklen 2006; Seidman 1998), and come to a group training session for which we compensated them for their time. In that session we discussed the readings, and then we either asked the undergraduates to interview one another in pairs using our shared protocol (see app. D) or we asked one pair to complete an interview observed by the group. In both versions, we closed with reflection on the process and feedback on the interview questions, which led us to make several changes for the final version of the questions.

Our undergraduate researchers all told us they appreciated the opportunity to talk with their peers about meaningful writing projects from across the disciplines. Often they were surprised by what their peers told them. What was interesting about the OU interviews was that because the interviewers were first-year students and the interviewees were seniors, the seniors often had to explain their projects. In one interview, for example, a senior describes a semester-long project, and on mentioning “lit review” as a component, notices the first-year student interviewer doesn’t seem familiar with the genre:

*Hank:* It was actually more structured . . . I guess there are different forms that academic essays can take. This was more of the formal kind where you do a lit review. Are you familiar with a lit review?

*Andre:* Vaguely.

*Hank:* A lit review is an overview of the current theories and academic discussions going on over the topic. I was doing securitization of borders in Europe. So I looked up what all the different authors had said over securitization. What securitization means. The history of it. That was actually the hardest part.

But moments of surprise arose even among the interviews being led by experienced writing center consultants. For example, in one of the SJU interview recordings we offer in greater detail later, we hear the interviewer’s surprise that the meaningful writing project was worth just 5 percent of the student’s semester grade.

Our undergraduate research team members completed twenty-seven interviews at our three institutions. The data set from these interviews includes digitally recorded interviews, transcripts of the interviews, some assignments, some drafts of the meaningful writing projects, and the interviewers’ reflections on the interviews.

#### **ANALYZING THE STUDENT-SURVEY DATA**

Faced with a large amount of survey data, much of it open-ended responses, we decided to ground the bulk of our analysis in the “Why was your writing project meaningful?” question. As soon as we started to read through the responses, we saw and heard striking evidence of students explaining how their writing and their learning (about course content, about themselves, about their disciplines and future professions) were interconnected. We chose the emic path rather than the etic approach that imposes an existing frame first. One definition of emic seems especially fitting for our study: “Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories

regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied' (Lett 1990, 130; see also Hass and Osborn 2007). In early summer 2012, we worked with randomly chosen sets of responses to develop codes we saw emerging and reoccurring (see app. E for list of codes). Our development of codes is in accord with what Johnny Saldaña (2015) describes:

A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. . . . Just as a title represents and captures a book or film or poem's primary content and essence, so does a code represent and capture a datum's primary content and essence. (4)

We then made a number of attempts to code independently and establish interrater reliability so we could each more quickly code portions of the 707 survey responses. However, we could never get better than 75 percent interrater reliability. While this might speak to flaws in our research design or our own weaknesses as researchers, we quickly came to realize that while some survey responses were short, like this one—"It made me realize how little power the average American actually has" (code: *content learning*)—other responses were long and rich and required multiple codes:

It was about a research study in which I participated for summer 2011. It took me almost three weeks to write that paper as it was 26 pages long. First time, I applied all the material learned in the Research Methods class such as, formulating hypothesis, writing introduction and method section, analyzing data, etc. to a real life situation. I was very excited writing that paper because it was based upon a real research study, carried out at St. John's University, in which I directly worked with human participants and analyzed data. Although, we couldn't get all of our results significant but at least some of them were, and it was a big accomplishment for me and my research buddy. (codes: *length, affect, transfer, accomplishment, app+*)

From our realization about the complexity of what we came to call the "*Why meaningful?*" responses and our desire to ground this study in what we could learn from students about why they had found these named projects to be their most meaningful, we decided to code every one of the 707 responses collaboratively. That meant talking through our rationale for the codes we were using and prioritizing the three or four most significant reasons/codes for why the project had been meaningful.

Thus began approximately a year of almost weekly Skype sessions in which we coded together for up to two hours at a time. While the time

invested in this step seems almost unfathomable now, it did lead to the three of us living with our data, engaging in what Peter Smagorinsky (2008) recommends: “The flexible and generative nature of the collaborative approach [is] more likely to produce an insightful reading of the data because each decision is the result of a serious and thoughtful exchange about what to call each and every data segment” (402). To ensure consistency, after nearly completing all of our coding, we pulled a random sample of previously coded data and coded again. We found nearly 100 percent agreement between the two coding sessions many months apart.

### **ANALYZING STUDENT INTERVIEWS**

In preparing some of our first presentations from this study, we turned to the student interviews to fill out our understanding of the contexts of students’ meaningful writing experiences in ways the survey alone could not provide. From those interviews, we were able to learn about students’ larger writing lives and experiences, the courses in which the meaningful writing projects were written, and the relationship of these to students’ identity, undergraduate experiences, and self-professed goals. We began to present individual students in first-person narrative case studies (Yin 2013), and in doing so, we were also able to start seeing the weight of some of our codes and the interconnection among other codes. In addition, as we worked with the interviews, we learned more detail about students’ experiences in their courses, and we heard more about their relationships with their faculty. This information informed how we went on to adjust the faculty-data stage of our research.

### **SURVEYING AND INTERVIEWING FACULTY**

We had always planned to interview the faculty who were named as having assigned and supported students’ meaningful writing projects (and we had IRB approval to do so), but we realized as soon as we received the seniors’ surveys that we could never interview all the faculty who were named. Somehow, we had expected a smaller number of faculty to be named several times, but seniors instead named many faculty only once, with just a few exceptions of faculty who were named by several students, often for the same course. As a result, we decided to develop a survey to capture more faculty descriptions of teaching with writing, which meant we wrote IRB modifications that had, once again, to clear

the institutional review boards at each of our institutions. We knew from our years of work with faculty that the survey would have to be short if we wanted a strong response rate, so we worked to develop a two-question survey with a request that faculty give us their contact information if they were willing to be interviewed. We piloted the initial version of our faculty survey with a small group of faculty who had been involved with WAC programming at OU and SJU but who had not been named in the students' surveys, and then we made adjustments to our questions based on feedback from that pilot. The final version of the survey consisted of the following questions:

1. We're sending you this survey because a student named a writing project written for your course as the most meaningful of their undergraduate career. Why do think that was so?
2. Please tell us about how writing "works" in your teaching—what is its role in terms of what you want your students to learn, where does it occur within the semester, and what does the instruction you provide look like (in assignments, in feedback, in class/lab, in office hours)?

We also knew that to get as large a number of responses as we wanted, our request and invitation would have to be complimentary, which wasn't difficult because in our e-mail solicitations to faculty we told the truth as we had it from the student survey:

Dear Professor X: I am writing to you because a student participating in a cross-institutional study I am conducting—Seniors Reflect on Their Meaningful Writing Experiences—cited an assignment written in one of your classes as one of their most meaningful writing experiences. The course was XXX taught in Semester/Year. Below is a description of the assignment: XXX. To learn more about this assignment as well as how you design writing assignments and teach with writing, I invite you to participate in a three question online survey.

Some faculty were surprised they had been named as *most meaningful*. Other faculty were not at all surprised. In fact, some faculty had an "of course" response—either because of their confidence in their curriculum and pedagogy or because students had been telling them for years that this particular assignment was meaningful. We offered faculty three options for completing the survey: (1) anonymously, (2) with their names but not an offer to take part in an interview, or (3) with an indication that they were willing to take part in a follow-up interview. We sent out 382 invitations (NEU = 100; OU = 210; SJU = 72) to individual faculty and received 160 completed faculty surveys (a 42 percent return rate); 134 faculty agreed to be contacted for follow-up

interviews, and our undergraduate team eventually conducted interviews with 60 total faculty.

### ANALYZING FACULTY-SURVEY RESPONSES

Because the first faculty-survey response was a reflection on the meaningful writing project the student had named (“We’re sending you this survey because a student named a writing project written for your course as the most meaningful of their undergraduate career. Why do think that was so?”), and we wanted to maintain a focus on exploring meaningful writing projects from students’ perspectives even as we considered faculty responses, we coded the response to the first question with the codes developed from students’ “Why meaningful?” responses. What is interesting is that sometimes, even when it is clear the student and faculty are describing exactly the same assignment, the “Why meaningful?” codes we assigned are different. For example, from a class on race, gender and the media:

- Student response to survey question 1, which first asked them to describe the project: “I was asked to discuss my family history and genealogy. I found it to be very meaningful, because I learned stuff about my family that I didn’t know before. I was also able to discuss stories that had been passed down through generations.” Response to the second part of the question, which asked why the project was meaningful: “It was nice to have time to reflect on what I had learned about my family.” (codes: *reflection, content learning, time*)
- Corresponding faculty response to survey question 1: “The assignment asked students to make connections between their family stories and their personal identities. I think students may find value in this assignment because they are invited to define themselves against the tapestry of family background in unique ways—race, gender & class. Students interview their family members as part of their work and engage in important conversations that they otherwise might miss.” (codes: *personal connection, researching to learn*)

But, as is also obvious here, even though *personal connection* is not a code we used for the “Why meaningful?” portion of the student’s answer, it’s clear in the student’s first survey question answer that the project was related to the student’s own “family history and genealogy.”

In other cases, as with a meaningful writing project written in an all-online course, Decision Making, the student and faculty descriptions of the project were similar, but our codes were still slightly different.

- Student response to survey question 1: “A ten page assignment that required presenting three different scenarios to solve a

problem. . . . The project was meaningful to me because I used a real-life work situation to base my paper on. The writing project gave me the chance to explore three different scenarios to solve this work situation and led to a better working environment for me.” (codes: *app+*, *personal connection*)

- Corresponding faculty response to survey question 1: “The assignment is a course spanning task that seeks to create a real world experience in strategic thinking and problem solving that is focused on issues in the future. Each phase is completed and feedback is given as the unit topics are covered. The assignment is designed to provide flexibility in topics and opportunity for creative thinking. This assignment allows the student to reflect on issues they are passionate about, and think strategically about possible resolutions outcomes.” (codes: *app+*, *reflection*, *process*)

The second faculty-survey question offered different data given its more general focus on how writing played a role in the faculty member’s teaching, and we spent quite a bit of time in person in Boston on a three-day data-analysis retreat struggling to determine how to best code these responses while still staying true to our “Why was the project most meaningful to students?” lens. We first tried to use the same codes we had used for students’ “Why meaningful?” responses and for faculty members’ descriptions of the learning and teaching of the meaningful writing projects, but we allowed ourselves to add new, additional codes, and we could agree on some of these (*synthesis* and *reading*) when we worked with a set of responses separately and then brought our analysis together. However, we realized how familiar much of what faculty described in that second response seemed to us; over and over again, we heard faculty describe their goals, their biases, and their familiar WAC/WID practices such as peer review or feedback or drafts or in-class minilessons. We asked ourselves what seemed to be important, and when we talked that through, using a set of responses, we came to see that we could easily separate these practices from beliefs faculty expressed about writing, from values faculty articulated, and from goals faculty were trying to reach with the assignments and learning and teaching they described using in their courses. We also developed a code for instances of faculty describing teaching out of what they knew from their own experiences writing and researching: teacher as writer. Once again, we spent several months via Skype collaboratively coding these faculty-survey responses. While we do not report on the specific results of this coding in chapter 5 when we focus on faculty data, it did inform our shaping of the case studies in that chapter, particularly instances in which faculty and student values and goals for writing were and were not aligned.



### INTERVIEWING FACULTY

To interview the faculty, we had to prepare three new sets of undergraduate interviewers because most of our previous interviewers had graduated. This time, Anne and Michele asked for volunteers from among their writing centers' staffs, Neal once again invited undergraduate English majors to take part, and we again compensated student researchers for their time. We each used the same process we had used when we prepared those who interviewed the seniors (IRB certification, the same readings, a practice session), as well as a shared interview protocol (see app. F). This time each of us asked one of the undergraduate interviewers to complete an actual interview with a faculty member who had been named in a student survey in a "fishbowl" setting with the other interviewers watching, listening, and taking notes. Afterward, we led a debrief of that interview as a way of preparing the group members for their own interviews. As we noted above, student perspective was our driving force; we knew faculty would speak to us quite differently than they would to undergraduates, some of whom were familiar with their courses and some of whom were not. Certainly, in both instances faculty would be performing in a particular rhetorical situation, but as we listened to completed interviews and heard faculty explaining their histories with teaching writing and as writers, the ways writing played a role in their courses, and their hopes for student learning through writing, we were struck repeatedly by the honesty, frankness, and, at times, fragility of faculty experiences. We do not imagine faculty would have been similarly open describing their experiences to fellow faculty, particularly ones they might see as "experts" on the teaching of writing.

### PRESENTING OUR RESEARCH

Throughout this research and writing process, we developed conference and invited-workshop presentations. These talks provided points at which we pushed ourselves to more certain analysis. Our earliest presentations after we coded the student responses led us to our most frequent codes for the "Why meaningful?" responses: *personal connection*, *app+*, *content learning*, *researching to learn*. And identifying the prevalence of these codes provided a lens for analyzing our data in smaller and/or more focused ways—co-occurrences of these codes and co-occurrences of these codes with other less frequent codes. The 2014 International Writing Across the Curriculum Conference was the first time we wrote and presented first-person faculty narratives developed from faculty



interviews, and our (award-winning!) poster presentation at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) was the first time we presented the most frequent codes of the student responses to the “Why meaningful?” question next to the most frequent codes of the faculty responses to “Why do you think this was a student’s most meaningful writing project?”

Another data-collection effort launched at our 2015 CCCC Poster Session was to capture CCCCs attendees’ meaningful writing experiences as undergraduates, as well as to create a link on our project website (<http://meaningfulwritingproject.net>) for anyone to contribute descriptions of the most meaningful writing projects they completed as undergraduates and why they chose those projects as most meaningful. Once again, we navigated the somewhat choppy waters of multi-institutional IRB approval but ultimately received permission to collect data at these additional sites. We invite readers of this book to contribute your stories: <http://tinyurl.com/meaningfulWP>.

#### A BROAD LOOK AT STUDY PARTICIPANTS

In the individual chapters that follow, we present specific findings from surveys and interviews and discuss those findings in relation to key current concepts in learning and teaching writing. Before we offer those specifics, however, in this section, we present an overview of student and faculty demographics, highlighting some of the institutional similarities and differences.

#### INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES

Our participants were all students and faculty (full and part time) at Northeastern University, the University of Oklahoma, or St. John’s University at the time of this research study. Our undergraduate and graduate co-researchers were enrolled students at these institutions. The following infographic chapter describes characteristics of each institution for the academic year in which we collected our student data. Although our 707 student-survey participants represent a small percentage of all enrolled undergraduates at our three institutions during the 2011–2012 academic year, the Common Data Set (CDS) from each of our schools for that year provides an overview of the institutional context (or at least the one publicly reported in the CDS). We offer these data to provide that context, as well as to point to institutional differences in terms of the data represented in the CDS. We do not claim that our student

participants are representative of all students in US higher education or our overall student populations. However, we do believe that the context we offer in the infographic chapter (which follows chapter 1) speaks to aspects of the campus climate in which our students' meaningful writing projects were situated.

There are additional differences among our schools. While the University of Oklahoma is public, Northeastern and St. John's are private. St. John's is religiously affiliated: Catholic and Vincentian. The University of Oklahoma sits in a small college town, and while both Northeastern and St. John's have quite large campuses, they are located in urban cities. Northeastern is perhaps best known for its "co-op" program, or a long-standing experiential learning component in which nearly all students complete from one to three six-month, full-time (and usually paid) work experiences during their tenure. As a result, most NEU undergraduates take five full years to graduate. St. John's has the largest percentage of students of color of the three institutions, while Oklahoma has the largest percentage of Native American students. While none of the three institutions has a full account of students' languages, spoken and written, we imagine from our experience on the ground that St. John's, which is located in one of the most linguistically diverse counties in the country, is the most diverse when it comes to multilingual writers and speakers, while Northeastern has the largest percentage of international undergraduates (we realize, of course, that not all international students are multilingual).

#### **STUDENT-SURVEY PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

As we show in the infographic chapter, student-survey participants were divided pretty much by the student populations of our institutions. Differences in reported race/ethnicity were also reflective of our overall student populations: the majority of participants from SJU identified as students of color, while OU had the largest percentage of Native American participants. In terms of gender, we were somewhat surprised to see female participants outnumber males by more than two to one even though the overall ratio at our institutions is approximately fifty/fifty. Perhaps females are more willing to fill out surveys, or perhaps they are more likely to have meaningful writing experiences. The latter conclusion is supported by research from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which shows that women undergraduates are more likely to report being engaged than men (Kuh 2003). The age differences are also a function of our



Figure 1.1. Most frequently named STEM majors.

institutional differences, such as NEU's seniors largely being in their fifth year (and thus twenty-two or older) and the presence of nontraditionally aged students at OU.

It is interesting to note that 40 percent of the 707 seniors identified themselves as being proficient in reading, writing, or speaking a language other than English and that this percentage is also fairly consistent across the participants from all three institutions.

In terms of students' majors, for all participants, the most frequently cited major was psychology (see figure 1.1), perhaps an indication that psychology majors frequently give and take surveys. The array of frequently named majors from social science, STEM, and humanities fields also offers an indication that our findings are applicable to a wide range of students (see figure 1.2).

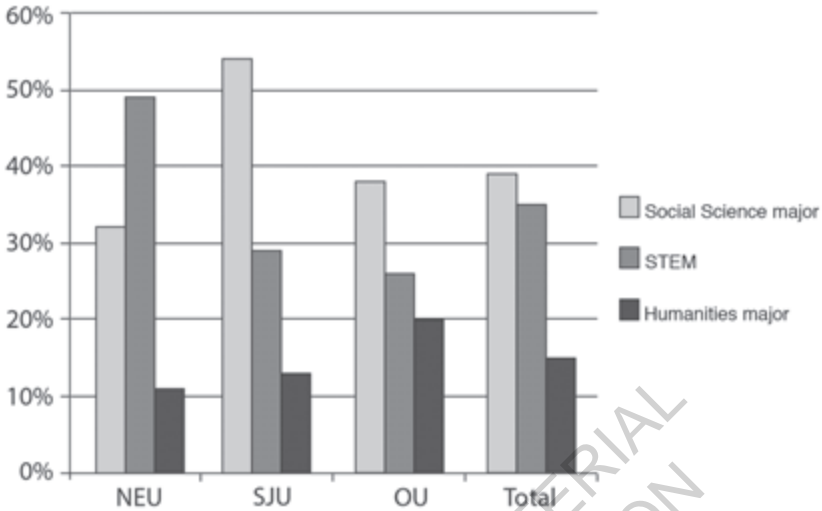


Figure 1.2. Frequently named majors from social science, STEM, and humanities.

#### BUT IS IT GENERALIZABLE?

We do not intend to argue in this book that student and faculty experiences in our home universities are the same as student and faculty experiences in every US institution—or even that the students who participated in our study are representative of our institutions, given our relatively low survey response rate and that our study design did not rely on random sampling. But we do believe the conclusions and theories we offer may be applicable to learning and teaching contexts at any college or university. We are left even more certain of this conclusion because of the ways faculty and staff at a wide variety of institutions—other public and private universities, regional universities, small private colleges, community colleges, technical universities—have received our findings as we have offered dozens of workshops and presentations over the last several years. Those audiences have found student and faculty experiences and explanations of meaningfulness both familiar and inspiring. As we present our work in these varied settings, we always ask participants to write about and share their meaningful writing projects completed as undergraduates (and we also continue to ask graduate students and undergraduates at our own institutions to respond to this prompt). We are consistently struck by how the responses represent the themes we saw repeated in our students' data. In other words, across widely different contexts and over extended periods of time, people can recall a key meaningful writing project from their undergraduate experiences and

describe that meaning making in similar terms. We believe the meaningful writing project is a shared phenomenon, one deeply enmeshed in our experiences of schooling in this country and in our experiences with writing and writing instruction (and it would be fascinating to explore these questions in contexts outside of the US educational system).

### OUTLINE OF THIS BOOK

In the chapters that follow, we present the results we gathered from student and faculty surveys and interviews along with additional materials we collected, including interviewers' written reflections completed after each interview. Immediately following this introduction we have inserted an infographic chapter that can be referred back to as you read this book. We build chapters 2–4 around terms we see as key to current discussions of student writing and learning—*agency*, *engagement*, and *learning for transfer*—and in each chapter, we situate our research within the literature in those areas. In these chapters, we offer case studies, drawing from student interviews, to offer depth and nuance to the concepts we discuss. In chapter 5, we triangulate our findings from the student data with what we learned from faculty-survey responses and interviews and also offer several brief case studies across a range of disciplines and types of classes in which the meaningful writing projects took place. Finally, our last chapter offers what we see are the implications and applications from our study for research and teaching.

### CHAPTER 2: AGENCY

Kathleen Blake Yancey (2011, 416) describes the question “how might we define agency?” as “at the heart of rhetoric and likewise at the heart of the teaching enterprise.” In our analysis of student-survey results, we saw a clear pattern emerge in terms of how particular writing assignments—and often the acts of faculty to shape and deliver those assignments—resulted in students making note of a particular kind of agency. More specifically, most frequently co-occurring with our codes for why students chose a project as meaningful was that it *allowed* or gave them the opportunity to pursue a subject or write in a particular form. However, there was a clear limit for many students to this freedom, as an equally frequent co-occurrence with our codes was students remarking that an instructor or writing task *required* or *forced* them into some action. And, at times, these qualities showed up together.

Agency, then, in the perspective of students participating in our research, consists of the opportunity to pursue subjects one is passionate about or writing relevant to a professional aspiration or future pursuit. However, such opportunity is shaped by instruction and by the writing task itself. After all, the writing tasks students were reporting on were often required assignments in required classes (the latter made up 56 percent of courses students named). Still, within such requirements, students have opportunities to find meaning in their writing projects and, further, to develop a sense of agency about themselves as writers, learners, and thinkers.

### CHAPTER 3: ENGAGEMENT

In *Making the Most of College*, Richard Light (2004) describes the ways students' writing is a key contributor to their sense of engagement with course material and with peers and faculty. Similarly, we saw repeatedly in our survey and interview results students describing new writing tasks or new ways of learning coupled with an investigation of a topic that offered high interest or personal connection (and, thus, motivation). The result represented a unique opportunity for our students, one in which they were engaged with their learning and their writing.

Light's definition of engagement, connected closely to the time and effort students devote to their studies, represents one dimension of what we saw happening in students' accounts of their meaningful writing projects. Following George D. Kuh (2009) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), we describe how "time and effort" were factors in students' choice of their meaningful writing project, and we compare the results of our survey with results from the NSSE (2012) topical module on students' "experiences with writing" from the same year as our survey, 2012. We also explore the social view of engagement and discuss what we learned about how students engage with others (peers and instructors) as well as with *things* or nonhuman actors (subject matter or content) to make meaning through their writing.

### CHAPTER 4: LEARNING FOR TRANSFER

While in our student survey, we did not ask about transfer per se—at least directly—our methods provide powerful means to understand how undergraduates across the disciplines make meaning from their writing projects, what previous experiences influence that meaning, and how students expect that meaning to contribute or transfer forward to future

writing. In this chapter we shift the conversation from *teaching for transfer* to *learning for transfer* as we put our findings in relation to writing studies transfer research and call for a focus on what students bring to and take from their learning rather than how they do or do not respond to transfer-intentioned curricula.

#### CHAPTER 5: MEANINGFUL WRITING HAPPENS WHEN . . .

Students' meaningful writing projects tell us a great deal about how students learn to write, but they also tell us a great deal about how writing is taught. In this chapter we draw on faculty survey and interview results to focus on those teaching practices and assignments that resulted in meaningful learning, and we distill, as much as possible, the common qualities these practices share. We saw a wide range of assignments in a wide range of disciplines, in both required and elective courses, all leading to students' most meaningful writing projects. Such range speaks to writing assignments as vital tools in the larger processes of learning and teaching, as well as to models of structuring student learning applicable to a large variety of contexts. Overall, faculty survey responses and interviews show us that pedagogy comes in multiple forms and through multiple channels and that faculty care a great deal about students' processes of writing as well as their products.

#### CHAPTER 6: SOME CONCLUSIONS

While we resist reducing our findings in this book to a template or formula that would guarantee students produce meaningful writing, we offer in this chapter some lessons for learning and teaching we feel are applicable to multiple sites of instruction. Meaningful writing projects that enable student agency, engage students with others and with content, and offer opportunities to learn for transfer have the qualities of personal connection, applicability, and immersion in processes of research and writing while balancing required elements and student choice. Not all these qualities happen at once or even all together, but their presence more often than not ensured that students found a writing project meaningful, worth recounting in a survey and remembering for its significance in their own lives. And it seems those desirable elements listed above are more likely to appear when placed within an expansive frame for learning.