Value in Academic Writing: An Inquiry into Reader Response

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Much of the existing research regarding the way college and university writing instructors view undergraduate students and their writing suggests a lack of high regard, potentially leading to a poor long-term student ethos that could have a lasting impact on perceptions of student writing. However, research also shows the emergence of a different way of teaching and working in composition classrooms that values student contributions and strengthens relationships between students and instructors. This essay presents original survey data that reflects instructor views on written work based on the identification of the writer as an undergraduate student or a professor with a PhD. Results indicate that certain students may have established a long-term ethos respected by instructors in spite of students' academic status, suggesting the potential for student contributions to be valued in ways that may be indicative of closer student and instructor work in composition studies.

Undergraduate students may wonder how their writing instructors evaluate student compositions. Is their work taken seriously by instructors, or is it considered differently because of the status of its creators? Do instructors view the writing of proven and accredited members of the academic community differently because of their stature as fellow instructors and researchers? These questions are primarily inquiries into the nature of student ethos; they strike at the essence of undergraduate students' relationships with the academic community of professional writers that their instructors presumably represent. In this paper, I will endeavor to determine whether writing instructors respond differently to the work of their undergraduate students than the work of academic writers with superior credentials, and I will seek to provide plausible explanations for the findings. The nature and influence of ethos will be examined, and two conflicting views of the relationships between students and instructors are described. Much of the research supports the view that students have persistently poor long-term academic ethos that reflects badly upon their writing. However, my own research does not support the conclusion that all students have a poor academic ethos; it indicates that there is no significant difference between the way instructors view the work of certain undergraduate students and the work of their colleagues. Writing instructors evaluated a variety of published compositions with the writer of each identified as an undergraduate student for some reviewers and as a professor with a PhD for others. They did not report significantly different responses to any of the sample compositions in spite of differing writer identifications. This could be the result of instances of strong long-term student ethos or a lack of regard for writer identity on the part of instructors. Either way, it suggests that student writers might have the opportunity to be successful academic writers outside of the classroom. The results also indicate a need for further extensive research into the ethos of undergraduate student writers.

A Review of the Literature of Ethos and Student/Instructor Relationships

Many conceptions of ethos are exceptionally broad. The *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* tentatively defines ethos as "character as it emerges in language" ("Ēthos" 263). It goes on to explain that ethos has been given many alternative and competing meanings throughout its history (263).

Though many conceptualizations of ethos are now more unified, modern theorists still stress the multiple facets of ethos. Michael Halloran writes that a good speaker leaves a favorable impression of character by "bringing to the rhetorical occasion a good reputation, but he must also manifest the proper character through the choices made in his speech" (60). Similarly, John Ramage explains that every person enters a rhetorical situation with an associated and substantial list of given factors that influence their persuasiveness in spite of the actual content of their rhetorical act (91). Nevertheless, Ramage insists that "more often than not, what a person actually says or writes will probably have the greatest bearing on our willingness to credit them with a strong *ethos*" (91).

The pre-existing characteristics referred to by Halloran as good reputation and Ramage as given factors are reflective of the argument that anyone who engages in the use of rhetoric has a perceived background or history that may influence an audience. For example, Ramage refers to cultural readymade identities that may be assigned to or adopted by users of rhetoric (52). Ramage asserts that "cultural readymades are derived from cultural myths that are transmitted in the form of narratives, icons, characters, jokes, props, scenes, and so forth" (52). These easily applied identities may lead to stereotypes that influence audiences before a speaker or writer even engages in a rhetorical act (65). A prior reputation has been created that may bias an audience. Johanna Schmertz notes that even the way people refer to things has an effect on people's impressions of them. She asserts that "how things get grouped under words determines how they will be recognized and treated" (Schmertz 88).

In addition to the influence of stereotypes and associations, long-term ethos is impacted by how a rhetorical actor locates himself in specific physical and metaphorical spaces over time. According to Nedra Reynolds, there is growing acceptance that "identity is formed through negotiations with social institutions . . . and through one's locatedness in various social and cultural 'spaces'" ("Ethos as Location" 326). A rhetorical actor enters each situation with a set of established social relationships that link his or her identity with specific spaces and locations. Reynolds insists that ethos develops as a result of deliberate actions, inclusive of choices that establish associations with certain physical and metaphorical spaces, which create a habit of mind (327). The word "habit" is of special importance here, indicating that momentary actions can result in more lasting identity formation.

Long-term literal and figurative proximity to certain institutions and groups may also lead to eventual membership in specific discourse communities and the reputations these communities impart to their members. According to Anne Beaufort, "a discourse community is a social entity distinguished by a set of writing practices that result from the community's shared values and goals, the physical conditions for getting writing done, and individual writers' influence on the community" (59). Inclusion in a discourse community requires a close association with its members and even the spatial conditions that distinguish it from other communities. Thus, participation and membership in a discourse community would create a long-lasting form of ethos identifiable by an audience in specific rhetorical situations.

Although many given factors influence ethos formation, it remains important to recognize that rhetorical actors are not entirely bound by them; each rhetorical situation also provides the actor space in which to construct ethos. In spite of his description of stereotypes and readymade identities, Ramage maintains that humans can construct their own identities as they go. An individual involved in a rhetorical engagement may produce alternatives to givens or even shift among several appropriate readymade identities (62). Schmertz notes that ethos may be created through a negotiation between a rhetorical actor and his or her listeners in which neither has the final say (84). The actor has the ability to attempt to establish ethos as he or she communicates, but the audience can choose what to accept. Even if the rhetorical actor attempts to satisfy expectations he or she will inevitably fail to meet with complete success. Schmertz explains that "to account for an

essence in terms of the contexts in which it appears is to change both to some degree" (89). No two rhetorical situations are identical, and neither is the ethos that emerges as a result of differences in audiences, environments, and their associated predispositions.

The potential influence of both given factors and instantaneous rhetorical shifts in the process of ethos formation has led to theories that strive to take both into account. For example, the ethos Schmertz describes for feminism is "neither manufactured nor fixed, neither tool nor character, but rather the stopping points at which the subject (re)negotiates her own essence to call upon whatever agency that essence enables" (86). This conceptualization of ethos is equally useful to describe the nature of ethos for any rhetorical actor. Each person's ethos is both fixed and unfixed as rhetorical situations constantly bend and shift and new points of convergence emerge (89).

Institutions may limit and guide these shifts and convergences, especially in regard to long-term ethos formation. In fact, Halloran identifies institutions of learning as one of the most powerful shapers of ethos. He writes, "Of all the ritual acts by which our culture expresses and shapes its *ethos*, schooling is surely one of the most subtle and powerful" (63). The relationships between students and instructors and the academic conceptualization of a lasting student ethos that stems from them are a symptom of higher education. Higher education's influence on the given factors and prior reputations of students cannot be responsibly ignored, as it has a formative influence on ethos during any rhetorical act. It is this impact of higher education on long-term student ethos formation that the remainder of this literature review will examine.

A discussion of student ethos formation in higher education must begin with an examination of those employees who facilitate student identity formation: instructors. In his book *Higher Education in America*, Derek Bok presents instructors as intense competitors fighting to retain student attention in an age where social and electronic distraction have combined with possible declines in student aptitude and interest to create a generation of disengaged students (184). It seems as though students themselves may be key to the formation of negative conceptions about students on the part of instructors, possibly situating themselves within a negative and stereotypical, cultural readymade that has been devised for college students by societal members.

Other views focus upon instructor habits and actions that may generate problems in the academic environment, leading to unflattering views concerning student performance. Samantha Looker writes that "attitudes toward student writing and writers in pedagogical research often limit scholars' abilities to see students' authority, intelligence and potential contributions" (125). These debilitating attitudes are supported by constructs like those that view teaching writing as an attempt to cut through a wilderness created by the "tortured prose" of students (Reynolds, "Composition's" 22). As indicated by Heather Bastian and Lindsey Harkness, the prevalence of these views of student writing in composition literature is exacerbated by a pronounced tendency for researchers to focus on basic writers with less developed writing skills (118). Bruce Maylath also notes that studies have indicated that writing instructors tend to speak in support of author/student authority but end up grading on the basis of reader/teacher authority (32). He writes that the instructors "seem oblivious to the effect our subconscious has on our judgments of students' writing" (35). Such views paint a less-than-generous portrait of the ways instructors treat students and their writing.

Even factors that are not directly influenced by instructor attitudes or beliefs cast them in a role that distances them from students due to locational differences. Reynolds notes that "even newcomers to the academy recognize that the larger or nicer the office, the more senior its occupant, and they don't need a member of a space allocation committee to tell them that" ("Composition's" 31). The recognition that space is connected to prestige and respectability immediately solidifies differences between students and their instructors that cannot easily be overcome. Undergraduate students generally have no offices or assigned workspaces; their instructors do. Students do not

need to be told that this spatial difference is a clear cultural marker of their subordinate role and inferior long-term ethos.

From a more expansive perspective, the tension created by seemingly negative views of students, flawed instruction, and spatial differences leads to potential problems. Jennie Nelson notes that "describing students as newcomers or outsiders who need to be initiated into the academic discourse community has become a commonplace in discussions of writing across the disciplines" (411). Similarly, Beaufort found that college students are usually assigned to social roles dominated by mock participation where true insider status is rare (192). Nancy Sommers draws attention to lists of writing outcomes that present an idealized view of what some instructors believe student writers should achieve (153). Such plans make students seem more like products on an assembly line than competent writers. According to Theresa Lillis, "the idea that students can't write is central to official, public and pedagogic discourse" (21). All of these descriptions present a view of students as outsiders and beginners whose poor writing skills must be improved before they can be inducted into their academic discourse communities as full members. These views of student writing are not irrational; students may not fully share the values, goals, influence, and environments of instructors, and these similarities are the basis for membership in discourse communities (Beaufort 59). Nevertheless, student ethos may be damaged by exclusion from top-tier academic communities.

Pervasive and negative descriptions of both students and their writing instructors have given rise to an equally unenthusiastic view of the bond that exists between students and instructors and might help to give rise to long-term student ethos. Looker describes the existence of a "them/us" dichotomy that presents students as outsiders and instructors as the authoritative holders of knowledge (114). Beaufort notes that some instructors "perform a negative gatekeeping role, keeping the aspiring writer from being 'in the know'" (170). In return, students may focus on prescribed guidelines and assignment sheets while ignoring the actual lessons instructors are trying to instill (Nelson 420). In some cases, students have been shown to be more intent upon discovering what instructors wish to see in student writing so that they may obtain a superior grade than upon the import of their assignments (413). Correspondingly, Beaufort lists pleasing the teacher, earning a satisfactory grade, and accumulating academic credit as the social purposes of writing in school (169). The student/instructor bond as represented through this perspective is one focused on hierarchy and grades, which seems unlikely to foster a sense of mutual respect.

An alternative view of the relationship between instructors and their students is noticeably more positive and suggests a growing sense of cordiality between instructors and students in composition classrooms. Nelson draws attention to the value of recognizing students as insiders who have been writing and reading in school for years so that they can "take more authority for their decisions as writers" (427). The rewards for treating students as respected insiders may be considerable. Nannerl Keohane indicates that "teaching, at its best, is a shared experience in which teacher and student strive together towards a clearer explication" (61). According to Nelson, more joint learning "occurs when the teacher is not the sole authority in the classroom but assumes that students might have something of interest to share, and incorporates students' contributions into class lessons" (426). Beaufort notes that "while the teachers are still the 'experts,' their task has shifted from assigning work and then judging its acceptability, to generating writing with students and coaching the students, throughout all stages of the writing process, toward more expert performances" (194). In this view of student/instructor relationships, both parties benefit from treating one another with respect and using student insights to supplement instructor knowledge and experiences. Such relationships may result in a burgeoning acknowledgment of students as competent academics.

A review of the relevant literature related to student ethos provides a great deal of support for

the conclusion that writing instructors and undergraduate students do not coexist well. Much of the available scholarship suggests that many instructors fail to see student writers as valuable or influential members of their academic communities. Similarly, a great deal of the literature supports the conclusion that students have accepted cultural readymade identities associated with their academic status and are uninterested and distracted novices who have yet to be seen as accomplished writers. These conclusions might lead to the expectation of poor relationships between students and instructors. However, it is plausible that such conclusions might not be reached. Some research suggests that instructors and students can both benefit from closer and more respectful relationships built on mutual academic and professional interests. If such relationships are flourishing, it is possible that student compositions can be viewed as respectable and worthy of serious consideration due to a stronger ethos stemming from improved reputations and participation in academic discourse communities. The rest of this paper will seek to investigate the nature of student ethos through the eyes of their writing instructors and their responses to writing.

Research Methods

To develop data on how writing instructors' reading of student writing might be shaped by students' established ethos, I conducted research that utilized two published papers written by undergraduate students and one published by a writer with a PhD. These papers served as samples for review by a group of current and past college writing instructors. For each of these writing samples, the writer was identified as an undergraduate student on one survey form and a professional writer with a PhD on another. Thus, some writing instructors evaluated each sample with the understanding that it was written by a student while other evaluators viewing the same written work on another survey form believed it was composed by a highly educated professional. The goal of this research was to determine if instructors respond to written works differently depending on whether the writer is perceived to be an undergraduate student or one of their more highly educated colleagues. All research methods were approved as exempt by the relevant Institutional Review Board.

While choosing three published papers for writing instructors to review and evaluate, I strove to select recent examples of writing that investigate highly debated topics in the field of writing and rhetoric. I also intentionally selected papers written by authors with highly variable academic backgrounds. The first paper is called "Propaganda vs. Political Persuasion in Politics: Public Beware" and was written by an undergraduate student named Demirae Dunn and published in the "Spotlight on First-Year Writing" section of *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric*. The second paper named "Social Media and the 'Perpetual Project' of *Ethos* Construction" was written by Robert Holt, an undergraduate writer whose work was not categorized as a "Spotlight on First-Year Writing" selection. His work was also published in *Young Scholars in Writing*. The last paper selected was composed by Tim Laquintano, who is currently a professor at Lafayette College and has a PhD. It is entitled "Sustained Authorship: Digital Writing, Self-Publishing, and the Ebook" and was published in *Written Communication*.

Six separate survey forms were created to facilitate the study. Each of the three papers selected for participants to review was featured in two separate forms or a pair of forms. To make the reviewing process more manageable for potential participants, only the introduction and conclusion of each article were included in all six survey forms, and each article was identified as having been submitted to a peer-reviewed academic journal for publication. In one version of each pair of forms featuring a specific article, the writer was identified as an undergraduate student. In the second version of each pair, the writer was listed as a professor with a PhD. Each pair of forms was completely identical apart from the identification of the writer's academic status.

In addition to the writing sample, each survey form included six separate questions. The first

three questions were designed to investigate each respondent's views of the paper from which he or she had just read an excerpt. The first question on each form asked the respondent to determine how valuable a contribution he or she felt the paper made to its area of inquiry. Possible answers included "no contribution," "minimally valuable contribution," "somewhat valuable contribution," and "very valuable contribution." Each choice was associated with a numerical score not disclosed to the participants. "No contribution" meant a score of zero, "minimally valuable contribution" was equivalent to a score of one, "somewhat valuable contribution" was associated with a score of two, and "very valuable contribution" meant a score of three.

The second question asked each participant to identify his or her potential willingness to cite the paper in his or her own published academic work if its contents pertained directly to the appropriate area of study. Possible answers to this question included "very unlikely," "unlikely," "somewhat likely," and "very likely." Scores ranging from zero to three were once again associated with participant responses with the response of "very unlikely" receiving the lowest score.

The final question asked each participant to identify how willing he or she would be to trust the sourcing and assertions of the relevant paper sample without conducting research to establish its validity further. The possible answers to this question ranged from "very unlikely" to "very likely" in the same sequence as those associated with the second question. The scores attached to each response were also identical. The fourth, fifth, and sixth questions listed on each form collected demographic information including each writing instructor's academic status, age, and gender, respectively.

Writing instructor participants to complete the surveys were gleaned by sending out a participant request by e-mail via the WPA-L mailing list. This list includes approximately 3,500 graduate students, adjunct or non-tenure-track instructors, professors, and administrators who are or have been college or university writing instructors. A total of twenty-five writing instructors participated. Those who indicated an interest in participating and then did not complete a survey or surveys are not included in this number, and neither are those whose responses were not recorded due to conflicts of interest. Of those who participated, four completed one survey and twenty-one completed two surveys for a total of forty-six survey responses. Sixteen participants were professors, comprising the majority, though graduate students and adjunct or non-tenure-track instructors were also significant contributors (see Figure 1). Most respondents were instructors in mid-to-late career (see Figure 2). Female respondents far outnumbered male participants and provided the vast majority of the data collected through the surveys (see Figure 3).
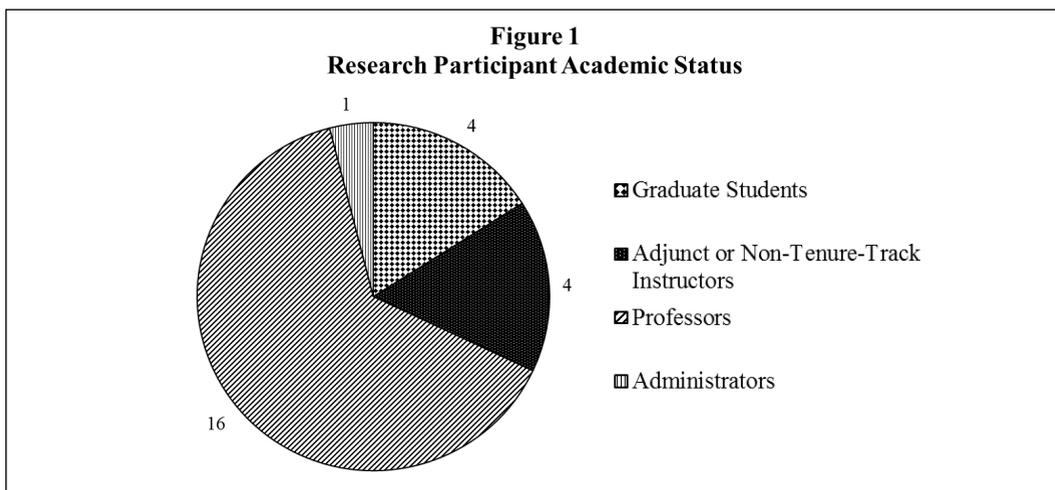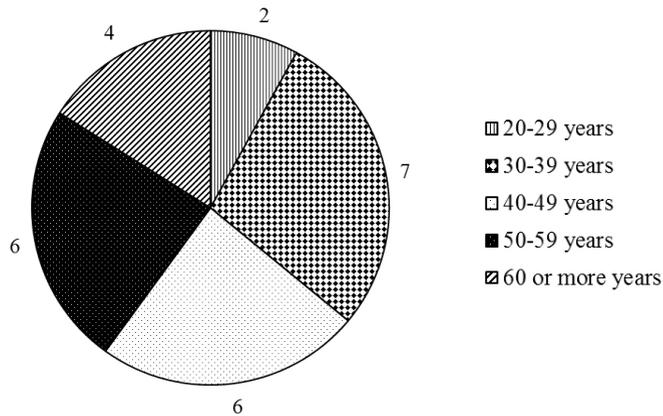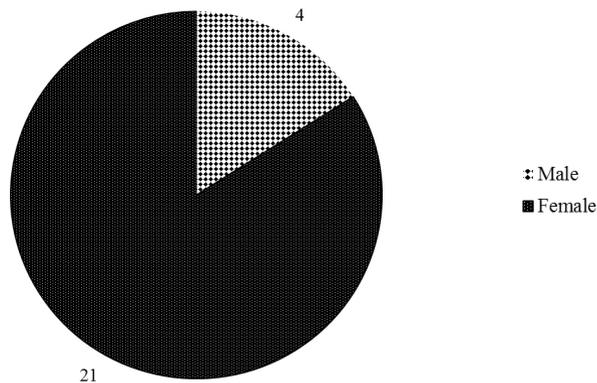

Figure 1
Research Participant Academic Status

Graduate Students

Adjunct or Non-Tenure-Track Instructors

Professors

Administrators

Figure 2
Research Participant Age

- ⊞ 20-29 years
- ⊞ 30-39 years
- ☐ 40-49 years
- ■ 50-59 years
- ⊠ 60 or more years

Figure 3
Research Participant Gender

- ∷ Male
- ■ Female

Those participants who responded to the request for writing instructors willing to complete reader response surveys were sent the link to two survey forms to complete via e-mail, with each survey form featuring excerpts from a single article. Each form included an informed consent statement. No respondent received two survey forms that featured excerpts from the same article for analysis, meaning that after the first article was selected for a reviewer it could be paired with one of four other survey forms containing excerpts from the other two articles with two different survey forms for each article due to differing writer identifications within each pairing. By distributing two forms to each participant but ensuring that no participant received two forms featuring the same article, responses were maximized without contaminating the data by allowing respondents to recognize that the same article was being identified differently in different instances. Most survey assignments were made randomly with the aid of a random numbers table, although a far smaller number of assignments were arranged manually in an attempt to make the number of responses to each survey form more even. Participants were aware that they were involved in a

study analyzing reader response but were not informed that differences in response due to writer identification were being recorded. All forms were submitted electronically.

Research Results

Research results will be discussed by examining responses to each question separately. Results stemming from each pair of survey forms containing excerpts from the same paper will also be analyzed separately. This method of comparison is best suited for examining differences in results based on the stated identity of the writer because it will highlight differences in response to the same question between pairs of forms that were identical apart from writer identification.

Value of Contribution

The first pair of survey forms featured an article from an undergraduate student that was listed as a "Spotlight on First-Year Writing" selection. Instructors were asked to determine the value of the paper's contribution to its field of inquiry. Instructors who were informed that a student had written the piece awarded it an average contribution rating of 1.125. Instructors who were informed that a professor with a PhD had written the paper awarded it an average contribution rating of 1. The difference between these scores is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .6979.

The second pair of survey forms utilized a paper from another undergraduate student, but it was not a "Spotlight on First-Year Writing" selection. Asked to determine the value of the composition's contribution to its field of inquiry, participants who were told the writer was an undergraduate student gave the paper an average contribution rating of 2.1429. Those who were told the writer was a professor with a PhD gave the composition an average contribution rating of 2.3333. The difference between these scores is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .5070.

A paper written by a professor with a PhD served as the sample in the third pair of survey forms. When asked to determine the value of the paper's contribution to its field of inquiry, an average contribution rating of 2.375 was given when the writer was identified as an undergraduate student. Identifying the writer as a professor with a PhD resulted in an average contribution rating of 2. The difference between these averages is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .3348.

Willingness to Cite

Participants were also asked whether they would be willing to cite the article they were evaluating in their own published academic work if its contents pertained directly to their area of study. After reviewing the "Spotlight on First-Year Writing" selection, writing instructors who were told the article was written by a student gave it an average willingness to cite rating of .75. Those who were told that the writing was produced by a professor with a PhD gave it an average willingness to cite rating of 1. The difference between these ratings is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .5792.

Participants completing the second pair of writing surveys utilizing excerpts from the other undergraduate paper as its sample were asked the same question. Those who were told that the writing was produced by an undergraduate student gave the paper an average willingness to cite rating of 1.8571. Participants told that the paper was written by a professor with a PhD gave the composition an average willingness to cite rating of 2.5. Although these results neared significance, analysis still revealed that they also fall short of the necessary statistical difference. This was indicated by a p-value of .2254.

Writing instructors completing the third pair of surveys were asked the same willingness to cite

question about a paper written by a professor with a PhD. Participants who were informed that the paper was written by an undergraduate student gave it an average willingness to cite rating of 2.125. Those who thought the paper was written by a professor with a PhD gave the composition an average willingness to cite rating of 2.1111. The difference between these means is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .9733.

Level of Trust

The third evaluation question asked of participants instructed them to consider how willing they would be to trust the assertions and sourcing of an article without conducting research to establish its validity further. The "Spotlight on First-Year Writing" selection was given a likelihood of trust average rating of .875 when respondents were told the writer was an undergraduate student. Writing instructors who believed that the paper was written by a professor with a PhD gave the article an average likelihood of trust rating of 1. The difference between these average ratings does not reach a statistically significant level, as the p-value is .7733.

The second set of surveys examined the same question utilizing the second student-written paper as its sample. Those who were told the composition was created by an undergraduate student writer gave it an average likelihood of trust rating of 1.7143. Writing instructors who believed the paper belonged to a professor with a PhD gave the paper a likelihood of trust rating of 2. The difference between these two ratings does not reach a statistically significant level, as indicated by a p-value of .6184.

The final set of surveys asked the same likelihood of trust question of writing instructors evaluating a paper written by a professor. Those who believed the paper was written by an undergraduate student gave the paper an average likelihood of trust rating of 1.75. Those instructors who received the survey that correctly identified the writer as a professor with a PhD gave the article an average likelihood of trust rating of 1.778. Once again, the difference between these ratings was found to fall far short of statistical significance with a p-value of .9389.

Discussion of Findings

Within each pair of survey forms exhibiting identical paper excerpts for analysis, questions answered on the basis of reader response might have been expected to mirror the pervasive view of instructors as professionals who possess a negative view of undergraduates more intent on obtaining a decent grade than contributing to their fields of study. The results, however, are not conducive to this view of student/instructor relations. When asked the first question, instructors consistently found samples to be similarly valuable to their field of inquiry regardless of whether the writer was identified as an undergraduate student or a professor with a PhD. The differences in average contribution rating were only noticeable across papers; the composition written by an undergraduate student and identified as a Spotlight on First-Year Writing selection consistently received lower ratings no matter how the writer was identified in the survey forms. It seems plausible that reviewers were responding only to the perceived quality of each writing sample, indicating that student ethos did not have a negative impact on reader response.

The same pattern revealed itself in regard to the second content question asking respondents if they would be willing to cite the relevant paper in their own academic work if its contents pertained directly to their area of study. No significant variance emerged in spite of the two different writer identities provided. Once again, the first writing sample was continuously given lower ratings than the second sample from an undergraduate writer or the sample from the professor with a PhD. Instructors seemed to make judgments about a paper's ability to provide reputable support within their own work based on their perception of each paper's quality instead of the identity of its writer. Student ethos once again failed to have a negative impact on reader response.

The third content question, which investigated whether participants would be willing to trust the assertions and citing of an article without conducting research to establish its validity further, revealed a third occurrence of the same pattern. Despite changes in perceived writer identities, no differences in results were revealed in regard to responses to the writing sample pairs. Once again, the most notable differences were between responses to the first undergraduate sample and the second and third writing samples. The implications of such a response seem to be that assertions and sourcing are more likely to be trusted if they appear in the context of a paper that instructors believe is more valuable. As in the first two content questions, student ethos did not condemn any of the three paper samples to significantly lesser ratings.

Two explanations seem most likely for the lack of differentiation between responses to writing believed to have come from students and writing believed to have come from a professor with a PhD. The first explanation is that certain students have established a long-term ethos that their writing instructors find respectable. Each writing sample was identified as a submittal to a peer-reviewed academic journal, and this may have made the writer appear as an initiated insider in his or her field regardless of academic status identification. These writers would have become associated with the same metaphorical space: that of active, research-based scholarship. Undergraduate students seeking to have their work published are also less likely to be viewed as lazy or uninterested; their early and voluntary participation in research and publishing clearly indicates an unusually high level of academic engagement and desire to influence their academic discourse community or communities. In other words, these students would be less likely to be viewed through the lens of stereotypes associated with the readymade student identity. Such students would already have revealed themselves as members of an academic discourse community who are unwilling to simply fulfill educational requirements, adopting an alternative form of student ethos that identified them as dedicated achievers even before their compositions were evaluated.

Students revealed to have reached such a level of engagement in the academic discourse community would be far more likely to be viewed as individuals who have adopted the cultural readymades associated with scholars and researchers. As Keohane and Nelson advocate, a level of learning and instruction may have been perceived that transcended the classic linear model of students as receptacles in need of filling by instructors who possess the far superior knowledge. Students who are participating in the academic community by seeking to publish their work would be superb exemplars of the new model of teaching that suggests that students and instructors learn together and can influence one another. In this variety of academic community, instructors are more than authoritative purveyors of knowledge holding the power of the grade above students who struggle to meet expectations. Students and instructors are partners in learning who occupy the same figurative academic space and share academic associations as they conduct research and seek to expand their knowledge together, giving students the opportunity to dissociate with the student identity and its stereotypes in favor of identities with more favorable given factors. Discourse community knowledge is shared; Beaufort notes that this type of connection is indicative of shared goals and values (173). Differences in physical office space are overcome by all of these factors that create a cohesive bond between active students and their instructors. The result could be a very strong long-term student ethos that explains the lack of significant differences between perceptions of certain students and professors as academic writers.

Though this view of the relationship between instructors and some of their students may be heartening, it does not indicate that long-term student ethos as a whole has become more positive. Some students are still more interested in satisfying the expectations of their instructors to obtain a good grade than they are in contributing to the academic community (Nelson 413). The ethos of a few students who have proven themselves willing to submit their work to academic peer-reviewed journals is not necessarily transmitted to other students who are not perceived to have

reached the same level of academic engagement. Less engaged students may still be laboring under the burden of the student readymade identity and all its associated stereotypes. They may also be seen as inferior due to a difference in location in the academic environment; their work may not have been distributed throughout the wider discourse community, indicating a lack of presence in important academic spaces like peer-reviewed journals. All of these factors may combine to relegate many students to the boundaries of the discourse communities in which they are hoping to gain membership. The long-term ethos of disengaged students may be entirely different from the perspective of their instructors. Thus, various groups of undergraduate students may exist with the academic perceptions of each group remaining vastly different based on the study habits and levels of engagement that characterize each one, allowing some groups to gain greater acceptance within the academic community than others.

Another plausible explanation for the lack in differentiation in reader response is that writer identity simply does not matter or matters very little and is ignored. In this view, all that matters to writing instructors is the quality of the product as influenced by the ethos presented through the rhetorical act. The content and voice of the text overwhelms any outside influences and remains as the sole premise upon which evaluations are based. Each time a rhetorical actor takes the stage, he or she constructs a new identity or dons a readymade identity with which he or she is familiar. This identity dissolves at the end of every rhetorical act and then reforms at the initiation of another. If this view is accurate, participants may have quickly forgotten the information identifying the academic status of the writer and based their responses on the content alone. This theory postulates that the prior reputation and given factors influencing student ethos, good or bad, are irrelevant. Any effect they may have is quickly overwhelmed by the writing and the identity construction that occurs within it.

If pre-existing student ethos does not matter, the construction of ethos in each individual rhetorical act is viewed as the only true indicator of character that influences audiences. Perhaps the character of the writer in the text is what leads to attributions of value, a willingness to cite a source, or a propensity to trust the assertions and citations of a paper. If this is the case, it would be necessary to devise a different form of study to determine if a difference exists between the appeals commonly made by students and those commonly made by professors. Different styles common to each group could then be compared to determine if significant differences in reader response result.

Of the two available explanations, the possibility that seems more likely is that certain students have crafted reputations and given factors that result in a strong, long-term academic ethos that their instructors find respectable. It seems unlikely that instructors accustomed to grading and providing feedback on undergraduate writing would simply ignore the academic status of writers. Instead, they would be accustomed to more actively critiquing student work than the work of their colleagues. Thus, the indication that some students can form a respectable pre-existing ethos that does not negatively impact impressions of their work suggests that writers are not entirely bound to the ethos common to their groups or the readymade identities and stereotypes commonly used to understand and describe them. Cultural groups are much more complex than such simple categorizations suggest; as Reynolds indicates, "a social group is not necessarily made up of like-minded individuals who gather in harmony" ("Ethos as Location" 329). Writers can create their own reputations and ethos through efforts, actions, and habits of mind. The effort and action required to extricate oneself from the limitations which may be imposed by a large part of a social group to cultivate a new reputation and identity might be intimidating and difficult. The desire and ability to be different and operate in a way uncommon to one's social group would be necessary. Nevertheless, the findings of the research examined in this study suggest that discourse communities in the field of writing are not as bound to credentials as they may seem. They may accept less

experienced members if they embrace the practices, goals, and values of the academic community.

Although this study makes a concerted effort to determine the nature of student ethos as viewed by their writing instructors, a number of factors may have influenced the findings in some ways that could limit their usefulness. One of the most notable aspects of the survey utilized for this research was the relatively low number of respondents. The fact that responses were split between six separate survey forms also had a notable effect. A much larger random sample size and the entirely random assignment system that it would facilitate could result in more tenable results. Financial incentives for participants could lead to greater instructor participation and more representative samples.

A second problem that may have impacted the results of this study is the possibility that some participants failed to notice the writer identification portion of the survey forms. Though writer identities were listed at the top of the forms along with other instructions, they were not displayed separately in order to prevent respondents from consciously or subconsciously recognizing the specific import of the study and altering their answers accordingly. A failure to take notice of the writer identification provided on each form could have had an effect on the responses of participants.

Another methodological issue is that participants were only asked to read the introduction and conclusion of each article. The reasoning behind this limitation was to encourage participation from potential respondents who would be more likely to abstain from becoming involved if they were asked to read dozens of pages of text instead of a strictly limited amount, but it also limited the information participants had at their disposal. Similarly, participants were only asked to select responses from a number of prearranged answers to make data easier to interpret and to prevent participants from being deterred from responding by distributing more time consuming surveys. This format may not have provided an adequate venue for any participants who might have wished to write lengthy responses to the texts that would have provided more insight into the reasoning influencing instructor text evaluations.

Conclusion

The study of instructor response to student writing presented in this paper was specifically designed to delve into an area of writing studies rarely subjected to scrutiny. A vast majority of the current research into student ethos in the field of writing involves teaching strategies and observations of student performance; a lesser amount seeks to interpret the ways that instructors view written work. The study in this paper seeks to determine if instructors respond to written work differently depending on whether they believe the writer is an undergraduate student or one of their more academically accredited colleagues. As far as I have been able to discover, this approach is entirely unique. It appears the ethos of the undergraduate student writer has never been directly compared to the ethos of the professor in a way that allows for the collection of data. This comparison directly analyzes the standing students may possess in their chosen fields, as it seeks to determine whether undergraduate students have the hope of serious academic achievement outside of the classroom. The results of this study suggest that they may. However, a great deal of research into student ethos in the academic environment is still needed before any conclusions are reached. As well as providing an initial means for understanding instructor views of student ethos, this study provides a methodology that may be integrated into further research attempts.

Future studies seeking to investigate student ethos in the academic community should seek to reach a broader range of potential participants. They should also collect responses in a variety of different formats ranging from approaches that offer limited answers conducive to mathematical analysis and representation to long answers that allow analysts to search for details that expound upon the state of student ethos in academic discourse communities. Funding will be vital to all

approaches in order to encourage response for studies designed to investigate how the student label affects the academic perception of so many members of the college and university writing community. If findings continue to suggest that student ethos does not necessarily have a significantly negative effect on student-produced writing, they may help to mitigate common perceptions of students as outsiders and could encourage more student involvement in the academic community. If future findings are contrary to the results expounded in this paper, they could serve as a catalyst for changes that promote opportunities for students to become respected members of their discourse communities. Either way, such findings have the potential to positively influence the participation of undergraduate students in their academies of higher learning.

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