

Nadeau, Jean-Paul, and Howard Tinberg. *The Community College Writer: Exceeding Expectations*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2010.

Reviewed by Sarah E. Elsworth

Community colleges are the often-overlooked siblings of four-year universities. Students choose community college for a variety of reasons and sometimes come to those schools with educational gaps and deficiencies that can make college-level writing appear to be an insurmountable challenge. In *The Community College Writer: Exceeding Expectations*, Jean-Paul Nadeau and Howard Tinberg take on the task of examining first-year composition courses at four community colleges. Their research was conducted with two populations. First, they studied the attitudes and pedagogical practices of community college instructors from a variety of disciplines. Second, they investigated the writing habits and attitudes of community college students. The work and findings of Nadeau and Tinberg are especially timely given the current cutbacks in state budgets and subsequent financial pressures plaguing community colleges.

An essential feature of this study is that the researchers conducted interviews not only with English faculty but with instructors from a range of disciplines. As former directors of community college writing centers, Nadeau and Tinberg recognize that although the majority of students who visit their writing centers are students enrolled in English classes, a sizable number of students are from classes in other disciplines, including history and sociology. In fact, as the authors remind us, writing is an essential component of community-college classes across the board since these colleges prepare students both for transfer to four-year universities and/or to enter the workforce. Nadeau and Tinberg found that instructors from many disciplines are requiring writing assignments relevant to students' future careers. Instructors want students to reach beyond basic writing skills. Despite the fact that many instructors admit to using a lecture

format for instruction, they also report offering their students feedback and expecting them to prepare multiple drafts of their writing assignments. These instructors are not writing teachers, yet they have a desire to guide their students to the best possible writing outcome.

After surveying community college faculty, Nadeau and Tinberg canvassed a large number of students from four different community colleges (the actual number isn't disclosed, but they surveyed 337 students in their own college in addition to surveys conducted on three other campuses). They asked questions about the students' backgrounds and their decision to attend a community college. Survey data confirmed the researchers' sense that most community college students are non-traditional students with many responsibilities outside of school. When asking about writing habits, Nadeau and Tinberg found that students and faculty have different views about the importance of writing; or rather, instructors make incorrect assumptions about students' understanding of the importance of writing assignments. Many faculty believe that students actively avoid courses that involve writing, but according to student surveys, less than 10% of students actually do so. A substantial number of students admit that they welcome the challenge of difficult writing assignments (60). Students were also asked about whether and to what degree high school prepared them for writing at a college level. Most students felt that high school prepared them for college on a basic skill level, but they were unprepared for the amount of writing that would be expected from them.

Nadeau and Tinberg then narrowed their focus to a cohort of sixteen students, following them throughout their first semester of college and collecting as many writing samples as possible for analysis. As a result, *The Community College Writer* provides an in-depth profile of these participants—of their writing processes, habits and skills—and insights into the obstacles, challenges, and triumphs student writers face during their first semester of college.

The Community College Writer has a number of strengths. Many academic texts are too theoretical, seemingly disconnected from the real world. This study is strongly rooted in real students and focuses on a frequently under-represented population. The authors begin the book by sharing their own stories and continue throughout their discussion to make readers feel as if they are having a professional conversation with colleagues. They also include individual reflections on what they personally learned from their research.

Another strength of Nadeau and Tinberg's book is that the text provides practical suggestions for college instructors, suggestions such as "Spell out criteria for success" and "Develop incremental stages for complex writing tasks" (117). College-level instructors, who often have expertise in their field but do not have extensive training in educational practices, may not be aware of these kinds of methods (Bureau of Labor Statistics). Readers of this text will appreciate the useful and valuable implications of Nadeau and Tinberg's findings.

However, there are two noticeable limitations in *The Community College Writer*. One limitation is an issue of dwindling sample size—a common problem when working with a population whose "free time" is at such a premium. As previously stated, Nadeau and Tinberg surveyed several hundred students and then focused on a smaller cohort (their target number isn't clear). The smaller number proved difficult to assemble. The researchers sent out numerous letters, emails, and invitations; they made phone calls and even tried to entice potential participants with gas cards and free meals. Unfortunately, Nadeau and Tinberg found that many of these students were simply too busy with jobs, family, and other responsibilities to participate fully in the study. Despite their efforts, the researchers were only able to follow sixteen college students, some of whom did not meet their original criteria of purely first-year, first-semester, new college students who were not enrolled in any of Nadeau and Tinberg's own classes. Of those sixteen students, only four attended a final meeting to discuss the previous semester. Nadeau and Tinberg

acknowledged they were hoping for a larger sample size but that it simply was not possible with their limited resources and time frame.

The other limitation, admitted by Nadeau and Tinberg themselves, concerns the students who volunteered for their study. In an ideal world, participants would be varied in terms of ability and confidence levels. But in this case, the students who stepped forward to discuss their writing habits and allow researchers to track them during their first semester in college tended to be more confident in their writing abilities. The cohort of sixteen students were “good students,” meaning that they were aware of their own learning habits and open to discussing their academic challenges. Nadeau and Tinberg were unable to incorporate data from students who perform closer to the bottom half of their classes, and may have failed to provide important data that would help a school’s lower performers.

Although *The Community College Writer* focuses on community college faculty and students, it is a text that will prove useful to virtually all educators, regardless of the ages and academic levels of their students. The researchers’ personal stories and conclusions are applicable to instructors who incorporate writing into their curriculum. The style in which Nadeau and Tinberg write is both accessible and informative, making *The Community College Writer* a helpful text for all community-college instructors.

Work Cited

Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. “Teachers Postsecondary.” Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2010-11 Edition. U.S. Department of Labor, 2009. Web. October 27, 2011.