

ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES AND IMPROVEMENT FACTORS OF UNDERGRADUATE COLLEGE STUDENTS ENROLLED IN A RETENTION PROGRAM**Alicia J. Carthell***Murray State University
acarthell@murraystate.edu***Abstract**

As predominantly white institutions (PWIs) work to support and retain students of color (SOC) in parity with White students, it is important to acknowledge the students' views about academic writing. This study focuses on SOC enrolled in a retention program at a PWI and explores existing survey data about academic writing challenges and improvement factors. Based on the findings, this study offers two recommendations to the program that could enrich the current success and retention initiatives. While this study focuses on the students in the program only, the broader relevancy is that retention programs designed to support SOC at PWIs should tend to the students' academic writing perspectives since academic writing is an essential component of student success and retention.

Keywords: Academic writing challenges, students of color, retention, student success

Introduction

Howard and Sharpe (2019) said that student retention is an effort of consequence for all higher education institutions. For decades, student retention has been at the forefront of the post-secondary shared lexicon and has been studied by renowned retention scholar Vincent Tinto (1990, 2007, 2012) and others (e.g., Aljohani, 2016; Tight, 2020; McDaniel et al., 2022; Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2023). It is no secret that students of color (SOC), Black students in particular, do not persist and are not retained at the rate of their White counterparts at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), and research about the retention of Black college students and other SOC from various vantage points is prevalent (e.g., Brown et al., 2024; Bowman & Denson, 2022; Glenn, 2019; Green, 2023; Jones, 2023; Kelly et al., 2021; Oseguera et al., 2019). McClain and Perry (2017) said PWIs are working to retain and graduate students and have made strides to counter past transgressions that contributed to SOC departure. Handy (2024) said while more Black

students are attending college than in the 1990s, retention to graduation continues to be a challenge. Still, Dougé (2020) pointed out that the 4-year graduation rate between Black and White students is still a challenge and stressed that the success of Black students is influenced by "...an environment that promotes positive learning, cross-racial interactions, and educational outcomes" (p. 9). Similar to Dougé, Patterson Silver Wolf et al. (2021) claimed that departure of SOC is tied to social belonging and that a sense of belonging is linked to an assortment of positive educational and wellness outcomes. Brown et al. (2024) agreed and wrote that universities should make it top priority to retain students from diverse backgrounds and ensure their academic success and mental wellbeing. As universities strive to retain SOC at PWIs, it is imperative that we continually engage and support them to degree attainment.

Focus of Study

This study looks specifically at academic writing and improvement supports identified by the SOC enrolled in a retention program at a PWI. As PWIs continually work to support and retain SOC, it is worthwhile to learn what students say about their academic challenges. One critical area of academic success and retention is academic writing. Writing is an essential part of the college learning landscape irrespective of major, and students' academic writing views provide insight into their outlooks and experiences that can help retention programs enhance their existing initiatives or cultivate new ones. This paper does not seek to discount the plethora of other elements impacting SOC departure (e.g., finances, lack of a sense of belonging, discrimination, isolation, etc.); it simply focuses on academic writing, a vital component of student success and retention. To support SOC at PWIs, it is essential to examine all academic and non-academic factors that influence their persistence and success. This study is focused on academic writing and is situated within the framework that academic writing is interlaced with success and retention.

Literature on Academic Writing

Scholars have interlinked academic writing, student success, and retention. According to Alawaji (2020), writing is thought to be one of the most essential academic skills in universities. Fang (2021) agreed and said that academic writing is vital to disciplinary learning and academic success. Badenhorst (2011) highlighted writing's impact on learning and retention and said while many universities have responded to academic writing needs in the form of writing centers, there still needs to be a widened commitment to cultivating student writing. Some students find academic writing challenging in their first-year writing courses and in their major curriculum. Campbell (2019) said that academic writing is one of the most challenging tasks that students encounter in college, and Elliott et al. (2019) proposed that "...effective academic writing support should be informed by knowledge and understanding of the aspects of undergraduate writing that students identify as the most challenging" (p. 6).

Academic Writing Challenges

Via a quantitative study, Ruppó (2022) explored the relationship between academic writing and student retention among undergraduate college students and found that writing issues might play a significant role in student departure or contemplation of departure. Ruppó said many retention models do not list academic writing as a separate element of student retention, and argued that studies such as the one they conducted illuminate the need for more studies about academic writing challenges and departure. Similarly, Fernsten and Reda (2011) said that the process of academic writing encompasses struggle and conflict for many students and writing issues exist not only in composition classrooms but also in content-area classes where issues are possibly even more challenging. The authors believed that educators can benefit from learning about students' writing beliefs, which can help educators create responsive and responsible pedagogic strategies that support struggling writers.

Villarreal and García (2016) explored the success and persistence of Black and Latino male community college students in first-year basic and transfer-level writing courses. As a challenge, "feeling overwhelmed" emerged as a theme when the researchers examined why the students dropped out of their English classes. Looking specifically at

attribution and referencing convention requirements in academic writing, Hamilton (2016) said that college students can seem overwhelmed and disoriented by the expectations placed on them as early academic writers, and for many students, the task of writing may seem daunting. Burnell et al. (n.d.) indicated that students can become overwhelmed when writing tasks seem vast and due dates are approaching; these and other conditions contribute to them feeling overwhelmed.

Distraction also poses a challenge for students. Aivaz and Teodorescu (2022) said that college students today live in a complex world filled with distractions such as social media, and such distractions might prevent them from meeting their scholastic objectives. Offering a distraction solution, Lang (as cited in Lederman, 2020) proposed that capturing students' attention rather than focusing on ending their distraction is the optimal strategy. Utemuratova (2023) and others noted common writing challenges such as structure, grammar, organization, and plagiarism, and insisted that instructors need to identify where students struggle most and offer support to address those challenges.

Academic Writing Support

For help, students use many online sources including the AI-powered Grammarly. As a writing support, Faisal (2023) looked at students' perception of Grammarly's utility for academic writing and found that most of the students had positive perceptions of Grammarly because of its practicality and accessibility. Another factor that helped students overcome academic writing challenges is interest in the topic. Kahu et al. (2017) studied student interest, which they contended is connected to learning and persistence. They found that student interest influenced the teaching environment, which led to better learning and grades. The authors emphasized the significance of interest and its impact on students' academic engagement and subsequent learning and success. With academic writing support strategies in mind, The University of Wisconsin (2023) wrote that writing is an important tool for learning a discipline, and faculty are responsible for helping students improve their writing and guiding them through the writing process. Walvoord (2014) agreed and noted that research about writing shows that among many factors for improvement, students need help, feedback, and opportunities to revise, and they need a safe, helpful, and rigorous environment with instructors who believe in their capacity to

improve their writing. With a focus on writing centers, Savarese (2020) believed that writing centers play a unique role within the academic environment as the centers can help advance academic outcomes, foster student confidence, and offer individualized instruction. Savarese encouraged researchers and other stakeholders to solicit students' thoughts about writing centers and gather data about student usage.

The foregoing researchers and many others have made a strong connection between academic writing, student success, and retention. While we're still on a journey of discovering the role of academic writing and its impact on SOC retention, we can and should gauge the students' writing challenges and improvement supports and put in place measures to help them succeed and earn their degree.

Study Contribution

This study is unique because it focuses on academic writing from the vantage point of SOCs enrolled in a retention program at a PWI. It builds on the discussion and research about the success and retention of these students. While SOCs face a plethora of challenges at PWIs, academic writing is a significant factor within the larger framework of challenges.

Method and Data Source

Approved by the university's Institutional Review Board, this study relied upon existing quantitative and qualitative survey data. Secondary analysis of existing data is well-researched (see Chatfield, 2020; Cheng & Phillips, 2014; Heaton, 2008; Johnston, 2014; Ruggiano & Perry, 2019; Sherif, 2018; Tarrant, 2017; Tate & Happ, 2018; Wickham, 2019). The data stems from a retention program's 2023-2024 mid-semester survey and mid-semester follow-up survey created by a committee of students, faculty, and staff to gain insight into the progress, needs, challenges, and concerns of students enrolled in the program. For validity, students enrolled in the program could access the surveys only by using their university-assigned email, student ID number, and user ID credentials for authentication. With a focus on academic writing, this study observed answers to quantitative academic writing questions in the mid-semester survey (available to the students in fall and spring semesters) that asked students to select academic writing challenges and factors for improving their writing. This study also observed answers to the corresponding qualitative academic writing questions in the mid-semester follow-up

survey (made available to students after the mid-semester spring survey), where students were given the opportunity to clarify their mid-semester survey responses.

The Retention Program

The program, open to all undergraduate students, is designed to address the needs of SOC by supporting and encouraging academic success, building leadership skills, creating a sense of belonging through various initiatives and programmatic efforts, and seeing them on to graduation. The program offers academic and leadership workshops, leadership opportunities, a structured study program, tutoring, mentoring, peer support, resource fairs, and faculty interaction. The program holds various types of programs and events that celebrate world cultures.

The University

This study took place at a regional, comprehensive, state-supported PWI in the United States with a 77% retention rate and approximately 9800 enrolled students. The student body comprises 77% White, Non-Hispanic, 6% Black, Non-Hispanic, 6% Nonresident Alien, 3% Multiracial, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 4% unknown students. Black students have a 43% retention-to-graduation rate compared to 60% of White students.

Population, Sample, and Program Enrollment

The population included undergraduate college students (classified as freshmen/first-year, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) pursuing bachelor's degrees at the university, and the sample consisted of the 142 students enrolled in the program. For the semesters under review, 127 students (89.4%) completed the mid-semester survey in fall, 111 students (78.1%) completed it in spring, and 60 students (42.2%) completed the mid-semester follow-up survey. Figure 1 shows the racial/ethnic composition of the 142 students enrolled in the program, and Figure 2 shows the classification percentages of enrolled students.

Figure 1.

Racial/Ethnic Identity of Students Enrolled in Program: N = 142

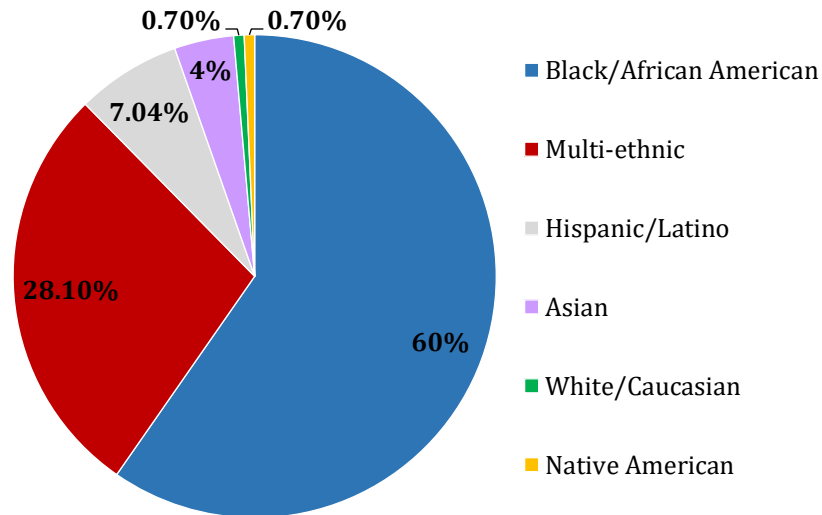


Figure 1 illustrates that, during the fall and spring semesters, Black/African American students made up the majority of students (60%) enrolled in the program, followed by Multi-ethnic (28.1%), Hispanic/Latino (7.04%), Asian (4%), White/Caucasian (0.7%), and Native American (0.7%) students.

Figure 2.

Classification Percentages of Students Enrolled in Program: N = 142

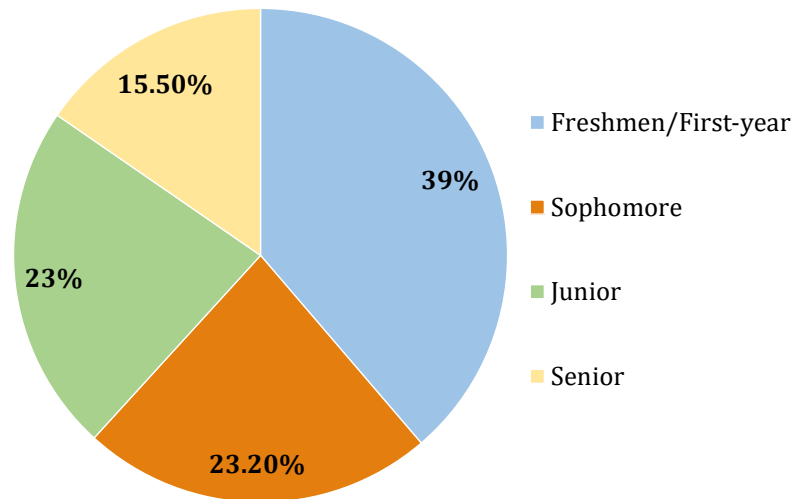


Figure 2 shows that, during the fall and spring semesters, freshmen/first-year students made up the majority of students (39%) enrolled in the program, followed by sophomores (23.2%), juniors (23%), and seniors (15.5%) students.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to observe the academic writing responses from a retention program's mid-semester survey and mid-semester follow-up survey. For brevity, this study focused on the students' top three writing challenges and top three improvement factors. The following research questions guided this study:

- **RQ1:** What were the top three academic writing challenges that students selected across classifications in the mid-semester survey?
- **RQ2:** What were the top three academic writing improvement factors that students selected across classifications in the mid-semester survey?
- **RQ3:** Concerning the top three academic writing challenges and improvement factors, what insight did the students provide in the mid-semester follow-up survey?

Analysis of Quantitative Data

This study comprised the observational quantitative method of descriptive research and employed secondary analysis of extant quantitative data to address RQ1 and RQ2. Data was analyzed using R Statistical software version 3.0.2 (2013-09-25). A Pearson's chi-square test of homogeneity (Turhan, 2020) was applied to check for homogeneousness and to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference in the distribution of the writing challenges and improvement factors selected across classifications (i.e., freshmen/first-year, sophomores, juniors, and seniors).

Analysis of Qualitative Data

I applied a research-driven, deductive approach (Kiger & Varpio, 2020) to the qualitative data in the mid-semester follow-up survey, and data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis to address RQ3. Content analysis is used to determine themes and concepts in qualitative text (Columbia University, 2022). Looking only at the responses corresponding to the top three academic writing challenges and improvement factors, I read through the qualitative data multiple times (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to become familiar with the content (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Washington State University, 2020), and to make observational notes about the students' discussions. After multiple readings, I organized the data into segments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) using codes based on recurring words and phrases that represented each segment. I examined the codes to detect patterns and then identified recurrent themes (Lochmiller, 2021; Vaismoradi et al., 2016; Varpio et al., 2017). Once I identified key themes in the students' responses, I revisited the data to ensure the themes represented it accurately.

Findings and Discussion

The section contains findings and discussion, and briefly connects the findings to literature about academic writing challenges and improvement factors.

Mid-Semester Survey Findings: Top Three Academic Writing Challenges

The results of the chi-square test of homogeneity show that the difference in the distribution of writing challenges across classifications was not statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 27.1419$, $df = 30$, $p\text{-value} = 0.6158$; thus, the proportion of students' academic writing selections was fundamentally the same across classifications. This section answers RQ1:

What were the top three academic writing challenges that students selected across classifications in the mid-semester survey? Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the most and least selected academic writing challenges and percentages for both semesters.

Figure 3.

Academic Writing Challenges Selection Percentages: Fall Semester

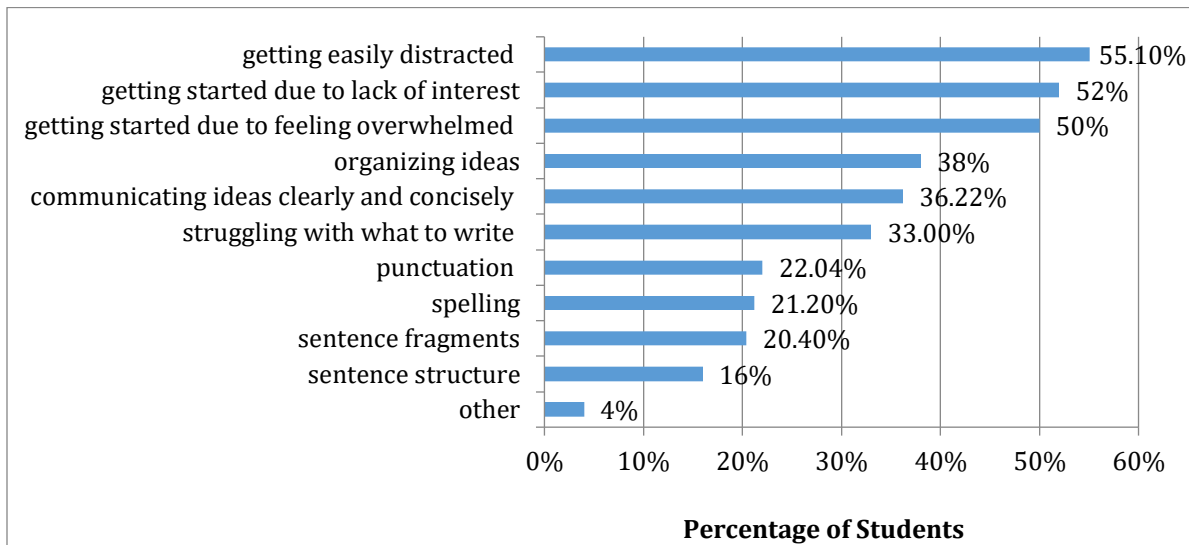
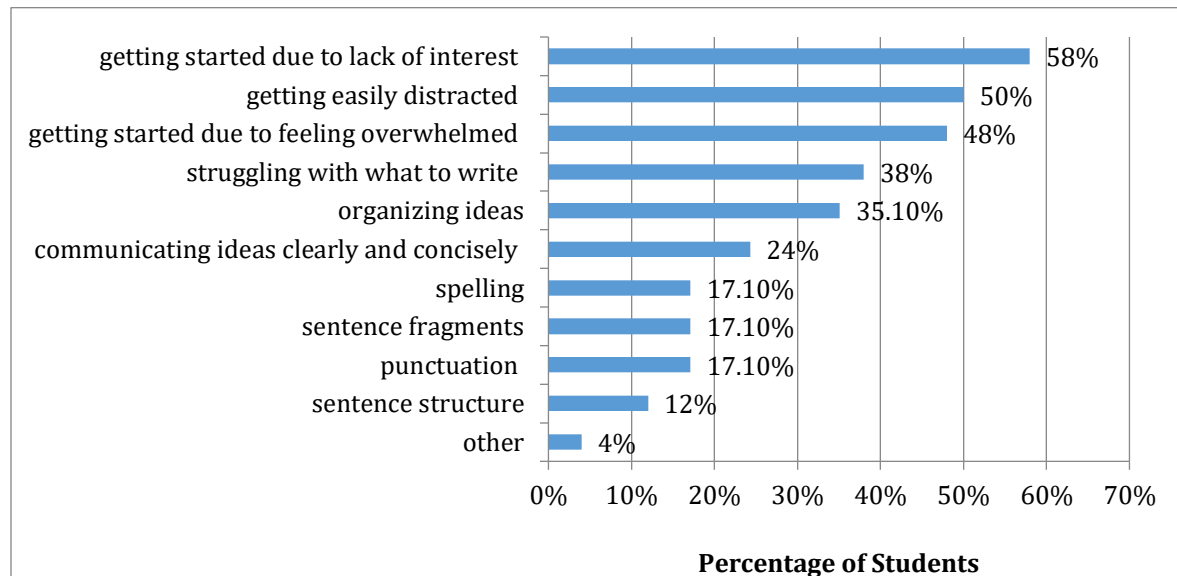
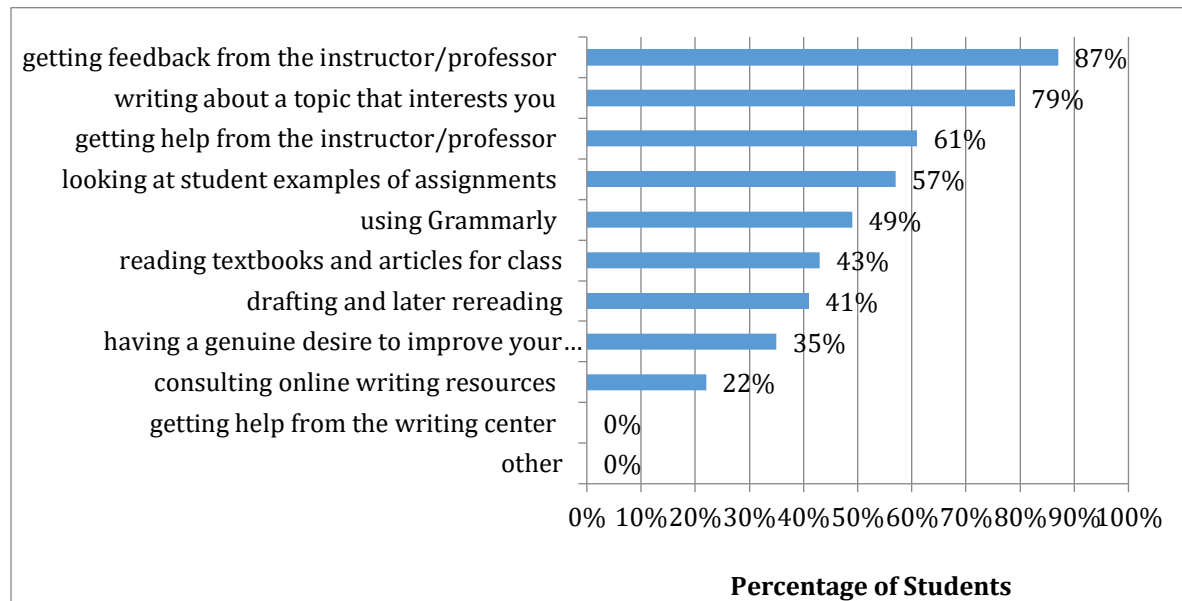
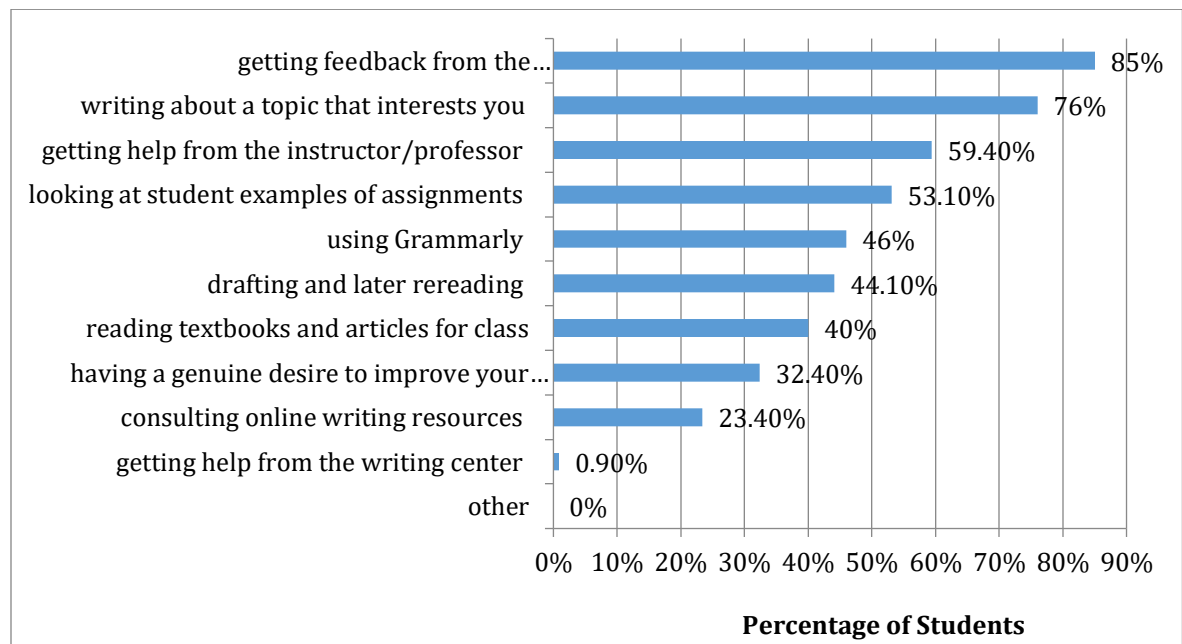


Figure 4.*Academic Writing Challenges Selection Percentages: Spring Semester*

As displayed in Figures 3 and 4, *Getting easily distracted*, *Getting started due to lack of interest*, and *Getting started due to feeling overwhelmed* were the top three academic writing challenges that students selected during both semesters.

Mid-Semester Survey Findings: Top Three Academic Writing Improvement Factors

The results of the chi-square test of homogeneity show that the difference in the distribution of writing improvement factors across classifications was not statistically significant, $X^2 = 27.7214$, $df = 27$, $p\text{-value} = 0.4254$; thus, the proportion of students' academic writing selections was fundamentally the same across classifications. This section answers RQ2: What were the top three academic writing improvement factors that students selected across classifications in the mid-semester survey? Figures 5 and 6 display the most and least selected academic writing improvement factors and percentages for both semesters.

Figure 5.*Academic Writing Improvement Factors Selection Percentages: Fall Semester***Figure 6.***Academic Writing Improvement Factors Selection Percentages: Spring Semester*

As displayed in Figures 5 and 6, *Getting feedback from the instructor/professor*, *Writing about a topic that interests you*, and *Getting help from the instructor/professor* were the top

three academic writing improvement factors that the students selected during both semesters.

The Mid-Semester Follow-up Survey Findings

This section presents findings from the mid-semester follow-up survey where students had the opportunity to provide explanations for their academic writing challenges and improvement factors selections in the mid-semester survey. To coincide with the previous findings, this section presents the findings from the top three academic writing challenges and top three writing improvement factors that students selected; it answers RQ3: Concerning the top three academic writing challenges and improvement factors, what insight did the students provide in the mid-semester follow-up survey? Table 1 displays the top three academic writing challenges from the mid-semester survey and the themes constructed from the mid-semester follow-up survey responses.

Table 1.

Top Three Writing Challenges and Themes

Top Three Academic Writing Challenges	Themes
Getting easily distracted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital distraction
Getting started due to lack of interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No freedom to choose topics • Assignment irrelevancy
Getting started due to feeling overwhelmed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple assignments to complete

As listed in Table 1, digital distraction (e.g., phones and laptops) was the central theme under *Getting easily distracted*. No freedom to choose topics and assignment irrelevancy were the two themes formed under *Getting started due to lack of interest*. Having multiple assignments to complete across classes was the overarching theme under *Getting started due to feeling overwhelmed*.

Academic Writing Challenge: Getting Easily Distracted

Theme: Digital Distraction

Getting easily distracted was a top-selected academic writing challenge as shown in Figures 3 and 4. Under this challenge, digital distraction (e.g., phones and laptops) was the overarching theme, as presented in Table 1. In their explanations, students noted that text messages, social media notifications and other notifications from their devices were constant distractions that pulled them from their academics. Students are coming to college more distracted than ever, and distraction is a core problem that educators grapple with. Because of this, researchers have studied distraction among students (see Dietz & Henrich, 2014; Emerick et al., 2019; Flanigan et al., 2023; Junco & Cotten, 2011; Wang et al., 2022). Aaron and Lipston (2018) believed that while digital devices offer a quick source for obtaining academic information, they can also serve as a distraction for many students. The authors said that when students interact with their devices, their cognitive resources diminish. In sample excerpts, students stated:

“Things that cause me to get easily distracted from the writing I must do for my classes are notifications on my phone.” (sophomore student)

“Just having a phone and social media that can constantly entertain you at your side. Especially when the work isn’t super captivating or easy to complete.” (junior student)

“Technology; for example notifications on phone or laptop.” (senior student)

Distraction among college students is prevalent, and both scholars and practitioners have sought ways to counter student distraction. Scholars have recommended ways to engage students and garner their attention through lessons, topics, and activities relevant and interesting to them.

Academic Writing Challenge: Getting Started Due to Lack of Interest

Themes: No Freedom to Choose Topic and Assignment Irrelevancy

Getting started due to lack of interest was a top-selected academic writing challenge as shown in Figures 3 and 4. Under this challenge, two themes emerged: 1) assignment irrelevancy and 2) no freedom to choose topics, as presented in Table 1. In their explanations, students wrote that not having the freedom to choose topics negatively

affected their interest in the assignment. Students also wrote that they lost interest when assignments seemed irrelevant. Scholars have illuminated the role interest plays in writing and overall academic success (see Borzea & Goodboy, 2016; Flowerday & Shell, 2015; Mazer, 2013; O’Keefe et al., 2017; Thomas, 2012). Linvill (2014) noted that because of the impact of student interest on academic success and retention, researchers should continually strive to comprehend the traits and behaviors that influence interest and then successfully nurture those traits. Dabrowski and Marshall (2018) maintained that in order for students to achieve and thrive, they must be interested and invested in their learning. Two of the authors’ central research points align with the themes constructed from the responses. For example, regarding choice, the authors indicated that offering students one meaningful choice per assignment underpins autonomy and gives them opportunities to be in control of their lives, which they insisted is key to academic success and emotional adjustment. Further, the authors noted in the “content” component of their choice framework how choice can occur even when instructors permit students to put their own angle on, specify, or narrow a topic. They emphasized the significance of choice and stated that it’s a universal goal for teaching and learning.

Looking at assignment relevancy, Dabrowski and Marshall (2018) found that students’ personal realm is reified through relevance—through their perception of an assignment’s value, and this perception can galvanize interest or lead to disengagement. When students deem an assignment interesting and beneficial for their present and future lives, they will engage (Dabrowski & Marshall, 2018). In sample excerpts, students stated:

No Freedom to Choose Topic

“If I can’t choose the topic or at least put my own take on it, I become a bit uninterested because I feel like it only interests the professor but doesn’t focus on the students.” (freshman/first-year student)

“Another thing that stifles my interest in writing assignments is if I can’t pick the topic. I’d like for writing assignment topics to give some semblance of choice, even if it’s just picking what parts of the argument you want to discuss.” (sophomore student)

“I think whenever my professors don’t allow us to pick topics it really harms my drive to write.” (senior student)

Assignment Irrelevancy

“Do instructors understand how to make content relevant? If they did, maybe students would be more interested. Yeah we do the work, but it’s a struggle sometimes if the assignment seems worthless.” (freshman/first-year student)

“The feeling that what I’m doing is irrelevant.” (senior student)

“If it is a repetitive topic or something a student feels is irrelevant to the course or what they need, a student tends to lose interest.” (senior student)

Interest is an essential component of the student learning landscape, and getting to know the students and their interests could help instructors create assignments that better engage them and pique their interest (Dabrowski & Marshall, 2018). Conceivably, interest can help students feel motivated and confident even when the assignment might be intimidating or causes them to feel overwhelmed.

Academic Writing Challenge: Getting Started Due to Feeling Overwhelmed***Theme: Multiple Assignments to Complete***

Getting started due to feeling overwhelmed was a top-selected academic writing challenge as shown in Figures 3 and 4. Under this challenge, having multiple assignments to complete was the overarching theme, as presented in Table 1. In their explanations, students wrote that having multiple assignments to complete in their classes caused them to feel overwhelmed, and they opined the struggles of balancing assignments with various due dates across classes. Researchers have studied overwhelmed college students (see Barriteau Phaire, 2022; DiCristofaro, 2018; Martinez et al., 2020; Oswald & Riddock, 2007; Vye et al., 2007; Welle & Graf, 2011). Sparks (2019) said that college students face many challenges, anxieties, and stresses that cause them to feel overwhelmed. In sample excerpts, students stated:

“Multiple assignments on top of the writing assignment itself.” (freshman/first-year student)

“A specific issue that has me overwhelmed is having too many writing assignments at once.” (freshman/first-year student)

“The most overwhelming aspects of writing for me are having multiple writing assignments due at the same time.” (sophomore student)

Some universities (e.g., Arizona State University, 2021; Purdue University Global, 2024; Wessling at Southern Utah University, 2024; University of Nebraska Omaha, 2024) have incorporated strategies to help keep students from feeling overwhelmed. These universities outline such strategies as prioritizing, planning, creating to-do lists, avoiding distraction, avoiding procrastination, having a routine, organizing, and tackling small tasks; these are a few strategies that students can implement to help them feel less overwhelmed about college responsibilities. Faculty can also help by breaking up assignments into smaller components, which could give students some relief and give faculty an opportunity to provide constructive feedback and help during the drafting process.

Tables 2 displays the top three academic writing improvement factors (from the mid-semester survey) and the themes constructed from the mid-semester follow-up survey responses.

Table 2.

Top Three Writing Improvement Factors and Themes

Top Three Writing Improvement Factors	Themes
Getting feedback from the instructor/professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear direction • Better grades
Writing about a topic that interests you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More time and effort
Getting help from the instructor/professor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understanding of assignments

As displayed in Table 2, clear direction and better grades were the two themes under *Getting feedback from the instructor/professor*. More time and effort were the central themes under *Writing about a topic that interests you*. In students' discussions about *Getting help from the instructor/professor*, better understanding of assignments was the reoccurring theme.

Academic Writing Improvement Factors: Getting Feedback and Help from the Instructor/Professor

Themes: Clear Direction, Better Grades, and Better Understanding of Assignments

Getting feedback from the instructor/professor and *Getting help from the instructor/professor* were two of the top three academic writing improvement factors that the students selected, as presented in Figures 5 and 6. Under these improvement factors, *Clear direction*, *Better Grades*, and *Better understanding of assignments* were the themes constructed from the data, as presented in Table 2. In their explanations, students wrote that *Getting feedback from the instructor/professor* offered them clear direction on assignment drafts, and this helped them get better grades because they could fix their papers based on the feedback they received. Students also wrote that *Getting feedback from the instructor/professor* resulted in them attaining better grades. Moreover, students wrote that getting help enabled them to better understand the assignment guidelines and expectations—help which was especially beneficial for assignments they deemed difficult. Researchers have studied the various ways that instructor feedback and help contribute to learning, academic success, and retention (see Bembenuddy & White, 2013; Bowden, 2018; Cunningham, 2019; Hempel et al., 2020; Kloppers & Potgieter, 2023; Otts, 2020; Owens, 2016; Stellmack, et al., 2012; Suamuang et al., 2021). In their study of helpful feedback from students' perspectives, Lipnevich and Smith (2009) said students felt that detailed comments were the most helpful kind of feedback, and they found that providing individualized feedback on students' work and permitting them to make changes accordingly was most helpful and motivating to the students in the study. Giving detailed constructive feedback, explaining assignments, and providing guidance on assignments are just a few ways faculty can help students succeed. In sample excerpts, students stated:

Clear Direction

"Getting feedback from my instructor is helpful for me because it helps me have a sense of direction after providing my work. It helps me go in the right direction instead of having an incorrect finished product." (freshman/first-year student)

"Make sure I'm heading in the right direction and can help me if I reach a writing block. Also allows me to see their opinion before it is fully graded and make changes if necessary." (junior student)

Better Grades

"It allows me to prepare and work on whatever I didn't do to get the full 100 percent of my grade." (freshman/first-year student)

"It gave me motivation to keep going and slow to always pay more attention and helped me to get better grade by them listening to my complaints and helping me to figure it out." (sophomore student)

"It helps you move forward in terms of your grades or personal writing goals instead of staying stagnant. It could quickly help turn a B average into an A just by taking notes on how you can improve." (junior student)

Better Understanding of Assignments

"Instructors can provide detailed explanations and examples to ensure you understand what is expected from the assignment." (freshman/first-year student)

"Being one on one with the professor makes it much easier to understand the material and sometimes they go more into depth to make sure you understand it." (sophomore student).

"Getting help from the instructor can help me gain a better understanding of what exactly the assignment is asking of me and how I can best proceed with tackling the assignment." (senior student)

The student excerpts illuminate the benefits of receiving instructor feedback and help. Offering feedback and help not only benefits the students, but also provides instructors with insight about students' struggles and strengths, which could influence lessons, activities, and assignments.

Academic Writing Improvement Factors: Writing About a Topic that Interests You**Themes: More Time and Effort**

Writing about a topic that interests you was a top three academic writing improvement factor selected by students, as shown in Figures 5 and 6. Under this improvement factor, more time and effort were the overarching themes from the data, as presented in Table 2. In their explanations, students wrote that they put more time and effort into an assignment if the topic is interesting. *Interest* also appeared as a top academic challenge, as presented in Table 1, and the role it plays in student learning and engagement

has already been discussed in this paper. To sum up the role of interest, Harackiewicz et al. (2016) said that learning can be boosted by interest because interest is a powerful motivator that contributes to engagement and is essential to academic success. The authors' assertion that interest stimulates learning by increasing attention and engagement is aligned with students' survey responses. In sample excerpts, students stated:

"Sometimes I struggle doing any writing that doesn't interest me. But if I am interested in the topic, I will feel a bit excited and put more time and energy into getting started and getting the assignment done." (sophomore student)

"I want to put more time and effort into something I like." (junior student)

"If I am interested in what I like writing about I'm going to put more effort and more time into my ideas." (senior student)

The foregoing sample student excerpts help shed light on what helps them thrive and what impedes their academic writing. Because academic writing is linked to student success and retention, soliciting students' perspectives about academic writing provides useful data. As we seek to support SOC at PWIs, giving them a voice is essential to learning about their challenges, needs, and successes. Chen et al. (2003) said while individual students may not be able to tell educators how to be effective, their collective voice provides insight into their learning preferences and processes. Elliott et al. (2019) agreed and said only by listening to students' experiences can we learn which elements of the writing process are challenging for them. Because academic writing is linked to student success and retention, it is paramount that we examine students' beliefs about their academic writing and act upon the findings. Doing so can help fortify student success and help us support the retention of SOC at PWIs—a salient topic for many postsecondary institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the survey data, I offer two recommendations to the retention program that could complement the initiatives that the program currently provides for the SOC and other students enrolled in the program.

Recommendation One: Share Academic Writing Survey Data Findings with Interested Faculty, Student Support Offices, and the Writing Center.

I recommend that the program administration share the findings with interested faculty of various disciplines across the campus, with other student support offices, and with the writing center. The retention program is not governed by faculty, so sharing the findings with faculty could launch a partnership to support the students' academic writing. Sharing would result in faculty learning about the students' top three academic writing challenges, *Getting easily distracted*, *Getting started due to lack of interest*, and *Getting started due to feeling overwhelmed*, and their top three academic writing improvement factors, *Getting feedback from the instructor/professor*, *Writing about a topic that interests you*, and *Getting help from the instructor/professor*. As part of pro-active measures, faculty might use the findings to reinforce learning strategies and adapt teaching methods to help mitigate writing challenges and help fortify improvement factors such as enhancing feedback on and help with assignments, and giving students in their classes autonomy on assignments with the intent to motivate their interest and curb distractions. As for support services offices that provide help from various vantage points, the findings might aid them in creating or refining existing academic writing support initiatives and innovations that address the students' top three and other academic writing challenges.

Regarding the writing center, *Getting Help from the Writing Center* was not ranked in the top three; in fact, it was ranked low for both semesters—0% in fall and 0.9% in spring (see Figures 5 and 6). Universities put resources into writing centers, and writing centers have been studied from the landscape of student persistence, success, and retention (see Fitzgerald, 2022; Leber, 2018; Olsson & Bindler, 2016; Savarese, 2020; Williams, 2021). Thus, sharing the findings with the writing center could be the genesis of a joint venture wherein the retention program and the writing center examine the students' perceptions of available support and investigate the students' use of the center and overall experiences. Such might result in collaborative academic writing support endeavors whereby the SOC and other students in the program would deem the writing center a valued resource for academic writing support.

Overall, sharing survey data could help form an interconnected system of student support. Scholars have studied and advocated for connections, collaboration, and even the merging of student affairs and academic offices (see Commodore et al., 2018; Eberhardt,

2017; Gulley & Mullendore, 2014; Walters, 2003). While I do not advocate merging academic and student affairs offices, I recommend fostering collaboration by sharing data to support student success and retention. Sharing survey data with interested faculty, student support offices, and the writing center could be the foundation of collaborative efforts focused on academic writing.

Recommendation Two: Hold Academic Writing Workshops Facilitated by Faculty.

While the retention program administration offers academic workshops on various topics, none specifically focus on academic writing. To address the top three academic writing challenges that the students selected, I recommend that, in addition to the workshops they currently provide, the program invite faculty volunteers from various disciplines to conduct academic writing workshops. The workshops might include open discussions where the SOC and other students enrolled in the program could discuss their writing challenges and improvement factors in depth. These workshops would afford faculty the opportunity to address the students directly, inquire about their writing challenges and improvement factors, and offer them strategies for tackling lack of interest and digital distractions, and managing multiple assignments across classes. Such workshops could target not only the top three writing challenges presented in the findings, but also other writing challenges and topics such as AI use for academic writing, a current topic which is and has been studied by scholars (see Dergaa et al., 2023; Frye, 2022; Roe et al., 2023; Seufert et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2023). Even further, workshops could comprise discipline-specific academic writing challenges, styles, and expectations by the faculty volunteers who can provide additional discipline-specific writing assistance (e.g., scientific writing and American Psychological Association format for psychology majors) outside of the classroom.

Based on research and the survey findings, I believe the foregoing recommendations could enrich the program's existing initiatives by focusing intentionally on an essential component of student success: academic writing.

Implications

This study can contribute to research about SOC success and retention at PWIs. As PWIs work to retain these students, surveys, focus groups, and interviews, etc., can

contribute to a student-centered approach wherein we can learn about ways to help them thrive. Since student learning, development, success, retention, and graduation are some central aims of postsecondary institutions, it is essential to remain cognizant about academic writing because of its integral role in student success and retention. While many factors influence the retention-to-graduation rates of Black students and other SOC compared to White students, academic writing is a critical part of their success. Though this study is focused in a particular setting, the broader relevancy is that retention programs designed to support SOC at PWIs should continually seek ways to help them persist and succeed. This study might inspire other retention programs to survey their students about academic writing to discover any leading or recurrent challenges and improvement factors that the students identify.

Limitations and Future Research

The study was focused on the students enrolled in the retention program at the PWI; thus, the findings are not generalizable. While the findings cannot be generalized, they offer a glimpse into how some SOC view challenges and factors for improving their academic writing. As mentioned in the *Data Analysis* section, this study also involved secondary analysis of existing data, which has its limitations (see Chatfield, 2020; Thorne, 2013). Since this study involved existing data, I was not involved in the data collection process; however, the data was examined judiciously to ensure data transfer accuracy. Johnston (2014) said that the limitations of secondary data analysis can be avoided if researchers examine the data with caution and careful reflection, evaluate the data critically, and ensure a match between the existing data and the research question. A future research project could entail surveying all SOC on the campus; doing so could offer a broader view of the academic writing challenges that some students experience on the campus and the improvement factors that assist them on their journey to graduation. Another future research project might involve surveying a representative sample of students to determine if the challenges and improvement factors in the findings are specific to the SOC on the campus or applicable to a broader spectrum of students.

Conclusion

This study showcases the usefulness of heeding academic challenges and improvement factors from the perspectives of SOC. Because SOCs can face many challenges at PWIs, such as isolation, lack of a sense of belonging, financial issues, etc., it is imperative that we remain student-centered and continuously engage them via surveys and focus groups, etc., to learn about their challenges, struggles, and successes. Academic writing is a vital component of student success, and learning about students' academic writing challenges and improvement perspectives could help us cultivate informed and adapted support initiatives designed to help students persist and succeed and help PWIs meet their retention and graduation goals.

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