

Columbia School of Social Work Can Better Support Development of Effective Writing Skills

Editorial Board

The Editorial Board of the *Columbia Social Work Review* holds a firm conviction that social workers must possess advanced written communication skills to serve individuals and communities and advance the field as a whole. To pair this conviction with action, the Board conducted a survey to explore student experiences with writing in graduate studies at Columbia School of Social Work (CSSW). The surveyed students agreed that effective writing skills are imperative for social work professionals, and they overwhelmingly wanted the school to do more to help them develop these skills. Although students highly valued writing, their enthusiasm did not always translate into perceptions of adequate writing instruction, exposure to diverse writing assignments, or adequate institutional support. As editors of a student-run journal, we believe in the value of cogent writing to our field, and we feel compelled to share this student perspective as a contribution to a meaningful discussion on writing at CSSW. This editorial uses student opinion from survey data to underscore the value of critical writing skills to the social work profession, and recommends ways that school supports can be enhanced to match student need. The goal of this editorial is to enrich the scholarly and professional nature of CSSW.

Why Write About Writing?

The idea for this editorial emerged from a series of conversations between editors of the *Review* and members of the CSSW community. At a *Review*-sponsored event in the fall, students expressed a desire to challenge themselves through written assignments, and many placed a high value on writing in social work education and in the profession. Recognizing this was part of a larger issue, the Editorial Board wanted to engage in formative research to determine the writing skills that students learn, apply, and expect to utilize in their careers. Further, the Board hoped to assess the extent to which students receive adequate instruction and support in developing their writing skills during their time at CSSW.

Last, we wanted to explore innovative changes to improve the student experience of writing at CSSW.

To do this, the Editorial Board of the *Review* designed a survey about specific written assignments, the development of writing skills at CSSW, the importance of writing in social work, the resources students have utilized, and the additional supports that might be helpful for students. Although the majority of questions were closed-ended, there were two open-ended questions for students to provide qualitative comments and offer new suggestions for changes to the CSSW experience. The Board used Google Forms to administer the survey, a copy of which is available on the *Review*'s website, <http://cswr.columbia.edu>.

The Writing Center and the Office of Academic Affairs sponsored the survey, and the Office of Student Services approved the questionnaire. On behalf of the *Review*, the Writing Center sent an e-mail message with the survey link to the 997 currently enrolled Master of Science students, and the Board advertised the survey on social media. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were not compensated. Seventy (N=70) students completed the questionnaire, and the breakdown of students by program and method of practice is presented in Table 1. Demographic information (age, race, gender) was not gathered due to sensitivity concerns from CSSW departments. Of the 70 respondents, 10 reported that English was not their first language, 50 said they were native English speakers, and 10 did not respond to this question; 8 international students took part in the survey. These percentages of non-native speakers and international students (17 and 11 percent respectively) are roughly comparable with school-wide levels of 12-15 percent available on the CSSW website (see <http://socialwork.columbia.edu/about-cssw-0>, 2014).

What the Survey Tells Us

Although all current M.S. students received a link to the survey, the voluntary nature of the survey creates a respondent bias—students who completed the survey were probably more likely to have an interest in the topic of writing or be different from the student body in some other way. Therefore, statistical tests of significance were not conducted because the sample would not have satisfied all necessary assumptions. The following section discusses trends among responses.

Table 1. *Numbers of Respondents by Program and Method of Practice*

Program	Advanced Clinical Practice (ACP)	Advanced Generalist Programming (AGPP)	Policy Practice	Social Enterprise Administration (SEA)	Undecided	Totals
2-Year Program	18	13	5	14	1	51
16-Month	2	—	—	—	—	2
Advanced Standing	2	3	2	1	—	8
Dual Degree	3	1	1	1	1	7
Extended Program	1	—	1	—	—	2
Reduced Residency	—	—	—	—	—	0
Totals	26	17	9	16	2	70

CSSW's student body believes that a diverse array of writing skills are necessary for professional social workers—the most convincing results from the survey. At least eight out of 10 respondents (82%) noted that it was “very important” to articulate a clear thesis and write persuasively, compile and analyze research, possess editing and proofreading skills, use professional language, use sensitive language, and write concisely and directly (Table 2). The only skill that students did not find as important as the above issues was writing in APA style. Despite the consensus on the importance of writing skills, fewer (62 percent or more) agreed that coursework and field instruction have helped them adequately develop all of these skills (Table 3).

Although general, instructional, and written assignment satisfaction ratings were mixed, the survey results overwhelmingly suggest that students crave more feedback from instructors. Although 70% of respondents reported feeling “satisfied or very satisfied” with CSSW's contribution to the development of their writing skills, 53% of respondents rated the instruction for written tasks unfavorably (“fair or poor”). This suggests that students are able to develop their writing skills to a satisfactory level, even while they may not be satisfied with writing instruction. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the responding students rated instructor feedback as “fair or poor,” suggesting that teachers can do more to help students grow from each assignment. Indeed, in the open-ended responses, one student stated her appreciation of instructor feedback: “I enjoy constructive criticism so I can grow as a writer. I want to read my professor's interpretation of my writing, areas of strength, and areas of growth. The more feedback, the better.” Eighty-four percent (84%) of respondents said greater feedback on assignments would be “very helpful.” More research is needed to assess the extent to which students develop their skills through practice, peer interactions, or other supports, as opposed to faculty. It is also important to consider that although students enter our program with a certain writing ability from undergraduate studies and work experience, they often leave needing to write in a much different role and context.

Some student experiences differed across method of practice. Only 50% of Social Entrepreneurship Administration (SEA) students felt they had developed the ability to write clearly and persuasively, that is, to the standards required in their intended career path, compared to 68% of all respondents. This may reflect a greater focus on written work and

Table 2. *Perceived Importance of Certain Writing Skills, Expressed in Percentages*

Skill	Very im- portant	Somewhat important	A little important	Not at all important	Don't know
Ability to articulate a clear thesis and write persuasively	94	6	—	—	—
Ability to compile and analyze research	82	16	1	—	—
Editing or proofreading skills	88	10	1	—	—
Using professional language	93	7	—	—	—
Using sensitive language	88	9	1	—	1
Writing concisely and directly	99	1	—	—	—
Writing in APA Style	37	30	19	4	—

Note. Text of the question: “How important or unimportant do you believe it is for graduates of CSSW to possess the following skills?”

Table 3. *Extent to Which Coursework and Field Instruction Has Developed Certain Writing Skills, Expressed in Percentages*

Skill	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know
Ability to articulate a clear thesis and write persuasively	21	47	24	7	1
Ability to compile and analyze research	18	56	21	3	3
Editing or proofreading skills	16	46	24	10	4
Using professional language	21	58	13	5	1
Using sensitive language	25	57	9	6	3
Writing concisely and directly	27	52	12	7	1
Writing in APA Style	40	40	18	1	1

Note. Text of the question: "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'CSSW's coursework and field instruction have helped me develop the following skills to the standards required in my intended career path.'"

communication skills in typical SEA careers; coursework in this method of practice should therefore address this unique challenge. Advanced Clinical Practice (ACP) students rated instruction for written assignments less favorably than respondents overall: 69% of ACP students gave unfavorable ratings (“fair or poor”) to the instruction received for writing that they expect to be called on to do in the five years after graduating, compared to 53% overall. ACP’s emphasis on practical, clinical skills may account for these lower scores on instruction, as discussion of these assignments likely occupies less class time. Yet ACP students think these writing skills, like composing letters, are equally important to learn and develop. Thus, more attention might be paid to the role of writing in clinical practice.

A further disconnect exists between what students currently complete as part of their graduate studies and what students expect to do after graduation (Table 4). When asked about the frequency of completing certain writing tasks, respondents reported that they most commonly completed process recordings, academic papers, reflection papers, and progress notes/documentation. However, the writing tasks that people expect to execute after graduation include writing letters, progress notes/documentation, and program and proposal development pieces (see Figures 1-3). Although students’ expectations are opinion-based assessment of future career tasks, we believe that a better mix of practical writing skills needs to be taught in the curriculum to prepare students for the diverse written tasks of our profession. For example, 78% of respondents expect to write program proposal and development papers “sometimes or very often” after graduating, but only 38% of respondents work on these pieces with such frequency at CSSW (see Figure 4). Moreover, 54% of ACP students expect to write program and proposal development grants at least “sometimes” within five years of graduating, but 77% of these students currently write these kinds of papers “rarely or not at all.” In comparison, more than half of AGPP, Policy, and SEA students write these papers “sometimes or very often.” Furthermore, at least 31% of respondents reported that they were unable to assess the quality of instruction for how to write letters, program proposals, and opinion pieces. A more in-depth assessment should be done to see if students feel a strong need for more instruction around these tasks, and if these exercises would be beneficial for students.

Survey results highlighted the contribution of the Writing Center to the CSSW academic community (Table 5). Of those who took

Table 4. *Comparative Frequency of Present and Expected Assignment Completion and Instruction Quality*

Assignment	“Currently Complete” Frequency	“Expect to Complete” Frequency	Deficit (current minus expectations) ^a	Quality of Instruction
Academic Papers	3.54	2.30	1.25	2.58
Advocacy Paper	2.64	2.67	-0.03	2.63
Case Study/ Narrative	2.59	2.88	-0.29	2.35
Letter	2.12	3.58	-1.46	2.11
Opinion Piece	2.17	2.73	-0.56	2.24
Policy Brief/Analysis	2.18	2.85	-0.67	2.56
Process Recording	3.74	1.92	1.82	2.38
Program and Proposal Development	2.06	3.30	-1.24	2.36
Progress Notes/Documentation	3.16	3.44	-0.28	2.34
Reflection Paper	3.22	1.92	1.30	2.56

Note. This table converted responses of frequency (1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Very Often) and quality ratings (1=Poor, 2=Fair, 3=Good, 4=Excellent) to a 4-point score.

^a Negative numbers indicate that students currently write these assignments with less frequency than they expect to after graduation. Positive numbers indicate that students currently write these assignments more at CSSW than they expect to after graduation.

Figure 1. Comparative Frequency of Present and Expected Assignment Completion: Academic Papers

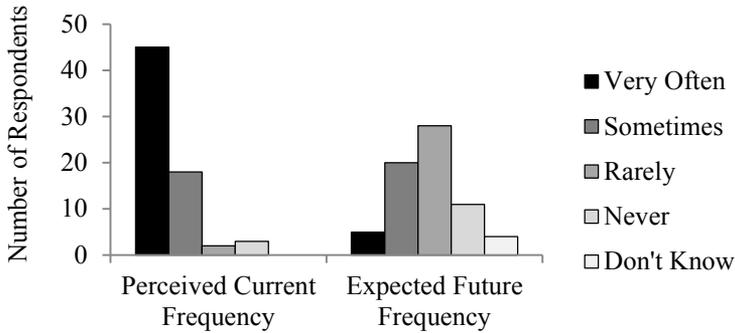


Figure 1. Student responses to the following two questions: “Since you enrolled at CSSW, how often have you had to write Academic Papers for CSSW coursework or your social work field placement?” and “In the five years immediately after completing your studies at CSSW, how often would you expect to complete Academic Papers in your career?”

Figure 2. Comparative Frequency of Present and Expected Assignment Completion: Letters

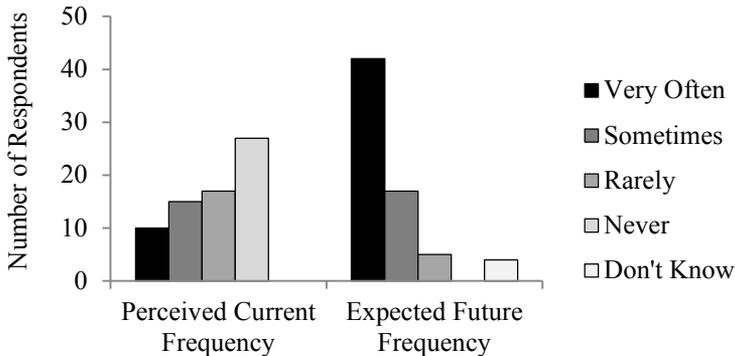


Figure 2. Student responses to the following two questions: “Since you enrolled at CSSW, how often have you had to write Letters for CSSW coursework or your social work field placement?” and “In the five years immediately after completing your studies at CSSW, how often would you expect to complete Letters in your career?”

Figure 3. Comparative Frequency of Present and Expected Assignment Completion: Reflection Papers

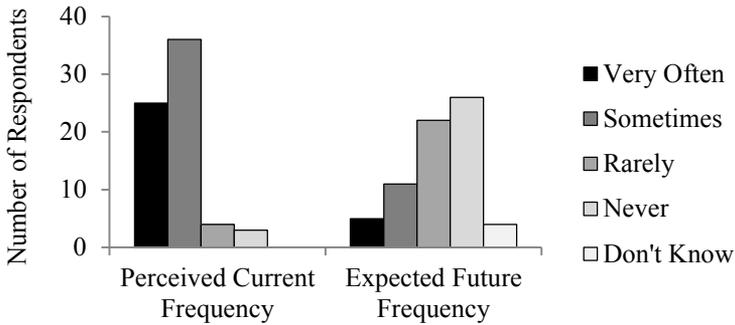


Figure 3. Student responses to the following two questions: “Since you enrolled at CSSW, how often have you had to write Reflection Papers for CSSW coursework or your social work field placement?” and “In the five years immediately after completing your studies at CSSW, how often would you expect to complete Reflection Papers in your career?”

Figure 4. Comparative Frequency of Present and Expected Assignment Completion: Program Proposals and Development

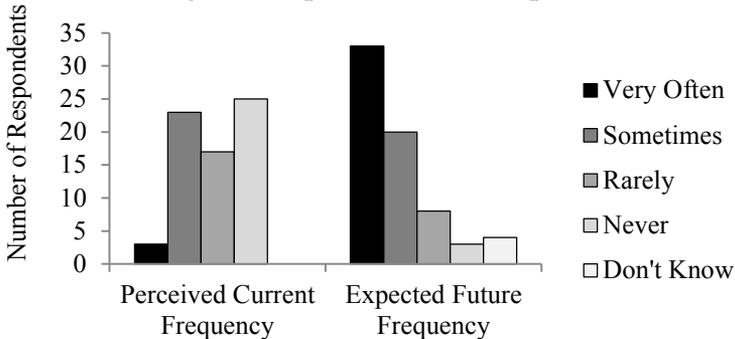


Figure 4. Student responses to the following two questions: “Since you enrolled at CSSW, how often have you had to write Program Proposal and Development Papers for CSSW coursework or your social work field placement?” and “In the five years immediately after completing your studies at CSSW, how often would you expect to complete Program Proposal and Development Papers in your career?”

advantage of one-on-one appointments, two out of three students reported that the sessions were “very helpful,” and only four individuals said that the sessions were “not at all helpful” (Table 6). Many students praised the Writing Center for contributing to their professional development: One believed that the Writing Center helps people “grow as students,” and there were calls for extended hours and more staff. It is clear that CSSW students have an invaluable resource at their disposal that provides an opportunity for students to become more confident social work writers and students.

Respondents made a strong call to increase writing support for students (Table 7). Ninety-four percent (94%) of students surveyed agreed with the statement, “CSSW should do more to help students develop their written communication skills.” Eight out of ten students surveyed thought that an optional course—an elective on writing in the social work profession—could help students improve their writing skills. A majority of respondents (61%) thought that devoting more class time to developing writing skills would be helpful. Three out of four individuals surveyed said that completing different kinds of assignments as part of CSSW coursework would help improve their writing ability. To this end, the Editorial Board of the *Review* has begun to reach out to curriculum committees across methods of practice to promote written assignments that encourage students to produce thought-provoking content relevant to the profession. We support further efforts preparing students to be critical thinkers, writers, scholars, and practitioners among a new generation of social workers.

Recommendations

The *Review* is eager to work with students, faculty, and administrators to make improvements to CSSW’s curriculum as it relates to written work.

Students showed strong support for an optional course on writing as part of graduate studies of social work (see Table 7). A course could be offered to focus on students’ writing skills, enhance understanding of different documents that social workers produce, provide detailed feedback on written work, and access peer support. In developing the curriculum, surveys could gauge student interest and town hall events could encourage students to provide their input. The course might address different types of written tasks in the field, and

Table 5. *Student Use of Writing Center*

Service	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
One-on-one appointments	14	13	15	26	1
Writing Center Handouts	14	21	17	17	—
Writing Center Events	2	14	13	30	1
Other Writing Center services	3	6	13	38	9
Totals	33	54	58	111	11

Note. Text of the question: “How often have you used the following services at CSSW’s Writing Center since you enrolled at CSSW?”

Table 6. Student Ratings of Writing Center Services^a

Service	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	A little helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't Know
One-on-one appointments	27	5	5	4	—
Writing Center Handouts	20	16	7	1	2
Writing Center Events	5	9	6	—	5
Other Writing Center services	7	—	4	—	7
Totals	59	30	22	5	14

Note. Text of the question: “If you have EVER used the Writing Center Services, how helpful or unhelpful did you find the services you used?”

^a “Not applicable” (n/a) responses are excluded from this table.

Table 7. *Perceived Helpfulness of Innovative Offerings or Changes at CSSW*

Offering/Change	Very helpful	Somewhat helpful	A little helpful	Not at all helpful	Don't Know
A required course on writing in the social work profession	16	21	15	10	5
An optional course on writing in the social work profession	38	17	5	5	2
More class time devoted to developing writing skills	27	14	16	8	2
Different assignments that better help students develop writing skills	29	22	12	1	3
More feedback on assignments from instructors	56	9	2	0	0

Note. Text of the question: “How helpful or unhelpful do you believe the following potential CSSW offerings/changes might be at helping students develop written communication skills?”

provide short assignments, such as writing a concise policy memo or a plan for the design and implementation of a new program. The course could be tailored to students' needs by allowing for choice among assignments. Just as students learn direct practice skills through field placements, we can also learn writing through practical applications *if we receive targeted support*. A pilot course could be developed to gauge interest and effectiveness.

Students crave detailed feedback on their written work.

Given professors' time constraints, students cannot expect every paper to be covered in red ink. But students deserve formal assessments of their writing, access to their professors, and class time devoted to analyzing written work. A common rubric template, adaptable across classes, could provide structured and streamlined feedback. Instructors could assess discrete and defined aspects of student writing, such as clarity of expression and thesis, persuasive and concise delivery of material, research analysis, and use of APA style. The administration might provide resources to faculty to encourage them to discuss writing skills before and after assignments are due, and foster student comfort in attending office hours to examine written work in more detail.

Students want to complete diverse writing tasks in preparation for their careers. Written assignments are physical, tangible products that demonstrate the same abilities that social workers possess and implement across practice methods: coherent statement of purpose, explanation and analysis of evidence-based interventions, and a coherent discussion of a topic's importance. Students have an ample portfolio of academic papers, and would likely benefit from a wider variety of assignments, yet many social work jobs expect candidates to implement a more diverse array of professional writing abilities. Students could gain a great deal of writing experience from exposure to grant-writing, policy memos, psychosocial assessments, program proposals, opinion pieces, evaluation reports, and case studies.

We need to incorporate an evaluation of writing into annual student evaluations if we are to seriously achieve a goal of improving the quality of students' writing skills. Course evaluations could have a separate section on writing to hold instructors accountable for addressing the topic. Certain results across the school could be publicly available to better track, evaluate, and discuss progress around the development of writing skills.

Conclusion

The *Review's* annual publication is a testament to the capabilities of our student body. The five articles in this publication that precede this editorial—and 11 previous editions of the *Review*—are concrete products from some of our finest students. In the process of writing this editorial, the Board has utilized a diverse skill set taught through course and fieldwork at Columbia University. We developed research questions, administered a survey and analyzed results, wrote and edited the text of the editorial, collaborated with community members, and devised original interventions to address a pressing concern in our community. The Board wants to see more students engage in work like this. Moving forward, we must ensure that discussions about writing take place throughout the graduate experience here at CSSW. Institutional supports must exist to mirror the value students place on writing in social work, so that all students may gain the opportunity to advance their skills, career, and service.