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What Does it Mean to Be Prepared for College-Level Writing?: Examining how college-bound students are influenced by institutional representations of preparedness and college-level writing

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This project grew out of my experience as both a K-12 and college writing instructor. And, in my own transition from K-12 to college settings, I encountered disconnects in the ways educators talked or did not talk to each other, as well as the disconnect between the kinds of guiding frameworks for writing at K-12 and the college level. I have also encountered ongoing conversations in water cooler talk, popular and academic discourse deeming students virtually unprepared for college-level writing.

In all of this, then, while my efforts as a teacher-scholar was to figure out more ways for K-12 and college instructors to effectively communicate with each other, I also started to think about how high school students are not often invited into most conversations about their preparedness or expectations for college-level writing. And, if they were invited into the broader conversation, I wondered whether their responses could contribute to educators' understanding of transitional experiences that students must navigate and the ways in which writing is understood by students across contexts. I hoped that by asking students about their experiences, it would help educators to better understand how to foster preparation for students for college-level writing, and provide valuable information for high school and college instructors on students' writing transition. In what follows, I first discuss relevant literature to this study, and then describe research methods for this project. Finally, I offer one of the key findings from this study and discuss implications of this finding for educators across K-12 and college contexts.

Literature review

Underlying Sources of College Students' Perceived Preparedness for College-level Writing Recent research from English Education and Literacy

Studies consider K-12 student perspectives and call for more research that highlights student voices at the secondary level (Juzwik, 2006; Sperling & DiPardo, 2008; Swofford, 2015). While student voices are rarely invited into conversations about their high school writing experiences, as prior research has suggested, research on what college students report as remembered high school accounts can still provide insight into how students understand prior writing experiences as influencing their perceived preparedness to write at the college level. Sullivan (2014) worked with students in a FYW course, in which she was the instructor, to learn more about how to accommodate students in their transition from high school to college writing. Sullivan reports that students felt unprepared for college writing due to various reasons including difference in expectations from teachers around writing skills, lack of rigor in high school, and a focus on standardized testing in high school. Students also noted a difference in content and amount of writing between high school and college, in that students did less writing in high school than college and focused more on studying literature in high school English courses. Findings from Sullivan's and Whitley and Paulsen's studies might mean that because of the differences in kinds of writing between high school and college (e.g. genre and length) and the time allotted for writing in high school compared to college, students feel unprepared for college writing. This sense of unpreparedness could be because students did not know what to expect as they transitioned from high school to college, or because students expected that what they learned in high school would prepare them for college writing. If the latter is the case, it is largely unknown what exactly students, still in high school, understood from their high school writing experiences as preparing them for college writing. However, as I have been suggesting, it is important to learn more about those experiences. For instance, keeping social cognitive theory and self-efficacy theories in mind (see Bandura and Pajares, F., & Schunk), it is likely that college-bound students base their expectations and perceptions of their preparedness for college-level writing on what they already know. Their current knowledge about college-level—even the smallest amount of knowledge—may draw from what they've been told by others, what they have observed of older peers and siblings, or what they have experienced themselves in college writing workshops, for example. Ultimately, developing certain expectations likely happens through vicarious and mastery experiences, as well as social persuasion and physiological states.

The research discussed in this section provides an idea of what prior experiences students might associate with their perceived preparedness, but more could be learned from the perspective of high school students as they prepare for college-level writing and are possibly influenced by varying environmental, personal, and behavioral factors that all work together to shape students' self-beliefs about their learning experiences. McCarthy et al. (1985) and Shell et al., (1989) studied college students to examine relationships between self-efficacy and

writing performance and found that writing self- efficacy predicted writing performance (e.g. composing an essay). Additionally, Zimmerman and Bandura (1994) studied the relationship between college students' self-efficacy and self-regulation and found that college students enrolled in advanced English composition courses had higher self-efficacy for managing writing activities, compared to participants enrolled in regular English composition. While these studies provide insight to self-efficacy as it functions in the college writing classroom, these studies do not address the underlying sources, especially prior writing experiences, that might have influenced these writing self-efficacy beliefs. From their findings in a study of college student interviews, Spear and Flesher (1989) suggest that students who took AP courses in high school think they are better prepared than they actually are. Spear and Flesher attribute students' belief in their mastery of writing skills— these students believed they had mastered the skills necessary to write at the college level.

In more recent research, Massengill begins to answer the question of what prior experiences influence students' perceived self-efficacy. Generally speaking, according to Massengill's participants, more experience with writing results in higher confidence to write at the college level. Massengill surveyed college students and analyzed essays they wrote for the study to examine the relationship between high school writing experiences, perceived self-efficacy, and their preparedness for college writing. Massengill determined that those students with higher levels of self-efficacy around their writing, found more success in college writing. Across the college students studied, writing experiences in high school varied, and these differences affected the level of each student's self-efficacy and sense of preparedness for college writing. Those students who reported higher levels of self-efficacy also reported writing more frequently in high school and practicing various genres. Several studies in composition studies focus on transfer of prior knowledge and genre awareness as individuals move from one context to another and engage in various discursive practices (see, for example, Anson, 2016; Lu, 2004; Miller, 1994; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011, Rounsaville, et al., 2008; Sommers & Saltz, 2004). Scholarship also draws attention to novice writers (see, for example, Beaufort, 2009, Hassel & Giordano, 2009, Reiff and Bawarshi, 2011, Sommers and Saltz, 2004). Because my study considers the prior writing experiences students perceive as informing their preparedness and expectations, I draw from scholarship that considers student “incomes” or prior knowledge that students carry into new writing experiences. Research about genre and transfer in Writing Studies is useful to consider how students situate themselves within new writing contexts and are also concerned with the proto- (beginning or potential knowledge) and meta-knowledge (developing knowledge that can be strategically applied in context) these participants develop as well as the nuances and complexities of those individual experiences. The scholarship noted above

examines the complex and sometimes conflicting experiences of language, relationships, and senses of self—all of which have the possibility to inform new learning experiences. In some cases, students' incomes (e.g. writing knowledge they already have) can be undercut when their understandings of and beliefs about writing conflict with new writing expectations at the college level, affecting their confidence in writing abilities and lessening motivation to perform certain writing tasks. In other cases, student incomes, while possibly different from college-level outcomes, can also embody a motivation to take on new challenges and learn new writing genres (Reiff and Bawarshi, 2011, Rounsaville et al., 2008, Sommers and Saltz, 2004). I extend the noted scholarship and posit that by recognizing and fostering college-bound students' prior experiences and their perceptions of those experiences, educators can more flexibly understand how students' perceived preparedness and expectations for college-level writing are formed.

Methods

As noted, I wanted to learn from students about their experiences, and there is little research that examines high school student perspectives about their preparedness and expectations for college-level writing. I aimed to fill this gap learning from high school student voices through two sets of qualitative, semi-structured interviews to deepen our understanding of students' writing experiences and their perceived preparedness and expectations for college-level writing.

Over the course of a semester in Fall 2016, I visited two sections of AP Literature and Composition at Great Lakes High School (GLHS), a public high school located about six miles from a state university in a small Midwestern city.¹ All of the 46 students in these sections completed a self-efficacy survey, which I mainly used to first recruit 15 participants for interviews and then as talking points for the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were the focus of the study. Interview responses surfaced participants' experiences and reflections on their perceived preparedness and expectations for college-level writing.

Research Site

At the time of the study, all participants were seniors and college-bound. Data collection took place at Great Lakes High School (GLHS). GLHS is a public high school located about six miles from a state university in a small Midwestern city, in a community of approximately 9,000 citizens. U.S. News and World Report, Newsweek, and Niche have identified GLHS as a top school in its home state and

¹ GLHS is a pseudonym that was recommended as a group by student participants

the country. The school also participates in a limited Schools of Choice Program. 18 GLHS enrollment during the semester of my study (Fall 2016) was approximately 1,800. The students at GLHS come from varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, though the majority of students (90%) are white, and the largest minority group (5%) is Asian. 6% of students qualify for free lunches and 2% qualify for reduced price lunches. As of 2015, over 93% of seniors graduated from GLHS and most students had plans for post-secondary education. I chose my site both purposefully and as a matter of convenience. After reaching out to various high school teachers whose schools could serve as potential research sites, I chose GLHS because one of its teachers taught two sections of senior-level Advanced Placement courses. As a first-year writing instructor at, many of the students I meet come into my class with experience in Advanced Placement (AP) English courses and are often surprised by the differences between my course and what they experienced in AP English Literature and Composition or AP Language and Composition. Curious about this anecdotal observation, I wanted to interview students like them to understand a different moment of student transition from high school to college-level writing. The cooperating teacher, Mrs. Gerard², seemed excited about my study and interested in learning what I might find out from her students. She had questions about how she could better support her students as they anticipated the transition into college-level writing. Finally, GLHS promotes academic excellence and ensuring its students are prepared for college, which made it more likely that I would find interested and willing participants who would talk about their prior experiences and share their ideas about what they were anticipating as they prepared to transition into college-level writing. The context of this research site provided an important backdrop for participants' reported writing experiences and for our conversations about their perceived preparedness and expectations for college-level writing. Additionally, my participants were taking AP Literature and Composition and some of those participants had previously taken AP Language and Composition or other AP courses. The context of a senior-level AP course fostered student determination to do well as they looked ahead to and prepared for college, and so I wanted to learn from students who participated in an environment where preparedness was potentially being fostered, was expected of these students, or students expected it of themselves, based on their academic status. The following sections explore one of the major findings from this study that suggests environmental factors, or what I am calling institutional representations, influence student perceptions of their preparedness to write at the college level, as well as their expectations for what college-level writing will entail.

² Mrs. Gerard is a pseudonym.

Findings

When I interviewed participants, most acknowledged that the ways in which they compared themselves to their peers was a factor for how they determined their preparedness to write at the college-level. *How* they compared themselves to their peers did vary among participants. Sometimes participants used task-based examples to compare themselves to their peers and then consider their perceived preparedness (e.g. participating in peer review). In other instances, participants used course experiences or assessment outcomes (e.g. SAT scores). Interestingly, even though participants drew comparisons between themselves and their peers, when they talked about these comparisons, participants often brought into conversation other environmental factors like teacher talk, GLHS expectations, or specific curriculum and assessment measures like the SAT and AP courses. In turn, these environmental factors represented certain expectations and standards that seemed to bear down on the comparisons participants made and by extension, the conclusions the participants drew about their preparedness and expectations for college-level writing. These expectations and standards, I argue, stem from institutional representations of college-level writing and preparedness that students must navigate on a both a local and global scale. Already established theory from social cognitive theory and self-efficacy research offers us a way to think about how an individual situates themselves within the reciprocal relationship of personal factors, personal behavior, and environmental factors. In this article, I consider how institutional representations can serve as environmental factors and how those representations can affect college-bound students' perceived preparedness and expectations, especially when they actively compare themselves to others.

Local and Global institutional representations at GLHS

I define institutional representations as environmental factors that are directly related to the ways in which students practice social comparison. Environmental factors can include, for example, how AP curriculum is represented to students by their teachers, school, and third-party organizations like the College Board. Other environmental factors can include peer interaction or teacher talk. I argue that institutional representations circulate throughout contexts like GLHS and when students actively compared themselves to one another, those comparisons were informed by local and global institutional representations of preparedness and college-level writing. I draw from Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999) who provide useful theorizing and definitional work around local and global communities, which I draw from to identify local and global institutional representations. Members of global communities are not always readily linked nor do they always participate in face-to-face interactions and these global communities

can include academic fields, business organizations, religions, etc. (Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, 1999). I suggest that college-level writing and preparedness for college-level writing can be represented by global institutions that students will not interact with directly or face-to-face, but interact with indirectly as they shape their own perceived preparedness and expectations for college-level writing. For example, the College Board can serve as a global institutional representation that establishes academic expectations through curriculum and assessment and serves a gate-keeping function for college admissions.

Meaning-making is constructed when individuals observe and interact with others at a more local level (Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, 1999). Indeed, in this article, I argue that participants' vicarious learning was affected by global institutional representations (e.g. the influence of the College Board and its AP curriculum and assessments), but participants' observations and interactions with teachers and peers within GLHS directly affected their writing self-efficacy, perceived preparedness, and expectations for college-level writing. For example, in discussing with their peers the SAT exam and high school English courses, some students came to believe that AP Language and Composition (AP Lang) was equivalent to what they expected college-level writing to entail. Throughout this article, I will offer other examples of how students compared themselves to one another, but did so with institutional representations of college-level writing and preparedness in mind. Specifically, in some cases social comparison was shaped by how teachers talked about college-level writing and their expectations for college-level writing. In other instances, students compared SAT scores to determine their perceived preparedness for college-level writing. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that while institutional representations of college-level writing and preparedness are very much present at GLHS, some participants showed a recognition of these representations, but sometimes chose to reject or question them as important to what they believed about their own preparedness or what they expected college-level writing to entail. For example, in the final section of this article I highlight participants who recognized that a course like AP Language and Composition held a certain reputation for college-level preparedness, but rejected the notion that without the course on their transcript, they were less prepared than other students. I will examine these differing perceptions, as well as the seven participants who did take AP Lang and collectively believed they were at an advantage, compared to their peers who did not take AP Lang.³ Thus, I argue in the following section that AP Lang functions as an institutional representation of college-level writing and preparedness at GLHS on both a local and global level.

³ Zach, who also took AP Lang, proved to be an exception to the general assumption that AP Lang was the epitome of preparedness for college-level writing. His perspective will be discussed in more detail at the end of this article.

AP Lang as a local and global institution

When analyzing the data, most surprising was how frequently participants used their experience with AP Lang as a way to compare themselves to their peers. While all participants were enrolled in AP Literature and Composition during the time of this study, important findings surfaced about how some participants compared themselves to each other and discussed their perceived preparedness, based on the AP Lang course seven out of the 15 participants elected to take during their junior year. What's more, the responses that emerged were surprising in that some participants illuminated AP Lang as an institutional representation that influenced how they compared themselves to their peers in order to determine their perceived preparedness.⁴ The examples offered in the remainder of the article also demonstrate how participants how AP Lang functioned as a global institutional representation but also how participants, on a local level through interactions and observations, made meaning of how AP Lang represented college-level writing and preparedness on a local level.

For contextual purposes, it is worth explicating how students described AP Lang and what they learned or valued from their experiences in that course in order to understand how AP Lang was situated as both a local and global institutional representation of preparedness for college-level writing at GLHS.⁵ According to what participants reported, AP Lang focuses on composing genres in response to informational texts. A clear difference between AP Lang and other English courses is that the latter focused more on writing that had to do with literary analysis. In AP Lang, participants reported that they practiced writing genres that involved comparison, synthesis, rhetorical analysis, and research. Additionally, many of the participants who took AP Lang often referred to the rhetorical analysis as a common feature of the AP Lang course, as well as a genre they expect to practice at the college level. Students employed rhetorical terms through daily writing assignments, blog posts, and formative assessment via Quizlet, an online learning program. Along with more informal activities, many of the participants who took AP Lang referred to "style days" as a regular component to the AP Lang course. Based on participant responses, it seems the class was designed in such a way that students could practice and experiment with different ways of writing and through

⁴ Participants did not explicitly identify AP Lang as an institutional representation. Rather, in my data analysis, I identified the ways in which participants talked about AP Lang as an institutional representation, along with other examples like GLHS and standardized assessment.

⁵ While information about participants' experiences with AP Lang emerged from the data, this study did not include any observations of the course of itself or an interview with Mr. Chesley. Still, it is worth first providing some context about the AP Lang course to better understand the experiences participants in this article draw upon to enact social comparison.

different means of writing (e.g. blog writing). All of this work, according to participants, also served as work towards the major essay assignments and the AP Lang exam—the synthesis essay, for which students were given about two weeks to gather research through interviews, online databases, and any other resources they believed useful to their research. Most participants who took AP Lang reported that overall, the class was not easy, but ultimately was a huge accomplishment.

Taking AP Lang was a crucial event in the larger high school experience of participants who took AP Lang, and beyond developing specific writing skills, was a seminal experience that influenced their perceived preparedness in that many participants who took the class believed they were more prepared mainly because they took AP Lang. For example, as we will learn from Alex later in this article, AP Lang, for them, was also a very challenging experience, and making it through the course and doing well on the exam was a proud moment for Alex.⁶ Alex even questioned whether college-level writing could actually get any more challenging than what they have already experienced through preparing for the AP Lang exam: “Considering the whole College Board AP test, I would think that is also how you want to write in college because I’m technically taking a college class. I assume it would be the same. Not to mention, just thinking about it, I just figure, how else could they add stuff onto rhetorically analyzing I just think about it, and I’m like, ‘How do you add more complicated stuff to it?’” Alex was not the only participant who seemed to equate AP Lang with college-level writing, and we will learn from other participants later in the article that success in AP Lang caused them to expect success with college-level writing. Additionally, for most participants who took AP Lang, the rhetorical analysis was a genre that they were able to practice throughout their junior year in AP Lang and because this genre was a component of various assessments, like the AP exam and the SAT, Alex and other students associated their experience with writing rhetorical analyses both with their preparedness to write at the college-level as well as what they expected college-level writing to entail.

Most participants were, regardless of whether they took AP Lang, aware that AP Lang was perceived as an intensive writing class. Furthermore, most participants were well aware that AP Lang carried a certain air of prestige and high academic status within the halls of GLHS. Not all participants necessarily agreed that it was the “be-all-end-all” of preparedness for college-level writing, as will be discussed in more depth later in this article, but AP Lang’s reputation at GLHS was certainly on most of the participants’ radars, and for some it made an impact on students’ self-efficacy in their preparedness to write at the college level, an important factor for how participants compared themselves to one another. Take

⁶ When discussing Alex, I will use the singular “they” and its variations as the singular “they” is Alex’s preferred personal pronoun.

Stewart who, when asked to reflect on what preparedness for college-level writing meant to him, resolutely responded, “I think it means that I’ve had practice doing what I’m going to need to be doing before. I’ve had the practice. I know what to expect, and I know what I’m getting into with this and that I’m going to be able to go and write successfully at college.” Throughout his interviews, Stewart often associated his expectations for college-level writing with the writing he had done in AP Lang, but the ways in which he talked about those AP Lang experiences surfaced an interconnectedness of global and local institutional representations that seemed to affect how Stewart perceived his level of preparedness for college-level writing. This interconnectedness of global and local institutional representations manifested from how Stewart talked about his teachers, but also how he saw a course like AP Lang as an investment that was sold to him by the College Board.

When he elaborated on his expectations for college-level writing during his first interview, Stewart explained, “Especially in the AP settings, ‘cause these are supposed to be college classes, the teachers have been drilling it into our mind, that this is what we’d be doing in college, and what we will be doing in college.”⁷ Stewart’s description of teachers “drilling” ideas into students’ minds suggests that Stewart’s teachers take part into the local institutional representation that perpetuates certain conceptions of preparedness present at GLHS. Teachers, then, play a role in how AP courses serve as a local institutional representation that influences what preparedness means and looks like at GLHS. Teachers are expected to provide models for their students about what is correct and what is not (Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, 1999). By indicating that he is certain about what college-level writing will entail because “teachers [especially in the AP settings] have been drilling it into our mind”, Stewart’s account illuminates teachers as disseminating specific information about what students should be prepared for and what they will be writing when they arrive at college. Thus, teachers, on a local level, are conveying specific representations that may have derived from global institutional representations like the College Board, but are verified and considered *the* way to

⁷ Throughout his interviews, Stewart pointed even more to AP Lang and his belief that it directly prepares students for college-level writing. Stewart, along with other participants, perceived college-level writing as writing across various subjects. Therefore, for some participants, college-level writing was not necessarily limited to a singular first year writing course. Although Stewart, in the above excerpt, groups AP Lit and AP Lang together, it should be noted that Stewart and other students associated AP Lang with college-level writing, more than AP Lit. This is likely because, according to participants, AP Lang facilitated the practice of a variety of writing skills and tasks, while the AP Lit course more narrowly focused on writing in response to literature. Participants did not expect college-level writing would have very much to do with literature unless they majored in English, and therefore, because AP Lang encouraged various writing tasks like rhetorical analyses and synthesis essays, participants, especially Stewart, felt highly prepared to write at the college level.

write at the college level. Stewart picks up on environmental cues from his teachers that inform his ideas about his perceived preparedness. It is possible that Stewart's teachers might have also suggested that what they are learning in AP courses are stepping stones to what they will actually do at the college-level, but even so, Stewart drew conclusions about college-level writing based on how he perceived AP courses as represented to him by his teachers on a local level where students and teachers interact to make meaning together. Essentially, global representations exert pressure on how college-level writing and preparedness are defined and these representations are reinforced by teachers on a local level.

Stewart's ideas about AP classes also surfaced the ways in which AP courses function as a global institutional representation. After Stewart reported what his teachers said about AP courses, I asked Stewart to clarify whether he equated AP classes with college-level writing and he responded, "Yes. That's how the College Board sold them to us." Stewart's statement embodies an inherent contradiction, but affirmatively stating that yes, he equates AP Lang with college-level writing, but then offering the caveat that that is what was sold to him by the College Board. Stewart's statement also demonstrates that the local representation AP Lang functions as has a relationship to how college-level writing and preparedness are represented by AP Lang on a more local level. Stewart's teachers have "drilled" the idea that courses like AP Lang are equivalent to college-level writing, but it is ultimately the College Board that sells the "package," to teachers and students alike. Stewart continued, "I understand that the College Board is, they're out there trying to make money. They're the purveyors of the standardized testing that allows us to be compared adequately with other students. Especially when going into the college level." Stewart's use of "purveyors" to describe the College Board is fascinating because while Stewart does identify the entity as sellers of something, with a motive to profit from the curriculum and assessments they distribute, his use of "purveyors" also illuminates how, as Hansen (2010) describes "competing brands" like AP courses "are often marketed to students and their parents as a way to 'take care of' the college writing requirement or 'get it out of the way'...and thus save time and tuition once [students] matriculate at college" (p. 2). Consequently, AP Lang, for Stewart, might be seen more as a commodity.

By using "purveyors" to describe the College Board, Stewart also invokes an entity that disseminates a particular representation of college-level writing. Interestingly enough, Stewart does seem to "buy into" the latter depiction of the College Board, because as he will demonstrate in the next section, Stewart uses his AP Lang experiences to not only deem himself more prepared than students who have not taken AP Lang, but as examples to demonstrate his preparedness for college-level writing. Furthermore, Stewart's commentary suggests that the College Board and its AP Lang curriculum and standardized assessment, like the SAT, demonstrate a reciprocal relationship between local and global

representations that shape the ways in which social comparison occurs within the context of GLHS. Indeed, Stewart's description of the College Board as "purveyors of standardized testing that allows us to be compared adequately with other students" suggests that perhaps students are compared by a more global entity like the college board, but as I will further highlight, these purveyors also create space for students to actively compare themselves to one another and possibly engage in competition.

Institutional Representations through Teacher Talk

It should be noted that the success some student participants described stems from their classroom room experience in AP Lang and in part, what they learned from their AP Lang teacher, Mr. Chesley. Therefore, while standards and expectations can be represented on a more global level, through standardized testing, and affect the way participants think about their own preparedness, these participants also consider their preparedness based on important, local interactions they've had in GLHS classrooms with their teachers.

In some ways, the institutional representations that participants encountered and used to compare themselves to others were more abstract and manifestations of standards and expectations. However, AP Lang as institutional representations seemed to also manifest through teacher talk, especially as participants, like Alex, demonstrate that Mr. Chesley was an important influence on Alex's experience in AP Lang and the conclusions they drew about their preparedness for college-level writing. When Alex reflected on how they believed they were more prepared than their peers, Alex further explained their beliefs about what AP Lang prepares students for:

Not does it only prepare you for logical essay writing, it also prepares you for creative because, at the end, after the AP test, he [Mr. Chesley] had us do some college application essays. I didn't use any, but he was just there like, "This is how you use style," and not to mention we had style days where we'd write on a blog, and he's just like, "Use this kind of sentence structure or description," or whatever. It helped.

How Alex describes Mr. Chesley's teacher talk holds important implications for how ideas about college-level writing and preparedness can be represented to students by teachers. What Alex recalls from Mr. Chesley's instruction may not be completely accurate. Regardless, the explicit "this is how" instruction is what Alex has carried away from the course and is steadfast in believing that AP Lang is *the* way to success with college-level writing. At the beginning of this article, I noted Mrs. Gerard's comment about AP students being the "best of the best," and later Stewart noted how messages about AP Lang and college-level writing have been "drilled into" students at GLHS. Alex once more highlights the influential role

teachers have when they convey certain messages to their students, and when teachers talk, students inevitably pick up on certain messages. In Alex's case, Alex very much values the explicit instruction Mr. Chesley provides about different kinds of writing. Even more importantly, Alex credits how Mr. Chesley taught writing in AP Lang as a crucial element of their preparedness.. Again, it is worth being transparent that this study did not include classroom observations of AP Lang, so I cannot speak to the actual realities of the course that Mr. Chesley taught. It is possible that Mr. Chesley's students received a "thorough exposure" (see Joliffe, 2010) to the principles of rhetorical theory and analysis and garnered important analytical reading and writing skills necessary for college-level writing. Furthermore, we know that AP Lang can work differently, depending on the instructor and school setting, which is why how college-level writing and preparedness is represented to students by teachers is so crucial.

It is important to acknowledge AP courses as potentially useful stepping stones to the preparing students for college-level writing, but it is also possible that AP courses can prevent students from being flexible and open to new challenges and writing experiences. Some students who participated in this study were confident that they *knew* what to expect for the SAT, and it was AP Lang and how AP Lang was represented to them, that they had to thank for that knowledge. In the following sections of this article, I offer examples from participants who both affirm and nuance AP Lang's role at GLHS and influence on student preparedness for college-level writing.

"I feel like I have other skills too that I can bring to the table": Complicating the representation of AP Lang and its effect on participants

In the earlier sections of this article, I have shown how AP Lang is an important institutional representation that affects how some participants compare themselves to their peers, and through that comparison, determine their preparedness to write at the college-level. The participants presented in this article, have up to this point, indicated that AP Lang is results in their preparedness for college-level writing and that students who take the course are likely more than an "average" student. What's more, even though I explicitly asked students to consider their preparedness according to how they compare themselves to their peers, for some of these participants, comparison involved more than comparing writing and grades. Rather, social comparison also involves the reciprocal relationship of local and global institutional representations like AP Lang curriculum and experiences, teacher instruction (or lack thereof) and standardized assessment that serves as a gate-keeping function for college admissions. While these representations might hold influence over some students at GLHS so that much that participants' self-efficacy was affected, it is also important to acknowledge how some participants

resisted these representations and in some cases, expressed more confidence in their own mastery experience. In the final section of this article, I complicate the ideas that taking AP Lang better prepares students for college-level writing. I offer three examples from Zach, who did take AP Lang, and two other examples from Rosy, who dropped AP Lang, and Charlotte James, who did not take AP Lang. The examples offered in this section do not necessarily contribute to frequent instances of AP Lang references in the data, but do serve as interesting outliers that offer a different perspective on the reputation of AP Lang at GLHS and how students might compare themselves to one another to determine their perceived preparedness for college-level writing. Ultimately, I argue that even though institutional representations bear down on students in both local and global ways, the views of the participants in this section suggest that students think carefully about how college-level writing and preparedness are represented to them in concert with their mastery experience. Through their thought processes, these participants make informed decisions about their own preparedness and expectations for college-level writing that depart from the ways in which other participants in this article have been affected by institutional representations.

Different from other participants in this article, Zach did not indicate that AP Lang was equivalent to college-level writing, nor did he think it was *the* ticket to complete preparedness for college-level writing. Rather, he saw the course as appropriate for the high school context.

I did, however, ask Zach during his second interview to clarify whether he equated AP Lang with what he expected college-level writing to be like when he made the transition. Zach admits a level of uncertainty about what college-level writing will entail, but does suspect that it won't necessarily be the same as his AP courses. He explained:

I haven't taken any [college-level courses]—well, technically, they pretty much are, but personally, I would say that they come—to me, come off—and this is from someone who—I haven't taken any actually college course at a college yet. I think that they might be more geared towards the high school environment just because the teachers are high school teachers. Once you have that high school mold around it, I don't wanna say it waters it down, but it takes a little bit of that edge off of it actually being a college class, I think....and I wanna say that once you take—I think the ones you take in college, they might be shorter. You're doing more material in less time than you would in high school.

By using phrases like, “waters it down,” to describe AP courses I do not think Zach meant to suggest that his high school courses were not rigorous or that his teachers did not teach him well. On the contrary, Zach believed that AP Lang, as he explained, “really helped me get the balance I needed between math and English. That helped me open up my mind more to nuanced things, and how to argue,

conceding your argument, and learning a lot of those little nuances that helped me out.” But Zach also fully recognizes the high school context he is in currently, and the possibility of differences in writing in a new context. In fact, different from what some of his AP Lang peers might suggest, Zach sees high school and college as different places, with different purposes. Essentially, Zach takes into consideration the local context of his GLHS experience, but also the global context of high school, and what the purpose of high school should be. Especially when he suggests that courses like AP Lang are “geared towards the high school environment” and are taught by *high school* teachers, for Zach, it’s not just about what the College Board might be selling to him, as it was for Stewart, but the context Zach is currently in. Zach is recognizing a specific context, its members, and draws his own conclusions about what that context represents. In that way, Zach has developed a different idea of what preparedness and college-level writing should be, and thus rejects the notion that AP Lang, and really anything about high school is equal to what college entails.

I would say I’d expect it to—as far as preparation, I view this as my preparation, to an extent. As far as what I expect, I’m expecting it to be just this is high school here, then this is college, moving—it’s just going to be another step up. If you go into that without being—having that mindset, you can be shocked at first.

Zach has the foundation, as he indicated to embrace nuances and perhaps practice more critical thinking, but for Zach, it takes steps. Zach also indicates that suggesting that classes like AP Lang should be equated with college-level writing might actually be detrimental to students’ learning experiences as they transition from high school to college-level writing. Zach recognizes that there is more to learn and that perhaps, despite its academic rigor and benefits, AP Lang does not necessarily ensure complete preparedness or is it equal to college-level writing. In a similar way, Rosy also embraced the idea that there is more to learn as she transitioned from high school writing and in fact, dropped AP Lang for fear of the class limiting her writing experiences.

Earlier in this article, I provided examples from Rosy who, during her first interview, described how she compares herself to her peers to consider her preparedness. Similar to most participants, Rosy does not discount the significance of AP or SAT scores or the peer pressure she gets from her friends with merit scholarships. However, while she uses these kinds of comparisons, similar to Zach, Rosy did not use AP Lang as an example to compare herself to her peers. Importantly, while Rosy recognizes elements of competition and rigor at GLHS and uses social comparison to determine her own preparedness, this does not necessarily mean for Rosy that preparedness for college-level writing is solely dictated by how preparedness and college-level writing are represented to students at GLHS by courses like AP Lang. I offer Rosy’s account because while, like Zach,

she demonstrates a similar resistance to the notion that a course like AP Lang will result in ultimate preparedness for college-level writing, Rosy offers a different representation of AP Lang altogether. Rosy first perceives the purpose of AP Lang as relegated to test preparation and then discusses how what she believed the purpose of AP Lang to be, could actually be detrimental to her writerly self.

Also during her first interview, Rosy described her writerly self as creative and expressed a love for reading and writing fiction. When describing kinds of writing she preferred, she explained, “I do prefer writing more fictional, write at your own—I don’t know, whatever you feel like. If it’s a given topic and I can just write whatever I want and there are limited guidelines, I think that it’s more fun and easier.” Rosy’s creative writerly self and her writing preferences might contribute to why she was not convinced that a course like AP Lang was equivalent to college-level writing or that it automatically made students better writers. In fact, during her second interview, Rosy explained that she originally intended to take AP Lang during her junior year, but after a week, she decided to drop the course when she realized the course might have negative effects on her writing:

Rosy: I was in it for a week, and, originally, I wanted to take the class. It was a lot of really intense writing, and, I write because I like writing, not because I want to prepare for a test. I felt it was not really going in the direction that I wanted it to, so, I ended up dropping it.

Interviewer: You stuck with AP Lit this year. What’s the difference, I wonder?

Rosy: AP Lit is more reading, and, I like that one thing that Mrs. Gerard does is she doesn’t teach for the test. The class is for students that are actually interested in expanding their reading and writing abilities. It’s not taught towards one area. A certain structure. It’s more a club...They [AP Lang] teach to the test and it’s very structured, and everything has to be uniform. I was in it for a while and I was like, “You know, this isn’t really where I wanna go with writing.” ‘Cause I like it [writing] and I felt if I stayed in the class forever, that it might destroy my love for writing because it was really intense and stuff.

Interviewer: As you’re looking ahead to college, are you okay with that decision still?

Rosy: Yeah. It was a good direction because I feel I would hate writing if I did take the class. It may have made me a better writer and helped me a lot for college, but I didn’t wanna not have that [love for writing] still....Other classes still prepare you, ‘cause the goal in any class is to prepare you for college, even if it isn’t an AP class. It’s still designed to help you do better.

While her exposure to AP Lang was brief, Rosy learned enough to know that the course would not be a good fit for her, and in fact, that it might narrow and limit her writing ability “destroy [her] love for writing.” Rosy might also be aware of the

reputation AP Lang has at GLHS, but importantly, she makes her own decision that practicing writing skills and preserving her love for writing are more important to her writing development than “prepar[ing] for a test.” Instead, Rosy values the writing experiences she has had and trusts that those experiences have helped her to develop important skills, and, in turn, prepare her for college. Similar to Zach, Rosy also demonstrates an awareness for how a local context can shape writing experiences when she says, “the goal in any class is to prepare you for college, even if it isn’t an AP class.” Rosy sees her high school courses as preparatory, but not necessarily equivalent to college courses. Thus, Rosy might not agree with other students like Stewart, Emma, or Alex, that AP Lang is equivalent to college-level writing. Further, unlike other participants, Rosy does not seem to relegate her perceived preparedness to achieving outcomes, preparing for tests, and churning out written products. Rosy still values those outcomes and is explicit about how she uses those outcomes to compare herself to her peers, but also seems to expect that there is room for growth when it comes to developing her writing and reading skills. Rosy did not believe AP Lang was the place to do that. Intermixed with her sense of institutional representations important to her perceived preparedness, Rosy also seems confident in what she believes is best for her and what has so far best prepared her for college-level writing. Rather than accept AP Lang as the equivalent to college-level writing or that it is the best way to prepare future writing experiences, Rosy trusts in her writerly self, the mastery experience she has developed, to confidentially make the transition to college-level writing.

Charlotte identifies herself as creative, and I offer a brief excerpt from her to further demonstrate how some participants, while recognizing dominant representations of college-level writing and preparedness at GLHS, choose other ways of approaching new writing experiences, while still expressing higher levels of confidence in their ability to write at the college level. In the earlier sections of this article, we saw how students compare themselves to each other with attention to things like equating college-level writing to AP courses and mastering standardized assessment. While they are aware of what AP Lang represents to other students, when Rosy and Charlotte compare themselves to other peers they do not necessarily direct all of their attention to grades, for example. In the following excerpt, Charlotte will acknowledge that she believes AP Lang students are prepared, but what seems key is that Charlotte does not seem to believe that the course is the “end-all-be-all” or a means for ultimate preparedness. In fact, Charlotte instead suggests that students who she identifies as “wired to like get an A,” might face some challenges when they are asked to write something that is not part of what they have already experienced or that does not match their expectations for college-level writing. Furthermore, for Charlotte, it does seem that more self-confidence emerges out of what she determines about her own mastery experience:

I'm like a pretty average person. I feel like I'm pretty in the middle. Obviously, like

there's people in my AP Lit class who took AP Lang and like literally it was their life. I feel like, yeah, those people are prepared. I feel like I have other skills too that I can bring to the table. I'm like a little bit more creative, I think. Some people are just like really smart have a hard time with that. Especially if an English class, they're like, "Okay, we're doing something like fun writing." I feel like certain people, like especially at [this school], their brains are literally not wired to do that. They're wired to like get an A. I think that in a sense, I am like in the middle of preparedness."

Charlotte, without being explicit about it, does seem to have awareness of institutional representations that shaped students' ideas of what it means to be prepared for college-level writing. Even for Charlotte, while she is confident that she has skills that other students might not be able to offer, she still sees identifies herself as "in the middle of preparedness." Does, Charlotte, then, despite her resistance to institutional representations like AP Lang, still consider herself only in the middle of preparedness because she does not necessarily meet the expectations of those institutional representations? Certainly, she demonstrates an understanding of institutional representations and how it might affect her peers' perceptions, but Charlotte seems to be more comfortable and confident in swimming around in the middle, so to speak, if it means she can practice other skills and learn more from her writing experiences along the way.

Charlotte, through her comfortability with average, does not demonstrate complacency or that she is "less than," but an awareness for other qualities and skills she has developed without taking courses like AP Lang. Charlotte suggests that there is room for growth and other kinds of writing skills and approaches, like creativity, to bring to the table as she anticipates the transition to college-level writing. In fact, when she compares herself to other peers, even though she identifies herself as average, it might be that Charlotte believes she is at an advantage because she is not "wired to get an A," but possibly explore and learn about other kinds of writing.

Together, Zach, Rosy, and Charlotte suggest that AP Lang also has limitations and is one way of developing preparedness for college-level writing, but not *the* way. Further, both Zach and Rosy indicate that while AP Lang might be an avenue for preparedness, the purpose of this course, as well as any other high school course does not serve the same purpose as college courses. Thus, these students are very much aware of the contexts in which they are learning, but do not seem to accept the institutional representations that circulate throughout GLHS. Rosy and Charlotte especially suggest that institutional representations of college-level writing and preparedness might not account for are other writing skills like

creativity or writing different kinds of writing, beyond what is required for the test or to get the A.

Conclusion and Implications

When some participants in this study used AP Lang as an example to compare themselves to one another, their accounts reflected ways that the course potentially better prepares students to write at the college-level, and that AP Lang represents the “gold-standard” of college-level writing and preparedness. However, other students, while recognizing the reputation of AP Lang at GLHS rejected the idea that they needed the course to be adequately prepared to write at the college-level, and thereby pushed back against the institutional reputation that AP Lang is equivalent to college-level writing. Even if some of the participants highlighted in this article disagreed on the value of AP Lang for college-level writing preparedness, I argue that all the participants in this article brought to light that first, peer comparison does not just occur through observing one another, but interacting and essentially, comparing notes with each other. Based on participants’ accounts in this article, I further argue that social comparison emerges not only from observation and interaction, but much of the participants’ observations and interactions based on the institutional representations that are bearing down on them. For example, on a global level, Stewart buys into, so to speak, what the College Board, as the “purveyors are standardized testing,” are selling him.

I also suggest that the way institutional representations play out within the halls of GLHS could be wildly different from other schools, based on their location and the resources to which those schools have access. Stewart and Rosy have indicated to us that GLHS is a high-performing school, but also a wealthy school with myriad resources to support its students, including the opportunity to take AP courses. While the scope of this project does not focus on economic inequalities of access to education, the ways in which participant accounts reflect institutional representations points to future, crucial research on how college-level writing and preparedness are represented and promoted (or not) across varying school contexts.

Participants’ accounts also raise questions of how institutional representations of college-level writing promote or inhibit learning. Findings highlighted in this article support self-efficacy research that posits that individuals are both products and producers of their environments. In this study, participants were clearly responding to certain representations and pressures within in GLHS, to the point that a course like AP Lang was believed to be the epitome of preparedness and the equivalent of college-level writing. Other participants seemed to make a more agentic move away from the dominant AP Lang reputation at GLHS. For example, AP Lang served more as a stepping stone for Zach to even more rigorous and nuanced writing practices. Importantly, what this article

demonstrates is that these participants are drawing informed conclusions about their preparedness based on how college-level writing is represented to them. All the participants in this article demonstrate a keen sense of awareness for their surroundings and make significant decisions on what to embrace in their learning and sometimes, what to resist.

Not only do the findings I offer need to be considered in context, but the support that educators might offer to students across the nation, will likely look different, based on their experiences. There are, of course, other factors like parent support and financial resources that create school environments and student support. However, it seems reasonable that teacher attitude as it was reported by participants at GLHS could be put forth by teachers across schools and districts. Participants' perceptions of institutional representations hold implications for taking up global representations of preparedness and college-level writing, while at the same time fostering a local environment in which students are simply told by teachers that they have value and that, if they want to, they can go to college. There is a crucial need, then, to build structure and culture in any school that fosters confidence, rather than taking it away through means of standardized testing.

GLHS students certainly felt the pressure of standardized testing, but teachers and structures were in place to build student confidence and help them face any challenge. It is therefore crucial for educators across K-12 and college spaces to consider the messages students might be receiving locally, from their teachers, parents, and others they interact with, as well as how messages not local to their learning contexts, might be still circulating. It seems especially important that local stakeholders understand what students observe, who they are interacting with, and what educators who are directly interacting with these students on a local level do to support students in their learning experiences. It is likely that much of how college-level writing and preparedness are represented in the K-12 classroom is shaped by how policy makers, legislators, and educational organizations establish national expectations for their students. To offer just one example of these influences, recall that Stewart called the College Board the purveyors of preparedness. Whatever the College Board sold, Stewart bought, with the expectation that he would be successful at the college level. Third party organizations like College Board and Advanced Placement often dictate how curriculum looks in the classroom.

Educational policy also affects what teachers do in the classroom and therefore what students learn about writing. What's more, the language of educational policy often excludes teachers and students in the actual classroom. Consequently, students and teachers are made to feel less agentic in the classroom especially when the discourse of preparedness is driven by high-stakes assessment and "internationally benchmarked standards" without much concern for what is happening locally in the classroom itself. (Gallagher, 2011; McKenna and Graham,

2000). At the same time, there have been times when teachers have been asked to contribute to the design of standards and guiding frameworks like CCSS (one teacher was asked to contribute) and the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. It should also be possible, then, that educators and policy makers could consider student voices and actually involve students in more intentional ways to develop curriculum, assessment, professional development, and policy efforts, giving agency back to students and teachers—those who are on the front lines of preparedness for college-level writing.

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