

Value in Academic Writing:

An Inquiry into Reader Response

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Abstract

Undergraduate students constitute a large part of academic communities, but their place in these communities may be unclear. This paper seeks to evaluate the ethos attached to student writers by their instructors. Much of the current literature indicates that students are perceived as incompetent outsiders in academic communities and society at large, but researchers have recently been advocating for a perspective that is more inclusive and accepting of student work. The data collected in this study indicates that college writing instructors tend to evaluate the work of their students no differently than that of their colleagues. None of the findings support a theory of inferior student ethos leading to a disparity between responses to texts when responders believe they are written by an undergraduate student in comparison to when they believe they are

**Comment [DD1]:** Interesting title!

So: Perhaps most obviously (to me as one reader, anyway), this is a really nicely done study – well conducted, and well written.

Structurally (the first place to begin) the paper is sound—good flow, all the necessary moves. It's easy to read and follow—never lost. Materially, it's solid: No move that I would expect is missing here; I don't see unnecessary material either. To the really positive, there are many actively good moments in the piece, either in the actual moves your research makes or in your thinking about the results of them. A ton of good ideas. I'm impressed, ultimately, with the smartness of the study design and what, even with a small N, it gets you. Your interpretive work is pretty solid as well.

There is only one absolutely necessary fix to the piece by the time I do final grading: The methods section needs an additional introductory paragraph overviewing the big picture of the study you did.

You should also keep fighting with your graph placement: as a manuscript copy, it's not terribly important here that things flow perfectly, but, it did make the document somewhat hard to use.

You might also choose to continue working on the piece for publication beyond the course—I think it certainly has strong potential for *Young Scholars in Writing*. In that case, my next strongest suggestion for revision would be a slightly expanded review of literature that addressed some of the misgivings you'll see in my comments. I would also say that you can to a bit more thinking about the implications of your study results for our definitions of ethos, and I point out those places.

On the whole, this is really impressive work, especially for your first time at bat with this kind of project, and I'm really glad you were committed to getting this experience. I'd be happy to help you work on taking it farther if you like.

**Comment [DD2]:** Notably well written—good compactness, thoroughness, choice of main ideas, and tone.

written by a professor with a PhD. Two different catalysts could explain these results: an unexpectedly strong student ethos or a general lack of concern for the identity of writers. Potential issues with the research included in this paper and avenues for future research are also discussed.

Value in Academic Writing:  
An Inquiry into Reader Response

Undergraduate students may wonder how their writing instructors evaluate student compositions. Is their work taken seriously by instructors, or is it considered differently because of the status of its creators? Do instructors view the writing of proven and accredited members of the academic community differently because of their stature as fellow instructors and researchers? I believe these questions are primarily inquiries into the nature of student ethos; they strike at the essence of undergraduate students' relationships with the academic community of professional writers that their instructors presumably represent. In this paper, I will endeavor to determine whether writing instructors respond differently to the work of their students than the work of academic writers with superior credentials. Ethos is considered as the qualities of speakers instead of ethical appeals within texts, and the primarily negative views of relationships between students and instructors are described. The research supporting these views seems to suggest that students have a poor academic ethos that reflects badly upon their writing. However, my own original research does not support this conclusion; it indicates that there is no significant difference between the ways instructors view the work of undergraduate students and the ways

**Comment [DD3]:** A word that comes to mind here is "novice," in an "apprentice" sense. Will be curious whether these terms come up later in the piece.

they view the work of their colleagues. This lack of differentiation could be the result of a strong student ethos or a lack of regard for writer identity on the part of instructors. It could also be due to deficiencies or issues within the research whose results are presented in this paper.

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

Many conceptions of ethos are exceptionally broad. The *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* tentatively defines ethos as “character as it emerges in language” (“Ēthos” 263). It goes on to explain that ethos has been given many alternative and competing meanings throughout its history (“Ēthos” 263). In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ethos is defined as “an audience’s assessment of a speaker’s moral character (e.g., honesty, benevolence, intelligence) primarily as reflected in the discourse, although at least secondarily dependent on the speaker’s prior reputation” (“Ethos”). This definition illustrates the multiple meanings associated with ethos; it is defined as both character as reflected by discourse and character as reflected by prior reputation. S. Michael Halloran further validates this interpretation. He writes that a good speaker leaves a favorable impression of character by “bringing to the rhetorical occasion a good reputation, but he must also manifest the proper character through the choices made in his speech” (60).

The split definition of ethos is explained by George Yoos as “a mix-up between the concepts of ethos and ethical appeal” (41). Yoos explains that ethos lies in the qualities of speakers instead of ethical proofs offered through discourse (44). The other half of character formation which stems from speech acts should be categorized as ethical appeals and not ethos itself (Yoos 49). Combined with Halloran’s assertion that ethos can have a collective meaning that applies to whole cultural groups (62), ethos can be seen as the perceptual character of a group that exists prior to and in spite of individual speech acts. This is the definition of ethos that will be utilized and applied to student ethos throughout this paper.

The ethos of cultural groups does not exist in a vacuum; it is generated by cultural contexts. The *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* suggests that ethos is in part “the construction of one’s history and culture” (“Ēthos” 273). Ethos is also subject to authority: it exists simultaneously with influential cultural voices which can include constructs such as institutions and cultural classes (“Ēthos” 274). Halloran identifies institutions of learning as one of the most powerful shapers of ethos. He writes, “Of all the ritual acts by which our culture expresses and shapes its

**Comment [DD4]:** If you continue on in study of rhetoric (because I’m not sure there’s really enough time still on this project to really explore the following), I’d suggest more reading on ethos that gets toward ethos as a *way of being* that then resonates with audience values. Readings that might be helpful here are John Ramage’s *Rhetoric: A User’s Guide*, Johanna Schmertz’s work on ethos as constructing essences, Nedra Reynolds’ work on ethos as location, and more descriptive work on how people actually develop ethos, like Ann Beaufort’s work on the transition from college to workplace writing. (Very diffuse discussion across an entire book, but interesting insights.)

I usually don’t play a blame game on dated sources, but ... there’s definitely been more said on ethos since ’79 (Yoos) and ’82 (Halloran), outside of reference entries like Sloan’s.

*ethos*, schooling is surely one of the most subtle and powerful” (63). The relationships between students and instructors and the academic conceptualization of student ethos that stems from them are part of what is formed by the rhetorical shaper that is higher education.

A discussion of student ethos formation in higher education must begin with an examination of those employees of the institution that facilitate student identity formation: instructors. In his book *Higher Education in America*, Derek Bok presents instructors as intense competitors fighting to retain student attention in an age where social and electronic distraction have combined with possible declines in student aptitude and interest to create a generation of disengaged students (184). It seems as though students themselves may be key to the formation of negative conceptions about students on the part of instructors. It is unlikely that instructors who have devoted themselves to academic advancement will be impressed by students who are distracted and uninterested.

Other views focus upon instructor habits and actions which may facilitate problems in the academic environment, leading to unflattering views concerning student performance. Bok writes that many instructors often lecture in class in spite of the fact that lecturing has repeatedly been shown to be ineffective and very poor at encouraging information retention amongst students (187). Samantha Looker writes that “attitudes toward student writing and writers in pedagogical research often limit scholars’ abilities to see students’ authority, intelligence and potential contributions” (125). Bruce Maylath notes that studies have indicated that writing instructors tend to speak in support of author/student authority but end up grading on the basis of reader/teacher authority (32). He also writes that the instructors “seem oblivious to the effect our subconscious has on our judgments of students’ writing” (Maylath 35). Such views paint a less-than-generous portrait of the ways instructors tend to behave in regard to students and their writing.

From a more expansive perspective, the tension created by seemingly negative views of students and problematic instruction seems to lead to problems. Jennie Nelson notes that “describing students as newcomers or outsiders who need to be initiated into the academic discourse community has become a commonplace in discussions of writing across the disciplines” (411). Looker has noted that undergraduate students are often described as novices and have very little input into how they are represented (113). Nancy Sommers draws attention to lists of writing outcomes that present an idealized view of what some instructors believe

**Comment [DD5]:** Interesting take, Bok's.

**Comment [DD6]:** So this is an interesting frame / light in which to use this term. It's used positively in learning theory such as "community of practice" theory.

student writers should achieve (153). Such plans make students seem more like products on an assembly line than competent writers. According to Theresa Lillis, “the idea that students can’t write is central to official, public and pedagogic discourse in many parts of the world” (21). All of these descriptions present a view of students as outsiders and beginners whose poor writing skills must be improved before they can be inducted into their academic discourse communities as full members.

Derogatory views of students do not cease even outside of the college environment. Societal perceptions of undergraduate students seem to be equally disheartening. A Conference Board study “found that employers felt that only 16 percent of recent graduates excelled at communicating in writing while only 28 percent excelled in critical thinking” (Bok 180). These findings suggest a pervasive lack of belief in student ability that extends beyond academic boundaries and reaches the entirety of society. Broad cultural perceptions of student ineptitude can do little to encourage trust of student work in academic environments and could potentially lead to a decline in positive perceptions of student ethos.

Pervasive and negative descriptions of both students and their writing instructors have given rise to an equally unenthusiastic view of the bond that exists between students and instructors and might help to give rise to student ethos. Looker describes the existence of a “them/us” dichotomy that presents students as outsiders and instructors as the authoritative holders of knowledge (114). Nannerl Keohane takes notice of the importance of research in a university setting and the fact that professors have been known to work at a new institution in exchange for less exposure to undergraduate students (65). The hours an instructor spends teaching have also been shown to shrink as his or her professional skills grow (Keohane 170). In return, students may focus on prescribed guidelines and assignment sheets while ignoring the actual lessons instructors are trying to instill (Nelson 420). In some cases, students have been shown to be more intent upon discovering what instructors wish to see in student writing so that they may obtain a superior grade than upon the import of their assignments (Nelson 413). The student/teacher bond as represented through this perspective is one focused on research and grades and seems unlikely to foster a sense of mutual respect.

A second view of the relationship between instructors and their students is noticeably more positive and advocates for change and greater cordiality between instructors and students. Nelson draws attention to the value of recognizing students as insiders who have been writing

**Comment [DD7]:** Again, I’m not going to worry about it at this point in the project, but if you were to continue working in this area, I’m struggling to see a level of refinement in this review that would distinguish between “outsider” (outside of rhet/comp) views of student efficacy (which accord quite a bit with what you’re describing here) and “insider” views that don’t use terms like “novice” pejoratively. Such views do absolutely position students or *any* newcomers to a given discourse community as beginners, novices, outsiders, and people who don’t know what they’re doing. But from the insider perspective, there is no derision or blame attached to this status; it’s as simple as saying, when you’re new to a place, why would you know what you’re doing? It’s a new way of being that needs to be learned, and sometimes taught. (There’s a difference, of course.)

Anyway, I don’t see in the lit review so far (in part because it would be difficult to span a wide enough array of the research and discussion to get at it) that distinction—that not everyone who says students don’t know what they’re doing is being or means to be derogatory toward them.

**Comment [DD8]:** Very good term for what you’re getting at, and a particularly strong sentence.

**Comment [DD9]:** As I’m reading this I’m thinking, again, about field-dependence, and I wonder which particular fields Looker studies. I think, for example, that we’d see a huge difference in the ethos of fields on this question even between Lit and Rhet/Comp. Rhet/Comp *in-discipline* (this is not the same as “all writing instructors”; actually a vanishingly small percentage of people who teach writing are actually members of the discipline of rhet/comp) has largely adopted a decentering pedagogy (we stopped running lecture courses 50 years ago, for example) that removes the instructor from being the font of all knowledge; my impression is that literature instruction is somewhere in between.

**Comment [DD10]:** You’re doing a wonderful job of creating a coherent narrative with this review.

and reading in school for years so that they can “take more authority for their decisions as writers” (427). Looker writes that students should be seen as scholars (126). They have the potential to be skilled researchers within their own lives (Looker 113). The rewards for treating students as respected insiders could be considerable. Keohane indicates that “teaching, at its best, is a shared experience in which teacher and student strive together towards a clearer explication” (61). According to Nelson, more joint learning “occurs when the teacher is not the sole authority in the classroom but assumes that students might have something of interest to share, and incorporates students’ contributions into class lessons” (426). In this view of student/instructor relationships, both parties benefit from treating one another with respect and using student insights to supplement instructor knowledge and experiences. Looker notes that her experiences working with undergraduate co-researchers complicated her role as a researcher and resulted in fruitful relationships in which she served as a teacher, colleague, advocate, and friend (113). More relationships like those that Looker described could result in a burgeoning acknowledgment of students as competent academics.

A review of the relevant literature in regard to student ethos provides a great deal of support for the conclusion that writing instructors and undergraduate students do not coexist well. Much of the available scholarship suggests that many instructors consciously and subconsciously use ineffective teaching techniques and fail to see student writers as valuable members of their academic communities. Similarly, a great deal of the literature supports the conclusion that students are uninterested and distracted novices who have yet to be seen as accomplished writers. These conclusions might lead to the expectation of poor relationships between students and instructors. However, it is plausible that such conclusions might not be reached. Recent research suggests that instructors and students can both benefit from closer and more respectful relationships built on mutual academic and professional interests. If such relationships are flourishing, it is possible that student compositions are viewed as respectable and worthy of serious consideration. The rest of this paper will seek to investigate the nature of student ethos through the eyes of their writing instructors and their responses to writing.

### Research Methods

Three published papers were chosen to be integrated into surveys for writing instructors to review and evaluate. I strove to choose recent examples of writing that investigate highly

**Comment [DD11]:** The undergraduate research movement, which really got rolling in the late 70s, seems central to this. I’m wondering if you looked at all at “undergraduate research” as a search term, which would lead to, for example, the Council on Undergraduate Research and its *CUR Quarterly* publication whose entire premise is precisely this take. A campus like MSU is also relatively UGR intensive, and it would be interesting to see how attitudes toward the possibility of student contribution vary around our campus. I wonder, would we see a few faculty in each dept who really believe in UGR and student contribution, or would we see some depts. more invested in UGR than others, etc?

**Comment [DD12]:** I can’t disagree with this overall conclusion, but I wish there were a way to better explore the *why’s* of it than this lit review has, because it hasn’t represented well the vast preponderance of literature in the field of rhet/comp that emphasizes the value of student contributions and validity of student voices. It’s basically a founding premise of the field, and it’s not really well represented here. I’m also not sure this lit review differentiates carefully between criticism leveled at *college teaching in general* and *college writing instruction by qualified writing instructors*.

Still, the reason I can’t disagree with the conclusion is, as I noted above, the fact that a huge number of writing faculty out there are simply not members of this field and are not well educated in this area. Even among our own MSU writing instructorate, I think about the best odds you’d get on this question would be about 50/50. Which is sad, and out-of-value with the field itself.

**Comment [DD13]:** Make a paragraph before this one that overviews the method rather than diving straight into the details of the papers used for the study. *What* study?

So, for example, “To develop data on how writing instructors’ reading of student writing might be shaped by students’ ethos, I conducted an experiment that used published student and professional writing ....” Overview here as well (just a sentence) who participated in the study. This is “headline” stuff that needs to be right-up-top in your methods description.

debated topics in the field of writing and rhetoric. I also chose papers written by authors with highly variable academic backgrounds. The first paper is called “Propaganda vs. Political Persuasion in Politics: Public Beware” and was written by an undergraduate student named Demirae Dunn and listed as a Spotlight on First-Year Writing selection. The paper was published in *Young Scholars in Writing*. The second paper named “Social Media and the ‘Perpetual Project’ of *Ethos* Construction” was written by Robert Holt, an undergraduate writer whose work was not categorized as a Spotlight on First-Year Writing selection. His work was also published in *Young Scholars in Writing*. The last paper selected was composed by Tim Laquintano, who is currently a professor at Lafayette College and has a PhD. It is entitled “Sustained Authorship: Digital Writing, Self-Publishing, and the Ebook” and was published in *Written Communication*.

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

In addition to the writing sample, each survey form included six separate questions. The first three questions were designed to investigate the each respondent’s views of the paper from which she or he had just read an excerpt. The first question on each form asked the respondent to determine how valuable of a contribution she or he felt the paper made to its area of inquiry. Possible answers included “no contribution,” “minimally valuable contribution,” “somewhat valuable contribution,” and “very valuable contribution.” Each choice was associated with a numerical score not disclosed to the participants. “No contribution” meant a score of zero, “minimally valuable contribution” was equivalent to a score of one, “somewhat valuable contribution” was associated with a score of two, and “very valuable contribution” meant a score of three. The second question asked each participant to identify her or his potential willingness to cite the paper in her or his own published academic work if its contents pertained directly to the appropriate area of study. Possible answers to this question included “very unlikely,” “unlikely,” “somewhat likely,” and “very likely.” Scores ranging from zero to three were once again

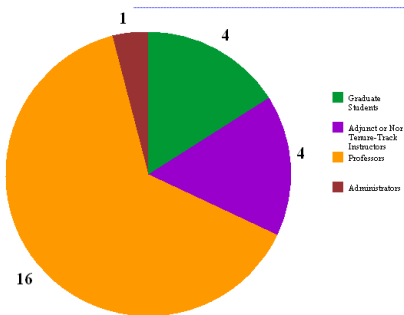
Comment [DD14]: Clever. 😊

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

**Comment [DD15]:** Gotta tell you, I love these questions. So smart. Your methodology here as described so far is pretty solid.

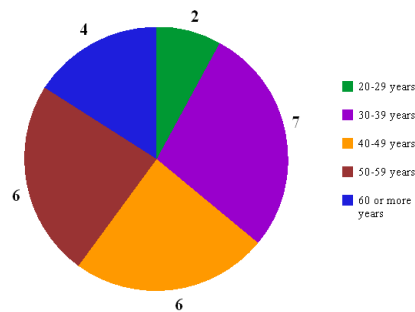
**Figure 1**

Research Participant Academic Status



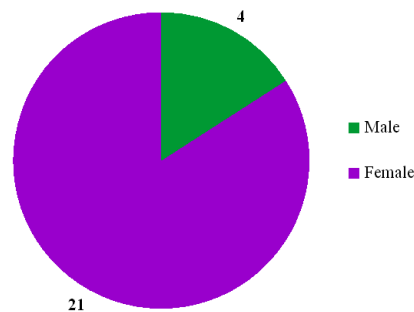
**Figure 2**

Research Participant Age



**Figure 3**

Research Participant Gender



**Comment [DD16]:** Nice graphs. Well done.

graduate students, adjunct or non-tenure-track instructors, professors, and administrators who are or have been college or university writing instructors. A total of 25 writing instructors participated. Those who indicated an interest in participating and then did not complete a survey or surveys are not included in this number; nor are those whose responses were not recorded due to conflicts of interest. Of those who participated, four completed one survey and 21 completed two surveys for a total of 46 survey responses. Participants included four graduate students, four adjunct or non-tenure-track-instructors, 16 professors, and one administrator (see Figure 1). Two participants were between the ages of 20 years and 29 years, seven participants were between the ages of 30 years and 39 years, six participants were between the ages of 40 years and 49 years, six participants were between the ages of 50 years and 59 years, and four participants were 60 years of age or older (see Figure 2). 21 respondents were female and four were male (see Figure 3).

**Comment [DD17]:** Rather than restating data already presented visually, do some brief interpretation of the exactly numbers. E.g., “Most respondents were professors in mid-to-late career.”

Those participants who responded to the request for writing instructors willing to complete reader response surveys were sent via email the link to two survey forms to complete.



Each form included an informed consent form. No respondent received two survey forms that featured excerpts from the same article for analysis. Most survey assignments were made randomly with the aid of a random numbers table, although a far smaller number of assignments were arranged manually in an attempt to make the number of responses to each survey form more even. Participants were aware that they were involved in a study analyzing reader response but were not informed that differences in response to writing identified as having been produced by a student and writing identified as having been produced by a professor with a PhD were being recorded. All forms were submitted electronically.

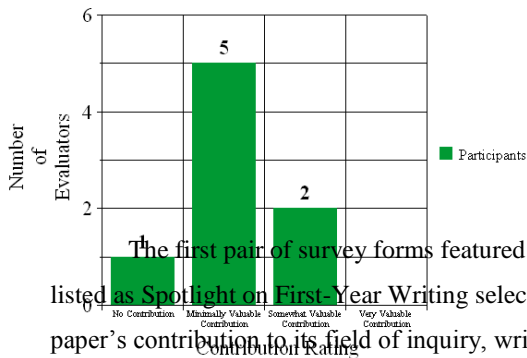
**Comment [DD18]:** statement.

**Research Results**

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

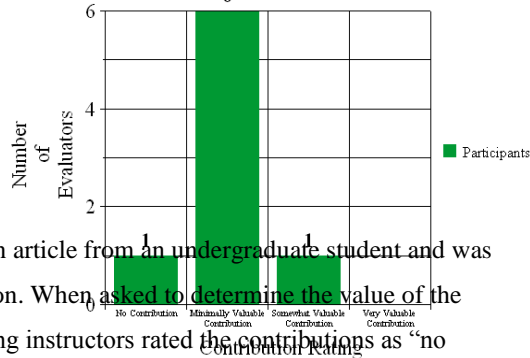
**Figure 4**

Paper One Value of Contribution with Undergraduate Identifier



**Figure 5**

Paper One Value of Contribution with PhD Identifier



**Comment [DD19]:** I had to use a “send behind text” command to see the text that the graphic was overlaying here. You might try some different text wrap options here. Talk with me about possibilities.

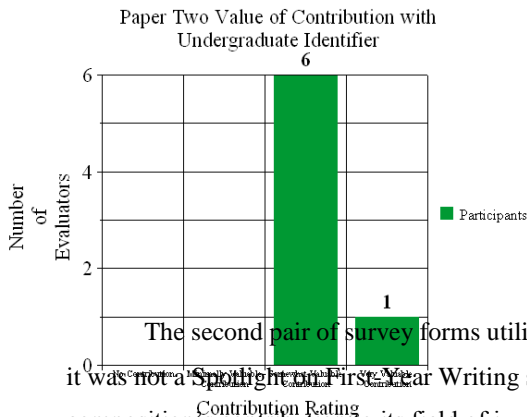
The first pair of survey forms featured an article from an undergraduate student and was listed as *Spotlight on First-Year Writing* selection. When asked to determine the value of the paper’s contribution to its field of inquiry, writing instructors rated the contributions as “no contributions” (a score of zero), “minimally valuable contribution” (a score of one), “somewhat valuable contribution” (a score of two), or “very valuable contribution” (a score of three). Instructors who were informed that a student had written the piece awarded it an average contribution rating of 1.125 (see Figure 4). Instructors who were informed that a professor with a

PhD had written the paper awarded it an average contribution rating of 1 (see Figure 5). The difference between these scores is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .6979.

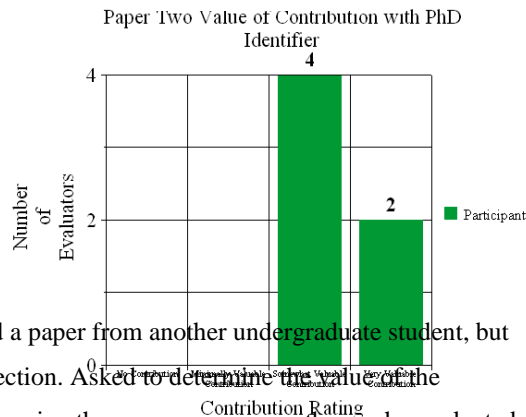
**Comment [DD20]:** Yep, the N's too small. I'll bet in a larger study it is a significant disparity.

One way that you probably want to frame this study is as validating methodology. I think you're really onto something here both in terms of a method for study and a valuable question, and I'll bet we could get a bigger N by distributing the survey directly to a hundred of my best colleague-friends and asking them to distribute it in their programs. Then we'd get a different study pool, too, because you'd be surveying *less informed* writing instructors than those who populate WPA-L.

**Figure 6**

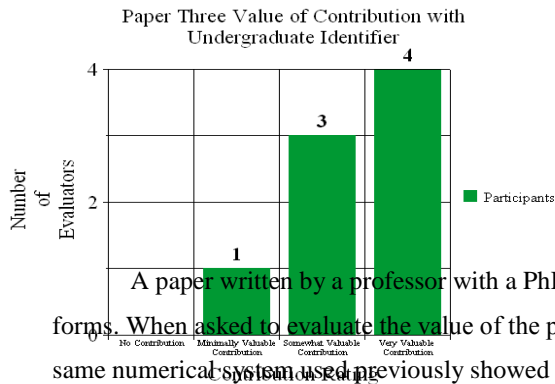


**Figure 7**

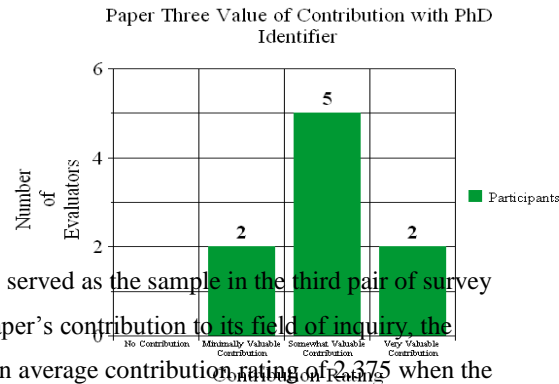


The second pair of survey forms utilized a paper from another undergraduate student, but it was not a Spotlight on First-Year Writing selection. Asked to determine the value of the composition's contribution to its field of inquiry using the same measures as those who evaluated the first pair of survey forms, participants who were told the writer was an undergraduate student gave the paper an average contribution rating of 2.1429 (see Figure 6). Those who were told the writer was a professor with a PhD gave the composition an average contribution rating of 2.3333 (see Figure 7). The difference between these scores is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .5070.

**Figure 8**



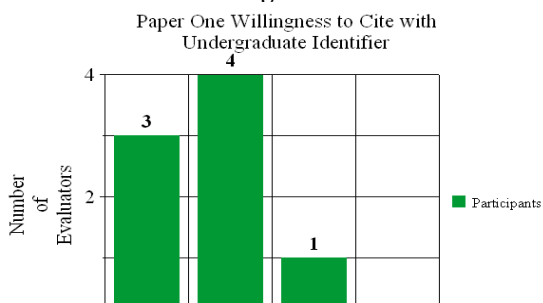
**Figure 9**



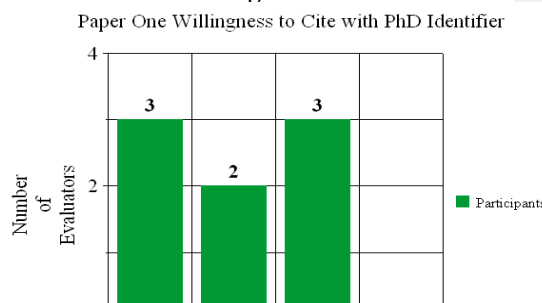
A paper written by a professor with a PhD served as the sample in the third pair of survey forms. When asked to evaluate the value of the paper's contribution to its field of inquiry, the same numerical system used previously showed an average contribution rating of 2.375 when the writer was identified as an undergraduate student (see Figure 8). Identifying the writer as a professor with a PhD resulted in an average contribution rating of 2 (see Figure 9). The

**Comment [DD21]:** I know I'm getting ahead of your discussion, but I suspect here we might be seeing a "reverse" effect – student writing is not credited *less* because it's identified as student writing, but *more*. Still, it comes from the same source, right? "Pretty good ... for an undergrad."

**Figure 10**

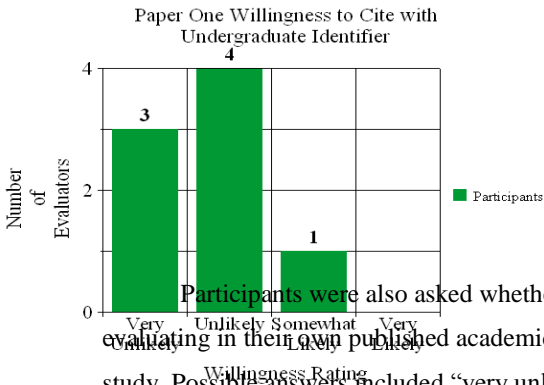


**Figure 11**

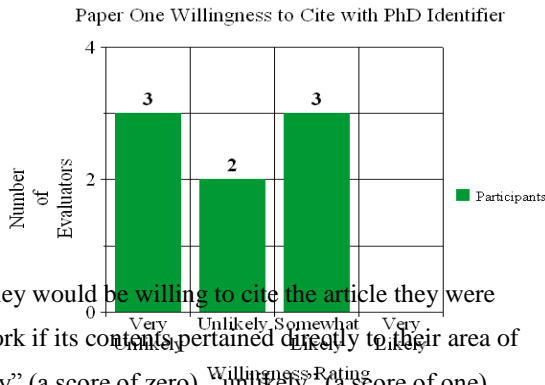


difference between these averages is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .3348.

**Figure 10**

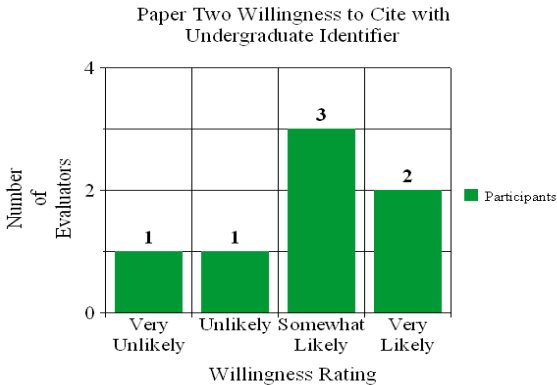


**Figure 11**

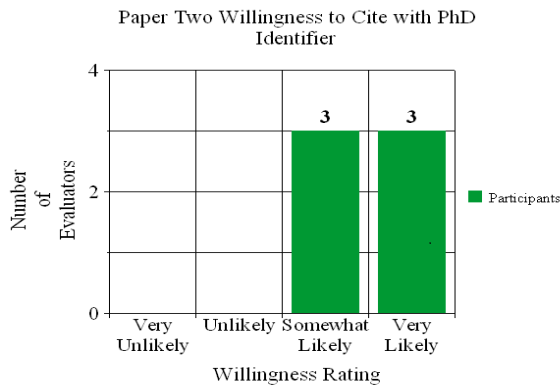


Participants were also asked whether they would be willing to cite the article they were evaluating in their own published academic work if its contents pertained directly to their area of study. Possible answers included “very unlikely” (a score of zero), “unlikely” (a score of one), “somewhat likely” (a score of two), and “very likely” (a score of three). After reviewing the first student-written writing sample that was a Spotlight on First-Year Writing selection, writing instructors who were told the article was written by the student gave it an average willingness to cite rating of .75 (see Figure 10). Those who were told that the writing was produced by a professor with a PhD gave it an average willingness to cite rating of 1 (see Figure 11). The difference between these ratings is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .5792.

**Figure 12**

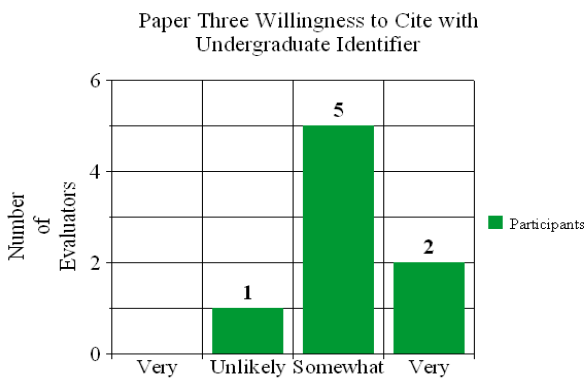


**Figure 13**

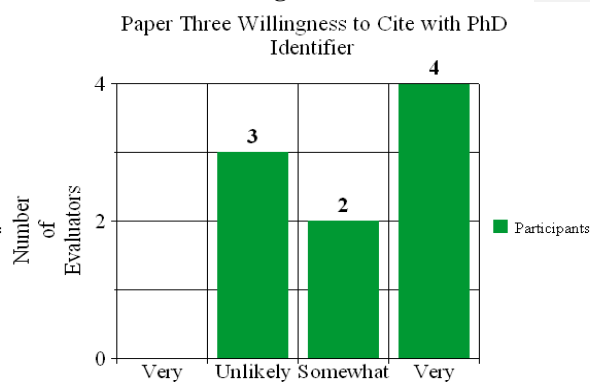


neared significance, an analysis still revealed that they also fall short of the necessary statistical difference. This was indicated by a p-value of .2254.

**Figure 14**

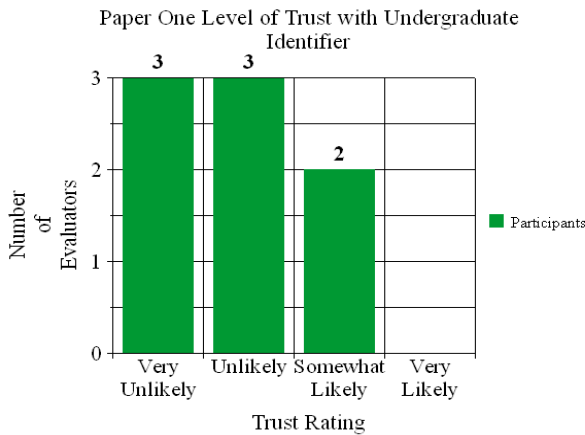


**Figure 15**

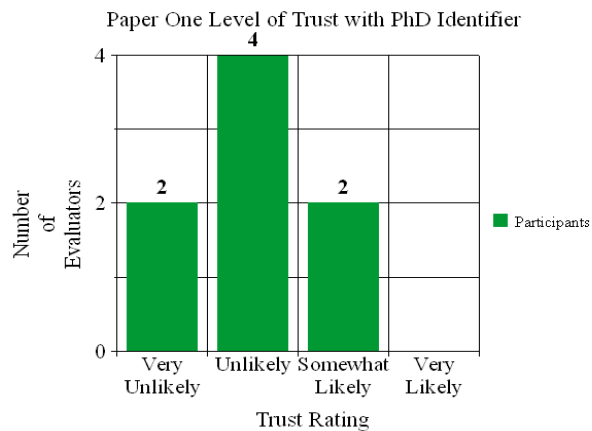


Writing instructors completing the third pair of surveys were asked the same willingness to cite question about a paper written by a professor with a PhD, and their answers were once again analyzed using the same numerical strategy. Participants who were informed that the paper was written by an undergraduate student gave it an average willingness to cite rating of 2.125 (see Figure 14). Those who thought the paper was written by a professor with a PhD gave the composition an average willingness to cite rating of 2.1111 (see Figure 15). The difference between these means is not statistically significant, as indicated by a p-value of .9733.

**Figure 16**

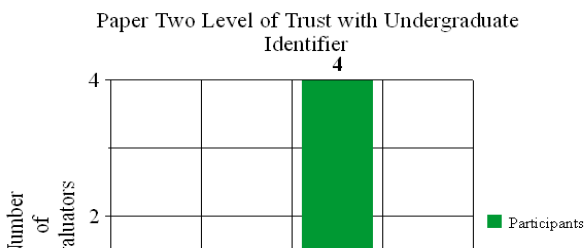


**Figure 17**

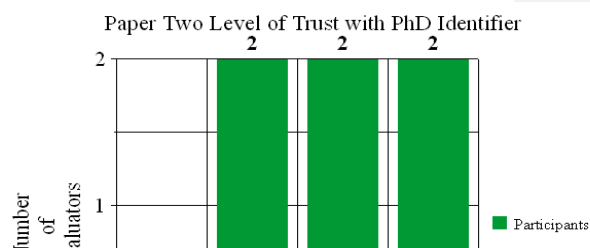


zero), “unlikely” (a score of one), “somewhat likely” (a score of two), and “very likely” (a score of three). The first article written by an undergraduate student and identified as a Spotlight on First-Year Writing selection was given a likelihood of trust average rating of .875 when respondents were told the writer was an undergraduate student (see Figure 16). Writing instructors who believed that the paper was written by a professor with a PhD gave the article an

**Figure 18**



**Figure 19**



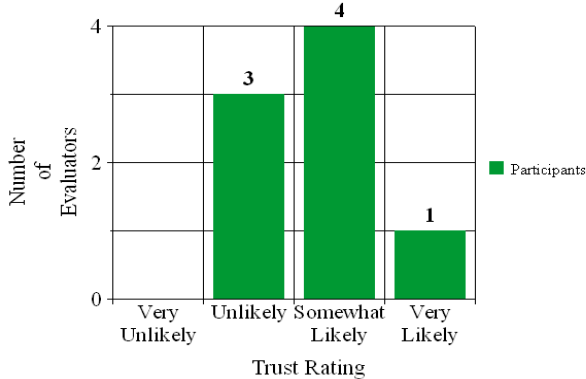
average likelihood of trust rating of 1 (see Figure 17). The difference between these average ratings does not reach a statistically significant level, as the p-value is .7733.

**Comment [DD22]:** Obviously still some layout difficulties here. If you're willing, I'd like you to walk me through what you've tried and what's up with them.

The second set of studies examined the same question utilizing the second student-written paper as its sample. Once again, the same numerical scoring system was utilized. Those who were told the composition was created by an undergraduate student writer gave it an average likelihood of trust rating of 1.7143 (see Figure 18). Writing instructors who believed the paper belonged to a professor with a PhD gave the paper a likelihood of trust rating of 2 (see Figure 19). The difference between these two ratings does not reach a statistically significant level, as indicated by a p-value of .6184.

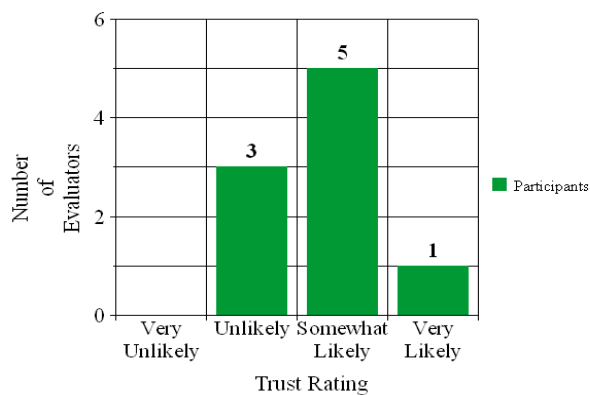
**Figure 20**

Paper Three Level of Trust with Undergraduate Identifier



**Figure 21**

Paper Three Level of Trust with PhD Identifier



paper an average likelihood of trust rating of 1.75 (see Figure 20). Those instructors who received the survey that correctly identified the writer as a professor with a PhD gave the article an average likelihood of trust rating of 1.778 (see Figure 21). Once again, the difference between these rating was found to fall far short of statistical significance with a p-value of .9389.

**Discussion of Findings**

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

**Comment [DD23]:** Agreed. Well analyzed and explained.

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

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

**Comment [DD24]:** A little chicken and egg here, right?

Two explanations for the lack of differentiation between responses to writing believed to have come from students and writing believed to have come from a professor with a PhD seem most likely. The first explanation is that the consistent lack of differentiation in response is indicative of the possibility for students to have a respectable ethos in the eyes of their writing instructors. The fact that each writing sample was identified as having been submitted to a peer-reviewed academic journal for publication may have made the writer appear as an initiated insider in his or her field in spite of academic status identification. Undergraduate students seeking to have their work published are also less likely to be viewed as lazy or uninterested; in fact, early and voluntary participation in research and publishing could be indicative of an unusually high level of academic engagement. Such students would already have revealed themselves as members of an academic community who are unwilling to simply complete the necessary requirements on a course syllabus and assignment sheet. They would be actively seeking to transcend the boundaries of simple learning in favor of the opportunity to teach and inform others.

Students revealed to have reached such a level of engagement in the academic community would be far more likely to be viewed as scholars and researchers in their own right. As Keohane and Nelson advocate, a level of learning and instruction may have been perceived that transcended the classic linear model of students as receptacles in need of filling by instructors who possess the far superior knowledge. Students who are participating in the academic community by seeking to publish their work would be superb exemplars of the new model of teaching which suggests that students and instructors learn together. In this variety of academic community, instructors are more than authoritative purveyors of knowledge holding the power of the grade above students who struggle to satisfy their masters' expectations. Instead, students and instructors are partners in learning. Such a cohesive bond between active students and their instructors could result in a very strong student ethos in academic communities and explain the lack of significant differences between perceptions of students and professors as academic writers.

Though this view of the relationship between instructors and some of their students may be heartening, it does not indicate that student ethos as a whole has become more positive. Research still suggests that some instructors seek to avoid exposure to undergraduate students (Keohane 65). Some students are still more interested in satisfying the expectations of their

**Comment [DD25]:** Usually I've been happy with the complexity of your writing in this paper (only as complex as it needs to be, no tangled syntax). Can you take another run at this sentence and a more direct way of phrasing what you're getting at?

**Comment [DD26]:** Now. What might this tell you about the nature of *ethos itself* that doesn't seem to have appeared in your lit review?

**Comment [DD27]:** In fact, let's stipulate this. It's possible that the samples you chose simply don't vary widely enough in quality because only the top maybe .5% of undergrads are working at this level, and as such these tend to be near-grad-student performance to begin with. Again: any implications for ethos in this observation?

**Comment [DD28]:** That's nice analysis. And then seems to suggest the need for a more differentiated view of "students"? Which is to some extent where you go next.

instructors to obtain a good grade than they are in contributing to the academic community (Nelson 413). The ethos of a few students who have proven themselves willing to submit their work to academic peer-reviewed journals does not necessarily translate to other students who are not perceived to have reached the same level of academic engagement. Many students are not very engaged in their coursework (Bok 183). The ethos of disengaged students may be entirely different from the perspective of their instructors. Thus, many different groups of undergraduate students may exist with the academic perceptions of each group remaining vastly different based on study habits and levels of engagement.

Another plausible explanation for the lack in differentiation in reader response depending on the perceived academic status of the writer is that writer identity simply does not matter or matters very little and is ignored. In this view, all that matters to writing instructors is the quality of the product. The content and voice of the text overwhelms any outside influences and remains as the sole premise upon which evaluations are based. If this view is accurate, participants may have quickly forgotten the information identifying the academic status of the writer and based their responses off of the content alone. This theory postulates that student ethos, good or bad, is irrelevant. Any affect it may have is quickly overwhelmed by the writing itself.

If student ethos does not matter, it is possible that ethical appeal as portrayed by speech acts in text is the true indicator of character that influences audiences. Perhaps the character of the writer in the text is what leads to attributions of value, a willingness to cite a source, or a propensity to trust the assertions and citations of a paper. If this is the case, it would be necessary to conduct a study of ethical appeal to determine if a difference exists between the appeals commonly made by students and those commonly made by professors. Different ethical appeal styles common to each group could then be compared to determine if significant differences in reader response result.

Although this study makes a concerted effort to determine the nature of student ethos as viewed by their writing instructors, a number of factors may have resulted in inconsistent or inaccurate findings. One of the most notable flaws of the survey utilized for this research was the relatively low number of respondents. The fact that responses were split between six separate survey forms also had a notable effect. A much larger random sample size and the entirely random assignment system that it would facilitate could result in more tenable results. The common problem of obtaining participants could be partially mitigated by offering financial

**Comment [DD29]:** Better research here would be to directly review findings from the latest National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which explicitly tracks a variety of measures of student engagement across a huge sample of institutions nationwide annually. Google it.

**Comment [DD30]:** Okay, so your job as a researcher now is to say which possibility you find more likely, and why. What are the implications for the study of ethos *in general* if possibility is actually what your results are showing, and how *likely* is this, and what is the resulting impact on writing in general if it's true?

**Comment [DD31]:** It's not a flaw. It's an aspect or a feature.

**Comment [DD32]:** Yeah. It'd be cool to see about 35 responses to each of the 6 surveys, just for starters.



incentives for participants. Thus, grants to conduct more research would most likely result in greater levels of participation through financial award and larger, more representative samples of the population of writing instructors could be utilized.

A second problem that may have impacted the results of this study is the possibility that some participants failed to notice the writer identification portion of the survey forms. Though writer identities were listed at the top of the forms along with other instructions, they were not displayed separately in order to prevent respondents from consciously or subconsciously recognizing the specific import of the study and altering their results accordingly. Any failure to take notice of the writer identification provided on each form would have resulted in **skewed results**. The effect such a lack of knowledge could have had on results may have had a notable influence given the relatively small sample size used in this study.

Another issue associated with the survey techniques utilized in this study is that participants were only asked to read the introduction and conclusion of each article. The reasoning behind this limitation was to encourage participation from potential respondents who would be more likely to abstain from becoming involved if they were asked to read dozens of pages of text instead of a strictly limited amount. Nevertheless, participants would have had more information to base their judgments from and may have responded differently if they had been exposed to full articles before being asked content question designed to evoke responses about the viability of the articles selected for use.

A final potential problem associated with the surveys distributed to participants was the limitations placed on respondent answers. Participants were asked to select their responses from four possible, prearranged answers. **This did not provide an adequate venue** for participants to offer lengthy written responses to text as are often elicited when instructors respond to written work in academic settings. If participants had the opportunity to offer written responses to texts, **patterns may have emerged that did not in the context of the strictly limited confines of this study**. Differences in remarks may have been noticeable based on the identified academic status of the writer that could have revealed views of student ethos not noticeable outside of more intricate reader responses. The issue with such a survey format would be that it would be asking for far more from participants and could result in a decline in the number of surveys completed.

The study of instructor response to student writing presented in this paper was specifically designed to delve into an area of writing studies rarely subjected to scrutiny. A vast

**Comment [DD33]:** Use care with this language. If people didn't notice the given identity of the writer and simply then rated the piece on the merits they perceived and the ethos that emerged from the text, that isn't a "skew" unless you *know* that they would have answered a different way had they seen the ID info. Since you don't actually know that, you can't assert that the results you have would be different.

**Comment [DD34]:** Again, you don't actually know this. The most you can say is "this may not have provided an adequate venue for any participants who might have wished to write lengthy responses to the text." That's really all you can say with certainty.

**Comment [DD35]:** Although, predictably, miles of additional qualitative data cloud the picture, they do not clarify it.

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

Future studies seeking to investigate student ethos in the academic community will need to reach a broader range of potential participants if they hope to be more persuasive. They must also collect responses in a variety of different formats ranging from approaches that offer limited answers conducive to mathematical analysis and representation to long answers that allow analysts to search for details that expound upon the state of student ethos in academic discourse communities. Funding will be vital to all approaches in order to encourage response for studies designed to investigate how the label of student effects the academic perception of so many members of the college and university writing community. If findings continue to suggest that student ethos does not necessarily have a significantly negative effect on student-produced writing, they may help to eliminate common perceptions of students as novices and outsiders and could encourage more student involvement in the academic community. If future findings are contrary to the results expounded in this paper, they could serve as a catalyst for changes that promote opportunities for students to become respected members of their discourse communities. Either way, such findings have the potential to positively influence the participation of undergraduate students in their academies of higher learning.

**Comment [DD36]:** All well said. I rather wonder about adding some of this to the intro.

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