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A Survey of the Opinions of English Professors in Virginia Colleges Regarding Desired Preparation for Their Freshman English Courses.

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A SURVEY OF THE OPINIONS OF ENGLISH PROFESSORS IN
VIRGINIA COLLEGES REGARDING DESIRED PREPARATION
FOR THEIR FRESHMAN ENGLISH COURSES

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the School of Education
The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

by

Elaine Robins Owens

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

High school English teachers often are chided for their extensive teaching of grammar to college-bound students—the assumption being that undue duplication will ensue. College professors, to the contrary, seem to think that entering freshmen have to be taught preliminary fundamentals before prescribed courses can begin to be mastered. The logical source of solution to the controversy lies in the demands of individual college professors. More important than such arguments are the students themselves. If they are to have guidance for the colleges of their choice, such information should aid them in their preparation.

Statement of the problem. This survey attempts to ascertain what English professors in Virginia colleges desire as prerequisite in high school grammar and composition to their freshman English courses.

It is realized that the requirements of each college course is set by the individual instructor, and because of this fact, the findings of this study will be valid only as long as the present professors remain in the particular colleges surveyed.

Although the response to the study does not represent all of the colleges in Virginia, it samples both the

liberal arts teacher training institutions; both state supported and privately supported schools; and coeducational, women's and men's colleges.

Importance of the study. Many students leave secondary schools each year to enter colleges ill prepared for what is expected of them in the various schools. English seems to be one of the weakest points of entering college freshmen and one of the most important since it is the key to the mastery of all subjects. One English professor responding to the survey said, "...these observations are based upon my experience...I, therefore, am convinced that the illiteracy of entering freshmen is fairly widespread." With such remarks in mind and with complaints from college students themselves, it is hoped that the results of this study can be used as one guidance instrument in helping students to better prepare for the schools of their choice and to aid high school teachers in their planning of a course of study.

Organization of the study. In the following pages the procedure used to construct the questionnaire and to determine its recipients will be discussed; an analysis or interpretation of the data will be attempted; some conclusions and recommendations will be presented. A copy of the questionnaire and a tabulation of responses may be found in the appendix.

CHAPTER II

PREVIOUS RELATED STUDY

In 1953 Dr. R. C. Simonini, Jr., Professor of English at Longwood College, made a similar study¹ to that attempted here. Although one of his objectives in the study was the same as that presented in this paper, to prepare college-bound students for freshmen English, Dr. Simonini's approach differed in that he used the contents of the courses of study for freshmen English in the white senior colleges of Virginia. Where this related study points out general areas of needed improved preparation on the part of high schools, this study attempts to point out specific items of grammar and composition that should be mastered before college entrance. The present survey concerns itself with prerequisite requirements only.

¹R. C. Simonini, Jr., "What is College Freshmen English in Virginia?", The Virginia English Bulletin, March, 1953.

CHAPTER III

METHOD OF PROCEDURE AND PRESENTATION OF DATA

Procedure. A questionnaire was used as the data gathering instrument in this survey since the scope of the study covered the entire state of Virginia. Twenty-five items concerning specific areas of grammar and composition were constructed with the aid of various secondary school¹ and college texts². However, it is realized that some areas are lacking, and adequate space was supplied in hope that further suggestions would be listed. That some of the items might have been misinterpretable is also realized.

Approximately one-half of the items concerning grammar only, and one-half concerned composition primarily. For each item, four categories were listed as follows: required, desired, beneficial, unnecessary. Space was provided for the the reaction of the recipients by means of a check.

Each of the twenty-two senior colleges in the state of Virginia was sent a questionnaire. For the sake of uniformity, the letters were addressed to the chairmen of the English departments. A space was provided on the questionnaire to determine whether or not the respondent taught freshman English.

¹ J. M. and A. K. Walsh, Plain English Handbook (Columbus: McCormick-Mathers Publishing Company, 1951).

² Walter K. Smart, English Review Grammar (New York: F. S. Croft and Company, 1945).

Since the professors contacted would reflect their own sentiments, the instructions on the questionnaire asked for opinions rather than facts.

Because the value of the data lies in knowing individual school requirements, a chart was prepared to show the response of each school. The only compilation made was the percentage of reaction to each category for each item. Such computation might easily tell the hurried observer something of the general tendency of response.

Presentation of data. Of the fifteen colleges responding to the questionnaire, more than fifty-two per cent seemed to think the items of grammar were requisite to their freshman English courses. One college considered one item unnecessary. There was no response to one item by another school. Twenty-nine per cent of the respondents considered the items of grammar desired and sixteen per cent registered them as beneficial. The first fourteen items are considered to be purely grammar.

The remainder of the items concern composition, but it is realized that grammar is still an important factor. Forty-seven per cent checked required for these items. A greater diversity of opinion occurred in this section of the questionnaire showing thirty-nine per cent listing desired, eight per cent listing beneficial, and approximately six per cent checking unnecessary. There were five instances of no response.

By consulting the tabulation table of the questionnaire in the appendix, the spread of opinions can be seen even though there is a decided clustering of response in the categories required and desired. Here, also, can be found the listing of individual reactions to each questionnaire item.

Suggestions and comments offered by respondents included the ability to read with comprehension which was partially covered in item eighteen. It was the opinion of the professor that the inability of college freshmen to read with comprehension stemmed from their inability to analyze a sentence. Another stated that since the large majority of their entering freshmen are not adequately prepared, two extra hours of English are offered those who are in the greatest need of attention. Still another stated that the teaching of "Freshmen English" should be unnecessary. An awareness of correct diction and vocabulary usage was considered desirable by one of the colleges. A university explained that although it did not require grammar, when one of its students showed a decided need in this area, it compelled him to learn such grammar as he needed.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

Percentage-wise, it would appear from the response on the questionnaire that Virginia college professors favor a thorough high school preparation in English grammar as prerequisite to their freshman English courses. In composition, there seems to be a wider scope of opinions in regard to high school preparation. However, the value of this survey does not consist of statistical figures, for it can be seen by studying the tabulation of response that there are practically as many diverse opinions as there are respondents and items. Only by using the survey on the basis of individual colleges can this study be useful to high school teachers and students.

Conclusions. From this survey may be concluded:

(1) that college professors desire to have entering freshmen well grounded in the mechanics of grammar as a basis for advanced study.

(2) that since this survey is based on opinions, it will not be valid year after year.

(3) that duplication will be at a minimum for those well prepared in grammar.

(4) that though experiences in composition in secondary school are desirable, they are not necessary to success in freshmen English courses.

Recommendations. The following suggestions might be made:

(1) that high school English teachers teach the mechanics of grammar in some way leaving the more advanced forms of composition for college courses.

(2) that guidance departments in high schools keep posted from time to time on specific preparation for colleges which are most often chosen by their students.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

In partial fulfillment for a master's degree in education, I am attempting to ascertain what professors of English in Virginia colleges desire in the way of preparation in high school English as prerequisite to their Freshmen English courses. Since I am a high school English teacher, this project is most pertinent to my work. It should help other Virginia English teachers as well. I should appreciate your cooperation in this venture.

Elaine R. Owens

Please check the category which you consider most nearly expresses your opinion regarding the importance of each item. Please feel free to offer any suggestions that are not covered in the field of grammar and composition.

Entering college freshmen should have the:

	Required	Desired	Beneficial	Unnecessary
1. Ability to construct grammatically correct sentences.	_____	_____	_____	_____
2. Ability to use simple, complex, and compound sentences equally well in theme writing.	_____	_____	_____	_____
3. Ability to recognize the difference between phrases and clauses.	_____	_____	_____	_____
4. Ability to distinguish between dependent and independent clauses.	_____	_____	_____	_____
5. Ability to understand the various uses of dependent clauses in a sentence.	_____	_____	_____	_____
6. Ability to recognize verbals.	_____	_____	_____	_____
7. Ability to use verbals as various parts of speech and parts of a sentence.	_____	_____	_____	_____
8. Ability to distinguish between the parts of speech and the parts of a sentence.	_____	_____	_____	_____

	Required	Desired	Beneficial	Unnecessary
9. Ability to recognize the various classes of pronouns.	_____	_____	_____	_____
10. Ability to understand the uses of the cases of nouns and pronouns.	_____	_____	_____	_____
11. Ability to distinguish between transitive and intransitive verbs.	_____	_____	_____	_____
12. Ability to recognize verb tense, mood, voice, and form.	_____	_____	_____	_____
13. Ability to analyze or diagram sentences.	_____	_____	_____	_____
14. Ability to compare adjectives and adverbs.	_____	_____	_____	_____
15. Ability to spell efficiently.	_____	_____	_____	_____
16. Ability to punctuate-				
(a) simple, compound, and complex sentences.	_____	_____	_____	_____
(b) social letters.	_____	_____	_____	_____
(c) business letters.	_____	_____	_____	_____
17. Ability to write a well constructed paragraph.	_____	_____	_____	_____
18. Ability to write a comprehensive summary of a book, short story, or other published work.	_____	_____	_____	_____
19. Ability to write a short story.	_____	_____	_____	_____
20. Ability to write some form of business letter correctly.	_____	_____	_____	_____
21. Ability to write a formal social letter.	_____	_____	_____	_____
22. Ability to write an informal social letter.	_____	_____	_____	_____
23. Ability to write an informal essay.	_____	_____	_____	_____
24. Ability to write a formal essay.	_____	_____	_____	_____
25. Ability to organize thoughts logically in a theme.	_____	_____	_____	_____

Tabulation of Questionnaire Response

Items of Questionnaire	Percentage of Response				Individual College Response to each questionnaire item															
	Required	Desired	Beneficial	Unnecessary	Bradewater	Emory and Henry	Hampden-Sydney	Longwood	Madison	Mary Baldwin	Mary Washington	Radford	Randolph-Macon W.C.	R.P.I.	University of Richmond	University of Virginia	V.M.I.	V.P.I.	Washington and Lee	
Entering college freshmen should have the:																				
1. Ability to construct grammatically correct sentences.	80	20			R	D	R	R	D	R	R	R	R	R	D	R	R	R	R	R
2. Ability to use simple, complex, and compound sentences equally well in their writing.	53	47			D	D	R	D	D	D	R	D	R	R	D	R	R	R	R	R
3. Ability to recognize the difference between phrases and clauses.	60	20	20		B	B	R	R	D	R	R	R	R	R	D	B	R	R	R	D
4. Ability to distinguish between dependent and independent clauses.	60	27	13		B	D	R	R	B	R	R	R	R	R	D	D	R	R	R	D
5. Ability to understand the various uses of dependent clauses in a sentence.	53	20	27		B	B	R	R	B	R	D	R	R	R	D	B	R	R	R	D
6. Ability to recognize verbals.	54	33	13		B	D	R	R	B	R	D	R	R	R	D	D	R	R	R	D
7. Ability to use verbals as various parts of speech and parts of a sentence.	53	27	20		B	B	R	R	B	R	D	D	R	R	D	D	R	R	R	R
8. Ability to distinguish between the parts of speech and the parts of a sentence.	67	20	7		B	D	R	R	N-R	R	R	R	R	R	D	D	R	R	R	R
9. Ability to recognize the various classes of pronouns.	46	27	27		B	D	R	D	B	R	R	D	R	R	D	B	R	R	R	B
10. Ability to understand the uses of the cases of nouns and pronouns.	73	14	13		R	R	R	R	B	R	D	R	R	R	D	B	R	R	R	R
11. Ability to distinguish between transitive and intransitive verbs.	54	33	13		B	D	R	D	B	R	R	R	R	R	D	D	R	R	R	D
12. Ability to recognize verb tense, mood, voice, and form.	53	27	20		B	D	R	D	B	R	D	R	R	R	D	B	R	R	R	R
13. Ability to analyze or diagram sentences.	13	53	27	7	B	D	R	D	B	N-D	D	D	D	R	B	D	N-D	B	U	U
14. Ability to compare adjectives and adverbs.	47	33	20		B	D	R	B	B	N-D	R	R	R	R	D	D	N-D	R	R	R
15. Ability to spell efficiently.	73	20			R	R	R	D	D	R	R	D	R	R	N-R	R	R	R	R	R
16. Ability to punctuate - (a) simple, compound, and complex sentences. (b) social letters. (c) business letters.	87 66	73 20	7 7	7	R	R	R	R	D	R	R	R	R	R	D	R	R	R	R	R
17. Ability to write a well constructed paragraph.	73	27			R	R	R	R	D	D	R	D	R	R	D	R	R	R	R	R
18. Ability to write a comprehensive summary of a book, short story, or other published work.	40	53	7		R	D	R	B	D	D	D	D	R	R	D	R	N-D	R	D	D
19. Ability to write a short story.	13	40	7	33	R	B	R	U	B	U	D	B	B	U	B	N-R	U	U	B	B
20. Ability to write some form of business letter correctly.	27	53	7	7	R	D	R	D	D	D	R	R	D	U	D	N-B	B	D	D	D
21. Ability to write a formal social letter.	13	40	33	7	R	D	R	B	B	D	D	D	D	U	D	N-R	B	B	B	B
22. Ability to write an informal social letter.	27	40	13	13	R	D	R	D	B	D	D	R	D	U	D	N-R	B	R	U	U
23. Ability to write an informal essay.	33	60	7		R	D	R	R	B	D	D	D	D	R	D	R	D	D	D	D
24. Ability to write a formal essay.	33	54	13		R	B	R	D	B	D	D	D	D	R	D	R	D	R	D	D
25. Ability to organize thoughts logically in a theme.	60	33	7		R	D	R	R	B	D	D	D	R	R	D	R	R	R	R	R

Required - R
 Desired - D
 Beneficial - B
 Unnecessary - U
 No Response - N-R