

Gender, Writing Self-Efficacy, and Help Seeking

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine gender, writing self-efficacy, and help seeking among undergraduates. The study spanned 8 years and involved 6 undergraduate cohorts (N= 671); 340 of the participants were international NESB students, and 331 were domestic native-English-speaking students. Data were collected at a liberal arts university in Southern California and included assessment of writing self-efficacy belief; reading scores based on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Level AR; an in-house writing test; SAT verbal and writing scores; frequency of help-seeking behavior; and composition grades. The results showed no gender differences with respect to writing self-efficacy belief but did show a significant gender difference with regard to writing performance. In addition, the results showed an inverse relation between writing self-efficacy and help-seeking behavior: Specifically, the international NESB students had lower self-efficacy scores than their domestic counterparts but sought help significantly more frequently. Furthermore, the international NESB students outperformed the domestic students in composition as measured by grades.

Key words: gender, self-efficacy, help seeking, writing performance

Introduction

Previous research has found a positive correlation between self-efficacy and help seeking. When facing need, students with high self-efficacy tend to manifest high help-seeking behavior, whereas students with low self-efficacy are, under similar circumstances, more reluctant to seek help (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Nelson and Ketelhut, 2008; Paulsen & Feldman, 2005; Pintrich & Zusho, 2007; Tan et al., 2008). Several studies have reported gender differences in self-efficacy and help seeking, with females commonly having higher levels of both than males (Alexitch, 1997; Ang, Lim, Tan, & Yau, 2004; Benenson & Koulazarian, 2008; Pajares & Valiante, 2001). In her study of 284 9th-grade students, Simon (2010) found that even when boys reported levels of self-efficacy equivalent to those of the girls, they were significantly less likely to seek academic help.

Gender differences are particularly prevalent with regard to writing self-efficacy and performance (Hansen, 2009). Previous studies of elementary and middle school children have shown that girls report higher writing self-efficacy than boys, even though boys tend to over-estimate their writing ability (Pajares, 2002). In studies in which the girls and boys had similar levels of self-efficacy belief, the girls consistently out-performed the boys on writing tasks (Wigfield, Eccles, & Pintrich, 1996). Pajares and Valiante (2006) suggested that these gender differences were associated with task orientation: That is, higher female self-efficacy is related to the stereotypical view that writing is a female domain. When task orientation was controlled, gender differences in writing self-efficacy became nonsignificant (Pajares & Valiante, 2001; Pajares, Valiante, & Cheong, 2007).

Previous research has also reported significant gender differences in help seeking. Female students are more likely to engage in adaptive (i.e., positive) help seeking than boys (Ang, et al., 2004; Benenson & Koulazarian, 2008; Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2004). In her study of undergraduates, Alexitch (2002) reported that gender was a significant predictor of help seeking, with females in her study being “more likely to approach others for help” (p. 15). Following the trend in cross-cultural psychology to identify Western societies as individualistic and East Asian societies as collectivist (e.g., Brislin, 1993; Triandis, 1994, 1995), researchers have sought to determine whether and to what extent these cultural orientations influence help seeking.

In a survey of 2,656 Asian and European students' preferences (e.g., working in a small group or working alone), Littlewood (2001) found that Asian students preferred to work in a small group, whereas European students preferred to work alone. Shwalb and Sukemune (1998), in their study of Japanese students, found that the participants were more likely to seek assistance from peers outside the classroom than to seek help from their teachers, even in the face of great need. A variety of additional studies has reported similar findings for students from East Asian and Chinese backgrounds (e.g., Chan & Hayashi, 2010; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000; Wright & Lander, 2003). One exception to this trend is a study conducted by Williams, Takaku, and Bauman (2006), who reported that the international (mostly Japanese) non-English-speaking background (NESB) students in their investigation displayed a high level of adaptive help seeking behavior.

Investigations of self-efficacy and help seeking in school settings have been linked to academic performance, and most were conducted with children in primary and secondary schools. Several studies of children have reported that gender differences in writing self-efficacy declined with age, largely owing to a drop in females' sense of self-efficacy (Berry & West, 1993; Bruning & Horn, 2000; Pajares, Valiante, & Cheong, 2007; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Indeed, Greene (1999) found no gender differences in writing self-efficacy among college freshmen but did find a difference in performance, with the females in his study earning higher grades in composition than the males. Such findings raise the question of whether age renders gender an insignificant factor in writing self-efficacy by the time students reach university.

The numerous investigations of academic help seeking have generally addressed issues of performance and gender, task orientation, motivation, and culture (see Karabenick & Newman, 2006). Relatively few have examined the question of whether help-seeking behavior declines with age. Marchand & Skinner (2007), in their study of academic help seeking among children in grades 3–6, found a decline beginning in early adolescence. (A similar finding has also been reported in the extensive literature on help seeking and health care. Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, and Ciarrochi (2005), for example, reported a significant age-related decline in help seeking among young people with mental-health problems.) The possibility that gender differences in writing self-efficacy and help-seeking behavior decline with age has important implications for young people entering university and for student-support services, as does the question of whether NESB students manifest low writing self-efficacy belief and low levels of help-seeking behavior. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) report, for example, concluded that “high school teaching is not aligned to college” (p. 2) and went on to indicate that the high failure rate among undergraduates is largely owing to students' deficient reading and writing skills. Universities have responded by providing a variety of support services to ameliorate these deficiencies, with writing centers being among the more successful (Williams et al., 2006).

The Present Study

The present study was designed to extend the existing research on gender differences, writing self-efficacy, and help-seeking behavior. It included international NESB students as well as domestic native-English-speaking students and spanned 8 years, involving 6 undergraduate cohorts. Given the previous research indicating that gender differences in writing self-efficacy decline from elementary school to high school, one of our goals was to determine whether such differences were evident in a large, diverse pool of undergraduates. Because previous research also reported significant gender differences in help seeking, another goal was to determine whether these differences appeared among our pool of undergraduates. In addition, universities throughout developed English-speaking nations have experienced significant growth in the number of international NESB students, and numerous studies have reported cultural differences in help-seeking behavior. On this account, another goal of our study was to determine whether there were any measurable cultural differences in academic help seeking. Unlike previous studies that relied on self-report questionnaires to assess help seeking, we chose to measure the frequency with which participants actually sought help with their writing through their voluntary visits to their university writing center. Collected data included participants' responses to a self-efficacy belief scale administered at the beginning of their freshman year; SAT verbal and writing scores, where available; reading scores from the university-administered reading exam (Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Level AR, Form S, 4th edition); writing scores from the university's in-house placement exam (pretest); and frequency of help seeking.

Hypotheses

We predicted that, regardless of their international NESB or domestic status, there would be no gender differences on the standardized tests, the in-house writing test, the reading test, writing self-efficacy, and composition grade (*Hypothesis 1*).

However, owing to the challenges that international NESB students face when writing in English, we hypothesized that, compared to their native-English-speaking domestic counterparts, these participants would score lower on the standardized tests, the in-house writing test, the reading test, writing self-efficacy, and composition grade, regardless of their gender (*Hypothesis 2*). As noted, a large body of research has indicated that Asians are reluctant to seek help even in the face of need. Given the existing research on the relations among gender, international NESB/domestic status, self-efficacy, adaptive help seeking, and performance, we also predicted that, regardless of gender, the international NESB students would have lower self-efficacy belief than the domestic students and that the lower the self-efficacy belief, the more frequently students would seek help in the writing center (*Hypothesis 3*).

Methods

Data were collected at a small private liberal arts university in Southern California (total enrollment per year is approximately 400). During their first year, students are required to take a one-semester writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) course that introduces them to the conventions of writing in science, social science, and humanities. During their junior year, students are required to take a one-semester advanced writing class that is associated with a content-area course in their major area of study. A student majoring in humanities, for example, would enroll in an advanced writing course that focuses on writing in humanities. The university does not have an English-as-a-second language (ESL) component in the writing program, so all NESB students are mainstreamed.

Participants

The participants were 671 undergraduates. Of this number, 331 (115 males and 216 females) were domestic students whose first language was English, and 340 (137 males and 203 females) were international NESB (nearly all from Asia, primarily Japan) for whom English was a second or third language. The participants came from 6 classes of cohorts (Class of 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010). Data were collected for each class from the beginning of its freshman year through the end of its junior year, at which point students complete the university's writing requirement. The data from all 6 cohorts were then combined for analysis. All participants signed an informed-consent form to participate in this study as part of the university's ongoing assessment work. The research was approved by the university's institutional review board (IRB), which determined that the study was in compliance with federal guidelines for research involving human subjects.

Tutors

The writing center tutors in this study were primarily professionals with a minimum of a master's degree and 3 years of teaching experience; at no time were more than 2 peer tutors involved during any academic year, and no graduate students served as tutors. Upon hire, the tutors received training that focused on cooperative rather than collaborative practices. Collaboration signals a joint, coauthoring effort between student and tutor, whereas cooperative practices involve application of a dialogic approach to all sessions, with some modeling, and the view that each session is an extension of the classroom. Training was refreshed 3–4 times annually during staff meetings and included the provision that the structure of tutoring sessions should not be differentiated on the basis of first language or cultural background. Tutors were instructed to focus first on rhetorical/global discourse features before addressing structural/local features, although they were advised that it might not be possible to follow this procedure in every tutoring session.

Data Collection

The Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Level AR (adult reading), Form S, 4th edition ($a = .93$) was administered to each entering class during the length of the study. Answer sheets were forwarded to test headquarters, where they were machine scored, with results designated in terms of reading grade level. Possible scores range from a low of grade-level 3 (indicating a third-grade reading level, or age 8) to a high of grade-level 13 (indicating a beginning college reading level, or age 18). In addition, an in-house writing exam was administered to each entering class. The exam followed Educational Testing Service (ETS) protocols for program-wide writing assessment. Scores were used to assess students' preexisting writing proficiency and were coded as a pretest variable. Although each exam differed with regard to content and subject matter, each exam was designed to be equal in degree of difficulty. Exams consisted of a short essay that presented a problem and an argument for a solution. The short essay was followed by the writing prompt, which presented a different problem and a possible solution that students were asked to argue for or against. Students were allowed two hours to complete the exam. The completed writing exams were scored holistically by writing program staff using standard protocols and a scoring rubric based on a 6-point scale, with 1 being low and 6 being high (interrater reliability ranging from .84 to .91).

At the end of their junior year, each class was required to retake the exam that they took at the beginning of their freshman year (posttest) to provide a measure of writing improvement during their first two years of study.

The university's writing center keeps records of all tutoring sessions, which allowed matching students with the total number of their help-seeking visits. Students' grades in composition—as well as reading scores and SAT verbal and writing scores—were obtained from the registrar's office. Letter grades (*A–F*) were converted to a 5-point scale ($A = 4, F = 0$).

The final data set for analysis consisted of all students ($N = 671$) enrolled at the university during the course of the study, including those who never visited the writing center for help, and their total number of visits (15,966), as well as the following variables:

- SAT verbal score
- SAT writing score (where available)
- Pretest score
- Grade (junior-level composition grade)

Writing self-efficacy (WSE) was assessed using a combination of two well-established writing self-efficacy scales—one by Shell, Murphy, and Bruning (1989), and one by Zimmerman and Bandura (1994). Combining the two scales increased the number of items and reliability. The resulting scale consisted of 45 items with an overall alpha of .95. To facilitate analysis, the individual scores were averaged to create an index variable (WSE Index) with a range of 0 (low writing self-efficacy) to 100 (high writing self-efficacy). For all participants, help-seeking visits were calculated: 1) from the time they entered the university to when they completed freshman composition, and 2) from the time they completed freshman composition to when they completed junior composition. Then, for each participant, these figures were combined to create a summed variable for help-seeking visits (HSV).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Examining all students over the 8-year period of the study, SAT verbal scores ranged from 250 to 780 ($M = 503.63$; $SD = 110.90$). SAT Writing scores ranged from 380 to 760 ($M = 545.22$; $SD = 88.11$). Gates-MacGinitie reading scores ranged from grade-level 5.3 to grade-level 13 ($M = 10.16$; $SD = 2.23$). Pretest writing exam scores ranged from 1 to 6.0 ($M = 2.76$; $SD = 1.07$). Writing Self-Efficacy Index scores ranged from 10 to 99 ($M = 63.31$; $SD = 18.83$). Help-seeking visits per student before and during freshman composition ranged from 0 to 146 ($M = 10.98$; $SD = 21.06$). Help-seeking visits per student before and during junior composition ranged from 0 to 142 ($M = 10.35$; $SD = 20.30$). Grades in junior composition (Grade) ranged from 1.7 to 4 ($M = 3.42$; $SD = .58$). The distributions of all of the above variables are within the expected range of chance fluctuations. Table 1 summarizes these data.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for All Variables

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Standard Error of Skewness
SAT Verbal	250	780	503.63	110.90	.11
SAT Writing	380	760	545.22	88.11	.17
In-house Reading	5.3	13	11.55	2.09	.10
Pretest	1	6	2.76	1.07	.09
Self-Efficacy	10	99	63.31	18.83	.15
Help-Seeking Visits	0	300	41.75	43.06	.13
Grade	1.7	4	3.42	.58	.13

Testing Hypotheses

Hypotheses 1 and 2. To test hypotheses 1 and 2, we performed a series of 2 (gender) x 2 (international NESB/domestic status) analyses of variance (ANOVA) on all test scores, writing self-efficacy scores, HSV, and Grade. As shown in Table 2, we found no gender effect, except for the composition course grade. Hypothesis 1 was therefore partially confirmed. Contrary to our prediction, we found that females outperformed males on junior composition course grade, regardless of cultural status, even though there was no significant difference in male/female writing self-efficacy. Also worth noting is that preexisting writing proficiency, as measured by SAT writing score and pretest, was unrelated to composition grade.

Table 2 also shows that there was a significant international NESB/domestic status main effect on all the variables tested. The NESB students scored lower on all measures except composition grade. Thus, hypothesis 2 was partially confirmed. The finding that the NESB students received higher grades in composition than their domestic counterparts was, however, unexpected. The international NESB/domestic status effect on help-seeking visits was particularly robust, with the NESB students seeking help far more frequently than their domestic counterparts. Hypothesis 3 was therefore confirmed.

Table 2: Results of ANOVAs on All Variables as a function of Gender and International NESB/domestic status

	International	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>F</i> (1, 654)	<i>p</i> -value
SAT Verbal	NESB	440.79	94.81		
	Domestic	565.02	89.08	189.09	.001
SAT Writing	NESB	516.08	73.09		
	Domestic	561.94	88.78	-3.77	.001
In-House Reading	NESB	10.60	2.26		
	Domestic	12.64	1.13	-13.77	.001
Pretest	NESB	2.35	.94		
	Domestic	3.15	1.03	-10.26	.001
WSE Index	NESB	53.96	20.03		
	Domestic	70.39	14.32	-7.60	.001
HSV	NESB	16.39	20.70		
	Domestic	1.00	4.26	12.94	.001
Grade	Male	3.21	.87		
	Female	3.47	.65	13.86	.001
	NESB	3.50	.53		
	Domestic	3.32	.62	2.76	.01

Hypothesis 3. To test hypothesis 3, we performed a path analysis for gender, international NESB/domestic status, writing self-efficacy scores, frequency of help-seeking visits, and junior composition course grade. We first calculated correlation coefficients for the variables used in the path analysis (see Table 3). We then ran a series of regression analyses to test the hypothesis (see Table 4). The resulting path analysis is shown in Figure 1.

Table 3: Correlations among All Variables Used in the Path Analysis

	Gender	Home Language Status	Self-Efficacy	WCV	Grade
Gender	1				
International NESB/domestic Status	.04	1			
Self-Efficacy	-.04	.42**	1		
HSV	.08*	-.47**	-.32**	1	
Grade	.16**	-.10*	.08	.21**	1

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$

$N = 671$ (Male = 247; Female = 424)

In the first model, we regressed gender and international NESB/domestic status onto self-efficacy belief. This analysis confirmed that gender had no effect on self-efficacy belief. However, as indicated by the previous analysis, the domestic students were found to have significantly higher self-efficacy belief than the international NESB students, $\beta = .22$, $p < .001$.

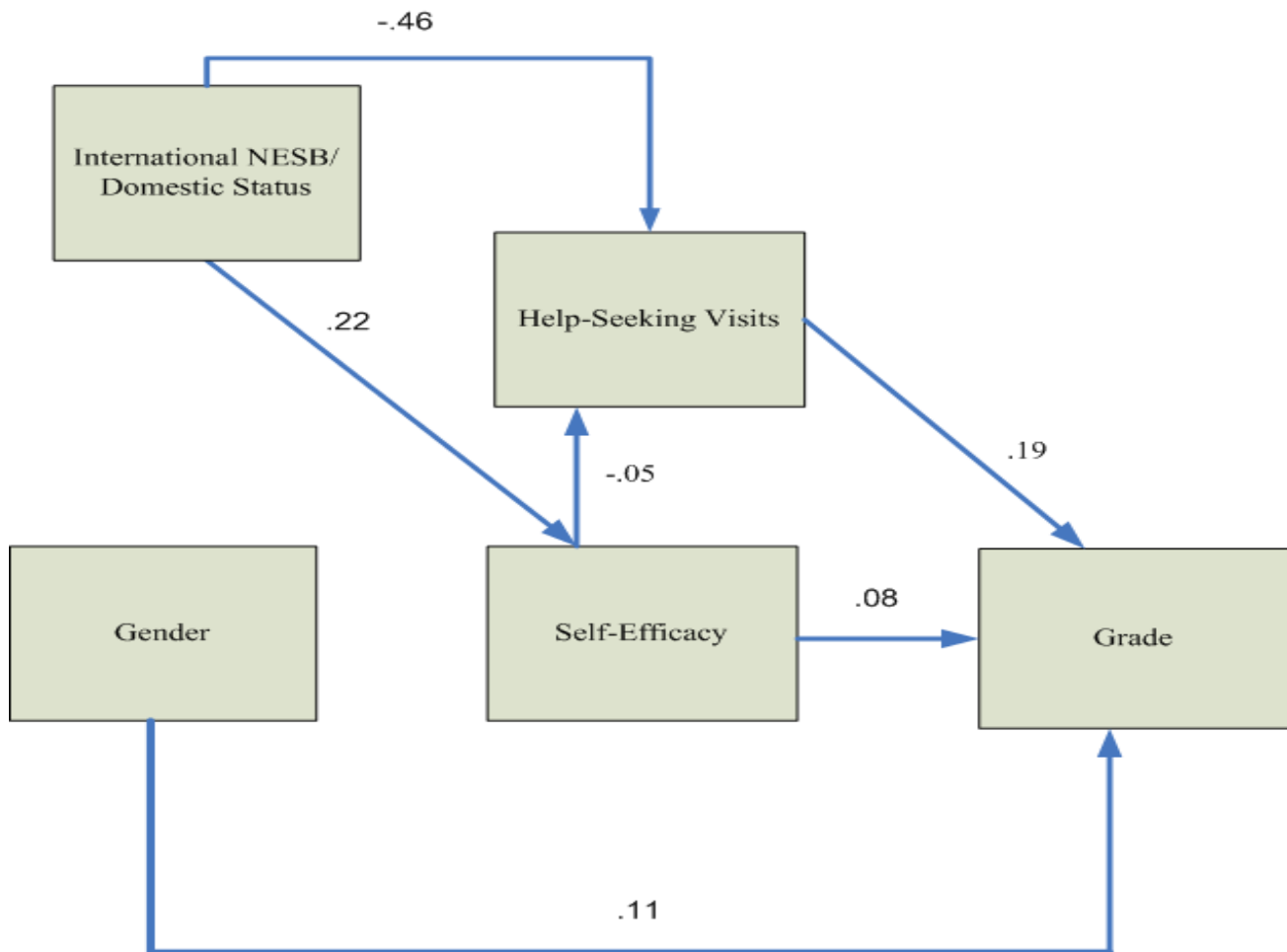
We then regressed gender, international NESB/domestic status, and self-efficacy belief onto HSV. This analysis showed that although gender was not a significant predictor, both the international NESB/domestic status and writing self-efficacy belief were significant predictors of help-seeking behavior. Specifically, above and beyond the effects of gender and self-efficacy belief, international students visited the writing center significantly more often than the domestic students, $\beta = -.46$, $p < .001$. Furthermore, above and beyond the effects of gender and the international NESB/domestic status, those who had a lower sense of writing self-efficacy sought help significantly more often than those who had a higher sense of self-efficacy.

Table 4: Regression Models of among Gender, Self-Efficacy, Writing Center Visits, and Grade

Model	IV	DV	β	t-value	$p <$	R^2
1	Gender	Self-Efficacy	-.05	1.56	ns	.05
	International NESB/domestic status ($df = 2, 666$)		.22	6.85	.001	
2	Gender	HSV	.03	1.00	ns	.23
	International NESB/domestic status		-.46	-15.42	.001	
	Self-Efficacy ($df = 3, 665$)		-.05	-1.77	.05	
	Gender	Grade	.11	3.46	.001	.05
	International NESB/domestic status		-.01	-.37	ns	
	Self-Efficacy		.07	2.05	.05	
	HSV		.19	5.23	.001	
	($df = 4, 664$)					

In the final model, we regressed gender, international NESB/domestic status, self-efficacy belief, and HSV onto Grade. The results indicated that gender, self-efficacy belief, and help-seeking behavior were the only three significant predictors of grade in junior-level composition. Specifically, above and beyond the effects of the other variables, female students earned higher grades than male students, $\beta = .11, p < .001$. In addition, above and beyond the other variables, the higher the students' self-efficacy belief, the higher their grades were, $\beta = .07, p < .05$. Finally, above and beyond the other variables, the more frequently students sought help in the writing center, the higher their grades were, $\beta = .19, p < .001$. The resulting path analysis for all variables is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: A path analysis of gender, international NESB/domestic status, self-efficacy, HSV, and grade



Discussion

This study was designed to examine writing self-efficacy, writing performance, and help seeking among undergraduates, looking specifically at the potential influences of gender and international NESB/domestic status on writing self-efficacy and help-seeking behavior. Previous studies have reported a positive correlation between writing self-efficacy and performance, as well as a positive correlation between self-efficacy and help seeking. In addition, several studies found significant gender differences in writing self-efficacy and performance, although a few indicated that as children aged these differences declined with respect to self-efficacy. As predicted in hypothesis 1, we found no significant gender effect with regard to writing self-efficacy, test scores, or help-seeking behavior. Given that the female-to-male ratio in the study was 1.66 to 1, we believe that this finding offers robust confirmation of previous studies showing that gender differences related to writing self-efficacy decline over time, such that upon university matriculation they have essentially disappeared. Moreover, the results were consistent regardless of NESB/domestic status. On this basis, we would suggest that we may be observing a cognitive/developmental universal.

Congruent with Greene's (1999) study, we found a significant gender difference with regard to performance, regardless of NESB/domestic status. This result raises the question of task orientation reported by Pajares and Valiante (2006) and their finding that writing, at least in the US, is a stereotypical female domain. Our finding of a significant gender effect on writing performance irrespective of cultural background suggests that task orientation regarding writing may not be culture specific. Future research should further examine this issue across various cultures. Our initial assumption was that the high performance of our female participants was linked to their help-seeking behavior, given that all previous studies have shown that females are more likely to seek help than are males. Our analysis, however, indicated that this assumption was incorrect, for there was no gender difference with regard to frequency of help seeking. We therefore are unable to explain the higher performance of the females on the basis of the data in hand. Future research would need to consider not only task orientation but also the writing histories (i.e., public school grades) of the participants.

Although reading ability has repeatedly been found to be a significant factor in writing performance, there was no gender difference in reading ability among our participants, but reading history might be a factor above and beyond reading ability and would need to be examined as well in future research. As anticipated, the domestic participants outperformed their international NESB counterparts on all tests and had significantly higher writing self-efficacy beliefs. Previous research on self-efficacy found that students with high levels of self-efficacy belief were more likely to engage in high levels of help-seeking behavior, but that was not the case in our study. The NESB students sought help significantly more frequently than did the domestic students. We have two possible interpretations of this result. First, contrary to previous research reporting a positive correlation between self-efficacy and help seeking, the domestic students' high writing self-efficacy belief made them overconfident and therefore reluctant to seek help even in the face of need. The result was an inverse relation with regard to help-seeking behavior. Second, the domestic students did not perceive a sufficiently high need for help to warrant visits to the writing center. Even with very few tutoring sessions, they were able to attain an average composition grade of 3.32, which most of the domestic students might have determined was good enough. Given what we know about grade inflation throughout higher education in general and composition classes in particular, we favor the second interpretation.

More important, we believe, is the finding that the NESB students significantly outperformed the domestic students, disconfirming part of hypothesis 2. As figure 1 shows, the frequency with which students sought help in the university writing center was a significant predictor of grade in junior-level composition, regardless of NESB/domestic status. Also worth noting is that although the relation between writing self-efficacy and performance was statistically significant, help-seeking behavior was a more robust predictor of grade in composition. Our path analysis leads us to conclude that help seeking played a mediating role between self-efficacy and performance. The performance of our international NESB students also indicates that self-efficacy alone is not enough to predict academic success when it comes to undergraduate writing. Our results suggest that students who want to improve their writing can do so through active help seeking, which should alleviate the anxiety of international students, especially those from Asia, and of writing center staff who fear that such students' cultural differences hinder effective tutoring.

Whether active help seeking and the ensuing success in composition result in higher writing self-efficacy, however, remains an unanswered question. In retrospect, an obvious shortcoming of the present study is that we did not address this question and failed to measure what effect, if any, writing center tutoring had on the students' self-efficacy at the end of their junior year. Additional research therefore seems warranted.

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