[opening slide] The Stanford Study of Writing began in September, 2001, when I and Vice Provost John Bravman invited a random sample of that year’s entering class to participate in a five-year longitudinal Study. Of the 243 students invited, 189 accepted the invitation, amounting to roughly 12 percent of that year’s class. [slides 2, 3, 4 demographics and majors] Participants agreed to submit the writing they did for all of their classes, along with as much of their out-of-class or extracurricular writing as possible. [slide 5-data sources] In addition, they agreed to participate in at least one annual survey. Out of the 189 students, a subgroup of 36 students agreed to be interviewed at least once every year.

The Study has several major goals:

- to provide an overview of student writing at Stanford;
- to trace student development in writing across a five-year period;
- and to use findings to inform the work of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric, the Stanford Writing Center, and, if appropriate, our Writing in the Majors courses.

Data collection continued from September 2001 to September 2006, resulting in a very large archive of student writing (some 15,000 pieces) in an Oracle database. The range of student writing is wide: email in eleven languages, for example, as well as everything from multimedia presentations to problem sets and lab reports to honors theses across disciplines to the script and video of a three-hour Hip Hopera. If all goes well, this archive
will become part of the library’s Stanford Digital Archives collection – and thus be available for scholars in years to come.

Coding and analysis of data are ongoing, but some preliminary findings have emerged:

- Students entered Stanford with a fairly wide range of writing abilities—describe briefly;
- During their first year, [slide 6 / kinds of writing] students reported being assigned to do some eighteen different kinds of writing; this broad range of assignments persisted through the four years, though the ratio differed from year to year. During the fifth year of the Study, findings show that by far the most prevalent form of writing is email and other electronic communication. Beyond that, [slide 7 year 5 writing] most on-the-job writing the participants are doing post graduation involves summaries, outlines, presentations, and group or collaborative writing;
- Students generally reported writing quite a bit in their first year [slide 8 number of pages year 1] (from 60 to more than 100 pages), then even more in their second and third year, then dropping off in the amount of writing in their fourth year, a finding I need to investigate further. As might have been expected, [slide 9 amount of writing in disciplines] students in the humanities report writing more than their counterparts in other disciplines. Visual elements in writing generally increased [slide 10] gradually during these students’ years at Stanford, as did the use of web pages [slide 11], audio and video files, and presentational slides, offering dramatic illustration of the changes taking place in the definition, nature, and scope of writing;
• These students arrived at Stanford as fairly confident writers: most reported that coming out of high school they were “very confident.” [slide 12] By spring of their first year, however, that confidence had slipped considerably, though by graduation and into their first year beyond Stanford their confidence levels were again moderately high. Looking back from the end of their fifth year in the Study, [slide 13] participants reported being more confident in both professional and extracurricular writing than they were in their undergraduate years, though they are still not as confident as they were as high school writers, and that’s probably a good thing;

• While several of the 189 students are still finishing up undergraduate school [slide 14 where are they now], most have graduated and moved on to graduate or professional school or into the workforce in a wide range of jobs, from teaching to investment banking to engineering to software design to film production.

• Students consistently told us that “really good” or “the best” writing is writing that is performative, that makes something happen in the world. I became especially aware of this aspect of their thinking when, on being invited to talk about their experiences with writing at a national conference they immediately decided to make a CD of their presentation and to “sell” the CD at the conference for $1—or any donation. The next week, they donated over $500 to the Mission Learning Center in San Francisco. I have a few copies of this CD with me for anyone who would like to have one, and I hope to have a link to it on the Study website soon.

• Throughout the five years, students reported being deeply engaged with writing out of class: for these students, extracurricular writing is
very important, often more important than any of the writing they are
doing for classes. These slides show just a very few of the kinds of
writing these students were doing outside of class; [slides to end]

- Across the five years of the Study, participants’ understanding of the
scope and function of writing changed considerably, from fairly
instrumentalist definitions of writing to writing as a way of managing
and making sense of enormous amounts of information and as a way
of creating new knowledge.

I want to conclude with a finding that is emerging from the interview data
but which is, at this point, anecdotal and only tangentially related to writing.
In their senior year, as we asked them to talk about the diverse audiences
they had written to or for, students talked extensively about their
engagement with diversity at Stanford, and every single one of them said
that, when they entered Stanford, being in such a diverse environment was
very exciting and engaging to them. While they still valued the experience
of diversity, however, many in their last year of college felt that those
experiences lessened as they went through the years. Several spoke in depth
about feeling relegated to one group or the other by graduation time. What
this may suggest is that while Stanford is doing an outstanding job of
creating a richly diverse setting, we may need to do much more to help
students understand how to operate successfully in and benefit from that
setting.

The Study does have a Website in progress and I will be posting new
findings to the site as we begin intensive textual analysis: see
http://ssw.stanford.edu. Thank you for your attention – and I hope I’ve
saved time for some questions.