

The Companies We Keep *Or* The Companies We Would Like to Try to Keep: Strategies and Tactics in Challenging Times

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In an address at the University of Michigan on January 27, 2012, President Obama hinted at his administration's potential plans for higher education. He began by linking education and economic achievement. "The degree you earn from Michigan," he said, "will be the best tool you have to achieve that basic American promise—the idea that if you work hard, if you are applying yourself, if you are doing the right thing, you can do well enough to raise a family and own a home and send your own kids to college, put away a little for retirement, create products or services—be part of something that is adding value to this country and maybe changing the world. That's what you're striving for. That's what the American dream is all about" (Obama). Obama then sketched the outlines of a new initiative, a college version of Race to the Top. Although he linked it to affordability, this initiative also includes elements of what in the post-Spellings age can be called accountability. Obama called for "a new report card for colleges. . . . From now on, parents and students deserve to know how a college is doing—how affordable it is, how well are its students doing? We want you to know how well a car stacks up before you buy it. You should know how well a college stacks up" (Obama).

The question of how well students are doing is one that has been asked with increasing frequency in public venues since the publication of the Spellings Commission Report in 2006. I've argued elsewhere that this report reflected—maybe even signaled—a moment where a number of people, forces, and organizations coalesced around a particular narrative. The purpose of postsecondary education, this story said, was to prepare students for participation in the 21st century economy by equipping them with the skills and knowledge to become economically competitive agents (Miller et al.). This narrative is analogous to what educational historian David

Labaree has called the “social mobility” model of school, in which the purpose of education is to train students to be individual economic competitors (Labaree “Public”; *Someone*). As the Report told it, though, faculty didn’t understand what was necessary to achieve this purpose and that, as a result, institutions of higher education were no longer successfully training students to fulfill it. They had not, in the words of the Spellings Report, “confront[ed] the impact of globalization, rapidly evolving technologies, an increasingly diverse and aging population, and an evolving marketplace characterized by new needs and new paradigms” (Miller et al. ix). Thus, the Spellings Report said, intervention was necessary. Among other things, colleges and universities needed to be accountable—they needed to outline what students were learning to be prepared for the 21st century economy, how, and why.

As Obama’s remarks at the University of Michigan demonstrate, this narrative has become considerably more powerful and focused in the last six years, especially around two key points: what “preparation” means and how “how well” will be indicated. In the first part of this article, I’ll consider how a number of organizations and movements loosely affiliated with education—organizations who upon first thought we might say are seeking to keep company with us—are seeking to define the meaning of “preparation” and how “how well” prepared will be indicated. Definitions of these elements reflect what students will be taught and how their knowledge will be assessed; thus, they will affect every aspect of instruction. Then, I’ll step back to consider how WPAs and writing instructors might work from principle to develop strategies for action in these challenging times.

COMPANIES—AND NON-PROFITS—AND KEEPING COMPANY

I’ll begin, then, by updating the narrative that I’ve contended extends from documents like the Spellings Report. This narrative says that the purpose of postsecondary education is to prepare students for participation in the 21st century economy, but that faculty aren’t doing a good job with this preparation because we don’t understand what’s necessary for success

As I’ve said, answers to two key questions—what is meant by “preparation?” And how should “how well” be indicated?—are critical, because the responses provided to these questions will shape curriculum (and assessments). I want to talk about five players offering responses to these questions.

The first of these players is the American Legislative Executive Council, or ALEC. Journalist John Nichols describes ALEC as “a critical arm of the right-wing network of policy shops that, with infusions of corporate

cash, has evolved to shape American politics. . . . Corporate donors retain veto power over [the language in ALEC's motions and platforms], which is developed by . . . secretive task forces" (Nichols). ALEC drafts model legislation and then distributes it through its members and networks to state legislatures.

In the last three years, ALEC has taken a keen interest in education. At the higher education level, ALEC's interests take a number of forms. For instance, they have drafted the Higher Education Scholarship for High School Pupils Act,¹ which would guarantee any high school student who graduates early and receives a "proficient" ranking on state tests a 50% tuition scholarship to college (ALEC, "High School Pupils"). It also includes the Credit Articulation Agreement Act, which would mandate that four-year institutions may not require additional coursework from two-year transfers unless explicitly required for a degree, and even then it could not add time to the achievement of the degree (ALEC, "Credit Articulation").

ALEC has also drafted sample legislation that defines what "preparation" means and how "how well" should be indicated in its Academic Accountability for Higher Education Act. The draft of this Act circulated to members as part of the 2011 States and Nation Policy Summit Policy outlines these definitions clearly. Section 1 of the draft Act, "Annual Assessment of Core Collegiate Skills," says that institutions must assess "the level of student learning gains in core collegiate skills." It mentions only one *specific* skill, though—writing. Section 2 says that "institutions will conduct their assessments with their choice of one or more of the three standardized, nationally-normed instruments now widely in use: the Collegiate Learning Assessment, administered by the Council on Aid to Education; the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, administered by ACT, Inc.; or the Proficiency Profile, administered by Educational Testing Services, Inc." Section 3 says that "[i]nstitutions have the option to choose a longitudinal assessment system to follow a group of students from freshman through senior status or test randomly selected cohorts of students of statistically meaningful size, in accordance with guidance from the testing companies" (ALEC 2011 States and Nation Policy Summit memo, October 27, 2011). For ALEC, then, answers to the question about "how well preparation is being done" lie in students' performances on one of three tests: the CLA, the CAPP, or the ETS Proficiency Profile. The companies designing the tests determine what "preparation" means, even if institutions should choose to develop some supplementary longitudinal assessment.

If your institution participates in the Voluntary System of Accountability, the second player I'll discuss, the details of ALEC's model legislation probably sound familiar. The CLA, the CAAP, and the ETS Proficiency

Profile are the same three assessments included in the VSA. But where ALEC's intention is for its act to become mandated by state law, the VSA is *voluntary*—at least, for institutions it is—and it doesn't preclude additional institutional assessment. It also includes a variety of other factors in its metrics, including information on student perceptions and learning outcomes. Answers to questions about what "preparation" means and "how well" it is being achieved in the VSA, then, are, several steps removed from the model ALEC legislation, though still tied to standardized tests (see, for instance, VSA, "Overview"). It's hard, though, not to notice the overlap between ALEC's model legislation and the language used in the VSA, which was in place before the sample legislation was drafted. This might—and I emphasize *might*—be because the VSA and ALEC are connected through the Lumina Foundation, the third player I'll discuss here. Lumina Program officer Kevin Corcoran was a member of the ALEC Education Task Force in 2010 and 2011 (ALEC Education Task Force Roster). Lumina was also a "Chairman" level sponsor of ALEC's 2011 conference, pledging \$50,000 to sponsor the speech of Bob Wise, the President of the Alliance for Excellence in Education (ALEC Exposed). Lumina also provided startup funding for the VSA (Voluntary)

Of course, many of us know Lumina. In fact, some of us may have received funding from Lumina. They, along with Gates, have been identified by education researchers Cassie Hall and Scott Thomas as one of two "megafoundations" engaged in what they call "advocacy philanthropy," efforts that "emphasize[] broad-scale reform initiatives and systemic change through focused, hands-on public policy work" (2). Hall and Thomas observe "a shift in the focus of [these] foundations toward issues of completion, productivity, metrics, and efficiency" (12). And Lumina has enormous financing to back their interests. According to Hall and Thomas's investigation, Lumina gave \$25,543,238 to initiatives linked to postsecondary preparation and success 2009 and \$25,654,300 in 2010 (12).

Among the efforts associated with Lumina's attempt to define "preparation" is the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), the fourth project I want to touch upon. Modeled on the European "Tuning" process, the DQP attempts to define "preparation" by outlining five, complementary domains for learning: Applied Learning, Intellectual Skills, Specialized Knowledge, Broad, Integrative Learning, and Civic Learning. Within each of these, the DQP identifies degree-level goals for the associate's, bachelor's, and master's. These definitions are farther still from the tightly controlled metrics included in the ALEC legislation or even the VSA. The section focusing on "Communication Fluency" under "Intellectual Skills" says that students will produce writing in a relatively narrow band of modes—argument or

narrative for two year students; argument, narrative, or explication for four-year (14). We might say that on *initial* examination, these don't seem so terrible, especially when compared to ALEC's ideas about what "preparation" means, though I will return to this point shortly.

While the DQP provides a somewhat more nuanced vision—at least, relative to ALEC—of what "preparation" means, it doesn't address "how well." But it might not need to. That's because several regional accreditors including the one in my region, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), are running voluntary pilots investigating whether the DQP might serve as a useful starting place for degree-level outcomes (Western Association). If institutions do decide to adapt (or adopt) the DQP outcomes as their own, they will then need to demonstrate how well these outcomes are being achieved through their assessments, and these assessments will invariably shape classroom practices. WASC has adopted this strategy in part to avoid the political heat that has been applied since the period around the publication of the Spellings Report, when the Higher Education Act (which in part authorizes the system of postsecondary accreditation that exists today) was renewed.

Since that time, accreditors have been repeatedly slapped for three things: allowing institutions to set their own learning standards and develop their own assessments; the lack of consistent outcomes across institutions; and the lack of comparable data. These were often accompanied by charges that some institutions were not ensuring that students experience the kind of intellectual rigor that they should in college. I point to you the example of *Academically Adrift*, for instance, as the latest instantiation of these accusations. However, they have been much more consistently expressed by people like Anne D. Neal, a longtime member of the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), which approves accreditors. You can read about her concerns in a piece called "Seeking Higher Education Accountability" in an October 2008 ALEC Policy Forum (Neal). The DQP, then, along with the very process of postsecondary accreditation, might be another constellation of entities seeking to define "preparation" and "how well."

Finally, I will point to the granddaddy of all efforts defining "preparation" and how "how well" should be indicated, the Common Core State Standards (Common Core). For those unfamiliar with them, the Standards have been adopted by 45 states and three territories. Adoption, in fact, was mandatory if states wanted to apply for Race to the Top funds. The Standards' definitions of "preparation" in writing do include actual writing, for which we can be grateful. Through them, students will focus on argumentative writing, informative/explanatory writing, and narrative writing from

kindergarten through 12th grade. The Standards do mention the words “purpose and audience”; they do say that sometimes, writers blend these modes.

I don’t want to get too far afield here, but I do want to talk a bit about one of the major sponsors of the CCSS, Achieve, because they are a significant player in defining “preparation” and how “how well” will be indicated. Briefly, Achieve came to prominence in the early 2000s through another effort, the American Diploma Project (ADP). This was an attempt by Achieve and other partners including the National Governors’ Association, another of the Standards’ primary sponsors, to create common standards for English Language Arts and mathematics education. ADP involved “working” with teachers within the states to craft the standards—though that “work” was guided with an iron hand and a set of draft standards developed with organizations like ACT. ADP also introduced a new phrase into the discussion of education as part of its efforts, “College and Career Readiness,” and a story about teachers that accompanied this phrase—that teachers didn’t understand how to make students “college and career ready.” ADP was there to fill in the gaps, along with partners like ACT and the College Board, who had assessments at the ready.

Flash forward four years, and Achieve was centrally involved in the development of the Common Core Standards. Drafted by a relatively small group of educators (largely administrators) and professionals, vetted with minimal input from professional organizations like NCTE or even MLA, the Standards went from draft to final version in about 14 months (see Hesse for a discussion of the drafting process).

How the Standards are implemented in the educations of the millions of students whose experiences they will shape will really depend on the assessments that are developed to indicate “how well.” Almost all of the states that have adopted the Standards have joined one of two assessment consortia: SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, or SBAC, which is coordinated by the State of Washington, and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career, or PARCC. PARCC is coordinated by Achieve. Achieve, then, has been at the center of many mixes of those seeking to define “preparation” and how “how well” should be indicated in the last five or six years. Its influence and its funding have also grown considerably since the ADP. According to the organization’s 2009 Form 990, the form required of all non-profits by the IRS, Achieve’s 2005 grant revenue was \$5,501,678. Its 2009 grant revenue was \$12,507,312, a more than 50 percent increase in grant revenue over a five year period (Achieve). Over that same period, Achieve received over \$20 million from the Gates Foundation and over \$200,000 from Lumina.²

While the definitions of “preparation” and “how well” that will ultimately be shaped by Common Core Standard assessments are still unfolding, we know that the assessments will be machine scored (see ETS, for example), and we know from research in the field about correlations between machine scoring and very tightly constrained writing assignments (e.g., Whithaus). We also know that the intent is for assessments developed for Grade 12 students to serve as placement tests for colleges. According to a blog entry by Allison Jones, the Vice President for Postsecondary Collaboration at Achieve, posted on Getting Past Go (a project which, by the way, is partly funded by Lumina),

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) college ready assessment will be used to determine whether a student will be “placed” into remedial courses or enrolled directly into entry-level, credit-bearing courses. . . . Thus, the PARCC college ready assessment, and that of SMARTER Balanced, too, will be used by colleges and universities as a “placement test” that determines into which course a student will be placed—remedial or credit-bearing.

Let me pause, now, and summarize where we are. First, we know that questions about what “preparation” means and “how well” preparation will be indicated are very much with us. Second, we know that there are a variety of answers being provided to these questions by groups like ALEC, foundations like Lumina and efforts they fund like the VSA and the DQP, and think tank/actors like Achieve. These answers are also tightly wound through the Common Core and its assessments, which will have a profound effect on the experiences of K-12 students and might also bear significantly on college writing placement. Third, we know that these organizations are connected—sometimes tightly, sometimes loosely, as is indicated in Figure 1. Finally, we know that these groups, foundations, and think tank/actors have considerably more power, reach, and money than do K-12 teachers, college instructors, or any of our professional organizations.

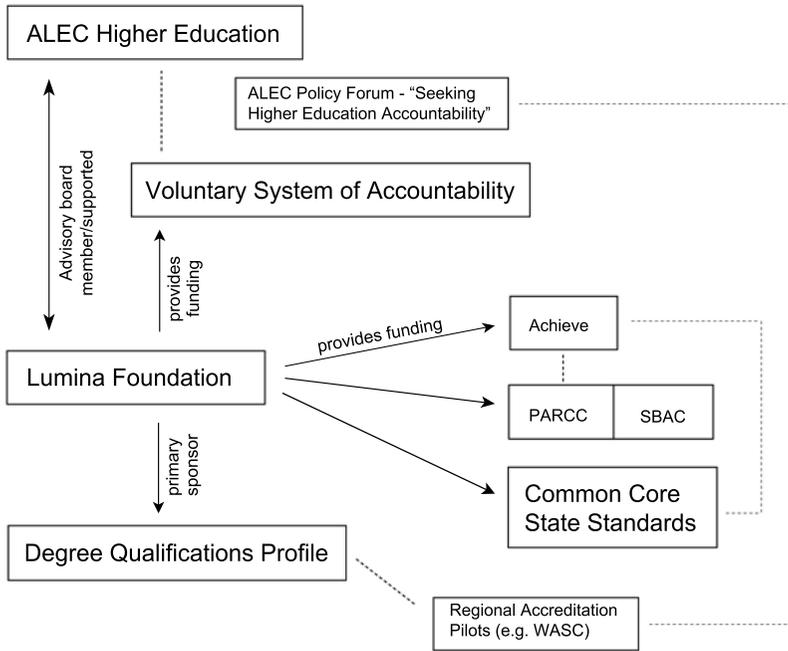


Figure 1. Relationships between organizations and efforts.

EDUCATION AND VOCATIONALISM: SOME BROADER CONTEXT

The question, then, is how can we faculty members enter these discussions in order to make a difference for our students and our programs? I think that we *can* make a difference. The question of “how” lies in achieving a balance between identifying *our* principles and enacting tactics that reflect them. By “principles” I mean beliefs and values that lie at the core of what we do and represent ideas that are foundational for our work. I think here of a phrase I’ve cited before from the legal scholar Karl Llewellyn: “Strategies without [principles] is a menace, but [principles] without strategies is a mess” (sic) (Llewellyn qtd in Adler-Kassner, 5). Llewellyn’s quote reminds us of the constant need to identify what we believe, to name what motivates and inspires us, *and* to work smartly and strategically with those principles in mind. I’m going to focus on just one of those principles here, one that I think is critical as we move forward. To explain it, though, it’s important to take a step back from the day-to-day discussions of what “preparation” means and how “how well” will be indicated and look at some broader context.

What we are seeing in this moment in time, I would contend, is a tension within the currently dominant narrative about the purpose of education. This narrative, as I've said, suggests that the purpose of education is to prepare students for participation in the 21st century economy by teaching them to be economic competitors, what Labaree called education for "social mobility." In a separate analysis, Labaree has also identified two simultaneous movements within higher education that are currently occurring within this purpose ("Mutual Subversion"). The intersections between purpose and narratives create both problems and potential for us, so I need to explain these movements to illustrate the point.

The first movement within higher education, says Labaree, is from liberal education to professional training. That is: learning at the undergraduate level has come to center on equipping students with what are seen as the "skills" necessary for professional success. While Labaree says that this shift isn't very recent at all, I would argue that it is more noticeable of late because of the dominance of the "college and career readiness" frame.

Existing simultaneously with the movement from liberal education to professional training, Labaree argues, is a shift from professional training to liberal education. That is: the professional training that institutions provide is primarily focused on attributes associated with liberal education: the ability to communicate effectively, think critically, and so on.

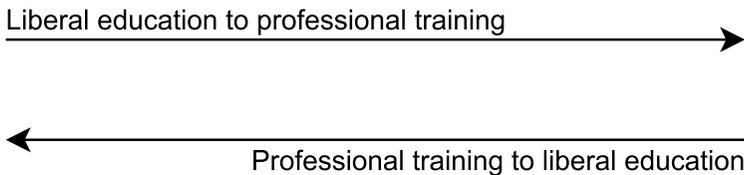


Figure 2. Two simultaneous movements in higher education (Labaree).

In the end, Labaree contends that liberal education has won. In other words, while higher education might seem to be professionally oriented when it speaks to "career readiness," that definition of "readiness," especially when it's posited by people *in* the academy, reflects the perspective of and attributes associated with liberal education.

Our initial reaction to what Labaree represents as the victory of liberal education over professional training might be to celebrate. But when this victory is situated within the purpose of social mobility, the triumph of liberal education becomes problematic. That's because within it, school is less

about education and more about credentialing for the purposes of vocationalism (“Mutual Subversion” 12–13). The content of learning is no longer important; it’s the development of strategies that will lead to career success that is. As a result, as academics seek to emphasize strategies like critical writing, reading, and thinking that are seemingly applicable *across contexts*, especially in making the appeal that they apply in “careers,” the actual content of academic disciplines and the connections between that content and those strategies is disappearing. As Labaree puts it, “the content is liberal, but credentialism means that the content does not really matter” (“Mutual Subversion” 15). So while we might celebrate the elevation of something like critical thinking in this new era of vocationally-oriented education, it’s increasingly seen as something that can be developed apart from specific disciplinary content.

Ultimately, then, Labaree’s analysis helps to put the challenges I’m outlining here into a broader context: Increasingly, higher education has claimed that it provides strategies and even “skills” associated with liberal education in order to prepare students for life beyond the academy. Within the social mobility narrative, though, this claim is frequently associated with a content-vacated vocationalism that I would argue is reflected in the phrase “career readiness.” It is also reflected in definitions of “preparation” and how “how well” will be indicated held by the entities that I defined earlier. Among all of them is the idea that in college, students should develop skills and strategies that they can use to compete in careers after college.

This content-vacant, vocationally oriented perspective on education is abundantly evident in Obama’s remarks, in the ALEC legislation, and in the Voluntary System of Accountability. I’ll skip over illustrations from these, in fact, because it’s so easy to see this perspective in them. It’s seen in documents like the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), which some might consider (at least upon initial reading) as somewhere between “okay” and “perhaps not so bad,” where the particularly invidious consequences of content-vacant liberal education can become more apparent.

First, I’ll remind you of the DQP’s explicit writing outcomes, which focus in part on the production of modes. At the associate’s level, these outcomes say that writers should “present[] substantially error-free prose in both argumentative and narrative forms to general and specialized audiences” (Lumina 13). Bachelor’s level outcomes include:

- Construct[ing] sustained, coherent arguments and/or narratives and/or explications of technical issues and processes, in two media, to general and specific audiences.

- With one or more oral interlocutors or collaborators, advanc[ing] an argument or designs an approach to resolving a social, personal or ethical dilemma. (Lumina 14)

While these might not seem terrible upon first or even second glance, they do primarily emphasize the production of a particular kind of *form*. As scholars from Anne Beaufort to Anis Bawarshi to Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle have argued, putting form at the center of writing instruction is highly problematic because it negates the *content* of writing, a point to which I will return shortly.

It is when the DQP implicitly includes writing, though, that things become more problematic. I'll mention just a few outcomes from four of the document's five domains focusing on writing to illustrate the point. These say that the student and/or the student's writing:

- Describes the scope and principal features of his/her field of study, citing at least some of its core theories and practices, and offers a similar explication of at least one related field (10).
- Defines and properly uses the principal specialized terms used in the field, both historical and contemporaneous (10).
- Demonstrates fluency in the use of tools, technologies and methods common to the field (10).
- Evaluates, clarifies and frames a complex question or challenge, using perspectives and scholarship drawn from the student's major field and at least one other field (10).
- Constructs a project related to a familiar but complex problem in his/her field of study by independently assembling, arranging and reformulating ideas, concepts, designs and/or techniques (10).
- Constructs a summative project, paper, performance or practice-based performance that draws on current research, scholarship and/or techniques in the field (10).
- Produces, independently or collaboratively, an investigative, creative or practical work that draws on specific theories, tools and methods from at least two academic fields (11).
- Incorporates multiple information resources presented in different media and/or different languages, in projects, papers or performances, with citations in forms appropriate to those resources, and evaluates the reliability and comparative worth of competing information resources (13).
- Presents a discrete project, paper, exhibit or performance, or other appropriate demonstration that links knowledge and/or skills acquired

in work, community and/or research activities with knowledge acquired in one or more disciplines; explains in writing or another medium how those elements were combined in the product to shape its intended meaning or findings; and employs appropriate citations to demonstrate the relationship of the product to literature in its field (17).

- Completes a substantial field-based project related to his or her major course of study; seeks and employs insights from others in implementing the project; evaluates a significant challenge or question faced in the project in relation to core concepts, methods or assumptions in his or her major field; and describes the effects of learning outside the classroom on his or her research or practical skills (17).

Again, these outcomes might not seem problematic. In fact, they could even be read as supporting writing in multiple sites, courses, and for multiple purposes. We like that, to be sure. But at no point does the DQP suggest that writing might be something *other* than a tool, a strategy. To give the document its due, it also doesn't do this for any other field. But *no other academic field* except, maybe, math, is considered by people outside the field—and, I would argue, sometimes inside as well—as a discipline whose subject is in service to other disciplines.

Because of this perception, a perception that is reflected in the DQP and, I think, in some first year composition courses, responding to questions of what “prepared” means and how “how well” should be indicated *from our perspective* becomes especially difficult. This is because from a content-vacant, skills-oriented perspective, our discipline of Writing Studies is erased. Until we develop *and act from* principles about the meaning of what composition and writing studies is *as a discipline*, and then link what happens in composition courses—which *exist within our discipline*—to those principles, we are at the mercy of the companies seeking to keep our company. And to me, that's a problem.

PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES: FOR NOW

Our challenge, then, is to develop strategies to navigate a course through these challenging times. Returning to the Llewellyn quote for a moment, I believe these must extend from our principles. The first principle, and I think the most foundational one, is to clearly define what Writing Studies *is*, what it *does*, and how we know that and then to make sure that this definition is clearly reflected throughout *all* of our work.³ This echoes Richard Haswell's call for RAD research (Haswell) and Chris Anson's for empirical

work (Anson), but speaks to something *sui generis*, too: an idea of what we are about.

Fortunately, abundant work in our field by many researchers—including (but not limited to) Chuck Bazerman and Paul Prior, Anne Beaufort, Doug Downs and Elizabeth Wardle, Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, and Kathleen Yancey—speaks to this issue. Through their research, we can identify long and short form definitions of what Writing Studies *is* and what it *does*. In the interests of time, I'll skip to the short form of this definition:

Writing Studies focuses on three things:

1. The roles that writers and writing perform in particular contexts;
2. The values reflected in writing and in those roles, and
3. The implications extending from relationships between roles, writing, and values.

The principle from which we must proceed, then, is that we must work from a definition of what Writing Studies *is* and what it *does*—if not this definition, something similar to it. From it, students—and also administrators, parents, community members, and other stakeholders—can study *and* practice with the writing in specific contexts, and also examine questions that involve the study of writing, values, and relationships in those contexts. Research tells us that this combination of study and practice contributes to the development of writers' abilities, development that is predicated in part on engagement with the very questions at the core of our discipline illustrated in Figure 3.

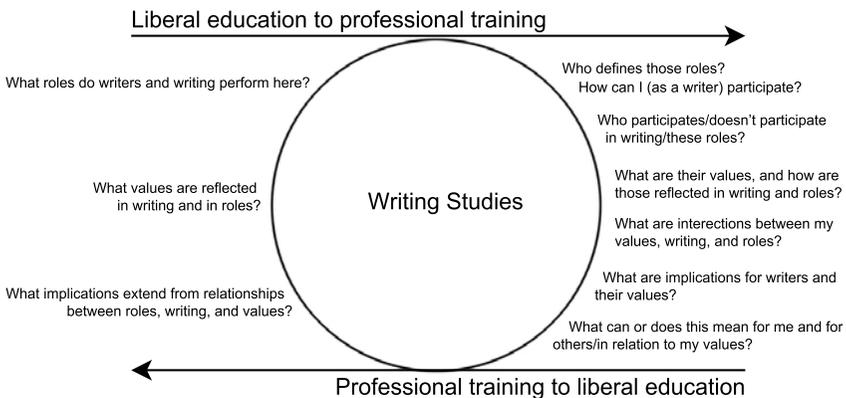


Figure 3. Questions at the core of Writing Studies/Study of Writing.

But without proceeding first from content and *then* to questions, study, and practice, we become nothing but strategy—and our field disappears.

I'll end, then, with three strategies extending from this principle that I think can help us to navigate through narratives currently shaping education, narratives that present distinct definitions of “preparation” and “how well.”

1. NO VAMPIRES POLICY

First is what I think of as the “no vampires” policy. This is: Writing classes, especially first year classes, must absolutely and always be grounded in Writing Studies, must always about the study of writing. They should not, as I heard recently and anecdotally, engage students in writing about vampires—nor about political issues, nor about recent controversies, nor about other things that are not about *writing*. In Writing Studies classes, students study writing and the intersections between writing and values within specific contexts. At the same time, that immersion helps students develop strategies that they can apply in other contexts, whether other classes or workplaces or community sites. I am certainly not the first person to make this suggestion, but I want to reiterate it here.

We can debate the limits of what this idea of “the study of writing means.” In my own first year classes and some others in the writing program where I work, it means asking students to study writing by focusing on a specific context, then using that as a site to learn how to learn about writing. Downs and Wardle work from the same principle with writing about writing; Liane Robertson and Kara Taczak do the same thing in their teaching for transfer model. Through these approaches, students learn to identify the boundaries of contexts, study and practice with conventions shaping writing, and understand and act upon values linked to those conventions and boundaries.

To illustrate strategies I've developed extending from this principle, I'll give you two brief examples. One is from an assignment I've used with great success; one is a strategy for public presentations that also has worked remarkably well. The assignment, usually the second of three in a one-quarter general education first year writing class, introduces students to one of two related learning theories: “literacy practices” or “threshold concepts.” They do some reading on either of these core concepts (if literacy practices, an excerpt from Barton and Hamilton's *Local Literacies*; if threshold concepts, a chapter from Meyer and Land's work on threshold concepts). Following this reading, students identify either appropriate literacy practices or threshold concepts in another class they're taking by analyzing texts (syl-

labi, assignments, textbooks) from the class; interviewing faculty, TAs, and/or other students; and conducting observations in the class. Then, students take writing they're doing for that class and examine how the literacy practices or threshold concepts they have identified through their research are or aren't represented in their written work.

I did the "threshold concepts" version of this assignment last winter in my Writing 2 course. Just to illustrate one of its effects, I'll quote here from an email I received at the end of the school year from one of the students in the most recent version of this class, Evan Pretzlaff. (It's worth mentioning that Evan took this class during Winter quarter, which ended in March, but he sent this email in June, following the end of Spring quarter):

As a side note, one of my friends and I were going over a paper we both had to write for my upper division Religious Studies course. What I noticed was how your major really does affect how you write. I could see he had been doing psychology just by the way the paper flowed and how he analyzed the people[,] whereas he could tell I was a History major by the way I did my analysis and how it all interconnected.

This email suggests that Evan is studying writing from the perspective of Writing Studies—and that study is helping him make choices about completing writing in different contexts, too.

I also use the principle of acting on what Writing Studies is and what writing studies classes do when I give public presentations to audiences from parents, to foundation boards, to teachers. I've done this for years and I don't think it's anything new, but it illustrates the point well. Before I begin, I ask members of the audience to think about two very different things they've written in the last week. Then I ask them to write down answers to two questions: 1) What were the things that they wrote? 2) What did they need to know to do a good job with them? We all know the answers to these questions: they had to think about the conventions of the genre, the purpose for writing, the audience, the context, the situation. And every audience member knows the answer, too. So they respond, and then I use that as a launching point to describe how we Writing Studies researchers and teachers study these things, how they are at the center of our teaching, and how they are also at the core of discussions *about* writing in public contexts right now. The last time I did this kind of presentation, with an audience of UCSB parents, the questions shifted from ones like, "Don't you think technology is ruining writing?" at the beginning of the talk to "How can we work with our kids to help them make connections between all the kinds of writing they do?" at the end.

I recognize that this idea of putting writing studies at the core of all that we do might represent a shift in the way that we conceptualize and teach writing classes, especially at the first year level. But this shift, I think, is critical. As Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, the co-director of the National Writing Project, put it recently, “the narrow or formulaic types of writing that we worry standards and assessments value in K-12 did not emerge *sui generis* and [are] not unknown at the college level, either” (Eidman-Aadahl). In some senses, we are reaping what our field collectively has sown by teaching writing classes about things other than writing, or by teaching a set of modes, or by seeing writing as a series of building blocks. These approaches feed directly into the content-vacated, vocationally-oriented frame that undermines our credibility and our field. Without this field, we have no firm ground on which to stand to participate in discussions about what “preparation” means and how “how well” should be indicated.

I also recognize that other people have different interests and approaches to this way of studying writing, so I invite you to think about how you and others in your program might work from this position. The key is to frame the study of writing within the larger principle: that writing classes focus on the study of writing within particular contexts, the values reflected in that writing, and the implications of relationships between writing and values. Not vampires.

2. DEFINE “COLLEGE READINESS” (WITHOUT CRINGING)

Strategy two: If the “college and career readiness” is the frame within which discussions about education are taking place, and we know that it is, we need to be the drivers of the meaning of “college readiness,” and our definition of what that means must reflect what Writing Studies *is* and *does*. Note that I’m not saying we need to reframe the orientation *toward* college and career readiness, no matter how problematic we find that frame to be. But right now, in this moment, we simply don’t have the power or the money to do that. That said, within this exceptionally dominant frame, we are the college people—so let’s own it and go from there. We need to outline what we think is critical for students to be prepared for college level writing.

This position was originally suggested by NWP’s Eidman-Aadahl when we started to think together about the document that ultimately became *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Council). As you probably know, the *Framework* outlines the habits of mind that students need to be prepared for credit-bearing college level writing courses and the critical writing, reading, and analysis strategies that can help students cultivate those habits. This month’s *College English* includes a symposium on the

Framework; two of the articles included in the symposium are quite critical of it (Severino; Summerfield and Anderson). Although I helped to draft the *Framework*, I don't necessarily think it needs to be *the* answer, or the *only* answer, to our current challenges (though I will say that I think some of the critiques included in the symposium work against some of the principles that I'm laying out here—though this is a topic for another day). But it does offer a statement of the possible, not a vision of the not-possible/don't-want/doesn't-work. Additionally, the *Framework* was developed with input from hundreds of K-16 teachers nationwide, and has been used very broadly since its publication about 16 months ago. I've been querying people about their uses of the Framework since before CCCC this year. Between responses to my emails and searches of the web, I've learned that it's been used as an institution-wide professional development resource in high school English departments and college writing programs/departments large and small (e.g., Schell; Rose); it has appeared in hundreds of NWP summer institutes. It is referenced in dissertations (e.g., Davis) and articles (e.g., Kirschbaum). Many incorporated it into presentations at CCCC (e.g., Dryer; Thaiss and Childers); some used it in presentations at the WPA 2012 conference (e.g., Elder, Paine, and Poblete; Delli Carpini). It has been distributed by two state departments of education (Kentucky and Maine) and a multi-state consortium. Interestingly, it is also cited in SMARTER Balanced "rationale" for the SBAC assessments for the CCSS (SBAC, 45).

If the Framework doesn't work for people—as it seems not to have for some of the authors of the *College English* responses—that's fine. But in this specific instance, as in all others where people are looking to define what "preparation" means and how "how well" will be indicated, we'd better come up with what we *want* in response to these questions, not what we *don't want*. Furthermore, these responses about what we want must strike a balance between content knowledge connected with Writing Studies and those strategies that can help students as they move through college and into careers. Because if we don't do this, as I tried to illustrate in the first part of this talk, there are plenty of people who will do it for us.

3. BUILD ALLIANCES

Finally, a point connected with the one I've just finished. We *must* build alliances with colleagues who are immersed in efforts to implement the Common Core State Standards in Writing, especially K-12 colleagues, no matter how problematic we find those standards to be. Unless we can find the educational equivalent of the 2000 year old man, K-12 teachers will be thinking creatively and hard about how to make their ways through

the morass of new standards and assessments that accompany these standards—and we need to think with them. This means, for instance, discussing how the *Framework* might deepen and broaden the Common Core State Standards in Writing, not focusing exclusively on the issues that we might have with those Standards. Here, too, I use the *Framework* **only** as an illustration of the point: we need to speak to what we want to happen in a way that reflects our principles, at the same time listening to and acknowledging the positions of others and attempting to make connections between our principles and theirs. Is this an entirely comfortable position? No. But will it enable us to move between our principles and others who are wading through the realities of public education today? Yes. If we have a chance to make our case, then make it we must. If we can't, we probably want to pack our bags. But in making that decision to pack, it's important to recognize that there is a significant cost attached—because right now, ours is hardly the loudest voice in conversations about what “writing preparation” means, and how “how well” that preparation has been achieved should be indicated.

CONCLUSION: PRINCIPLES AND STRATEGIES IN CHALLENGING TIMES

It's not hard to look around and recognize that these aren't the brightest days we've seen for writing or education more generally. We can point to MOOCs, to for-profit universities, or to refinements in machine scoring as only a few signs of a movement to “educate” (and I use the term loosely) more people, often in less time, generally for less money; we can look at any number of efforts at the K-12 and postsecondary level to find evidence of what is now broadly referred to as the accountability agenda for education. The organizations and entities I've described here—the American Legislative Executive Council, the Voluntary System of Accountability, the Lumina Foundation, the Degree Qualifications Profile, and the Common Core Standards—are illustrations of just a few of the entities seeking to participate in a number of related movements to reshape education by influencing definitions of what “preparation” in writing means and how “how well” that preparation should be indicated as part of this transformation. As I've tried to indicate here, these movements are larger, more powerful, and better funded than any writing teachers, or even any group of writing teachers, will ever be.

But while this analysis might seem slightly pessimistic, I don't believe that it should be. We writing teachers have a lot to bring to the table, too, as I've tried to illustrate here. Every day we work with students, on writing, with ideas. This work leads us to a kind of connection that just isn't

accessible to those who don't have day-to-day contact with students. We also bring a passion and a commitment to writing that extends from those experiences. If we work from strategies extending from a central principle that reflects our passions and ideals—defining what writing is and what it does, and then acting on that in all that we do—I believe that we can and will navigate these tricky times.

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NOTES

1. This Act, along with all other ALEC model legislation affecting education, is available thanks to the work of The Center for New Media and Democracy and Common Cause. Acts can be found at alecexposed.org/wiki/Bills_Affecting_Americans'_Rights_to_a_Public_Education; ALEC meeting agendas can be viewed at www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQlwG&b=8072485 (or from the link on the front page of the CNMD ALEC site at alecexposed.org/wiki/ALEC_exposed).

2. Form 990s and other tax reporting information on many non-profit organizations are available at Guidestar.org.

3. I use the name "Writing Studies" to refer to the field in this discussion; I am equally comfortable with (and sympathetic to) the name "Composition and Rhetoric" to refer to it—and the same principles apply.

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