

Saturday Plenary Address

Writing Program Faculty and Administrators as Public Intellectuals: Opportunities and Challenges

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Most of us in the academy communicate routinely with others in our field. In hallway conversations, we share ideas with colleagues in our programs and departments. On listservs and social media sites and at conferences, we talk about theory, research, and practice with others interested in teaching writing and in writing program administration. Many of us also write articles and books for audiences consisting of people who share our interests in writing studies and writing program administration. We find comfort in hanging out in our discourse community because, in my humble opinion, people in writing studies and writing program administration often function as role models across the academy in their widespread commitment to students and their learning.

Even though we spend all this quality time together advancing our field and supporting learning, we don't spend enough time and energy hanging out with the general public to talk about what matters to them. For instance, Nicholas Kristoff, a columnist for *The New York Times*, recently observed in a piece titled "Professors, We Need You!" that America has marginalized us academics because we have marginalized ourselves.

Sometimes we have done that by writing impenetrable prose. Jill Lepore, a professor of American history at Harvard, frequently writes for the general public, including pieces in *The New Yorker*. She notes in a 2013 column in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that academics have "produced a great, heaping mountain of exquisite knowledge surrounded by a vast moat of dreadful prose." Sometimes we academics have marginalized ourselves by not adequately valuing work that appeals to the general public. Whatever the reason for our lack of participation in public discourse, Scott Welsh, in a 2012 article in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, notes how unfortunate it is that scholars in our field too often sit on the sidelines:

. . . because rhetoric scholars spend a large majority of their time in faculty offices, classrooms, and archives of one kind or another, by necessity, mostly talking, reading, and writing about political action, the felt alienation from public life can feel like hypocrisy or, even worse, complicity in the perpetuation of brokenness. (3)

WHAT IS A PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL?

By many accounts, Russell Jacoby introduced the term *public intellectuals* in 1987 in his book *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*. He defines public intellectuals as “writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience” (5). That is, a public intellectual makes a difference in the lives of people. Collectively, public intellectuals—note the plural—have the potential to make a huge difference in the lives of people.

WHO ARE PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS?

For the purposes of this presentation, I will focus primarily—but not completely—on the United States because that is where most of us live and do our work as academics. I am also excluding persons who have not had careers in the academy as college or university faculty. Therefore, I will not include well-known public intellectuals such as Betty Friedan, Rachel Carson, Jane Jacobs, Thomas Friedman, and many intellectuals who have appeared since 2005 on the annual list of *Foreign Policy* magazine’s list “FP Top 100 Global Thinkers.” By the way, in 2005, 40% of the people on the list came from the United States and Canada, and only 8% were women. Number one on the 2005 list was Noam Chomsky, a long-time academic. On the 2013 list, I counted 39 women on a list that now includes 134 people.

Other lists of public intellectuals include those offered by the British periodical *Prospect*. *Prospect* and *Foreign Policy* have collaborated on several polls. To compile its 2013 “World Thinkers” list, *Prospect* counted more than 10,000 votes from more than 100 countries. The top three thinkers on that list are Richard Dawkins, Ashraf Ghani, and Steven Pinker, all of whom are academics.

If we exclude non-academics and limit our examples and exemplars to academics—that is, to university faculty—who work with “a general and educated audience,” names that come to mind most readily are probably those academics who have achieved celebrity status. For instance, Albert Einstein, a faculty member at Princeton University, has been a household name for many decades. Carl Sagan, who spent most of his career at Cornell University and who published more than 600 scientific papers, also

wrote books with broad appeal among the general public—*The Dragons of Eden*, *Broca's Brain*, and *Pale Blue Dot*. He immortalized the phrase “billions and billions” in his popular television series and book *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*. In the summer of 2014, when I keyed in the word *Carl* in Google, the first name on the list is Carl Sagan—a clear sign of Sagan's status as a public intellectual.

Closer to home for those of us in rhetoric and composition, John Dewey was a faculty member at the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago before moving to Columbia University, where he spent the last twenty-six years of his career as a professor of philosophy. Many scholars in our field have quoted from his books and articles, and his work can be considered influential in the intellectual genealogy that led to some of the eight habits of mind in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. As an indication of Dewey's status as a public intellectual, the United States Postal Service issued a postage stamp with John Dewey's name and image in 1967.

Deborah Tannen is a distinguished linguist on the faculty at Georgetown University. However, she has also written for the general public. For instance, her book *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* raised her to celebrity status almost as soon as it was published in 1990. It stayed on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list for almost four years, and it was ranked at the top of the list for eight months. Since then, Tannen has published other popular books such as *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Relationships*; *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and Men at Work*; *The Argument Culture: Stopping America's War of Words*; and *I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs, and Kids When You're All Adults*. Her more recent books *You Were Always Mom's Favorite!: Sisters in Conversation Throughout Their Lives*, and *You're Wearing THAT?: Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation* have also appeared on *The New York Times* Best Sellers list.

bell hooks, born with the name Gloria Jean Watkins, has taught at Yale University, Oberlin College, City College of New York, and Berea College. Many of us have read, taught, and cited her works. When *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* first came out in 1994, I was riveted. I was cheering.

Henry Louis Gates is another academic who has captured the attention of the general public. He has been on the faculty at Yale, Cornell, Duke, and Harvard, where he also serves as director of the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and Director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, formerly the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research. I first became familiar with his work

when he was a featured speaker at the Wyoming Conference on English in the late 1980s. Of course, Gates has enjoyed a high public profile with his work on the PBS television programs *Wonders of the African World*, *African American Lives*, *Faces of America*, and *Finding Your Roots*. He is also known for having had a beer with the President of the United States on the White House lawn.

Even closer to home is Mike Rose, who seems to move effortlessly between the academy and the public sphere. Many of us in the field have read his books written for peers, as well as his books written for the general public. In both, Rose uses a prose style that is accessible and elegant. In both, Rose maintains a respectful tone. In both, Rose makes even the most complex ideas understandable. In his books, as in his life, he melds the academic, the professional, the civic, and the personal arenas of life. He shows us how they are interrelated. He shows us why the academy matters, especially in books such as *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us*, *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*, and *Lives on the Boundary: A Moving Account of the Struggles and Achievements of America's Educationally Underprepared*. His book *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*, reprinted in its tenth anniversary edition in 2014, is the quintessential work of a public intellectual because it is an unapologetic analysis of and tribute to intelligence in the non-academic world. When I read *The Mind at Work*, I marvel at the intelligence needed to perform the work that some people consider outside the realm of the intellectual—plumbing, welding, electrical wiring, carpentry, construction, hair styling, serving food. Each time that I return to *The Mind at Work*, I am reminded of my great fortune to have grown up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, where I learned to do the kinds of work that Rose describes—skills and knowledge that have served me well throughout my life.

Those of us who subscribe to WPA-L are familiar with Peter Smagorinsky's regular postings, many of which connect rhetoric and composition with English education. Smagorinsky has done much in recent years to show scholars how these two fields are linked, but he has worked to educate the general public. For example, in 2014, he published an article in *The Atlantic* titled "'The Ideal Head': Bizarre Racial Teachings From a 1906 Textbook." In the essay, he examines past and current representations of race in textbooks, and he ponders what they will be like a century from now. In this article, he encourages readers—the general public—to reflect on features of their textbooks. To reach the general public, Smagorinsky has also written blog entries for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and one of that newspaper's longtime reporters, Maureen Downey, has drawn

attention to Smagorinsky's work on her education blog *Getting Schooled* ("Assessing Teachers").

Among those who have introduced the general public to language and technology, Dennis Baron deserves special recognition. Since 2006, Baron has written insightful and witty entries in his blog, *The Web of Language*. With entertaining but informative entries such as "Thanks to Facebook, 'Like' Just Means 'Uh-huh,'" Baron has shown the general public that the study of language is relevant and interesting, and therefore, the work of linguists is relevant and interesting. He has also written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. A sure sign that he has street cred with the general public, he has also appeared on Joan Rivers' radio show.

Some academics have become public intellectuals because of their high-profile public service. For example, Condoleezza Rice was a professor of political science and provost at Stanford University when she was asked to serve as National Security Advisor and later, US Secretary of State. Likewise, Madeleine Albright was a faculty member at Georgetown University before becoming the first woman to serve as US Secretary of State. However, she had been active in public life before she became a university faculty member.

Elizabeth Warren, now a US Senator from Massachusetts, was a law professor before she entered public life. She taught at the Rutgers School of Law-Newark, the University of Houston Law Center, the University of Texas School of Law, University of Michigan, the University of Texas at Austin, University of Pennsylvania Law School, and finally, the Harvard Law School.

Some academics become involved in public discourse about political issues while remaining academics. For example, Lawrence Lessig, the Roy L. Furman professor of law and faculty director of the Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University, has established a super PAC to "end all super PACs"—as noted in the title of a recent story in *The Huffington Post* (Blumenthal). As of November 13, 2014, his super PAC, named MayOne, had raised more than ten million dollars. The financial goal is to raise twelve million dollars—half of it from small donors—to support five congressional candidates. The overall goal is to fight the "corrupting influence of money."

Of course, I would be remiss if I failed to mention one of today's most popular public intellectuals. In a recent interview with National Public Radio's Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*, Tim Gunn made a profound observation, which happened to be about academics and teaching:

So I have to say, though, I am an individual who is always aware of how he's presenting himself. And I've certainly developed that awareness when I was teaching because I'm a role model in a manner of speaking for my students, and I have to say there is no population that is worst dressed than academics. (Gunn, *Fresh Air*)

I think that Gunn may have been talking about some of us in rhetoric and composition when he added,

They are horrible. I actually work with people who—they weren't *my* faculty. When I was chairing the Fashion Department, I had—I won't say rules, but there were certainly expectations. But when I was in a larger academic community, I actually knew of fellow faculty members who wore pajamas—I mean, can you—I mean literally pajamas with soccer balls on them and elephants and you name it. I thought this is horrifying, horrifying. What does this—what message does this send to your students? (Gunn, *Fresh Air*)

Incidentally, on *Wait, Wait . . . Don't Tell Me* on June 7, 2014, Tim Gunn offered a rhetorical lesson that all of us can use to improve our relationships in all arenas of life. He said that whenever a stranger asks him, "How do I look?" he responds, "Well, if that's the look you want, you sure have a good one." Gunn's rhetorical acumen is exemplary.

As I was working on this article, I became so engrossed in the biographies and bibliographies of academics who have been engaged with the public that I was tempted to simply share many of those biographical sketches. Others who were on my list of academics who are well-known public intellectuals include Cornel West, Anita Hill, Juliet Schor (professor of sociology at Boston College), Marian Nestle (professor of nutrition at NYU), Paul Krugman (economist at Princeton), Henry Kissinger, Chinua Achebe, Stanley Fish, Michel Foucault, Stephen Jay Gould, Lewis Thomas, Martha Nussbaum, and Margaret Mead. Colleagues have suggested other names for the list: Drew Westen (professor of psychology at Emory), Cathy Davidson (scholar of the history of technology), George Lakoff, Richard Miller, Anne Curzan (professor of English at the University of Michigan), Robert Boyce (history scholar at the London School of Economics), and John McWhorter (professor of linguistics at Columbia University). Of course, I also could list scores of academics who have written widely-read fiction, poetry, and drama.

One of my favorite public intellectuals is Michael M. Crow, president of Arizona State University (ASU). Among other things, he has tirelessly made the case that ASU has a responsibility to live by eight design aspirations for "A New American University":

1. Leverage Our Place: ASU embraces its cultural, socioeconomic and physical setting.
2. Transform Society: ASU catalyzes social change by being connected to social needs.
3. Value Entrepreneurship: ASU uses its knowledge and encourages innovation.
4. Conduct Use-Inspired Research: ASU research has purpose and impact.
5. Enable Student Success: ASU is committed to the success of each unique student.
6. Fuse Intellectual Disciplines: ASU creates knowledge by transcending academic disciplines.
7. Be Socially Embedded: ASU connects with communities through mutually beneficial partnerships.
8. Engage Globally: ASU engages with people and issues locally, nationally and internationally.

A common thread running through these eight design aspirations is that universities and colleges should reflect on the ways that they can make a difference in the world. In 2014, ASU took a big step in making a difference in the world when it announced a partnership with Starbucks to offer the Starbucks College Achievement Plan, which will make it possible for thousands of Starbucks employees to complete college degrees. When I watch the emotional testimony from Starbucks' employees in the video announcing the College Achievement Plan, I am reminded of the many conversations that I have had with non-traditional students who struggle to complete a college degree while simultaneously working at full-time jobs and rearing children.

Other academics have been celebrities among peers in their fields, even though they may not have attained celebrity status among the general public. Many academics with this kind of profile work in the field of rhetoric and composition. However, none of us need celebrity status to make a difference in the world, and that is the most important reason for serving as a public intellectual.

SCHOLARSHIP REDEFINED

As Ernest Boyer notes in his 1990 book *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, academics in general do a wide range of scholarly work in four areas: the scholarship of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. The scholarship of discovery is research—discovering new informa-

tion. The scholarship of integration is the act of “making connections across the disciplines, placing the specialties in larger context, illuminating data in a revealing way, often educating non-specialists, too” (18). The scholarship of application is the act of applying what we have learned through the scholarship of discovery to solve problems that are important to people and institutions. When Boyer describes the scholarship of teaching, he argues that “[t]he work of the professor becomes consequential only as it is understood by others” (23).

Although Boyer’s 1990 book describes the value of a wide range of work in the academy, in 1996 Boyer expanded the definition of scholarship even further in his article “The Scholarship of Engagement,” which was published in the *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*. (The article is a verbatim version of a speech that he gave in October 1995, just two months before his death.) In the article, he notes that “America’s colleges and universities are now suffering from a decline in public confidence and a nagging feeling that they are no longer at the vital center of the nation’s work” (18). Boyer notes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, Stanford University’s president, David Starr Jordan, used the words *reality* and *practicality* to describe the work of universities. At about the same time, Harvard’s president, Charles Eliot, used the word *serviceableness*. Just a few years earlier—in 1896—Woodrow Wilson, a professor at Princeton at the time, argued that “We dare not keep aloof and closet ourselves while the nation comes to its maturity” (qtd in Boyer 19). Boyer makes a convincing case that we must engage with the public and policy makers to solve problems that matter to them and to us.

Reflecting on Boyer’s argument, I believe that all of us who call ourselves academics have opportunities and responsibilities to serve as publicly engaged intellectuals. In particular, each of us can share with the public the work that we do as teachers, researchers, and administrators. As Linda Adler-Kassner and Duane Roen note, we can accomplish this simply by providing service. We can also explain to the public the missions of our institutions and our professional organizations—CWPA, TYCA, NCTE, CCCC, IWCA, and others. We can do this in such a way that it is mutually beneficial to the public and to us.

TED TALKS

I am a fan of the *TED Radio Hour* on National Public Radio, as well as TED.com. A TED talk is an ideal venue for academics to speak to the general public about ideas that are important to them and to us. Although we should aspire to reach the public via this venue, we don’t need to reach the masses

to make a difference. However, we can learn from TED talks—for example, Julian Treasure’s TED Talk “How to Speak So That People Want to Listen.”

MY PUBLIC SERVICE

Although I engage with the public in multiple ways, some of my most consistent engagement occurs when I conduct evening and weekend workshops on writing about family history, which I do an average of three times per month. I offer these workshops at the invitation of public libraries, family history societies, family history centers, genealogy clubs, and even the Daughters of the American Revolution. These workshops can draw as many as 170 participants or as few as three. Before getting down to the business of writing in these sessions, I talk about important initiatives at my university. I also emphasize that faculty at my institution regularly engage in public service and that I feel fortunate to engage in service focused on my passion for family history and family history writing. During these workshops, I also talk about how we teach writing in American high schools, colleges, and universities. The responses are *always* positive. Participants acknowledge that our teaching methods make sense—especially when I engage participants in some of those methods. I thoroughly enjoy these workshops because I get to talk about our work with the general public, because I get to teach outside of my place of employment, and because I get to hear lots of fascinating stories about the family members, places, and events that are meaningful to the people who participate.

I also have the great fortune of regularly engaging the public as I perform my administrative duties at Arizona State University. For example, about once a week from March until August, I welcome incoming students and their families at the many orientations that we offer. At each session, I talk about two lists. First, I talk about the eight design aspirations of my university I described previously, explaining how those features enrich the undergraduate experience.

Second, I talk about the eight habits of mind in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Education*. In my role as dean of University College, I work with students who can benefit from a little extra support, and I am convinced that the eight habits of mind in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Education* are important tools for success not only in first-year composition but also in other courses, in jobs, and even in personal relationships. Because I value the eight habits so much, I discuss them at every orientation, telling students and their families that the eight habits—curiosity, creativity, openness, engagement, responsibility, persistence, flexibility, and metacognition—are keys to success in college and in life. To illus-

trate the power of persistence, for example, I ask students and their families if writing 15,000 pages of journal entries seems like a doable task. When they shake their heads no, I note that my life partner, Maureen, and I have written more than 15,000 pages about family by investing a mere fifteen or twenty minutes a day—every day since October 1978. I also illustrate the utility of flexibility: I note that I’ve been married for more than thirty-six years, thanks, in part to flexibility. I add that I have been happily married for thirty-six years. I’m not certain how long Maureen has been happily married, but I’d estimate that it’s something in the range of eighteen or nineteen years, although perhaps I’m too optimistic.

When I talk about the eight habits of mind, the incoming students seem attentive, but the parents continuously nod their heads in agreement. They recognize the wisdom of the NCTE/NWP/CWPA task force that crafted the *Framework*. We owe this taskforce thanks for providing us with a document that resonates so well with a wide variety of audiences.

CUMULATIVE EFFECT

I often wonder what the cumulative effect would be if each of us regularly engaged with the general public to talk about our institutions, our work, and the work of our field. For every ten articles or chapters that each of us writes for peers in the field, what if we wrote one article or editorial for the general public to let them know about the usefulness of our scholarship of discovery, application, integration, teaching and learning, and engagement? For every conference presentation that each of us does at CCCC, TYCA, CWPA, NCTE, MLA, RSA, Computers and Composition, IWAC, or International Writing Centers Association, what if we did one presentation for the general public? What if our colleagues in other fields did the same?

Perhaps, at this moment, some of you are thinking of me as the twin brother of Pangloss, the ever-optimistic character in *Candide*. Perhaps you are perceiving me as some sort of naïve devotee of German philosopher Gottfried Leibnitz, who wrote in *Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man and the Origin of Evil*, published in 1710, that we live in “the best of all possible worlds.” Well, even though my ancestors came from Norway, I generally have a positive, optimistic outlook. However, I follow the news on National Public Radio and in *The New York Times*, so I am aware that this is not the best of all possible worlds. I realize that we face difficult challenges: less respect than academics enjoy in some other countries, less public financial investment than colleges and universities had in the past, legislators who don’t share our view that a well-educated electorate is crucial to the health of our democracy.

I am not saying that we should think that everything is wonderful, but I am arguing that we should engage with the general public. We have insights and cross-perspectives that can illuminate the conversations of the day. Will such engagement solve all the problems that we face as educators—the issues that make our professional lives uncomfortable, frustrating, and even miserable at times? Probably not. However, engaging with the public—if we all do it—can make a positive difference. I have seen cases where such engagement has turned fence-sitters, skeptics, and even harsh critics into supporters, allies, and partners. Loyal supporters can become advocates who will sometimes refute our hostile critics.

As Linda Adler-Kassner observes in *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*, when we engage with the public, we have agency in shaping perceptions of our field and those who work in it. For example, Les Perlman, who has made it his mission to inform the public that machine grading of writing is lacking in many ways, is often cited in the popular press (Winerip). In the title of a recent opinion piece, Joanna Weiss, a writer for *The Boston Globe*, refers to Les Perelman as “The man who killed the SAT essay.” Doug Hesse has also helped to make that case to the public in a piece in *The Washington Post*. When we do not choose to seize such agency, as Linda Adler-Kassner reminds us, there is no shortage of journalists, pundits, and other public figures outside the academic who are more than happy to fill the void and write and speak about us and our work.

As Nicholas Behm, Sherry Rankins-Robertson, and I have noted in a piece that appeared in *Academe*, academics—including everyone reading this article—have much to share with the general public, and “we should revel in and capitalize on the generative opportunities” that we have. We should be eager to tell the general public about our curricula, our teaching methods, and our assessment practices. We should relish opportunities to explain to them the rationale for and practical applications of documents such as the WPA Outcomes Statement and the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, as well as some other position statements offered by CWPA, CCCC, NCTE, and MLA. For example, I have had many engaged and productive conversations with parents when I have shared with them NCTE’s “How to Help Your Child Become a Better Writer.”

For those seeking tools to support their work as public intellectuals, I point to the online journal *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning*. This much-needed journal publishes a mix of work for both academics and community members—individuals and groups. Another form of support for academics in the field who wish to

engage with the general public, the press, and policy-makers is NCTE's Spokespersons' Network, which provides resources and training.

We should show the general public how our work helps students develop skills and knowledge that will serve them well not only in the academic arena of life but also in the professional, civic, and personal arenas. We should show them how our work contributes to the success of democracy, which is especially important now because our democracy seems to be functioning at less-than-peak levels these days. Our work matters to us and to our students, and we need to take every opportunity to demonstrate that it matters to the general public. As Nicholas Behm and Duane Roen note, while engaging with the general public "benefits the community, it can also strengthen public trust in and support for higher education" (129).

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