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Occupy Writing Studies: Rethinking College Composition for the Needs of the Teaching Majority

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Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano

## **Occupy Writing Studies: Rethinking College Composition for the Needs of the Teaching Majority**

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By challenging misconceptions about students and instructors at two-year campuses, this article critically examines practices of knowledge making in writing studies, arguing for the repositioning of writing instruction at two-year and open-admissions colleges from the margins to the center of the profession.

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**I**n 2002, *College Composition and Communication* published John Lovas's "All Good Writing Develops at the Edge of Risk," which emerged from the previous year's Conference on College Composition and Communication Chair's address. In it, Lovas critiques the omission of two-year college students and faculty from the professional knowledge base of first-year writing, arguing, "You cannot represent a field if you ignore half of it. You cannot generalize about composition if you don't know half of the work being done. . . . much of the theorizing in our profession about basic writing, assessment, grading practices, teaching methods, and text production by students has a thin empirical base" (276). A decade later, we take up this claim and call once again for greater professional attention to the work happening in two-year colleges. Like Lovas, we believe that not enough has been said in scholarly conversations about marginalization of open-admissions and two-year campuses from professional dialogues even

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though such campuses are sites of engaging and essential work where almost half of all college students start their postsecondary educations.

In this essay, we address misconceptions about teaching writing in the two-year college and question the professional discourse that marginalizes teaching at open-admissions and two-year campuses from writing studies.<sup>1</sup> We first place our argument in the context of demographics about teaching college writing, including student populations, institutional types, and employment statuses. We provide details about the wide range of students and student learning needs that two-year college educators confront (and enjoy) in their work. We examine how academic hierarchies are maintained and reproduced in professional discourses and processes and explain how those hierarchies are largely tied

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to student preparation and institutional resources. We press college composition instructors to embrace an open-access mission of higher education. Ultimately, we call for a scholarly reimagination that repositions two-year college teaching at the center of our disciplinary discourse

about college composition and argue for the greater participation of two-year college faculty and contingent instructors in writing studies knowledge making to create a broader and more accurate knowledge base from which to make curricular and instructional decisions and, ultimately, to reshape the profession.

### **Status, Exclusion, and Writing Studies**

For the purposes of our essay, we distinguish between two kinds of institutions. There are institutions like ours that admit all students who meet the minimal criterion of having a high school diploma or its equivalent, or who can demonstrate through a standardized test that they have the “ability to benefit” from higher education (see Sullivan and Nielson). These we contrast with institutions that have any additional admission criteria and that reject applicants. With comparatively heavy teaching loads, open admission policies, and spare budgets, open-admissions and two-year campuses do not enjoy the same cultural status as selective institutions.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this low status obscures 1) the important cultural and educational function of two-year campuses, 2) the engaging work at such institutions, and 3) the relationship of teaching and learning that happens at two-year colleges from our collective knowledge about the teaching of college composition (see Lewiecki-Wilson and Sommers).

Given the large role that teaching remedial or introductory college writing at less-selective institutions plays in higher education, published research in writing studies should include and account more fully for such teaching. A majority of postsecondary writing instructors will not spend their careers teaching upper-division courses, training graduate students, or researching narrowly focused issues in rhetoric and composition. David Laurence reports on behalf of the Modern Language Association, for example, that of 82,400 faculty members whose principal field is English, *almost half* (47.9 percent) teach at Carnegie Associate's institutions. As Laurence writes, "Despite the extraordinarily high percentage of faculty members teaching off the tenure track in two-year colleges, the 8,704 English faculty members holding tenured and tenure-track positions in two-year colleges outnumber the tenured and tenure-track English faculty in every other sector." In other words, the most common faculty experience in teaching English is at a two-year college.

Further, teaching off the tenure-track is increasingly the norm for college faculty. Figures vary, but an account is provided by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

"full- and part-time adjuncts, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows account for well over three fourths of all faculty appointments" (Schmidt). A more nuanced accounting from the American Association of University Professors points to 41.1 percent of faculty as part-time, 15.1 percent as full-time, non-tenure track, and 19.4 percent as graduate student employees. In four-year institutions, the MLA report observes, 60 percent of faculty in English departments work off the tenure track. In two-year colleges, the figure rises to approach 80 percent of English instructors.<sup>3</sup>

These often ignored postsecondary writing teachers need a more effective and extensive body of scholarship that offers research-based best practices that are relevant to the daily work that they do; moreover, our disciplinary knowledge base is incomplete if not informed by this work. Unless intellectual engagement in the form of inquiry, reading, research, and writing becomes part of the professionalization of all postsecondary writing teachers—including those working in teaching-intensive institutions and off the tenure track—writing studies has a very incomplete picture of the teaching and learning of college composition.

This underrepresentation is revealed through a brief analysis of the review practices that shape scholarly publication by the inclusion or exclusion of two-

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year college perspectives in professional exchanges of knowledge. For example, the 2012 Conference on College Composition and Communication program included 478 concurrent sessions. Just 12 of those sessions were identified in the program as “Sessions Presented by Two-Year College Faculty” (27). Though certainly two-year college faculty presented in other sessions not specifically identified as two-year sessions, these numbers reveal the mismatch between the number of instructors who teach at two-year institutions (almost half) and their representation on the CCC program, 2.5 percent. Similarly, an examination of the *CCC Reviewers for 2011–2012* in the June 2012 issue of *CCC* demonstrates how underrepresented two-year college scholars are in the gatekeeping function that shapes how the field of writing studies is represented in our flagship journal. Of the 184 reviewers named and thanked in that feature, 4 are from two-year campuses, or around 2 percent. The editorial introduction to that issue, “Tracing Intersections,” notes that peer review is “at the heart of epistemological and scholarly practice” (554) and is a critical part of the method by which we shape knowledge in the field. We agree with Kathleen Blake Yancey that peer review is the signature methodology by which disciplinary knowledge is established, and the name itself suggests collegiality among disciplinary peers. If two-year college teacher-scholars are not adequately represented among the corps of those who both produce and review what becomes the baseline knowledge for members of our profession, then we are not benefiting from the experiences of two-year faculty.<sup>4</sup>

### **Teaching and Learning in the Two-Year College**

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 44 percent of all US undergraduates are enrolled at community colleges. Like many two-year college learners, a majority of students in our own statewide, two-year institution of access arrive at college with the potential to *become* proficient college-level readers and writers, but they aren’t yet ready for postsecondary academic reading and writing in their first semester. Many take a full year of composition before they have enough experience with source-based writing and critical reading to enroll in a transfer-level research course, which is the starting point for most writers at more-selective universities that admit primarily well-prepared students.<sup>5</sup> A few students even require two years of writing instruction to become eligible to take a second-semester writing course; in other words, they are still “first-year” writers in their third college year. For most instructors, working with underprepared college students is the daily reality of teaching college composition.

Writing instructors at two-year institutions face a class of students with an extremely varied pathway to a transfer-level composition course. After implementing changes to our process for placing students into first-year writing courses and to our placement test cut scores, for example, we faced many questions from administrators regarding the effectiveness of those changes. Data we collected to assess our new placement process reveal what a writing classroom in an open-admission institution often looks like and how it might differ from one at an institution with more specific

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admission criteria than our own institution's. We examined institutional data and collected information about the curricular path of all students who began their college education in a non-degree credit writing course (either basic composition or a workshop course for multilingual writers) on our campus in fall 2010. Data sources for these ninety-three students included their academic profiles (high school grades and English curriculum, test scores, and recommended placement) as well as their grades in all courses they took in the first two years of college. Their average score on the English portion of the ACT standardized test was 12.9, and the average ACT reading score was 15.25. Since the benchmark set by ACT for likely success in degree-credit composition is 18, these students were, at least on this measure, extremely unprepared for college reading and writing. Tracking these students' academic outcomes, we learned that the overall average college GPA for this group of students was 1.95, below the cutoff for good standing; indeed, 46 percent of the students were on final probation, probation, or suspension within two years. However, over half were in good standing after four semesters of college. Of the thirty-nine students (41 percent) who successfully made their way through the first-year writing sequence (consisting of a non-degree credit course, first-semester credit-bearing composition, and a transfer-level, research-based writing course), students averaged 3.33 semesters to complete the sequence. Most students who had to repeat a course en route to Composition II needed to take Composition I twice, while three multilingual students purposefully repeated a developmental course to develop more fully as writers before moving to credit-bearing composition. These data illustrate the challenges of teaching at an open-admission campus where instructors struggle to create effective programs, instruction, and interventions that will move students to even a basic level of college literacy readiness.

However, academic outcomes for the students who successfully completed the writing program sequence demonstrate that learners who are excluded from most institutions can become proficient postsecondary writers at two-year colleges. Further, the teaching experience of instructors at open-admission campuses is likely to include a broad range of students with a great deal of variation in their precollege experiences and an enormous variety of academic needs as they prepare to achieve the learning outcomes for college writing courses. For instance, at our own institution, we keep records of students' placement profiles as part of our multiple measures approach.<sup>6</sup> In fall 2012, our campus had first-year students with ACT scores in English as low as 8 and as high as 36, and ACT reading scores ranging from 10 to 35. Though these students will likely not find themselves in the same first-semester writing course during the same semester, many of them will *eventually* find themselves in a writing course with writers whose initial assessments varied widely, as underprepared students move through the developmental curriculum and into the core, transfer-level writing course. Some instructors will be working with students initially unprepared to do college-level

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work who will ultimately take a research-based and transfer-level writing course in a classroom with students who direct-tested into that course, perhaps through standardized test scores, Advanced Placement credit, or a high school dual enrollment program. As a result, many—perhaps most—college writing instructors at open-access campuses must continually develop an expansive, flexible, and constantly revised sense of the answers to these two questions: What is college-level writing? How do we know when a student is ready to do it? One of the most interesting aspects of working at an open-admission, two-year campus is that these two framing questions have multiple answers and require continual reflection and adaptation.

### **The Maintenance of Academic Hierarchies**

An important question, then, is why has writing studies so narrowly centered its work on college composition at four-year institutions? Lovas's essay provides a partial explanation—the publication expectations of the tenure process at such campuses. However, we cannot ignore that academia's hierarchical structure contributes in important ways to the shaping of our disciplinary knowledge—a hierarchy that is, in our judgment, imagined in some ways and true in others.

In terms of the work that faculty, instructors, and administrators do at varying types of institutions, the status difference lies primarily in the selectivity of the institution and the resources each institution has, not in the relative value of the kinds of work that professionals do. Teaching-intensive work, including teaching in the lower division, is as equally valuable to the higher education enterprise as teaching in the upper division, mentoring graduate students, or conducting the scholarship of discovery (per Boyer's *Scholarship Reconsidered*) most characteristic of Research I institutions.<sup>7</sup> To understand why the lack of knowledge about writing instruction at two-year colleges persists, it's important to acknowledge how academic hierarchies are maintained.

Where hierarchies most stand out in higher education institutions is in the nature of the students who enroll in them. As the July 2012 *Chronicle of Higher Education* symposium, "Has Higher Education Become an Engine of Inequality?," explains, the biggest difference between our types of institutions is in the resources allocated to the students who attend them, and the social mechanisms that "sort" students into colleges and universities are the primary sources of hierarchies. For example, Richard Kahlenberg observes in "Magnifying Social Inequality" that students who have the most resources typically go to colleges with the most resources and vice versa: "Low-income and minority students are concentrated in community colleges, which spent an average of \$12,957 per full-time-equivalent student in 2009, while higher-income and white students are disproportionately educated at private four-year research institutions, which spent an average of \$66,744 per student." Social class also predicts a student's likelihood of earning a degree, with 50 percent of children whose families earn more than \$90,000 earning a BA by age twenty-four, while one in seventeen children whose family income is less than \$35,000 will have that same educational outcome (Wolin). Community colleges also serve minority students at a rate that is larger than proportional to the overall population. The American Association of Community College asserts that "Community colleges have historically enrolled approximately half of all undergraduate students of color" (Mullin 7-8). The Community College Research Center reports that 51 percent of all Hispanic undergraduates enrolled at a two-year college, as did 31 percent of African American students, with African American students making up 20 percent of the overall student population at two-year colleges (Bailey, Jenkins, and Leinbach 13; "Community College FAQs").

Many of the arguments (see Wilson; Goldrick-Rab; Bailey) in the *Chronicle* forum suggest that the solution to such social and institutional inequality is



to attract more low-income students to high-status institutions, which will produce increases in graduation rates. However, this solution fails to recognize that first-generation or working-class students face more challenges (cultural, academic, and financial) that often make a four-year institution a poor match for their learning needs. What these numbers do demonstrate is the function of social class in predetermining students' likelihood of earning a college degree, the way that students' baccalaureate ambitions evolve during their work at the two-year college, and the critical importance of research and inquiry needed at open-door institutions if we as a profession are truly interested in expanding access to higher education for greater numbers of Americans.

At the same time, we fully acknowledge—and are troubled by—the low retention and persistence rates at two-year campuses, that is, the number of students who continue from their first semester to their second, and then to the subsequent academic year. Sociologists and education theorists since 1960 have built on Burton Clark's essay "The 'Cooling Out' Function in Higher Education" as an analytical lens for forming arguments about the social function of open-admissions institutions, arguments that are not very flattering to two-year colleges. Specifically, Clark advanced the thesis that community colleges serve as a sort of holding pen for students with low academic ability, and that "while some students of low promise are successful, for large numbers failure is inevitable and *structured*," and that ultimately such a student has "been allowed to become involved but [his or her] destiny is to fail" (571). Clark's provocative thesis has been explored more fully and has been complicated since his article's publication (Brint and Karabel; Beach), but Clark's claims seem still to hold a great deal of explanatory power for policymakers who are increasingly hostile to open-admissions campuses (see, for example, Fain ["How to"] for current attempts to eliminate open-admissions policies).

Another explanation for the dismal cultural perception of two-year college campuses is their greater reliance on contingent faculty, whose labor conditions often exclude them from full participation in the profession. Recent research has linked the use of contingent faculty to decreased student retention and reductions in transfer rates, such as Kevin M. Eagan and Audrey Jaeger's study that found "a significant and negative association between students' transfer likelihood and their exposure to part-time faculty instruction" (180). They observe that "for every 10% increase in students' exposure to part-time faculty instruction, students tended to become almost 2% less likely to transfer" (180). We agree with those who attribute this decline in student success to

the inequitable working conditions in which many contingent faculty teach, including a lack of basic material resources that are preconditions to effective teaching (office space, technology access, library privileges, etc.). We would add to this explanation that contingent status often also equals exclusion from an institution's professional resources that help instructors develop as teachers (for example, involvement in workshops, support for professional memberships, funding to attend conferences, and financial support for disciplinary scholarship or research on student learning), as another article in this special issue illustrates. A lack of equal

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access to resources essentially results in instructors with the least professional support working with the most at-risk and underprepared students. Inequitable working conditions create a recipe for a disciplinary crisis that has a profound effect on the students who attend two-year colleges and their ability to get the education that open-admissions institutions aspire to provide.

In some ways, then, the low status of the open-admission institution has partly been reinforced by the notion that the function of the community college is to create the illusion of democratic access to education. Though not all community college students intend to transfer, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement results from 249,548 students show that the vast majority of students at two-year colleges nationally identify transfer (71 percent) or obtaining an associate degree (79 percent) as a primary or secondary educational goal; however, just one in five actually do transfer (Fain, "Graduate"). The average, six-year baccalaureate-achievement rate nationally for students who begin their studies at community colleges, which data from the National Student Clearinghouse show is, on average, 12 percent (National Center). In contrast, according to the 2011 Community College Survey of Student Engagement in our own statewide two-year institution, 94 percent of students identify transfer to a four-year college or university as a primary or secondary educational goal. Nevertheless, just 44 percent of our students each year ultimately transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution, with numbers at some of our thirteen campuses as high as 50 percent (University of Wisconsin Colleges). With a 70 percent graduation rate (for students who ultimately transfer) over six years, the overall graduation rate of new freshman students beginning in our two-year institution hovers around 23 percent or 29 percent over eight years

(Nettesheim).<sup>8</sup> It's also notable that approximately 19 percent of students who attend our state's flagship university (with its 83 percent six-year graduation rate for new freshman) can be categorized as first-generation college students, while the numbers for our open-admission institution are 66 percent (Office of Academic Planning and Research; Nettesheim).

We have two thoughts on these data. First, though we are reluctant to agree that this structured failure is indeed part of the role of the open-access college, we recognize that the promulgation of this view is one way that academic hierarchies are maintained—in other words, that “low-promise” students at institutions of access either aren't college material, or that the school they attend is not a real college. Second, if postsecondary institutions have any social aspirations to achieve the college completion agenda that aims to increase the number of US residents with higher education credentials, then “structured failure” at the two-year college is unacceptable.

Writing studies professionals are perhaps in the best position to stage an intervention to increase the academic success and retention of students whose

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only pathway to a college degree is through an open-access institution.<sup>9</sup> Writing studies is a “high-contact” discipline because college composition is a near-universal requirement for a college degree and because two of the defining characteristics of writing classes are individual conferencing and ongoing feedback on student texts. As a result, writing instructors

reach nearly every student enrolled in a postsecondary writing class. They may interact with students through multiple semesters of non-degree credit writing or as they repeat a credit-bearing academic writing course. The ubiquitous and engaged nature of teaching college writing means that we are well-positioned to develop increasingly better ways of preparing students to meet the rigorous expectations of college-level reading, writing, and thinking.

As reenvisioned, a more inclusive writing studies profession should account for the complex and diverse needs of students who enroll at institutions of access and should better meet the professional needs of the instructors who teach those students. Without such a research base, most instructors cannot find their teaching realities reflected in the published literature. Certainly, faculty (including those with contingent status) who teach in two-year colleges and other open-admissions institutions need to advocate for greater represen-

tation in scholarly publications and the national conversations that shape the profession of teaching college writing. We also need to do a much better job of helping members of the profession who work outside of two-year institutions understand the importance of the work that takes place at open-admissions colleges. However, two-year college faculty don't have the primary responsibility for being more included (or arguing more forcefully for inclusion) in the professional organizations and activities that shape writing studies, especially given the hierarchical way that higher education usually privileges the voices of professionals at research universities over the majority who teach at other institutions. Our professional organizations and the most privileged groups in writing studies (i.e., those who work at high-status, high-resource institutions) have an intellectual, scholarly, and moral obligation to work toward creating an inclusive profession that fully accounts for the diverse range of teaching and learning experiences in postsecondary writing.

### **The Disciplinary Benefits of Recentering**

Though some readers might take issue with our characterization of two-year college teaching as substantially different from teaching at other kinds of institutions, there are meaningful differences between working at an open-admission institution and working at a campus with admissions criteria beyond a high school diploma or its equivalent. To fully comprehend the experience of writing students in the United States, we need a better picture of the paths they take to college writing classes. Because teaching and learning in the two-year college is distinct from other settings, additional data, research, and systematically collected evidence are essential for helping instructors more effectively do what they are employed to do.

Certainly in some ways, CCCC has recognized one part of that work, basic writing. For example, the 2013 CCCC Convention included a special thread on basic writing, and publications such as *The Journal of Basic Writing* focus on the needs of students in non-degree credit composition. However, basic writing does not define or capture two-year college teaching. While most basic writing is taught in the two-year college, it is not taught only in two-year colleges, and two-year college faculty teach many other courses including intermediate composition, technical and business writing, and a wide range of other first- and second-year courses in English. To identify basic writing as a defining feature of the work of two-year college teaching is to misunderstand the teaching and learning that happens in such institutions.

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The broad range of college preparation levels for writers who enroll at open-admissions institutions not only provides new and challenging teaching and learning experiences for instructors teaching in two-year colleges, but also has important scholarly benefits for the profession. As part of the previously discussed project to assess changes to our placement process and curriculum, a group of sixty-seven students consented to share writing from their first-year courses, including developmental composition, academic reading courses, first-year writing, and, for more advanced students, sophomore writing in other disciplines. The

purpose of this study was to document in a richer and more specific way how our students were developing as writers across the composition curriculum; we also needed to identify the barriers students faced in completing the core writing requirement. We knew from institutional data that low percentages of students at our statewide campuses moving from non-degree credit writing through the composition sequence earned high grades that marked proficiency in academic writing. For example, institutional reports showed that students who began their college career in the core, degree-fulfilling writing courses were 2.5 times as likely to earn As compared to students who began in non-degree credit writing—and fewer than a third of basic writing students eventually complete the core writing course at all.

In 2010, we invited the approximately 1400 students on our campus to participate in our study of students' transition to college writing, using an electronic survey and distributing consent forms in first-year writing courses. Sixty-seven students consented to participate (though we were only able to draw meaningful conclusions about fifty-four students because the other thirteen did not complete the first semester or did not complete any writing courses). Over the course of two years, we collected student writing through student self-submission and the assistance of campus composition instructors sharing participating students' drafts. Students began at all levels of the first-year writing program—developmental writing, first-semester credit-bearing composition, or direct placement into a core transfer research course. This permitted us to examine the entire range of students at our open-access campus. We collected an average of 6.2 papers per student, for a total of 359 pieces of formal writing, primarily from composition classes, though some students shared work they

had produced for courses in other disciplines. After identifying participants, we returned to our initial placement data (collected for all students during the placement assessment process) and examined how those students progressed as writers over their first two college years. At the end of the first academic year, we analyzed the collected writing in relation to our writing program's learning outcomes and the students' initial placement profiles. We conducted the same process again in the second year for students who took three or four semesters to complete the core writing requirement.

Nineteen of the fifty-four participants took a first-semester, non-degree credit composition course. Our analysis of the writing that they produced during their first college year revealed four key findings that illustrate the benefits of conducting research at an institution that admits the full range of students who enroll in higher education.

First, about half of these students had difficulty with the conventions of standard written English (which their low standardized test scores reflected), but the others had sentence-level skills that were indistinguishable from research participants who received a degree-credit composition placement. However, the needs of these writers were different from most participants who began college in a more advanced course because the basic writers lacked experience with writing in formal academic ways. We learned a great deal about participating students' educational backgrounds through self-assessment essays produced at the point of placement; the self-assessment and reflection writing they completed for their basic writing course; and the many writing assignments of varying purposes and genres that they completed over the first and second years. For example, one student, Violet, acknowledged in a piece of self-assessment writing: "In high school I didn't really prepare for college. None of my friends help me at all on preparing for college, I would have to say my family members were mainly the only ones that did a little bit on preparing me for college." Another participating student, June, wrote in a self-assessment essay: "My academic learning was very limited at my high school. The reason I say that is because, a small town like [her hometown] just teaches you the basic, to pass a student through high school"; in a separate essay she wrote: "I remember we always wrote essays on our self, family, or place that we cared about. We didn't do any research papers, or papers we had to write after we read a book." Another student, Kevin, confessed in a reflective letter: "Coming into my senior year, I had to decide if I wanted an easy class or a hard college based class. I decided to take the easy class because it was my final year of high school."

I wanted to enjoy it more instead of wanting to work harder. I deeply missed a crucial opportunity to get better knowledge in writing.” This theme repeated itself throughout the student writing, helping us to draw conclusions that can inform curricular change and make decisions about, for example, appropriate textbooks or pedagogical approaches that will both reflect best practice based on disciplinary knowledge and reflect systematically collected evidence about the students we serve in our own classrooms and their learning needs.

Second, all of the students who were placed into a non-degree composition course had difficulty with critical and analytical reading. Most of them completed writing assignments at some point in their first two college years that asked student writers to analyze, respond to, or in some other way write about a reading they had done for class. Students either could not write effectively about difficult college-level texts or could not reflect their understanding and subsequent analysis of such texts in their writing. Illustrative of this gap is a journal comment by a participating student, Suav: “As a reader, I think that I am only at like a freshmen level because I haven’t really read an entire book since my freshman year [of high school]. Reason why is because I don’t really have anyone but my friends to talk to and ask questions about school readings.” Suav, like many of our participating students who began in developmental writing, either chose not to enroll in or did not have access to a literacy-rich high school curriculum, and as a first-generation college student, he did not have family support for his academic learning.

Third, the other, most challenging areas of college writing for these students were a lack of familiarity with academic conventions and rhetorical knowledge. We identified fifteen students of fifty-four (about a quarter) who did not demonstrate an understanding of basic academic conventions such as using signal phrases to introduce sources, using formal academic tone, or referring to authors by their last names. An example of this is from a student, Wayne, whose use of informal language permeated his formal writing in the first semester: “In the beginning of the course I was always like I don’t need this class, I don’t know why I’m in here.” For many of the students who began in non-degree credit writing courses, then, academic conventions, more than sentence-level correctness, presented the biggest barrier to their readiness for degree-credit coursework (not just in writing courses).

Fourth, another fifteen students of our fifty-four (not entirely the same group as those developing their knowledge of academic conventions) did not demonstrate a command of rhetorical knowledge, primarily in their ability to

make appropriate choices for a particular audience or rhetorical purpose. For example, one participating student, Tammy, struggled into her third semester with making choices that fit a specific rhetorical purpose. A good example of this is in her first-semester writing course, when she was asked to write an analysis of an advertisement. Tammy frequently conflated the genre conventions of analysis she was supposed to be doing with the advertising rhetoric she was critiquing, as when she writes about several ads for cosmetics: "Every girl wants to be pretty so this can make some women want to go out and make their eyes dazzle." In her third-semester course, English 102, Tammy continued to have difficulty meeting the needs of academic readers; she had still not quite mastered the use of signal phrases to orient readers to sources, or she presented obvious and factual information in lieu of analysis (for example, noting in a paragraph on organ donation that organs require life support to stay alive).

In identifying these skills and readiness gaps faced by students with particular placement profiles and who started at different points in our composition sequence, we created knowledge useful in confirming the appropriateness of our placement test cut scores, in advocating for expanding a "multiple measures" placement process on all thirteen of our campuses, and in producing suggested revisions to our three-course writing sequence to place greater emphasis on critical reading, writing from sources, and a wider variety of academic genres and rhetorical purposes. For practically all the students across our composition sequence, our research demonstrates that standardized test scores can sometimes be a proxy for select proficiencies, but they almost never demonstrate a student's ability in the most important skill sets, including knowledge of academic conventions, rhetorical knowledge, and processes. Further, all ten of the students in our study who started in the transfer-level research course struggled with critical and analytical reading of texts. Our research provides us with evidence to show that 1) the students our institution serves benefit from substantial experience with critical reading and writing about reading before completing the transfer research course, and 2) textbooks and assignments that focus on sentence-level exercises or paragraph writing aren't a good fit for the needs of students in our developmental program.

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As we draw additional conclusions from this research study, several lessons stand out to us for the purposes of our present argument. First, this kind of research—studying the needs of students who are served by open-admissions institutions and who hope to access the opportunity that higher education presents—can only be done at two-year institutions. Students with poor academic preparation, low test scores, or poor grades are overrepresented—potentially only represented in open-admission and two-year campuses during their first year. For example, the study described above has led us to examine the relationship between students' standardized test scores and the quality of writing they produced in the first year of college. Our analysis includes a wide variety of writers—students who by any measure would be excluded from higher education except at institutions of access, as well as students whose test scores and academic records could admit them to most colleges in the country—all of whom might be in the same classroom at a two-year college. What the results of such research can do is 1) specifically and in a systematic way document the learning needs and gaps of students who hope to pursue a college education but who have academic and language deficiencies that prevent them from entering into a degree-credit college curriculum, 2) help inform our own curriculum and instruction within our institution to better match the learning needs of this array of students if we hope to move more students from remedial writing to transfer-level coursework, 3) provide research-based recommendations that can help build a body of knowledge to inform the work of developmental and degree-credit writing instruction nationally, and 4) inform national position statements on best practices in writing instruction to bring evidence-based instructional practices and shared disciplinary values to the field. With increasing numbers of students in the United States enrolling in college each decade, many of whom have not necessarily taken an academically rigorous high school curriculum or who are returning to school after some years away, it's more imperative than ever that the research produced on writing and reading in college reflect the complete spectrum of college writers.<sup>10</sup>

Further, there is a benefit to the institution to have such inquiry take place on teaching-intensive campuses whose mission is focused on serving the needs of students versus producing scholarship of discovery. Teaching-focused research produces new knowledge that can be funneled back into the work of the students and instructors in that institution. One advantage of using instruction at an open-access institution as a starting point for developing a research question is that the intersections between research and teaching

can translate a problem or professional frustration into an engaging line of scholarly inquiry. As teacher-scholars, we have received significant professional benefits from researching and teaching students whose educational pathways and life experiences bring them to our two-year campus. One key value of our research comes from using what we learn from systematically analyzing the writing that students produced over their first college year to enhance our own teaching to help students transition more successfully through the first-year writing program. When two-year college faculty conduct scholarship, they can subsequently use the findings from this systematic inquiry to lead their institution in adapting policies, practices, and pedagogies that respond to the specific needs of the students (as documented in another article in this issue). More important, this kind of work then becomes part of the departmental conversation that informs policy and practice within the institution.

Additionally, there is a benefit to the profession of writing studies when research into first- and second-year writing reflects the material and academic realities of the students in postsecondary writing classrooms because such scholarship grants our profession a fuller understanding of what writing instruction in college looks like. Some key and unexplored questions about what it means to be a college writer can be answered only through research at institutions that admit many different kinds of college writers. For example, we used the findings from our study to write a peer-reviewed article (see Hassel and Giordano, "Transfer") that ultimately, we hope, contributed to the body of knowledge on the teaching of writing.

There is certainly *some* work by two-year college instructors and about two-year college writing already taking place, but it has limitations. For example, a number of two-year college scholars have documented through case studies and anecdotes the particular challenges of the students who are served by two-year institutions and faculty who teach there (see Holladay; Tinberg; Valentino). The *What Is College-Level Writing?* series of volumes published by NCTE and coedited by two-year college scholars are other prominent examples (Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau). Howard Tinberg and Jean-Paul Nadeau's *The Community College Writer: Exceeding Expectations* also showcases the intellectual work of both instructors and students that is happening in two-year colleges. Recent issues of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* have featured articles about WPA work in the two-year college (Calhoon-Dillahunt) and programs for student veterans (authored by two-year college scholar Marilyn Valentino, "Serving"). *College English's* first issue of 2013 tackles questions about policy and

underprepared students (Sullivan and Nielson). Our professional resources are making an effort to include voices from two-year college faculty and students.

However, we note two limitations to the current range of scholarship on the teaching of writing at the two-year college. First, these voices should be at the center of our national conversations about teaching college writing if we hope to accurately represent the sheer number of faculty and students who

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are teaching and learning in such settings and to provide professional resources that meet the needs of instructors and students at two-year colleges. Second, the profession can benefit from more systematic inquiry into student learning in the writing classroom that takes place at two-year colleges.

For example, in *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, the major journal for two-year college English professionals, the primary publication emphasis has historically been on teacher reflection and classroom narratives rather than articles emerging from systematic inquiry or from a formal research design (see Hassel, for an assessment of research gaps for two-year college teaching). All of the professional resources in our field must work together to fill in these gaps and better meet the needs of the members of our profession.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

To bring about this rethinking of college composition, our profession must support more research conducted at two-year colleges, research that can then inform the graduate training of instructors who will likely spend their teaching careers at such institutions. Both coauthors serve in administrative capacities that involve evaluating, mentoring, and training new instructors in our statewide program, and we continually hear common refrains: “it was a major adjustment to teach this student population”; “I was unprepared to work with these students”; “I was trained to teach [creative writing, literature, rhetoric], and now I primarily teach developmental composition”; “these students struggle to read college-level texts, and I didn’t take coursework in reading pedagogy.” More scholarship emerging from open-enrollment institutions would provide a stronger knowledge base for the training of future professionals in the teaching of college writing. Writing studies work at institutions of access is teaching-intensive, and it almost always requires instructors to adapt their pedagogical

approaches to meet the needs of students who aren't prepared for college reading and writing. The efforts of this sometimes ignored majority are essential to higher education, and their work is both engaging and rewarding. An increased emphasis on teaching and learning at two-year colleges and other institutions of access is vitally important if we are to meet the needs both of college writers and of the members of our profession.

To close, we turn to the work of one of our students who discusses her experiences with academic writing by balancing the realities of her prior learning with optimism for the future (with an attitude mirrored by many of the nearly 140 college writers we have studied over the past five years): "In high school, I only had the basic writing courses which did not prepare me for college writing. Also, as a second English learner, writing is always a challenge for me. As a second semester college student, I hope to find out more about the relationship between writing and learning." We echo the thinking of this college writer. We, too, hope to find out more about the relationship between writing and postsecondary learning at two-year colleges and other institutions of access to higher education, and we hope that many others will join us in exploring that issue and related questions that will provide our profession with a clear picture of what it means both to be a college writer and to teach college writing.

### **Notes**

1. We should note that in most two-year institutions, teaching English and teaching writing are nearly synonymous; though many campuses teach sophomore-level literature, creative writing, film studies, or writing courses, most instructors at two-year campuses can expect to teach primarily first-year writing, basic writing, or other developmental and learning support courses as the majority of their teaching load.
2. We acknowledge that the spectrum of institutional types in American higher education is much broader than what we refer to here; the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education offers a nuanced range of categories across undergraduate and graduate instructional programs, enrollment profile, undergraduate profile, size, and setting (see Carnegie Foundation).
3. Space limitations prevent us from discussing in depth here the specific concerns of contingent faculty. Please see Arnold et al. and our forthcoming chapter for other arguments we have made about contingent faculty in writing studies.
4. Certainly the teaching-intensive nature of the work at two-year and open-admissions institutions limits the ability of faculty who work in those settings to

contribute to writing studies in the form of professional service activities at the same level as faculty teaching at research institutions. However, these differing professional responsibilities cannot entirely explain the virtual omission of two-year faculty from the peer-review process and conference program.

5. For example, in our own University of Wisconsin System, students at the three most selective campuses start in the “second-semester” or transfer-level, research-focused writing course, while at most other campuses in our system, students will take two semesters of degree credit writing.

6. See Holly Hassel and Joanne Giordano (FYC Placement) for a discussion of this placement work.

7. For example, Ernest L. Boyer outlines his vision of multiple types of scholarship: scholarship of discovery, the traditional type of inquiry that “contributes not only to the stock of human knowledge but also to the intellectual climate of a college or university”; scholarship that integrates knowledge across disciplines and specialties; scholarship of application, which may include service activities emerging from the professional knowledge of the faculty member; and the scholarship of teaching, which applies the rigorous methodology of disciplinary research to the classroom and to the learning needs of students.

8. See Patrick Sullivan’s essay “Measuring ‘Success’ at Open-Admissions Institutions” for a discussion of the contrast between students who begin their educations at four-year campuses and those who start at two-year campuses.

9. See Pegeen Reichert Powell’s essay “Retention and Writing Instruction” for a more thorough treatment of this relationship between retention and writing studies.

10. The current public discourse around the “college completion agenda,” accompanied by the increasing investment in educational reform of philanthropic foundations like Lumina and the Gates Foundation, provides a more urgent incentive than ever before for educators and professional organizations to find systematic, evidence-based, discipline-specific ways of improving our work in the classroom. See Linda Adler-Kassner and Kristine Hansen for discussions (and critiques) of related and varying educational reform efforts.

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