2014 CCCC Chair’s Address

The Loss of the Public

Editor’s note: This is a written version of the address that Howard Tinberg gave at the CCCC Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana, on Thursday, March 20, 2014.

I. Two Tales of Indiana

Let me begin by sharing two stories set in Indiana. The first focuses on the work of Caleb Mills, a New Englander by birth but a man who would come to be known as the Father of the Indiana public schools system. Mills came to Indiana after having been appointed as the first faculty member at Wabash College. When he arrived in the state, Mills found the condition of education there to be deplorable. In a series of written declarations begun in 1846 titled “One of the People” and submitted to the Indiana state legislature, Mills painted a dire picture of the state: every district looked out for itself, a fact that proved devastating to the so-called common schools. One of Mills’s biographers notes,

While other institutions were becoming well organized and efficient, the schools, under the domination of the ruinous idea of self-government, were struggling hopelessly with unequal lengths of terms, incapable teachers, dishonest trustees, diversity of textbooks, lax enforcement of school laws and school discipline, neighborhood quarrels over school sites, narrow views of education, and lack of wise leadership. (Worley 6–7)

But, for Mills, most unacceptable of all were the rates of illiteracy in the state: one in every seven adults over twenty was unable to read and write, a
figure in stark contrast with the rates in other so-called free states—most conspicuously, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts—which set the standard of literacy for the time (Worley 26).

Given this state of affairs, Mills observes:

There is but one way to secure good schools, and that is to pay for them. . . . Awaken the public mind and consecrate it on the question, “Am I not interested in the proper education of all that are socially and politically connected to me?” (Mills, qtd. in Worley 29)

Mills seems so sure of the answer to that question, although it should be stated that he was swimming against the current here, as very few states at the time paid for their schools with public money (Worley 19). Still, I’m struck with the apparent certainty of his belief in a connectedness among citizens and that an imperative exists to care for the educational needs of all. From the perspective of our own time, the notion has acquired, for me at least, a degree of poignancy and an indication of what has been lost.

Here’s a case in point: We flash forward to this headline offered on the blog of Diane Ravitch, whom you may know as a principle architect of George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind,” but who has since turned into one of its most caustic critics: “Indianapolis: Farewell to Public Education” (Ravitch). “What is happening in Indianapolis is terrifying,” she writes, “if you believe that public education belongs to the public, not to private corporations.” Deemed, through standardized testing, a low-performing school and allegedly plagued by financial problems, the Project School, a community-based, progressive charter school in Indianapolis, was closed in August 2012, despite fierce resistance from parents and members of the community. Eagerly waiting in the wings to transform the school and the system as a whole are non-public entities dedicated to producing twenty-first century online learning centers (Martin).

While Ravitch sees a conspiracy or corporate “takeover” of the public schools—here and elsewhere—I wonder whether the lesson from this “Tale of Indiana” and the other that preceded it is much more nuanced and more difficult: I wonder if the answer to Mills’s question has changed and if the very connectedness among citizens assumed by Mills can no longer be counted upon. Indeed, we might well question the construct of the public in the first place, echoing John Dewey’s observations made so long ago: “[T]he public is so bewildered that it cannot find itself” (Dewey). Dewey was referring to the balkanization of communities in the Machine Age but was also anticipating the fragmentation and isolation of the Digital Era. The fact is that while we
might be wary of various corporations and foundations for their intrusion into public education—higher education most definitely included—the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room, as it were, is not the corporate heavy but the spectral public itself, which continues to withdraw its attention and resources from educational matters. If *Inside Higher Ed* informs me that “in the decade before 2009, total operating expenditures at private research universities grew by an average of $14,000 per student while those of community colleges grew by only $1” (Fain), or, close to home, I note that state funding per student for higher education in Massachusetts has dropped nearly 50 percent since 2000 (“Per Student”)—should I not revisit Mills’s question and cringe at the consequences of doing so? Judging from recent events, Massachusetts may have begun to address the problem of state neglect of its public colleges; it is unclear, however, whether other states will follow Massachusetts’s lead. As long as state support for public higher education continues to decline, higher education will continue to attract the attention of those who are capable of fulfilling the task of funding so-called public education. In light of this stark reality, each of us would do well to recall Mills’s question, “Am I not interested in the proper education of all that are socially and politically connected to me?”

### II. Teachers Disengage 2.0

The situation that I have described is partly created by disengagement of the public—however we construe that term—from civic life. To make that point, I don’t intend to trot out the usual data about the historically low voting trends and increasing voter apathy or the number of Americans who prefer to bowl or text alone. Rather, I prefer to point to our own disengagement from the public work before us. To that end, I am inclined to emphasize data reported by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future: a third of teachers leave the classroom within their first three years of teaching; about half within their first five years (Barnes, Crowe, and Shaeffer 7). And I can’t help but notice that many veteran teachers and faculty are beating a hasty retreat from the classroom. As a rhetorician, I note the emergence of a new genre—teachers’ testimony of resignation from the classroom. Teachers are disengaging in dramatic fashion—on Facebook, on YouTube, blogs—and then, going viral, these statements are being picked up by the web media. Gerald Conti, for example, a social studies teacher who had taught for more than twenty-seven years at a high school in New York State and forty years overall, posted a letter on his Facebook page announcing his retirement. While addressing the district superintendent, Conti, in fact, reaches out to a much larger audience, courtesy
of the social media, and does so as dramatically as possible. The media have taken notice. “Veteran teacher’s resignation letter pouring scorn on America’s ‘zombie-like’ education system” reads the headline from the UK’s Daily Mail (“Veteran”).

Another website announces, “Jerald [sic] Conti’s Resignation Letter Goes Viral: Teacher Resigns and Goes Out with All Guns Blazing” (Brooks). Sensational headlines aside, Conti’s letter in a very deliberate way offers a clear statement of his case. Conti begins by glancing at the large societal threats to his profession and to schools:

STEM rules the day and “data driven” education seeks only conformity, standardization, testing and a zombie-like adherence to the shallow and generic Common Core, along with a lockstep of oversimplified so-called Essential Learnings. Creativity, academic freedom, teacher autonomy, experimentation and innovation are being stifled in a misguided effort to fix what is not broken in our system of public education. . . . In their pursuit of Federal tax dollars, our legislators have failed us by selling children out to private industries. (Conti)

Conti drills down to the failure of leadership at his own school, blaming the union for not stepping up to protect its members and chiding administration for being “uncommunicative and unresponsive to the concerns and needs of our staff and students by establishing testing and evaluation systems that are Byzantine at best and at worst, draconian.” Conti points to the diminution of faculty autonomy and creativity—key tropes in such teacherly testimony of disengagement. He observes:

[T]eachers cannot be permitted to develop and administer their own quizzes and tests (now titled as generic “assessments”) or grade their own students’ examinations. The development of plans, choice of lessons and the materials to be employed are increasingly expected to be common to all teachers in a given subject.

When closing, Conti observes, again echoing a familiar element in this genre, “After writing all of this I realize that I am not leaving my profession, in truth, it has left me. It no longer exists.”

While such dramatic resignations seem peculiar to K through 12, it is worth glancing at a recent national study of college faculty conducted by UCLA. It found that while full-time faculty generally view their work as desirable, the amount of time those faculty members actually teach has dramatically declined, as has the time that faculty prepare for their classes (Jaschic). Many factors may be at play here, including the increasing reliance on part-time faculty to
teach sections, the drive to increase class sizes, and the outright elimination of sections. Faculty who teach at public colleges report more stress than their counterparts at private colleges, likely feeling the effects of budget cuts. Despite considering all these factors, Sylvia Hurtado, the UCLA professor who directed the research study, is led to observe, “something really odd is happening” (qtd. in Jaschic).

Indeed. Here’s my take: Like Mr. Conti, many of us have seen the profession that we were trained to serve as “no longer” existing. Certainly those contingent faculty who always imagined that they would be comfortably positioned in a tenured job are likely to think so. But even those of us fortunate enough to teach full-time and to have achieved tenure, may have been led to the same conclusion.

But how realistic was that vision of an academic life? I am reminded of the point made by Walker Percy in his influential essay “The Loss of the Creature.” Sightseers who come to the Grand Canyon with preset images in their mind, Walker asserts, have lost the ability to grasp truly the canyon’s reality. “It is the mistaking of an idea, a principle, an abstraction, for the real,” writes Percy (58). To recapture the “real” we have to disrupt our quaint theories and preformed dispositions with the unexpected: we have to leave the “beaten path” (Percy 48).

To apply Percy’s thinking here: perhaps Mr. Conti and those of us in academe who have become comfortable with a somewhat quaint, somewhat formulaic, notion of the “profession” need to rediscover the canyon, as it were. Has our profession—and here I include all of academe—ever been without the stress and strain that reflective practice or praxis requires? Has our profession ever been immune to the pressures brought upon it by technological advances or the demands of innovative and groundbreaking knowledge? Is the notion of public accountability so new? Just as we do well to interrogate our own teaching approaches, so we need to pose routinely such questions about the profession itself and our relationship to what we call “the public.” As teachers of writing and rhetoric, are we not especially sensitive to the shifting terrain of meaning and to the need to reclaim language after the loss or distortion of that meaning? In this regard, I am mindful of the words of the poet Nelly Sachs, whose project after the Nazi distortion of language was the reclamation of language itself:

Peoples of the earth,
leave the words at their source,
for it is they that can nudge
the horizons into the true heaven
and that, with night gaping behind
their averted side, as behind a mask,
help give birth to the stars—
Nelly Sachs, "Peoples of the Earth," lines 16–22

Words that give “birth to the stars,” we infer, have a peculiar power, as does the observer who is able to perceive the world in new ways, thus expressing what Percy calls the “sovereignty of knower over known” (59).

III. A Vet Claims Sovereignty
To reclaim such power for ourselves, to reconstruct our work as a public good, requires that we engage fully in the work of our students, at all levels. As a discipline—as teachers of writing—we have fought to ensure that all students have equal access to empowering literacy education and have engaged the challenge in very public ways: most notably, during the Grand Experiment of Open Admissions at CUNY in the 1970s, when students who had in the past little chance of entering the gates of the university were granted admission and thus could hope to dream of a better life. It is not my intention here to reinvoke the heroic narrative of that time, however, or to restore to iconic stature those teachers of writing engaged in the daunting task of instructing wholly unprepared students. Rather, I would simply point to this incontrovertible fact: that the decision to engage these new, mostly first-generation college students was never in doubt. The public called, and we writing teachers responded, however unprepared. "The public" was no mere abstraction but rather was embodied in the very real persons seated in those classes.

And so it remains today. Our many publics are embodied in the diverse students who inhabit our classrooms, our community centers, our writing support groups, and our work places. Repairing the loss of the public must start with our genuinely engaging the labor of those writers, not merely as a theoretical construct but as an expression of flesh and blood and mind. Please do not misunderstand me: we must continue to theorize and construct models of how our students write and learn, and we must do the research necessary that affirms our expertise and supports our understanding. But we must also direct our full and undivided attention to these writers as they are, not as we simply believe them to be. We must attend to their words with as much sensitivity and generosity that we can muster. In so doing, we affirm our sovereignty as knowers, and we enable students to claim their own.

Consider a former student of mine named Paul, whose age I’d estimate at mid-thirties but who looks much older and walks with a cane. Paul is a
returning veteran, having served in Iraq. Growing up as the youngest of eight
and as someone who had been told quite often “your not tall enough not fast
enough, not smart enough”[sic], Paul knew adversity from an early age. The
very choice to go to college—“at your age?” his friends would say—drew lots
of skepticism. Paul responds to this question in an early draft of an essay on a
belief important to him—self-determination:

“[Y]eees I am!" Self determination did not help me get any taller, and I’m slowing
down with age, my eyesight is waning. You might think that I’m a ego maniac,
that I think only about myself and my goals. Self determination is a very humbling
road to travel, if I thought that all my expectations were going to come true I’d be
a fool. I have taken many bumps bruises and falls as I wandered down the road of
life, but the ability to pick myself up dust myself off and continue on the journey
is the self determination that keeps me going.

Paul is not unlike so many community college students, who have faced
countless obstacles in their educational journey and put forth an indomitable
will to face down those obstacles. For example Bill, aged fifty-five, came to my
English 101 class after having served during Operation Desert Storm, where
his job was “contamination prevention,” helping to destroy the chemicals once
utilized by Saddam Hussein against his own people. In the process, Bill himself
became infected and suffered neurological damage. In fact, during our March
break, Bill suffered a stroke (which he attributed to the PCB exposure from his
service) but amazingly recovered sufficiently to return after the break to class
and resume his work, although still suffering from the effects of that stroke. Bill
has decided to major in environmental science at our local university so as to
prevent others from being exposed to toxic chemicals. Then there is Eurydice,
who is in her early thirties and one of nine siblings and the first female in her
family to go to college, having emigrated from the island of Cape Verde. To
realize her dream of higher education, she left her home country, which at that
time did not have a university, and took on the challenge of adapting to another
culture and language. But going to college directly from high school became
impossible. With her fiancée having been diagnosed with lymphoma and her
having given birth to a daughter, Eurydice needed to support her family. She
plans to major in economics and minor in business administration. Her goal is
to earn a PhD in business administration with an emphasis in entrepreneurship.

It would be tempting simply to categorize such narratives of triumph over
trial as a familiar trope. But with Paul and students like him who bare their
scars in the classroom, we would do well to refrain from such easy pigeonholing
and schematizing—and honor the resilience that the writing embodies. We do well, too, to note any nuances or disjunctions that express a deepening of the writing. For example, Paul attempts to distinguish a dedication to “the self” from a notion of ego building or selfishness. “Self-determination” claims no high ground here, as life brings with it a keen awareness of limitations: despite his advanced experiences, Paul still wants to find out who he really is, deficits and all. At the end of this piece, Paul ties the theme of “self-determination” to resilience when he notes, “but the ability to pick myself up dust myself off and continue on the journey is the self determination” (emphasis mine).

In his next piece, an essay of application for admission to a college of pharmacy, Paul redeployes the phrase dust off in his title and reveals early on the source of that phrase: “As I child I took many bumps and bruises when I went to my father he would say ‘It’s alright just dust it off and you’ll be ok.’” Is Paul going to go over the same ground as in his first piece? I ask myself. Anticipating my own concern and the reader’s question, Paul acknowledges, “[You] may have noticed my topic ‘Dust Off’ and wondered where I am going with this topic.” Indeed. But then Paul brings us to a battlefield in Iraq:

It was a hot and arid day with the temperature well over one hundred degrees. December 27, 2009, a normal day in the life of a soldier. I woke at my set time of 4am, grabbed some chow and received my assignment. A team was set for a convoy; we rolled out like we did a hundred times before.

We were outside a little town of Al Quit when boom! We had been hit by a roadside bomb.

Then there is this: “Now the ‘Dust Off’ was the Army’s term for a medical life flight.” I was taken aback by this phrase’s shift in meaning. How did his father’s somewhat worn advice take on this unfamiliar sense? Seeking to verify this information, I went—where else?—to Wikipedia: “Dust off or casualty evacuation, the emergency evacuation of casualties from a combat zone” reads the Wikipedia entry (“Dust Off”). Then I went to YouTube, where I found a video showing a “dust off” evacuation of soldiers in Kandahar, Afghanistan (“Dust Off: Part One”). As a reader, I admit to being startled by the change of context and the juxtaposition of the familiar—dust off as a sign of resilience—with the unfamiliar—its use as specialized, combat MEDEVAC terminology. But I begin to see method at work. To my mind, Paul knows exactly what he is doing in redeploying this phrase to fit this more recent, life-defining experience. He draws a line connecting his hard life as a child with his wartime challenges as a soldier, even as he implies the stark differences between the bruises felt by a
young child and the life-threatening wounds of the warrior—all for the purpose of self-determination, of trying to make sense of his life.

Paul continues to discern life patterns later in the essay. Having been successfully evacuated, Paul wakes up in a mobile surgical or M.A.S.H. unit:

The first person that I recall seeing was the x-ray tech, little did I know that we would be spending a great deal of time together. I had broken my back and thirteen other bones, most of them on my right side, the side of the impact. Each time they would set a bone I'd see his face, after the setting more x-rays and a smiling face.

Returning home to begin his rehabilitation and not knowing what he would do with his life, Paul, recalling his father’s words to “dust off” the hurt and pain, enrolled at the college, intending to get a certification as an X-ray technician. He writes: “I would like to be the face of hope and care for the person who looks up and sees my face.” Amid all the disruptions in his life, amid all the pain and suffering, Paul seeks through his writing to create continuity and, from that continuity, meaning and purpose.

When Paul and his classmates are required to produce writing less personal in nature, I fully expect him to “change the subject” entirely. Students are asked to produce writing in the form of a proposal, whose format requires that they identify and research a solvable and significant problem in their community, locate an authentic audience, propose practical solutions, and construct an analysis of the costs and benefits of such solutions. Paul chooses to write to the Fall River, Massachusetts, City Council offering a “Proposal for housing of homeless veterans.” He titles his proposal “Homes for the Brave.” Paul comes clean as to his own personal stake in the matter. After mentioning the name of a homeless vet with whom he is acquainted and revealing through government statistics the extent of the homeless vet problem, he writes:

I found myself in a similar situation upon my return from Iraq, while I was recovering from my injuries in Boston. When the time of my rehabilitation was coming to an end, I had no place to call home due to the increased rental prices and a slow job market. I was able to secure a bed at “The New England Center for Homeless Veterans,” [which] has the bed space for 235 veterans.

Counting himself fortunate to have found shelter in Boston, he notes that Fall River has no such facility or beds available for homeless vets. To address this problem, he goes on to propose to the council that a small percentage of unused school property be reserved for veterans’ use rather than be sold for conversion to housing units and provides a balanced assessment of the costs and clear
benefits of such a proposal. In his postwrite, or reflection, on the proposal, Paul makes it clear that he fully intends to take this school-based writing, in which he had so much personal investment, public and present it to the council.

That impulse to draw public good from private pain leads Paul in his final assignment—a trends analysis paper—to research and analyze “the silent trend” of suicide among returning vets. While he does not disclose a direct personal connection to the subject—taking his cue from the assignment protocol to privilege analysis over narrative—when this subject is placed in the context of his other work, there can be no doubt how personally meaningful it is for Paul.

Late in the semester Paul apologized to me for writing so much about his wartime experience and its consequences, as if he had been redundant and derivative and, well, not academic enough. I saw the matter differently. I saw an inventive, if still developing, writer attempting “self-determination” while at the same time engaging his private experience for public purposes. Who was I—who have never seen war except through the mediated imagery of book and film—to prohibit a veteran, for whom the “creature” was not lost but rather whole and tangible, from conveying his rich experience? The fact is that Paul needed to write and write and write and to do so from his vantage point as a returning, wounded vet—as if under a moral imperative. His goal was not to make himself feel better. Rather, he was busily working to make a self. At the same time, he was exploring the intersection between the private and the public.

IV. The Not So “Miserable Truth”
This field, our field, that I have gratefully considered my professional home for more than two decades, has concerned itself through sound scholarship and engaged research with these very same subjects—the power of multiple literacies to afford both self-creation and social construction. In essence, our discipline, like the humanities generally, aims to provide the means by which to determine who we are and where we belong. These goals have a clear and significant public purpose, a public purpose that serves as a foundational principle in our discipline. Indeed, while the fields of languages and literature in recent years—in reaction to charges of alleged irrelevancy—have only begun to define and promote the “Public Humanities,” scholars in the discipline of writing studies and rhetoric have long been committed to public action. Our discipline has been examining the collaborative efforts of writing support groups, for example. It has also organized and studied community literacy
centers. Moreover, we composition scholars have constructed service-learning partnerships with community agencies and created innovative digital archives of local and global literacy narratives. And we have explored written genres that enable transactions beyond the writing classroom and intrepidly built networks across national, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries. While the area of “digital humanities” has only recently begun to gain traction at MLA, at the CCCC Convention, the vast public reach afforded by digital media has occupied researchers for more than a decade. Most conspicuously of all is this organization’s, and NCTE’s, long campaign to promote a respect for linguistic diversity and students’ rights to their own languages and literacies. Through all of these activities and more, our organization has recognized that language takes its meaning both from the individual and the collaborative enterprise. The acquisition of literacies produces both individual and collective good. We understand and we value such outcomes. As a learned society, we stand committed to the production of knowledge that will, to borrow a phrase from our mission statement, “enhance the conditions for learning and teaching college composition” (CCCC, “Mission”). That same mission statement announces our organization’s role “as an advocate for language and literacy education nationally and internationally.”

All of these accomplishments notwithstanding, we clearly have our work cut out for us. The CUNY experiment in democracy has long since faded. Open admission continues as a lived reality by and large only at public community colleges, to which more and more universities, public and private, have outsourced basic writing instruction. At community colleges, roughly 60 percent of incoming students require at least one developmental course (Bailey, Jeong, and Cho). Data suggest that students taking developmental course sequences are less likely to persist than those who are not taking such courses (Bailey, Jeong, and Cho), setting up enormous pressure at community colleges to discard the conventional model of developmental course work in favor of accelerated, co-curricular arrangements or self-paced computer-aided labs allowing multiple portals for exiting the developmental sequences. The end of basic writing as we know it, I believe, is at hand.

Our organization has not been a mere spectator as these events have unfolded. Indeed, many of us years ago began to question the usefulness of a stand-alone basic writing course. Back in the late 1990s (as CUNY was getting out of the business of remediation) some on the left proclaimed that these courses served only to replicate inequalities (Bartholomae; Shor). More recently,
many in CCCC have shared stories of success in developing various accelerated learning and academic support modules enabling basic writers to persist in greater numbers ("ALP").

Furthermore, the universal first-year composition course itself has come under some criticism within our organization for several years, as opponents of the requirement wonder whether a course that lacks disciplinary grounding and whose purposes are so complex can actually achieve all that it sets out to do (Crowley; Smit).

I recollect these events from our history in part to acknowledge our organization's willingness to engage in constructive critique and reformation. But at the same time I wonder whether our organization, whose first conference was held on April 1 and 2, 1949, in Chicago and focused on "Freshman English" ("Founding"), would prefer to spend its energies on more specialized topics and less publicly visible areas than basic writing and first-year composition. As Derek Mueller's study of composition's citation practices demonstrates, the impetus of our scholarship is toward the breaking of new subfields, new areas for research. Rather than continuing to return to and reflect on familiar scholarship, we are led to move on and cite new work, new authors. Our attention has spread far and wide rather than deepened.

Meanwhile, the concern that used to fix our attention and draw upon our energies and that drew the passions of our pioneering colleagues back in 1949—the "Freshman Courses in Composition and Communication" as teaching and research subjects ("Founding")—is being taken up by others. Here I refer to the ample attention paid to "college and career readiness" by private groups or publishing conglomerates. Many scholars in our field are, of course, devoting much of their time to such public issues—the whole area of transfer knowledge, for example. What do students take from their basic writing and first-year composition experience that transfers to their other courses and to the workplace? Other somewhat obvious examples of engagement with public-affiliated issues would be NCTE's and CCCC's role in assessment, especially relating to the electronic grading of student essays to meet the Common Core Standards (NCTE) or Best Practices in the Online Teaching of Writing ( CCCC, "Position").

This is a momentous time for public education and for literacy instruction that seeks to provide public empowerment. I liken it in some ways to the pivotal year of 1976, the year when Mina Shaughnessy gave a talk entitled "The Miserable Truth" in front of writing supervisors at CUNY. New York City's dire financial crisis—near bankruptcy—prompted wholesale retrenchment
of many departments in the system, including the basic writing program that Shaughnessy had been instrumental in leading. Open admission was clearly being challenged: the writing was on the wall. Fully aware that so-called literacy crises have come and gone and would continue to raise alarm in the future, Shaughnessy nonetheless saw real grounds for concern this time, expressing her reasons in ways that seem so familiar to us today. Describing staff cuts and increasing class sizes, subjected to the whim of decision makers who continually shift their expectations, expressing concern for those students to whom the university had committed itself to educate but who were likely to be forgotten, Shaughnessy attended to the bigger picture:

And underlying all this turmoil we sense a growing national indifference to the goals of open admissions. Ironically, as the national press spread alarm about the state of literacy in the country, funds (federal, state, and city) for teaching the educationally neglected and betrayed are disappearing. Somewhere, it has been decided that the experiment hasn’t worked, that our hopes were overblown. (Shaughnessy 107)

When I reread these words, I can’t help but think of that charter school in Indianapolis or, closer to home for me, a middle school in Fall River—both having been deemed failures and therefore fit for “transformation.” I’m also mindful of the roughly 140,000 Californians turned away in 2010 from the state’s community colleges because of budget cuts (Schaffer).

Any attempt by this organization to make the case for public reengagement with higher education must begin with our own pledge to recommit ourselves to the importance of literacy instruction at all levels, from novice writer to graduate student to adult learner. That means investing our own time, our own energy, and our own expertise not only in preparing graduate students to teach composition and rhetoric in a variety of settings but also to reinvest in first-year composition and basic writing courses ourselves and to assist, through meaningful mentoring, the contingent faculty who currently teach the bulk of those courses. To put it more bluntly: whether we teach at a community college or university, a public or private institution, we need to embrace the opportunity to teach all student writers, especially the novices, whose stories we need to hear. And we need to provide the much-needed support for those many part-time faculty who assist us in this important task. Their stories matter, too.

As we engage in these efforts, it is my hope that we come to an authentic and rich understanding of who those novice students are and what they hope
to achieve by enrolling in our courses. If I’ve learned anything during my more than a quarter century of teaching at a public community college, it is that while my students come to the college with varied skills and levels of preparedness to do college-level work, most have arrived with the intention of making serious changes to their lives; most are willing to put forth the effort necessary to succeed and express a desire to be challenged. “I would like them to know,” Eurydice told me to tell you,

that we take college very seriously. We are here because we want to educate ourselves and have a successful future. We are willing to work and so are the teachers.

I hope to meet Eurydice’s expectations, as I know you all do.

Back in 1976, despite the many challenges and trials, Shaughnessy asserted her belief that the “lion got out of the cage before the gates were shut” (112). All that was learned about the teaching of writing will stay and be the basis of new knowledge. All that these new students experienced will make them hunger for more. Paul, Bill, Eurydice, and those students whom they represent will not tolerate a return to the inequalities of the past. Nor should we.

Works Cited


