Welcome to CCCC 2018! I am happy to be with you here in Kansas City today. There was an extended period of time this summer and early fall when it was not clear whether CCCC 2018 would occur, as the EC grappled with how to respond to the Missouri Travel Advisory and how to respond in ways that respected and served our members, that allowed us to do our work and fulfill our mission as a disciplinary organization, and that enabled us to be responsible stewards of CCCC and its resources.

This is not the first difficulty we have faced as an organization. As I noted in my position statement on the ballot when I ran for CCCC Assistant Chair: “There are serious challenges to the integrity of our profession and the field of composition . . . But facing challenges is what CCCC does. We are the organization we are today because of the challenges we’ve confronted. Our ability to evolve is what sustains us. And this willingness to struggle and strive makes me feel very optimistic about our organization’s future.”

Moments of crisis, like this one in Kansas City, push us to respond: to reflect, to think creatively, and to work together. They can create the impetus for change. Ultimately, this particular crisis created a moment of kairos—an opportunity to act on our policies and our values with
one another and with the local community. And I’d like to recognize a few of the individuals and groups who were instrumental in turning this problem into possibility. Thanks to then-Chair Linda Adler-Kassner for her thoughtful and responsive leadership through these difficult discussions and decisions. Thanks to Asao Inoue for using this challenge as an opportunity to reconsider what our convention time can look like and do, providing space for us to think, labor, and act together. Thanks to the Social Justice Action Committee and the Local Arrangements Committee, who have worked for months on initiatives that promote member safety, access, and engagement.

**Returning to Our Roots**

To prepare for this talk, I began by reading the past forty years of chairs’ addresses, twenty-nine of which are gathered in Duane Roen’s *Views from the Center: The CCCC Chairs’ Addresses, 1977–2005*. As a collection, the chairs’ addresses provide a fascinating glimpse into the evolution of our organization and discipline and the history that has shaped it. These addresses reveal the range of scholarship in the discipline, most notably the scholarship of teaching and learning, and they address persistent issues, particularly around inclusion and equity, within the organization, the discipline, and the profession. These addresses are a powerful narrative of who we are.

I also reviewed CCCC history. The organization, as most of you know, was born out of the need for a space within the National Council of Teachers of English for college-level faculty to discuss “Freshman English.” After its inaugural gathering in 1949 to discuss topics, such as pedagogy, theory, research, and the recruitment, retention, and training of writing faculty, NCTE’s first Conference, a college-level group dedicated to postsecondary composition and communication, was founded. According to an early draft of the first CCCC constitution, the purpose of this new organization was “to unite college teachers of composition and communication in an organization which can consider all matters relevant to their teaching, including, in general, teachers, subject matter, methods, and students” (“Founding”). Members of this organization would go on to create the modern discipline of writing studies, using first-year writing classrooms as spaces to theorize and research.

I turned to my own passions, interests, and expertise: two-year colleges, teaching, assessment, policy, and advocacy. And I realized
that what connects me, CCCC, and the discipline together is first-year writing. Since the idea of transforming crises into kairotic moments is what I’d like to focus on today, I decided to return to our disciplinary and organizational roots for my talk. It is where we, as an organization, began, and it is where I found my way into the organization.

Although I developed my love of reading and writing before and apart from my schooling, in retrospect, I recognize that my first formal interactions with the discipline occurred while I was in high school. I attended a small, rural high school that produced more future farmers than college graduates. We didn’t have an AP program, but my “College Prep” English class centered on writing, not literature. In it, we learned to write five-paragraph essays and longer research papers and practiced timed writing. Clearly, by the late 1980s, the discipline of writing studies was insinuating itself into the furthest reaches of public education for preparation for college English to be seen as preparation for academic writing.

Apparently, my high school preparation served me well because I was exempted from first-year writing in college, though I insisted on taking it anyway. I loved writing, so why on earth would I want to “skip” what I imagined would be my favorite class in college? My first-year writing experience reflected the state of the discipline in the 1980s. Graduate programs in composition and rhetoric were proliferating, yes, but they hadn’t yet reached Washington State University, where I completed my undergraduate work. My first-year writing course represented what I imagine was a fairly typical experience of students attending public state universities at the time. It was taught by a graduate student studying literature, supervised and presumably trained by a writing program administrator. (At the time, Sue McLeod, who later served on my master’s committee, served as WSU’s director of composition.) The course was “computer assisted.” There was some attention to process and writing to learn; the instructor conferenced with us on some drafts, and we kept a journal as part of the class. We primarily researched and wrote about current issues.

Fast forward half a dozen years or so, and I reconnected with first-year writing again, this time in the role of teacher, as I began my graduate work and a teaching assistantship as part of the second class of Washington State University’s fledging composition and rhetoric
program. I flourished in this space, where theory and practice, teaching, and scholarship were directly and symbiotically connected. I applied what I learned in my teaching writing methodology course directly to the ENGL 101 classes I was teaching, and then I studied and theorized about the results.

After graduate school, I returned to teaching high school, but after being introduced to basic writing and teaching the nontraditional student in Victor Villanueva’s class, my sights were set on the community college. A few years later, I had a full-time job teaching composition at Yakima Valley College and reconnected with the organizations that have formed my professional home ever since, NCTE, CCCC, and TYCA. And for the next nearly two decades, my intellectual and professional work has been inextricably linked to first-year writing, not unlike the work of many of you in this room and the teaching majority that make up this organization and this field.

**Problems and Possibilities**

We face serious problems as a field, and I see first-year writing as both the source of many of these problems and the place where we have the opportunity and capacity to create change. I am not suggesting that CCCC limit its work to first-year writing. Our discipline is more expansive than that, and our organization reflects the diversity of our discipline. As Gwen Pough recognized in her 2011 chair’s address, as a field that is interdisciplinary, “It’s Bigger than Rhet/Comp,” and it’s bigger than first-year writing. Our field is enriched by its ever-expanding knowledge base. At the same time, as an organization, our identity, centered on college composition and communication, and our mission are what distinguish us from other related professional groups. I’d like to argue that we embrace first-year writing as the particular site where CCCC, as a professional organization, and its members have the greatest ability to influence—policy, pedagogy, professionalization, students—through our teaching and scholarship, and where there is the greatest exigence for our work.

**What We Talk about When We Talk about First-Year Writing**

When I refer to first-year writing in this talk, I am not talking about a particular content, but rather a space in academia. I am also talking about more than the course or course sequence, which itself may be offered in various
forms and in various modes. I am referring to the whole support network around first-year writing, which may include developmental coursework, ESL courses, writing centers, and writing programs. I am referring to writing assessment processes linked to first-year writing, such as placement and programmatic or institutional assessment. I am also talking about the various programs that first-year writing enables, including WAC/WID programs, advanced composition courses, writing majors, and graduate programs.

Additionally, first-year writing serves as a benchmark for determining “college-readiness” for secondary teachers, policymakers, and testing agencies alike, and it has spawned an entire industry of first-year writing substitutes or alternatives, including dual enrollment and early college programs, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs, prior learning and competency-based assessments.

The FYW Problem
From its founding, CCCC centered on freshman English as a “problem,” as early CCC articles illustrate. The tables of contents in those early years of the journal were filled with titles relating our troubles, such as “The One-Legged, Wingless Bird of Freshman English” (October 1950), “The Problem of Freshman English in the Professional School” (February 1951), “The Problem of Freshman English in the Liberal Arts College” (May 1951), “The Problem of Freshman English in the University” (May 1951), and “The Professional Status of the Composition Teacher” (October 1952). According to John Gerber, the first CCCC chair, many of the “problems” that dominated early CCCC programs and CCC journals centered on teaching-related issues, such as dealing with struggling writers or international students, improving student reading and writing, evaluating student work, improving high school and college articulation, addressing grammar and linguistics, and preparing students for careers. Professional issues, such as the status of freshman English instructors and teacher preparation, were also important early concerns (Gerber). Sound familiar?

“*The More Things Change, The More They Stay the Same*”
*(Karr)*
While the practical problems of teaching composition persist, as the discipline matured and professionalized and the numbers of students taking
first-year writing increased and diversified, the problems have become more complex. About this time last year, I had the opportunity to contribute to a Studies in Writing and Rhetoric blog series revisiting James A. Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality* on the thirtieth anniversary of its publication. As I reread *Rhetoric and Reality* for the first time since graduate school, I was particularly struck by the repeated rise and fall in prominence of particular beliefs related to first-year writing over time, the consequences of such beliefs, and the conditions that create and re-create them. I noticed several familiar issues: the denigration of students and student writing, the vilification of high school English teachers, the marginalized place of writing instruction and instructors in the academy, and the shifting purposes of first-year writing—a vocational skill, a means of assimilation, a gatekeeping device, a service to other disciplines, an introduction to academic writing and writing as a discipline, the foundation of democracy.

One particular problem, the disappearance of first-year composition and basic writing from the general education curriculum, caught my attention. At one point, Berlin addresses a 1973 report by Ron Smith, which observed the reduction of and exemption from first-year writing offerings at colleges and universities and predicted the eventual erasure of freshman composition. Smith noted a set of symptoms, including alternative means of granting credit for freshman writing courses, and a set of causes, such as tighter budgets, difficulty of demonstrating the course’s “value-added,” external and internal pressures to reduce gen. ed. requirements, that are eerily reminiscent of today’s higher education landscape.

Berlin responds, “Smith’s prognosis, like all other predictions of the demise of the freshman writing course, proved to be inaccurate. . . . Today the freshman writing course remains an essential element in the education of the majority of college students, and the graduate training and research effort given to rhetoric history, theory, and practice is greater than ever before” (182–83). Berlin’s final assertion still holds true, but I can’t help but wonder, in the current political and economic climate, if Smith’s warnings were not erroneous, but premature.

Around the same time Smith was prognosticating about the fall of first-year writing, *Newsweek* announced that “Johnny Can’t Write” (Sheils), and 1977 CCC Chair Richard Lloyd-Jones observed how writing was suddenly at the center of the public stage, “the crisis of writing
skills.” As Lloyd-Jones describes, “there is a crisis, and we are it” (45–46). And that alarm grew in intensity as we neared the twenty-first century, when the demand for higher education and the need for a college-educated citizenry increased at the same time as higher education is being, as Chris Anson described in his 2013 chair’s address, “fragmented” and “deinstitutionalized”—and at the same time as outcomes-driven accountability measures accompany a public divestment in higher education.

**The State of First-Year Writing: It’s Complicated**

Let’s start with the state of higher education. In 2016, the on-time high school graduation rate rose to a record high of 84 percent (NCES, “Public”), and nearly 70 percent of high school graduates were enrolled in colleges and universities (Bureau of Labor Statistics). This is a far cry from the rates in the decade in which CCCC was founded. In 1940, only 30 percent of high school students graduated. Of those, 20 percent enrolled in college, and only 6 percent completed degrees (“America’s Fortunes”).

As of fall 2017, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimates over 20 million students attend US colleges and universities, over 17 million of whom are undergraduates. Of these 17 million, 7 million enroll in two-year colleges (NCES, “Fast”), which welcome the largest proportion of students of color, first-generation college students, returning students, and students from low-income families to higher education (“Fast Facts”). Most of these 17 million undergraduate students will be required to complete a first-year writing course of some type, with about half of first-year writing courses and the vast majority of developmental writing courses taken by students at two-year colleges.

Most incoming undergraduate students, that is, excluding those who earn college credit by other means prior to entering college. For instance, nearly one million students took Advanced Placement (AP) English Language or English Literature exams last year. Of that nearly one million, about half of those students earned scores of 3 or higher, potentially earning them college credit for first-year writing (College Board).

Additionally, according to the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP), by the 2010–11 school year, over 80 percent of public high schools enrolled students in college courses (“Fast
Facts about”). The Education Commission of the States state profiles, last updated in 2015, reveal that nearly all fifty states offer some sort of program for earning college credit in high school (“Dual Enrollment”). A 2015 ACT report discusses the significant increases in enrollment since the early 2000s. In the 2002–03 academic year, approximately 1.2 million students took one or more dual enrollment courses. By 2010, that number jumped to 2 million, a 75 percent increase in less than a decade (ACT). While I haven’t been able to find credits granted by course designation, it’s not hard to extrapolate that the most common dual enrollment courses offered in high school are likely the most common general education requirement in college, first-year writing.

According to the 2015 ACT policy brief Using Dual Enrollment to Improve the Educational Outcomes of High School Students, “as the number of participants in dual enrollment programs continues to rise, so has the popularity of these programs among policymakers and education leaders.” Between 2013 and 2015, twenty governors mentioned dual enrollment proposals or existing programs’ successes in their State of the State addresses (ACT). The current House GOP version of Higher Education Act reauthorization, the PROSPER Act, and its Democratic counterpart, the “Aim Higher” Initiative, both promote concurrent enrollment or early college programs. Additionally, as former TYCA Chair Eva Payne reveals in her eye-opening NCTE blog series, “Dual Enrollment: The Good, the Bad, and the Potentially Ugly,” most states subsidize the cost of dual enrollment, and now there is growing support in Congress to enable low-income high school students to access Pell Grant funding to pay for college coursework in high school, a (potentially harmful) move that would ensure continued growth in dual enrollment programs nationwide—and increased numbers of students earning credit for first-year writing while still in high school.

At the same time as competency-based education, prior learning assessments, dual credit, and credit by testing are proliferating—and eroding the traditional notion of first-year writing courses—colleges and universities increasingly rely on adjunct and contingent labor to teach developmental and first-year writing. The 2012 Coalition on the Academic Workforce report found that approximately 75 percent of the postsecondary workforce were employed in positions off tenure track, numbers that include part-time faculty, full-time non-tenure-track
faculty, and graduate student teaching assistants. A 2014 special report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement found that 58 percent of two-year college faculty taught part-time. While neither report breaks out numbers by discipline, given the relatively small class sizes and universality of first-year writing requirements, issues of labor tend to disproportionately impact our discipline.

Last year, Linda Adler-Kassner traced the narrative of higher education’s “failure” professed by the network of “NGOs, granting agencies, businesses, consulting firms, [and] policy institutes” she termed the “Education Intelligence Complex [EIC].” The EIC’s solutions to this problem privilege proficiency and efficiency (aka “success” and “completion”) over learning and development. The EIC’s view of “accountability” is market oriented, with “value” measured almost exclusively in economic terms. Because, as Adler-Kassner asserts, “Writing . . . doesn’t belong to us. It truly is everybody’s business” (333), first-year writing and developmental writing are primary targets in the EIC’s quest to streamline and economize higher education.

All of these trends put first-year writing—and the students and programs (including graduate programs!) that such courses support—at risk. As a discipline, we bear some responsibility for its endangerment. Despite the significant space that first-year writing occupies in our discipline, our scholarship fails to account for the “teaching majority” or the spaces in which they work. In “Occupy Writing Studies,” Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano observe, “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” (119). Yet, as John C. Lovas asserted in his 2002 chair’s address, “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” (406) because it doesn’t account for the work being done in two-year colleges and other open admissions institutions. Lovas continued his argument: “You cannot represent a field if you ignore half of it. You cannot generalize about composition if you don’t know half the work being done” (276). Hassel and Giordano attribute this inequity to the hierarchical structure of the academy, which assigns relative value to work based on the status of the institution (122–23). Darin Jensen and Christie Toth take these
critiques a step further, asserting that “[t]his structural ignorance is also a moral failing, one fueled by an academic tradition of elitism that maps in shameful ways onto the relative class, race, and ethnic make-up of our institutions” (584).

Additionally, despite arguments for the value of first-year composition in the undergraduate curriculum, we often assign responsibility for teaching those courses to the least prepared, least experienced, and least supported instructors. Doing so feeds into another troublesome narrative that “anyone” can teach writing, reducing first-year writing to proficiency development and perpetuating negative stereotypes about those who teach it. Such mischaracterizations make it easy to farm out the task to overworked high school English teachers or literature graduate students and enable competency exams to substitute for teaching and learning. This mythology also undercuts our ability to argue for working conditions and the necessity of a professionalized teaching faculty.

**Problems as Possibilities**

With all the problems we face, it may leave some of us longing for the “good ol’ days” of the profession, but I don’t. More often than not, I find the “good ol’ days” a tale of exclusion. Rather, our problems are a gift because they inspire, even incite, change. As Adam Banks argued in 2015, “the only way to gain the freedom we so desperately need as a society and as a discipline is through the very problems that threaten and seem so intractable” (277).

Although the ubiquitousness of “freshman composition” has eroded, and some scholars in our discipline would argue against a universal first-year writing requirement (see Crowley), first-year writing remains the most universal general education requirement, and, as such, it is our space of power. For various reasons and for its many stakeholders, first-year writing continues to be viewed as an essential part of a college education. While policymakers and education reformers may seek to economize its instruction, no one seems to deny the necessity of communication and critical thinking skills in today’s economy and their importance for civic engagement.

First-year writing is the space where we can best exercise our power through disciplinarity. For good and bad, writing is one of the academic disciplines that is directly touched by policy—local, state,
and federal—but it also means that we have the power to effect change through our scholarship. We know writing. We know effective writing instruction. And we have a full and rich research base upon which to make our claims.

More importantly, first-year writing reaches more students than any other postsecondary course: virtually all college students, regardless of institution type or certificate or degree goals and regardless of whether they complete their college educations, will take first-year writing. That is power.

**How Do We Solve a Problem like First-Year Writing?**

So how do we exercise our power to solve these problems? To paraphrase Cheryl Glenn’s conclusion to her 2008 chair’s address: we do the work. And I’d add we do the work strategically: we act where we have capacity, and we conscientiously create the conditions for change.

**Changing the Public Narrative: Strategic Advocacy**

There is often a push for CCCC to “speak out” on a whole range of issues, whether they relate directly to our mission or not. This is unsurprising, I suppose, given how, broadly, all public issues can be connected in some way to communication or rhetoric, and given the politically engaged stance of many—perhaps most—in our member organization. This “speaking out” occurs largely through internal channels—statements broadcast to members through social media, resolutions articulated at an early morning convention meeting, position statements warehoused on a website, and it is often directed toward member audiences—not the most effective ways to become, in the words of CCCC’s 2022 vision statement, “the leading voice in public discussions about what it means to be an effective writer and to deliver quality writing instruction” (CCCC, “About”).

While it is important to identify and express our collective values, our power in the public sphere is rooted in our *expertise* and our ability to leverage that expertise to create change. As CCCC members, first-year writing—the whole of it I described earlier—is the primary space where we have expertise of value to policymakers and other public audiences, and it is incumbent upon us to make the case, repeatedly and publicly, for what writing is, how it develops, and why it matters.

While federal policies are often the most publicly prominent and at-
tract the most attention and passion from our members, as a nonprofit, disciplinary association, NCTE and CCCC have limited influence in this sphere. Additionally, as Joyce Locke Carter noted in her 2016 chair’s address, in policy matters, “when you’re doing the asking, . . . the power rests in the asker’s hands, not in the askee’s” (389). And that’s why an important strategy shift for NCTE’s policy advocacy in recent years has been to position ourselves as a resource to federal policymakers, to position ourselves as a “trusted public voice” on matters related to literacy and writing in educational contexts. This is a position that is paying off as, increasingly, lawmakers are turning to NCTE and its constituencies for information and feedback. Positioning ourselves as a “trusted public voice” requires building relationships among legislators from both sides of the aisle. It requires attention to exigence: what policies are currently being considered? This spring, it’s reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. It also requires approaching issues pragmatically rather than philosophically, shaping our “asks” around policymakers’ needs.

Another consideration of policy advocacy on the federal level is capacity. How can the organization have a greater effect on the issue at hand—through the organization at large or through its members influencing their legislators? Where is there space for our distinct professional voice, and where are we better served “joining the chorus”? Generally, federal laws and allocations do not directly affect our discipline. They do, however, often impact our students, and, for CCCC, this impact is most evident in first-year writing.

The reality is most national policies are actually enacted by state legislatures and, to continue to borrow Adler-Kassner’s term, the EIC through grants. In this space, CCCC, as an organization, is not nimble enough or in a position to take action, though it can help members keep abreast of policy trends through the NCTE Policy Analyst Initiative and its convention and publications. CCCC members, however, can make a difference. Higher education reforms imposed by state legislatures and promulgated by the EIC often do connect directly to first-year writing through developmental education reform, placement reform, writing assessments, and dual enrollment programs. And CCCC members have already had some success influencing policies in these spaces. For example, former CCCC Executive Committee member Les Perelman is credited with bringing down the robo-scored SAT essay exam
Peter Adams and his County of Baltimore Community College colleagues developed a new approach to developmental writing, ALP, a grassroots effort grounded in disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship, that has since been adopted as a best practice by reform-minded NGOs, such as Achieving the Dream and Complete College America (see Adams et al.).

Most importantly, we can act locally. CCCC members are smart people, skilled communicators and rhetoricians—and there are a lot of us, nationwide and internationally, and we occupy spaces in which we have influence. In fact, we have most power in our local contexts to shape local policies and practices and to shape the local narrative about writing, and that is where our work will have the most impact for ourselves, our students, our institutions, and our communities. In this space, CCCC, the organization, plays a supporting role—connecting members to its collective expertise and experience, including our position statements, and, coming soon, a Strategic Action ToolKit.

**Disciplinary Inclusion and Equity**

I recently received reviewer feedback on an article I co-wrote with a couple of TYCA colleagues related to two-year colleges. The reviews were positive and offered constructive revision suggestions, but one particular comment struck a nerve. It essentially asked us to justify why this two-year college–centered work matters to four-year college faculty. My collaborators and I wondered aloud if our university colleagues ever felt compelled to explain why their work mattered to others in the same profession, in the same discipline. As one who often reviews the work of two-year college scholars, I can say that this comment has been internalized by some of my two-year college colleagues. I have read many manuscripts that beg to be taken seriously.

This scholarly exclusion—note I do not see this as “exclusiveness”—is not limited to institution type. We also tend to do a poor job of reading, citing, and representing scholars of color and other marginalized groups in our CCCC publications, and when we do, often including them as “add ons” in special issues. But my focus is on institution type because that is where the realities about *who* does the majority of the work of the profession (teaching writing) and the scholarship of the profession are most out of sync. According to Hassel and Giordano, “the most common faculty experience in teaching English is at a two-year college”; thus,
“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” (120).

The scholarship of first-year and basic writing provides a space in which we can create a complete and representative knowledge base. Within the organization, we can do this—and are trying to do this—through our publications, convention programs, research grants, and awards. We do this when we expand and diversify reviewer pools, awards committees, and task forces. We do this when we invite and mentor new and representative voices.

Within the larger discipline, we have even more possibilities. We can develop graduate curriculum that reflects and values the entirety of the field, particularly as it relates to first-year writing programs. The recommendations in the 2016 “TYCA Guidelines for Preparing Teachers of English in the Two-Year College” offer a good starting point for developing a relevant and responsible curriculum, including, but not limited to, integrating readings from TETYC and two-year college scholars in any graduate course relating to pedagogy, basic writing, or first-year writing. We can collaborate with two-year college faculty, conducting research on two-year college campuses and with two-year college scholars. Given that two-year colleges are particular targets of higher education reformers, who demand large amounts of data collection in exchange for their grant funding, there is a vast and fairly untapped resource of local research that two-year colleges can contribute. In Hassel and Giordano’s disciplinary reenvisioning, “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” (Hassel and Giordano 126). I would add that without such a research base, we cannot effectively advocate for faculty and students.

Our policy agenda requires a complete and representative knowledge base: CCCC and its members need evidence in order to enact our mission. Even more, we need to fill in research gaps strategically. For instance, our members are deeply concerned—and rightly so—about the
deteriorating working conditions of writing faculty, yet we lack evidence to connect faculty working conditions, including teaching loads, class size, and professional development and support, to student learning. Many members are concerned about the proliferation and efficacy of dual enrollment writing courses, yet discipline-specific research on dual enrollment is very limited. (And there is very little motivation among its sponsors and proponents to investigate possible deficits or long-term consequences of these popular programs.)

Our professional ethics and values demand it: we cannot work together, we cannot fulfill our mission, if we willfully ignore and exclude our members.

**Professionalizing**

Several years ago, I was sent by my college to a workshop on competency-based education hosted by Western Governors University. The goal was simply for me to learn more about how it worked, so I did my best to check my preconceived notions and to rein in any hostilities I felt about this educational model. But I still went in with a strong dose of skepticism.

I had a lot of questions about how writing was taught. On the first day of the workshop, I asked about how WGU handled developmental writing. The response was that they preferred students to come in at college level. That makes sense in a competency-based system. It is designed to measure proficiency, not develop it.

On day two, one of the workshop facilitators shared the program’s freshman writing syllabus with me. On paper, the course appeared in line with other English 101 course syllabuses I have seen. It was sufficiently rigorous and required a similar number and complexity of writing projects as compared to my own courses. But I had to ask, “How do students engage with feedback and revision in a self-paced program? Do they interact with other students at any point along the way?” The answer: there are mentors who can help students with their work. Clearly, my question was not understood. As a discipline, we know that effective communication is more than correctness; it is rhetorical; it’s situated; it’s developed in and through response. As a discipline, most of us agree that meaning is socially constructed.

Before I could ask another question, the workshop facilitator gave me his spiel: “As teachers, you have so many jobs; it’s like you are riding
five horses at once [how did he know I was an equestrian?], but, here, we have disaggregated the teacher’s role, so that you can focus,” and he began outlining the different jobs: one person is responsible for course curriculum development, which is standardized; another is responsible for assessment, also standardized; another, the student mentor, essentially an online tutor, responds to students’ questions and provides individual help.

“But I want to do all those things at once,” I responded. “I’ve been trained to do all those things at once.” And suddenly, I recognized that “disaggregate” was code for deprofessionalize. Only one job in his list requires a specialist with an advanced degree, and that was the the curriculum developer, and that was something that could be managed on a one-time, contractual basis.

To work against forces attempting to “disaggregate” teaching and learning into measurable outcomes and to deprofessionalize teachers, we must take responsibility for professionalizing all who teach our courses. Doing so is within our capacity. In his 2005 chair’s address, Douglas Hesse asked, “Who Owns Writing?” And while many may be able to lay claim to it, most certainly we “own” writing scholarship, and we “own” postsecondary writing instruction, and, most particularly, we own first-year writing. We are the ones who teach, who research, who administer writing programs, who develop graduate programs, who mentor writing faculty.

If we are serious about changing faculty working conditions, about improving student learning, about maintaining control over writing programs, and about preserving the integrity of our work, we can start by doing our part to make sure all who teach our courses are professionalized. In his 2014 chair’s address, Howard Tinberg argued: “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” (339).
That means, within our home institutions, working to ensure that first-year writing and basic writing courses are taught by teachers who have adequate support and appropriate preparation. And CCCC can help. While the organization does not have the capacity—or the mission—to bargain or sanction, CCCC can support members to advocate in their contexts through its position statements, such as the CCCC Statement on Working Conditions for Non-Tenure-Track Writing Faculty and the CCCC Statement on Best Practices in Faculty Hiring for Tenure-Track and Non-Tenure-Track Positions in Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies, through the resources developed by its Labor Liaison, and through its collaborative spaces, such as the Annual CCCC Convention, where CCCC members can network with those who do research and advocacy related to issues of labor.

That means that those directing graduate programs in composition and rhetoric prepare future writing faculty for the full range of writing instruction and research in the profession. The “TYCA Guidelines for the Academic Preparation of English Faculty at Two-Year Colleges” asserts “graduate programs have an ethical and professional obligation to prepare all students—even those who will go on to careers at four-year institutions—to be knowledgeable about two-year colleges, their students, and their faculty. Such knowledge is essential for understanding the landscape of postsecondary literacy instruction in the United States.”

That means those supervising first-year writing programs that employ teaching assistants or teaching faculty who are not writing specialists provide a strong foundation in composition theory and pedagogy as well as mentoring support, so those instructors are prepared to teach effectively at a range of institution types. A 2015 survey conducted by the CCCC Task Force on Teacher Preparation found that over half of all respondents—all CCCC or TYCA members and all writing professionals—had not completed graduate work in a writing studies–related field (see Johnson). The CCCC Statement on Preparing Teachers of College Writing reminds us that “an investment in the training and professional development of writing instructors is an investment in student learning and success” and provides concrete strategies for how to “cultivate and apply a theoretically informed writing pedagogy.”

That means engaging with high school English teachers teaching dual enrollment courses through our college. We cannot control all
spaces where first-year writing is taught, but we can shape programs and practices and develop relationships with high school faculty that improve writing education at the secondary and postsecondary levels. For examples, TYCA maintains a website of “Dual Credit/Concurrent Enrollment Best Practices,” which includes a link to model programs. (See also Kristine Hansen and Christine Farris’s College Credit for Writing in High School: The "Taking Care of" Business.)

That means resisting the use of standardized curriculum in first-year writing courses, which reinforces false notions that “anyone” can teach first-year writing, as long as they have a book and syllabus, undercuts instructor autonomy and perpetuates reductionist ideas about writing and learning.

**Save First-Year Composition, Save the Discipline**

I didn’t watch the television series Heroes, which made famous the tagline “Save the Cheerleader, Save the World,” but as I understand the basic message, saving a part can save the whole. For postsecondary writing, defense of first-year writing—the entire enterprise—is defense of the entire discipline. This may sound dramatic, but I’m not sure writing studies, or CCCC, can survive without it. We will certainly be much diminished without this common space, a space that crosses institution types, to theorize and practice together, and our ability to influence policy will be much eroded if we cede authority over first-year writing to testing companies.

But, ultimately, it comes back to students. First-year writing matters because it touches more students than any other college-level course—whether these students complete college or not. We can never underestimate the power of the classroom to create changes for students, the community, and the world. First-year writing is the access point to higher education—and, as such, is often a transformative and even liberatory space for students. We owe it to students—and to our ideals of democracy and justice—to protect that space.

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