Racial identity and linguistic difference are deeply embedded in the way teachers of writing think about linguistic features of oral and written performance (Ball 360; Canagarajah, “Negotiating” 62–4; J. Jordan 17–21; Gilyard, Composition 45–8; Peckham, Going North 29–32). While it is understood that race and ethnicity do not determine the language varieties students employ in their oral and written communication (Holmes 64), race and language difference remain a concern in evaluating student writing, in large part because race and language can be closely connected to the ways that teachers evaluate comprehension and rhetorical choice (Murphy 232). Institutional and social contexts further shape our readings of student “writing ability” in relation to racialized identities and language varieties. The evaluation of student writing, thus, is a complex negotiation driven by institutional context and teacher knowledge, both of which are reinforced by the curricula and evaluative materials developed and implemented by writing programs.

As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva notes, “[P]ost–Civil Rights culture has created a climate where racially based opinions are deemed illegitimate and a marker of racism” (10–12). And yet, as he also notes, discrimination based on race still exists, given that race still informs the socially constructed ways people, their performances, and their practices are interpreted and measured. What I want to suggest in this article is that race can inform ways of thinking about assess-
ment that are not straightforward examples of discrimination. If we consider the relationship between social justice and writing assessment, then conversations on race, language, and difference within composition studies should change how assessment is handled within the classroom and writing programs in general. To engage this project, I argue that historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) provide an alternative way of thinking about race and writing assessment. As such, HBCUs provide a unique site for inquiry into questions of writing assessment and social justice because of their long histories negotiating social justice agendas with an academic focus on development and knowledge building (Jarrat 2009; Kynard and Eddy 2009). Specifically, in engaging with the push-pull legacy toward language use and race that is found at HBCUs, we might enable teachers, administrators, and students to resist monolingual, racialized consequences embedded in their views of writing assessment and rethink foundational measurement concepts of reliability, validity, and fairness.

To explicate how the complex push-pull legacy of HBCUs might help us rethink foundational assessment concepts, I draw on an example from the first-year writing program at Howard University. First, however, I historicize the push-pull legacy found at HBCUs to illustrate its importance in assessing writing at HBCUs. I examine foundational measurement concepts of validity, reliability, and fairness as they are traditionally understood and may be usefully re-examined. Finally, I examine the Howard University case, revealing the present and new first-year writing curricula with an eye toward broadening definitions of validity, fairness, and critical language use. Following a curricular and assessment analysis informed by the creative tensions of a push-pull legacy, I conclude by suggesting ways that these legacies might be used to provide purpose and aim in collaborations with writing teachers so they can envision assessment as an “ongoing rhetorical argument that evolves as new understandings are developed” (Murphy 229). In particular, I work toward building on institutional and cultural histories that can cultivate conversations about writing assessment, social justice, and language variety.

**Push-Pull Legacies: HBCUs as Sites for Writing Assessment Research**

The sociocultural mission of most HBCUs emphasizes the cultivation of students into global leaders and critical citizens. Influenced by the ever-present legacies of racism and social exclusion, these goals press students, through curricular and extracurricular programs, to become increasingly aware of social justice concerns at the same time as they develop their professional personas. Yet students are also encouraged to view writing as the acquisition and application of a set
of standardized skills and conventions. Even at HBCUs where Black English traditions flow through ceremonies, social events, and sports culture (see any HBCU homecoming), classroom discourse focuses on normative standards for writing. In other words, HBCUs push students toward social justice goals within the institutional context while also pulling them toward certain dominant, white language norms within classrooms. This tension is probably best highlighted in Juanita Williamson’s 1957 article “What Can We Do About It?—The Contribution of Linguistics to the Teaching of English.” In the article Williamson proposes a contrastive understanding of language norms and writing conventions; students must at once acquire an understanding of traditional academic writing literacies, but this acquisition need not overwrite student’s cultural literacies. A linguist at heart, Williamson does not offer a way around this tension in her article, but her emphasis on contrastive rather than prescriptive approaches to language does indicate an enduring concern—one that still persists today—about the presumptive value of white academic literacy and its ability to overwrite or subordinate one’s cultural literacies.

Geneva Smitherman describes this concept as a push-pull orientation toward language and culture. As she notes, the term was developed as way to identify the type of tension produced as an effect of US race relations (5–8). Borrowing from Dubois’s concept of double-consciousness, she draws on the push-pull term to highlight the ways that Black linguistic and cultural attributes are, at times, celebrated as creative and innovative, and at other times admonished (5–8). Rickford and Rickford capture this push-pull tradition in their discussion of a commencement ceremony at Howard University in which an invited speaker took time to denounce both rap music and Ebonics as a negative reflection on the culture and language of Black people, and the inclusion of Negro spiritu-als—which rely heavily on Black English—within the ceremony (74–5). As they note, the contradiction is so ingrained that few at the ceremony saw anything wrong with the speaker’s displeasure with hip-hop music, a form of Black music that has evolved from spirituals, and the unanimous celebration of spirituals employing the Ebonics denounced in the speech. The same contradictions occur in literature courses where the works of African American English employing “eye dialect” or written Black English are valued as powerful contributions to the literary canon, yet students are taught to edit out, not edit, their Black English usage rhetorically to inform or enhance their academic writing.

The roots of the push-pull attitudes toward language may be found in the establishment of HBCUs. David Gold, in Rhetoric at the Margins, notes that while many Black colleges established courses and curricula that mirrored White institutions, the culture of the institutions worked to define literacy and educa-
tion for themselves (20). Using Melvin Tolson’s teaching career as an example of the unique rhetorical instruction at HBCUs, Gold highlights the degree to which sociocultural influences shaped much of Tolson’s teaching and often led him to blend classical, communal, and political material in ways that embraced contradiction and fostered a distinctive black intellectual ethos. As Gold notes, Tolson’s approach and that of most HBCUs has been to frame “dominant discourse norms and liberal culture” as connected to the rich cultural heritage of its students (61). In her study “Classics and Counterpublics in Nineteenth-Century Black Colleges,” Susan Jarratt also makes note of this legacy. She notes that students at Howard, Fisk, and Atlanta (now Clark Atlanta) Universities often drew upon their classical education to question social issues affecting Black citizens at that time (143–8).

One can identify a similar sentiment even today within composition instruction at HBCUs; many students attend these schools with an understanding that training in academic writing and its genre conventions are a valuable part of their education. Yet there is also an expectation that these abilities will enable them to respond to the social issues of their time. As a colleague once noted, HBCUs serve as distinctive sites, shaped by social exclusion, cultural pride, and varying interpretations of social justice as central to formal education. Carmen Kynard and Robert Eddy argue that because HBCUs function as “intentional communities” with their own unique conditions and institutional culture, they demand a different kind of attention by compositionists (W25). In “Toward a New Critical Framework: Color-Conscious Political Morality and Pedagogy at Historically Black and Historically White Colleges and Universities,” Kynard and Eddy make the case that “a shared fate of mutual survival in the academy and beyond has been foregrounded in HBCUs such that pedagogy, mentoring, and interracial and intercultural communication take on critical meanings” (W27). Moreover, as they note, teachers and students in these spaces share the politics of this space in ways that produce distinct views about race, culture, and opportunity. In this way, their legacies distinguish them from Minority Serving Institutions in deliberate ways.

The push-pull legacy of HBCUs surfaces frequently in writing assessment practices. The overreliance on constructs and criteria that punish students “tethered linguistically” to traditions and practices trouble the norming process of rubrics and narrowly defined objectives for writing (Gilyard, “The Rhetoric” 285). An illustration of this “troubling of the norming process” occurred at the 2014 Symposium on HBCUs and Composition held at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (Let Our). At the symposium, an interesting dialogue broke out during a presentation on Black English. While
many of the professors were familiar with Black English and its cultural value, many also expressed a deep concern about how to assess student writing that employed Black English well enough, yet struggled with writing conventions traditionally associated with academic literacy.

For many of the professors, many of whom were African American, their concern was not their ability to understand the Black English the students were using; rather it was their ability to assess and measure its proficiency in relation to the other criteria used to assess the document as a whole. Knowledge of and facility with punctuation, transition statements, topic sentences, and citations practices are often considered central to quality writing. If one recognizes that culture and identity can influence a variety of writing choices such as language, adherence to convention, and the types of evidence used, then how do you account for those differences in the instruction and assessment of student writing? How can decisions be valid when the very premises upon which those decisions are being made are unstable?

The answer lies, in part, by shifting not just our worldview regarding language, but by altering our understanding of assessment as a rhetorical act. In short, we can improve writing assessment by broadening definitions of composing and writing instruction. This does not mean consistency is disregarded; it is instead achieved through recognition and discussion of salient factors shaping how students are impacted by our assessment choices. It asks readers, raters, and teachers to move away from considerations of language as correct or incorrect, and toward a view of language as experiments in communicating across linguistic borders. HBCUs are places that highlight the complex entanglements of language, culture, and legacy with dominant institutional objectives, which often reaffirm views of fairness as sameness and difference as distortion. Thus, while Smitherman and Rickford and Rickford make the case for avoiding the push-pull dynamic as a way of eliminating the prejudices that undermine understanding and interpretation of student written performances, I would argue that the push-pull phenomenon is a part of the legacies that shape all HBCUs. A deeper understanding of this push-pull legacy may shift particular dispositions toward assessing writing; ideally it would lead to a rethinking of linguistic, racial, and classed prejudices embedded in traditional approaches to assessment.

My call for the study of writing assessment practices at HBCUs has been echoed by other scholars. For example, Zandra Jordan has studied student and teacher attitudes toward writing at HBCUs (96). For Jordan, HBCUs provide “informative sites for examining complex issues surrounding writing assessment and language diversity” (98) due to their predominantly Black student populations, who produce varied demands for writing instruction. Much can be learned by examining the different ideological positions and cultural values
students bring with them to HBCU writing classes and making spaces for these positions and values within or alongside the institutional assessment practices used to measure them. These values, when considered important, often reveal ways of enhancing the types of critical writing and critical thinking institutional writing objectives seek to impress upon students.

Studying assessment practices within the context of HBCUs also provides a powerful heuristic for rethinking foundational measurement concepts like validity, reliability, and fairness. Such concepts have been developed in decontextualized, race-neutral (i.e., White) frameworks. However, context can deeply shape what makes, for example, a plausible interpretation from a validation study. For example, institutional attitudes toward language difference influence what we may think of as a “good decision” based on assessment results.

**Reliability, Validity, and Fairness: Received and Revised Interpretations**

Approaches to assessment are informed by three theoretical tenets: reliability, validity, and fairness. Often reliability is used as a way of measuring the consistency of a writing construct. The precision and repetition of results is used to gather information about measurement accuracy. The *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* defines reliability as “the degree to which test scores for a group of test takers are consistent over repeated applications of a measurement procedure and hence are inferred to be dependable and consistent for an individual test taker” (222). While the 2014 edition of *Standards* does acknowledge precision as central to reliability, previous conceptions of reliability (such as those found in older versions of *Standards*) tend to suggest that repetition confirms consensus and defers precision to the interpretation of results. Thus, we might consider how integrated in actual practice the concept of precision is in reliability in the field of psychometrics. In *Very Like a Whale*, a discussion of measurement concepts used in the assessment of writing programs, Edward M. White and his coauthors define reliability as “a measure of consistency and precision across replications of an assessment” (174). They also describe it as “the estimate of the ways scores resulting from measurement procedures would be expected to vary across time and circumstance” (22). However, reliability can become a god concept used to determine the ability of raters or machines to reproduce consistent results rather than a way to gather meaningful information about those results. That is, it may fool us into thinking that consistency is accuracy, or accuracy is consistency. This can, if left unchecked, become an acritical set of assumptions that equate a lack of consensus among group judgments with inconsistency, and thus inaccuracy. While this read may be valid in
some instances, it may also fail to connect a construct’s validity or lack of validity with a shifting conception of quality writing among raters. The potential damage caused by such misapplications of reliability has been pointed out by Brian Huot, among others. In “Toward a New Theory of Writing Assessment,” Brian Huot argues that, pushed to its logical conclusion, reliability becomes a mechanism for measuring characteristics such as the amount of words produced for a single writing event. If the measurements were consistent and ratings reproducible, they could be considered reliable (167). If we take to heart Huot’s claim that “assessment practices need to be based upon the notion that we are attempting to assess a writer’s ability to communicate within a particular context and to a specific audience who needs to read this writing as part of a clearly defined communicative event” (169), then reliability in program assessment might also be interpreted as the consistency of the relationship between particular results and the evolving goals of a program, its students, and its faculty. I am thinking here of how certain cultural literacies might heighten or complicate the types of interpretive arguments made about how well a text or test corresponds with a construct-task. While this interpretation of reliability stretches the concept, it places emphasis on teacher knowledge in decisions about assessment, which also acknowledges the political environment and other factors in any given assessment context that are vital to understanding the reliability of a measure.

Validity, on the other hand, represents the use of available evidence to justify or affirm a particular interpretation derived from assessment results. Standards gives this definition, “[V]alidity refers to the degree to which accumulated evidence and theory support a specific interpretation of test scores for a given use of a test” (225). The emphasis here is on the intended uses by the test giver and the process devised to ensure interpretations are accurate, but we might better think of validity as the type of arguments made for reading and valuing student responses in a particular way. In Very Like a Whale the term is defined this way, “as a deeply situated rhetorical statement used to explicate and interpret research, validity is defined as the extent to which evidence supports claims” (175). As is the case for educational measurement, validity is not a unitary concept within the field of rhetoric and composition studies. For researchers such as myself who are interested in issues of social justice and assessment, validity is determined by its connection to consequence, namely consequences for students historically disadvantaged by social dispositions on the bottom end of uneven power relations, power relations that maintain certain assumptions about writing (Poe et al. 590). In “Valid Writing Assessment from the Perspectives of the Writing and Measurement Community,” Nadia Behizadeh and George Engelhard identify consequential validity as the rising focus of validity studies in composition studies given its cultural and social relevance to writing assessment (38). As they note,
the focus on social consequences reveals an explicit concern about what can be learned about particular student communities negotiating particular spaces, “necessitating empirical research in classrooms to examine the effects of writing assessments on instruction and students” (41). In “The Technology of Writing Assessment and Racial Validity,” Asao B. Inoue makes a similar case about validity, maintaining that validity should be thought of as a rhetorical concept, one that can help program administrators and teachers use empirical evidence through validation studies to make interpretations that avoid a competency/deficiency dichotomy and presses for inferences and actions that acknowledge competencies that can be enhanced and developed to address legacies of race (110–11). He also explains that

[r]acial validity, then, is an argument that explains the degree to which empirical evidence of racial formations around our assessments and the theoretical frameworks that account for racial formations support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions made from the assessments. (108)

For my purposes, validity links program and classroom assessment, representing the means by which discussion of particular choices, tasks, and ideas are used to improve decisions about how writing is assessed among teachers, students, and administrators. Thus validity can be an agent for institutional change. My hope is that by understanding validity as rhetorical, context specific, and centered on decisions about change, improved assessment practices and teaching will follow from increased sensitivity to language used and rhetorical choices students make. In other words, I hope teachers and writing administrators will begin to ask, “Are we making good decisions for the students at our institution? Are we moving past a focus on error and toward addressing disparities connected to difference (linguistic or otherwise)?” Such questions privilege an investigative way of thinking about building critical language awareness and rhetorical sophistication among student writers. Moreover, in this case teachers and administrators are pushing against tradition as a way of pulling toward a nuanced conception of justice or fairness in assessment.

Finally, although bound to validity, fairness remains a broad and shifting concept within the measurement and writing assessment communities where it is a concept related to testing conditions, score interpretation, and, to a lesser extent, consequence and opportunity to learn. In the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, fairness is defined as the minimization of “construct-irrelevant variance associated with individual characteristics and testing contexts that otherwise would compromise the validity of scores for some individuals” (219). One way of looking at fairness is that student engagement with the construct being measured should avoid reproducing biases that disadvantage
students. However, because race, language, and gender can serve as a means for reinforcing biases “stereotypically associated with particular subgroups” (55), fairness as the deletion of variance (or consideration of difference) does not quite capture a central dilemma of teaching that the push-pull dynamic makes present in HBCUs: how might difference be accounted for under definitions that emphasize construct-irrelevant variance and remain silent on consequence? How might we extend the process of validation to highlight the complexity of measuring multilingual or polyvocal writing?

John Rawls and Lani Guinier provide important insight here on the treatment of social justice as related to both fairness and opportunity. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls explains that “justice as fairness” requires a basic strategic move: When basic rights are found unequal, other positions require consideration. As he notes, favor is to be shown the groups whose “fixed natural characteristics” are disadvantaged by “the basic structure” in place (84–5). Lani Guinier questions this idea of a fixed group characteristics that lead to advantages for some by suggesting that fairness, or rather the limiting of disadvantage, stems not from the recognition of individual interest, but group interests (140). In *The Tyranny of Majority*, Guinier provides a lengthy conversation about representation, race, and rights in electoral voting politics. As she notes, the assumption that all things are equal privileges a narrow (perhaps willfully blind) view of social consequence (147). We may view Guinier’s position as both a critique and extension of Rawls’s discussion. Whereas Rawls frames advantage and disadvantage, or rather decisions about social justice as an outcome of ignorance or lack of awareness, Guinier highlights such a position as impossible because individuals and communities are always already negotiating within and from particular social dispositions and contexts that must be recognized when making decisions about disadvantage. Thus, justice as fairness requires a radically different view of what has come before, accompanied by structured questioning of the procedures used to maintain inequity. Drawing on Guinier, we might describe fairness in writing assessment as the consideration of alternative positions that limit disadvantage for marginalized groups because of a recognition of the importance of social context and a desire to address the needs of particular groups located in particular spaces at particular times. From this perspective, reliability, validity, and fairness are concepts that exist to serve the collective benefit of all groups and are informed by the histories that shape the spaces in which group interests converge.

Together, reliability, validity, and fairness can be tools central to institutional measurement practices that provide pathways for examining values embedded in writing assessment practices. A review of Howard University’s recent attempts to revise first-year writing highlights such pathways.
**Case Study: First-Year Writing at Howard University**

Informed by a long and proud legacy, Howard University’s mission is to combine a global and culturally relevant approach with rigorous academic professionalization:

Howard University, a culturally diverse, comprehensive, research intensive and historically Black private university, provides an educational experience of exceptional quality at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels to students of high academic standing and potential, with particular emphasis upon educational opportunities for Black students. Moreover, the University is dedicated to attracting and sustaining a cadre of faculty who are, through their teaching, research and service, committed to the development of distinguished, historically aware, and compassionate graduates and to the discovery of solutions to human problems in the United States and throughout the world. With an abiding interest in both domestic and international affairs, the University is committed to continuing to produce leaders for America and the global community.

That mission flows into many of Howard’s courses, including first-year writing. Howard, a four-year, private university, enrolls about 11,000 students each year. In the fall of 2014, Howard students were 90 percent Black or African American, 3.4 percent international, 1.9 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1.4 percent White, 1.3 percent Asian, 0.4 percent Latino, and 0.3 percent Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian. As of fall 2015, the first-year writing program at Howard enrolled approximately 1,600 students. Composition courses at Howard are largely delegated to writing faculty. The normal course load is four writing classes a semester. While a small portion of tenured and tenure-track faculty teach first-year writing courses, the bulk of first-year writing is taught by full-time non-tenure-track faculty (FTNTT). The instructors are considered full faculty members with voting rights and privileges. Much of the writing faculty, who are White, African American, Caribbean, and Indian American, comprises instructors with advanced degrees in literary studies, creative writing, and African American studies, as well as advanced graduate students. Faculty training includes two day-long workshops held twice a year and a series of mini workshops, scheduled throughout the semester, designed to discuss and facilitate conversations about the course curriculum and student learning. Graduate students who teach first-year writing attend the workshops for professional development purposes as well, but are also assigned to shadow senior faculty members for a semester before teaching their own composition courses.

Until recently, first-year writing comprised a two-course sequence that focused on expository writing (ENGW 102) and persuasive writing (ENGW 103), each course building student experiences with academic research writing. Both courses draw on an Afrocentric writing tradition with an eye toward
the development of academic literacies. This emphasis on African and African American writing traditions and academic literacy is probably best exemplified in the course overview found in the sample syllabi for the expository writing course, which builds on the views of James Baldwin and W. E. B. Du Bois to frame writing as both a cultural and practical experience. As the overview notes:

The mission of all writing courses in the Department of English at Howard University carry forward and transmit to you a liberating tradition in reading and writing skills. You may then use these skills in your and the world’s best interest. (Expository Writing and Literacy Studies 1)

ENGW 102 uses the textbook *Revelations: An Anthology of Expository Essays by and about Blacks*, which includes a variety of essays and excerpts by African American authors, spanning several decades of African American writing. As also outlined in the syllabus,

The course is designed to help students develop expository writing skills through critical thinking and reading and to lay the foundation for writing in Freshman English 103 and upper-level courses throughout the University and in meeting the writing demands of the 21st century global community. (Expository Writing and Literacy Studies 1)

As evident, ENGW 102 goes to great lengths to stress its alignment with a very traditional concept of first-year writing (pull) and its desire to develop global citizens who are able to make the power moves necessary for influencing the broader culture (push).

ENGW 103 allows faculty members to select from a range of composition textbooks and additional texts such as novels, *New Yorker* articles, and documentaries. The primary focus is developing student literacies regarding argumentative and research writing. Yet many of the readings present a broadened conception of argument and research. As outlined in the syllabus,

the course emphasizes argumentation and, as a tool in argumentation, the research process. Argumentation is a discourse that seeks to change attitudes or to bring about action. This course will enable students to argue effectively by stressing critical reading, logical thinking, research techniques, and an awareness of contemporary issues. (Persuasive Writing and Research 1)

Similar to ENGW 102, 103 presses along a similar push-pull dynamic. The course emphasizes traditional features of argumentative writing while simultaneously asking them to read and compose a variety of texts that violate the features of traditional research writing.

For both ENGW 102 and 103, the primary means of evaluation consist of formal essays written and graded by instructors, shorter writing assignments
usually graded as pass/fail, and tests or quizzes given on terms or skills exercises relevant to writing. In ENGW 102 teachers are asked to require a multimodal assignment and research essay toward the end of the semester. The multimodal assignments range from e-portfolios, to blogs, to poster-presentation, or some type of multimedia artifact. As the ENGW 102 sample syllabus states:

All students will compose a minimum of 4 essays, each of which will combine several modes of exposition. Students will complete a fifth major writing assignment that takes a different expository form (e.g., business letters, brochures, or poster presentation, etc.). (Expository 2)

ENGW 103 tends to focus on argumentative writing and formal documentation skills but progresses along a similar trajectory of essays, tests, and skill exercises that build toward a multimodal final assignment. As stressed in the sample syllabus, ENGW 103 is designed to

[p]repare students to promote and defend issues of concern, [. . . emphasize] argumentation and, as a tool in argumentation, the research process. Argumentation is a discourse that seeks to change attitudes or to bring about action. This course will enable students to argue effectively by stressing critical reading, logical thinking, research techniques, and an awareness of contemporary issues. (Persuasive 1)

In recent years, some faculty members have dabbled in an animated-argument festival where students are asked to rethink and develop an argumentative essay into a short animated distillation of their arguments.

Beginning in fall 2015, students were allowed to select from two different sequences to complete their first-year writing requirement (Table 1).¹

The new 104-105 course sequence, developed as way of reconceptualizing the writing course offerings, was designed over a number of weeks with several writing faculty members, the department chair, and the director of first-year writing (myself). We discussed the role of the courses and their objectives as an extension of the current course sequence but with an emphasis on critical language awareness and reflective writing. Through our discussions, we sought to recognize assumptions about monolingualism, white privilege, and other discriminatory attitudes embedded in constructed response tasks used in our courses. Yet, similar to the 102-103 course sequence, we did not entirely abandon an emphasis on form, structure, and evidence. In some ways this emphasis speaks to Howard’s tradition of combining creative cultural texts and projects with rather conservative goals of producing structured, argumentative, and researched writing.

In designing the 104-105 sequence, we took great steps to make concepts such as metacognition, openness, curiosity, and engagement explicit in the course.
The goal was to provide a space where students could conceptualize writing as a communal act, one that occurs across various academic and nonacademic spaces in ways that are valuable and require critical thought.

Together, the 102-103/104-105 sequence is bridged through the framework offered in *The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, which has been embraced by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project. Specifically, the *Framework*’s emphasis on interpersonal and intrapersonal domains mobilizes rhetoric to serve as means for building a vision of writing that moves beyond individual prowess and exposes the shifting nature of clarity, expertise, and correctness. Table 2 provides an overview of the objectives of these courses and their alignment.

Because the ENGW 105 course had not been taught at the time that this article was written, I focus on ENGW 104 for the remainder of my discussion.

**English 104: Writing, Literacy, and Discourse**

In ENGW 104, students read arguments from the field invested in language, diversity, and sociocultural concerns. There is no formal textbook required for the course; instead the students are provided with PDFs of journal articles that discuss composition, literacy, or discourse analysis from a culturally relevant perspective. Admittedly the focus remains rather too closely aligned with argumentation, but the goal is to build on student knowledge of various threshold concepts—constructing our own such as “Linguistic Pluralism: How do we value all of our languages?”; “Rhetorical Listening: What kinds of works are important to understanding cross-cultural dialogue?”; “Multiliteracies: What kinds of cultural literacies have been important to your growth?”; and “Multimodality: How have we poorly defined writing?” (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 12–13)—and to

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Encourage them to use that knowledge to think dynamically about what rhetoric and composition studies is as an institutional apparatus and a social practice.\(^2\)

The course includes a broad variety of constructed response tasks, which instructors are welcome to modify as they wish. In *Very like a Whale*, White and colleagues define a constructed response task as a genre of assignment that asks students to demonstrate specific abilities in relation to the writing construct. Table 3 illustrates a sample constructed-response task designed for ENGW 104 that engages the objective: *design and compose a variety of digital or multimedia compositions that forward an intellectual or professional argument*. Critical language

| Table 2. Sample of Traditional and New Course Objectives. |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Framework for Success in Post-secondary Writing** | **English 102 Traditional Objectives** | **English 103 Revised Objectives** | **English 104 New Objectives** |
| Rhetorical knowledge—the ability to analyze and act on understandings of audiences, purposes, and contexts in creating and comprehending texts | • reading with attention to ideas, structure, and style and recognize the ways that writers convey their ideas and explain what is difficult to understand | • reading and organizing information from periodicals, academic journals, research monographs, and social media as a means of developing a lifelong interest in research as well as national and global issues | • reading and composing in several genres to understand how genre conventions shape and are shaped by readers’ and writers’ practices and purposes |
| Critical thinking—the ability to analyze a situation or text and make thoughtful decisions based on that analysis, through writing, reading, and research | • responding critically to print and nonprint texts by summarizing, paraphrasing, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating the texts | • writing effective argumentative essays that contain valid evidence, avoiding logical fallacies, and refuting and/or accommodating opposing views | • responding to a variety of situations and contexts calling for purposeful shifts in voice, tone, level of formality, design, medium, and/or structure |
| Abilities to compose in multiple environments—from using traditional pen and paper to electronic technologies | • reinforcing writing and oral skills by integrating multimedia in the composing process | • designing and composing a variety of digital or multimedia compositions that forward your own intellectual or professional argument | |

*Note: Habits of mind (indicated in italics) are integrated with the writing goals, rather than working as stand-alone learning goals.*
awareness, a stated objective of ENGW 104, identified as, “students should be able to respond to a variety of linguistic contexts calling for purposeful shifts across voices, tones, level of formality, designs, mediums, and/or structures,” is incorporated within the description of the task.

The task itself evolved out of discussion about the Black Lives Matter movement and the visuals of protesters, arms raised, in the sight line of armed officers in body armor. While perspectives and politics noticeably differed, there was general agreement among writing instructors about the importance of social media in displaying these optics upon the public and for the types of stories these optics convey when strategically reorganized as memes and photo essays. The desire, thus, was to allow students to view creativity as a central component of critical writing and to do so through a task that asked them to organize, comment on, and imagine for themselves how narratives about racialized identities circulate within digital spaces.

| Task | Digital spaces have challenged conventional notions of academic writing. Given the importance of these spaces, everyone needs to be able to think dynamically about the digital platforms they engage. For this reason, you are asked to write a Storify essay that addresses a social issue of interest to you. To do this you will need to define for yourself “What is critical writing?” Undoubtedly you may also want to think about how digital practices such as memes, music, and blogs may serve as forms of evidence for the composition you design. Your narrative should include, at least, two academic sources, drawn from the course or from a peer-reviewed article gathered from the library resources available to you. |
| Reflective Questions | Can one measure proper attribution and citation in writing formats that borrow heavily from non-peer-reviewed sources, such as memes, music, and blogs? Can writing with too few sources still be considered critical? What responsibilities are most important for writers: to adhere to the conventions and expectations of their disciplines and professional communities or to address and persuade readers with the perspective that the writer values most? Rethink previous discussions about narrative writing and the ways organization is constructed by leaving some things out and building on other writings that shape one’s main point. Can writing ever be too neat? Too organized? |
| Format | Your narrative should include at least 750 words. The final version of your composition can be a published version of your paper from Storify or a link to your composition submitted to your professor. |
Regarding the format of the task, Howard writing instructors agreed that genre awareness for students is often cultivated through actual experimentation and discussion of possibility. As a result, students are asked to view this writing as a genre-blended practice, one that takes place across digital and social media sites in ways they can develop, in ways that suit their own interests and identities. The task presented in Table 3 presses for nonacademic artifacts as a way to encourage students to think about writing as a social practice engaged regularly within and outside of academic contexts, in different languages, and across platforms.

The description of the task remains general, though precise and clear in what the students are asked to do. Yet the categories of criteria for the rubric remain the same—Organization, Supporting Evidence, Rhetorical Strategies Employed, Language Control, and Grammar and Punctuation. Although instructors are able to adapt the rubric to fit the assignment as they see fit, the value and focus of the courses remain fairly static and focused on academic argumentative writing. As Todd Destiger highlights in “On the Ascendance of Argument,” argumentative writing remains the dominant form of writing privileged in most writing programs, often at the expense of creative variance in composing (18–19). The rubric reinforces this tradition of privileging argument in composition. This is a part of the ongoing push-pull in the course. In order for the push-pull metaphor to truly affect a broader conception of writing, faculty members must cultivate assessment tools, such as the course rubric, that resist traditional definitions of quality writing. Some of the suggestions made by me and other faculty members include shifting the categories of criteria to include concepts such as creativity, voice, or critical commentary. The categories alone are not the main issue. What I’ve found is that many of the categories hold narrow definitions of style, such as the sophisticated use of language and control that adds to the quality of a paper. Such definitions vaguely and narrowly define what style might mean and, from my perspective, intuitively frame style as something added to rather than shaping the clarity and interpretation of a composition. The next steps for us require clear discussions about the expectations and value of confirming a broader conception of writing beyond “the academic essay.”

Evaluating the English 104 Curriculum

Assessment of the ENGW 104 curriculum has included teacher feedback, class observation data, course grade data, and course evaluation data. Additional data remains to be collected on retention and other measures.

Based on teacher reports, the revised curriculum has been well received, though some elements of ENGW 104 have been identified for revision. Dur-
ing our end of the semester review, a number of questions and comments were posed that oscillated between traditional objectives and student interests. Many of the teachers found the composition-studies approach and readings selected valuable for the types of discussions about writing it elicited. For instance, one teacher commented on the way David Kirkland’s “The Skin We Ink: Tattoos, Literacy, and the New English Education,” helped students to broaden and rethink their positions on the value of certain types of writing. Kirkland’s article on tattoos as a valuable form of literacy registered with the students and aided their conception of writing as multimodal.

Other teachers questioned the request for academic sources within the Storify assignment highlighted in Table 3. For some of them, the request to use academic sources as well as the lack of familiarity with the digital platform seemed to layer and complicate an assignment designed to build on the student’s own familiarity with nonacademic, digital sources. One teacher requested outright that the assignment only require students use popular or digital sources, such as memes or tweets, in a manner similar to many of the blogs they already compose. Others preferred that the use of academic sources remain. What was central to much of the discussion was student reception of the assignments and readings.

In addition to data collected from teacher reports, I observed all of the teachers throughout the semester. I observed that students were invested in the readings and assignments because they were asked to engage in a variety of writing activities that incorporated narrative writing, tweeting, reflection on their majors, and social issues.

In addition to teacher feedback and class observation data, I have also collected course grade data and course evaluation data. In total, 767 students registered and attended ENGW 104. Of those students, 332 received As, 244 Bs, 72 Cs, 12 Ds, 60 Fs. Additionally, 48 students withdrew from the course and received no grade. In sum, approximately 85 percent of the students who completed the course passed, with 75 percent of those students receiving marks in the A or B range. At Howard, students must receive a C or higher in Freshman English to receive credit for the course, thus 72 students or 9 percent of the students who completed the course did not receive credit for ENGW 104. We were unable to account for the reasons for the 48 withdrawals as some students withdrew from the university altogether and others were unresponsive when emailed about their withdrawal.

Many of the course evaluations praised the challenging nature of the course and the readings. I paraphrase some of the comments that appeared across evaluations here:
• Students requested more blogging or multimedia forms of writing and fewer traditional academic essays or homework assignments requiring academic responses.
• Students complained of too much emphasis on the rubric and the conventions of writing.
• Students enjoyed the readings and class discussion.
• Students said they loved thinking of themselves as writers and having the authority to question their past courses.
• Students complained that the length of the assignment prompts added to some confusion about what was being asked of them.

Whether students enjoyed the course thoroughly or disliked the course (roughly 86 percent of the students who completed an evaluation enjoyed the course), they overwhelmingly believed they earned an A or B for the course. Much of this seems related to the amount of writing and effort expended for the class. In addition to the larger essay and multimodal assignments, students were required to keep a journal for the course and were required to complete two-page response writings each week. Instructors have the flexibility to connect these response writings to a particular reading discussed that week or to pose questions that require students to connect two or three readings previously discussed. The most numerous comments from student evaluations connect to previous concerns about the emphasis on traditional writing. As noted, the emphasis on traditional expository and argumentative writing still informs the language of the rubrics and to a lesser degree some of the language for the assignments (push-pull appears again). The fact that the students picked up on this highlights the need for faculty and writing program administrators to think about this as an assessment issue. In part, it is about the ways we read institutional objectives and become comfortable with a different way of defining quality writing. While we have taken steps, there are miles obviously ahead we must continue to travel.

As we continue to develop the ENGW 104 course, teacher and student input remains valuable, keeping an eye toward recognizing the tensions that produce conflicting positions about interpretation of the course objectives. Their input will be important as we move forward with program assessment. Traditionally the Howard Office of Institutional Assessment and Evaluation gathered and organized data from common essays and assignments. A common rubric was used to develop a report on freshman writing. The office has recently asked us to design and organize our own program assessment. In the next section, I explain how we will approach program assessment, drawing on the push-pull legacy and the revised foundational concepts of reliability, validity, and fairness.
THE LEGACY OF PUSH-PULL: IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING ASSESSMENT

If the goal of writing instruction is to aid writers in developing precision, accuracy, flexibility, clarity, and control of their writing across genres, audiences, and contexts, then the manner in which those things are taught and measured can undermine that goal when different cultural and institutional traditions are not placed in conversation with teacher experience and student aspirations. The push-pull history of HBCUs can inform writing assessment in powerful ways, effectively helping us rethink assumptions about race, language, and program assessment. Although Howard has a conservative tradition of academic writing, it also has been ahead of the game in the way it privileges alternative cultural literacies and analysis of social justice practices that heighten student awareness of power relations. What we have tried to do with ENGW 104 is build on that legacy in ways that broaden interpretations of critical writing beyond the academic essay. While our gestures may be modest, of bigger concern has been our ability to recognize monolingualism, white privilege assumptions, and other discriminatory attitudes embedded in constructed-response tasks used for writing instruction. In future work, our goal is to ensure that those values are included in program assessment.

To do the work of program assessment that honors the creative tension of push-pull attitudes toward race and language found at Howard, I propose that a push-pull approach to writing assessment should facilitate practices that

• invest in alternative composition histories that trouble discriminating attitudes toward linguistic and social differences while also carefully reflecting on student expectation and desire for concrete learning objectives that will benefit them professionally and socially;

• document student efforts toward organizing and applying a variety of academic and nonacademic literacies toward effective academic and nonacademic practices;

• engage teachers’ voices, historical and local, as invaluable resources for progressing the conversation on language and writing; and

• frame writing assessment as an ongoing dialogue among teachers, students, administrators and the broader public, and adopt rhetorically oriented validity practices that are contingent and inquire into the (un)equitable consequences and interests of historically silenced groups in the school or program.

Such program assessment needs foundational concepts of reliability, validity, and fairness that are attuned to the HBCU context. For example, a validation study at Howard should link program and classroom assessment, representing the means by which discussion of particular choices, tasks, and ideas is used to
improve decisions about how writing is assessed among teachers, students, and administrators and that leads to more equitable consequences for those structurally disadvantaged by previous writing assessments. One might begin with a series of surveys designed to assess teacher and student orientation toward language use and cultural perspectives on writing. At Howard, what we have developed are short narrative surveys requesting some explanation of how teachers and students view writing after the 104-105 sequence. The surveys will be used in future workshop sessions to discuss and to think extensively about changes we may make to particular constructed response tasks or the course rubric.

Fairness, as the consideration of the alternative positions and needs of the student bodies that sit before us, becomes a concept necessary to expose and challenge some of the embedded traditions of HBCU writing programs in general. When coupled with the push-pull concept, fairness becomes a resource for interrogating the invisible assumptions shaping our assessment tools. At the heart of the choices we will make about course rubrics, or about how we define quality writing, must be a consideration for the types of writing, writ broadly, that we value, that our students value, and that balance the social justice orientation of the university and its intellectual expectations as well.

In the end, in many ways Howard’s focus on rigor connected to an emphasis on form and structure reaffirms a hierarchy in which white-dominant discourse remains the ideal standard of valued writing. As with Melvin Tolson’s students, many of Howard’s students value this emphasis. Yet, as I have suggested, fairness, reliability, and validity expanded in certain ways can be used to rethink the relationship between teacher knowledge, program alignment, student investment, and institutional legacy in ways that can be useful for understanding and researching assessment at HBCUs and other unique academic spaces. If, as Mya Poe suggests, “assessment should be transformative, and it should transform us—as researchers, teachers, and administrators—as much as it transforms our students’ learning and writing” (271), it becomes important, as she also notes to begin to bring in theories of race, culture, and language into discussions of assessment at the level of curriculum design and constructed response tasks that will improve our understanding of what is at stake for students locally, culturally, and institutionally.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to give a hearty thank you to the anonymous reviewers for this article and the editors of this issue for their patience, timely questions, and helpful suggestions. The author would also like to give a special thank you to Norbert Elliot for providing invaluable resources, unending encouragement, and useful feedback for several versions of this article.
ENDNOTES

1. Students are traditionally placed into ENGW 102/103 courses no matter their SAT scores or written aptitude. Students are placed into ENGW 104 based on SAT score and a writing sample. Based on their own comfort with their writing ability, students can opt for the traditional sequence in lieu of the ENGW 104 course. Honors students can opt for Honors Freshman English, which is designed and taught by literature faculty with the goal of emphasizing close reading and literary analysis, or they can choose 104. The goal of the modified placement process is to provide a broader view of writing by offering options to students.

2. The threshold concepts listed here were organized and developed as units of inquiry for the new course sequence drawing on Adler-Kassner and Wardle’s discussion of threshold concepts in Naming What We Know.

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“Mission, Vision, & Core Values.” *About Howard*. Howard University, www2.howard.edu/about/mission-vision


