What is the College Section, anyway?

My titular question may seem to answer itself. After all the College Section is just that: it is the section of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) that coalesces around the interests of college/post-secondary English faculty. And yet, this does not precisely answer the question for most of its members. If asked what was the scholarly focus of another NCTE group, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), for example, a respondent in writing studies might say something about writing and rhetorical studies defined relatively broadly and certainly mention its journal *College Composition and Communication* (*CCC*). Similarly, specialists in English education would be able to articulate the scholarly focus for the newly renamed English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE) and their journal, *English Education* (*EE*). Other NCTE members could also easily name the scholarly identities associated with the Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Sections, and their associated journals. However, with active college-level NCTE groups such as CCCC, ELATE, and the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA), what is the scholarly focus of NCTE’s College Section?

By contrast, who is included in NCTE’s College Section is confusing for many NCTE members. Most College Section members do not realize they are members of the College Section. In some cases, they don’t even realize there is a College Section. Instead, they primarily associate with a conference or journal.
that is part of NCTE like CCCC/CCC, ELATE/EE, TYCA/Teaching English in the Two-Year College (TETYC) and Research in the Teaching of English (RTE). As College Section Chair, I have spent the past year and a half trying to figure out what we, the College Section, do in NCTE. College faculty who do writing studies are members of CCCC (and/or the Council of Writing Program Administrators, CWPA). College faculty who do rhetorical studies are members of the Rhetorical Society of America (RSA) and/or CCCC. College faculty who do applied linguistics and teaching English as an additional language are members of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). College faculty who do literature are members of the Modern Language Association (MLA). And those who do, especially, teach all of this in the first two years of college are members of TYCA. And since I'm confident many of you reading this are members of multiple organizations, I know there are overlaps. The point is members of those other organizations primarily identify with these specializations and organizational alignments. What do the members of NCTE’s College Section do as college faculty?

As a member of NCTE’s College Section Steering Committee (CSSC), I have helped organize college presentations, panels, and events at the NCTE Annual Convention. I work with other CSSC members to put together panels for MLA and identify the annual Richard Ohmann Award winner for the best article in College English. This, however, is the majority of the work of the CSSC. As chair, I had the opportunity to represent the NCTE College Section as the acting delegate to the 2019 annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). ACLS is an alliance of seventy-five scholarly organizations from across the disciplines. Besides being a place where the leaders of those organizations can meet to learn from one another, ACLS functions as a clearinghouse for scholarship money. Not that many readers of CE are eligible for this funding, however: although ACLS has expanded their grant and fellowship opportunities to account for the “public humanities” with “public fellows” programs, and the organization has started a Community College Fellows program, they generally do not support teaching initiatives. ELATE scholars, for example, generally would not get funded within an ACLS program. ACLS would only provide funding to those CCCC scholars not focusing on pedagogical research. TYCA members would be competitive for ACLS’s new Community College Fellows program because it allows for pedagogical projects but likely not its other grant programs.

This description of ACLS may feel like a critique, yet, my aim is not to denigrate ACLS but to underscore the need for the work that NCTE can do in supporting pedagogically focused research. I understand how difficult it is to argue for funding for humanistic scholarship, and I know it is critically important
From the College Section Chair

However, acknowledging ACLS’s focus on humanistic scholarship that is not pedagogical emphatically reminds me of both my rhetorical space as chair of NCTE’s College Section and professional position as a writing studies scholar who specializes in digital pedagogies. In both identities, I fall through the cracks of the ACLS program. My problem is not unique, however: it can be difficult to find significant funding for college-level pedagogical projects because writing studies either does not count as “the humanities” (while looking at grants for the National Endowment for the Humanities) or, with our scholarly history in the humanities, we are not as competitive with some of the empirical methodological rigor of education scholars. As a scholar, I did not quite fit with ACLS in the same way that I struggled to articulate the scholarly focus of NCTE’s College Section and how that fits, or not, as an ACLS society member.

However, in my role as chair, chances to advocate to address this gap are limited, for the scope of my service in the position has been tied to the duties I describe here. If, as an organizing body within NCTE, the College Section wanted to be truly representative of all of the college-level groups within NCTE, representatives from CCCC and ELATE would sit in on the College Section Steering Committee meetings; instead, they sit in on NCTE’s Executive Committee. The only College Section group that regularly sits in on the College Section meeting is the TYCA chair, even though the CSSC meeting conflicts with TYCA’s Executive Committee meeting, so the chair is unavailable to attend. As it is currently organized, then, the College Section does not officially represent the college members and groups within NCTE. I’ll conclude here, then, by describing the kinds of changes that would make the College Section truly representative of the shared concerns that give us cohesion as a community.

As the outgoing chair of NCTE’s College Section, I propose that the College Section embrace the T in NCTE. Why not flip the scholar-teacher designation in College English’s description to teacher-scholar? This emphasis would not only give focus to the College Section members for what they are doing, it might better align the relationships and collaborative projects between the Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Sections. Why not embrace the scholarship of teaching and learning, or action research, as what the teachers of English in NCTE’s College Section do as their form of scholarship and their scholarly identity as associated with NCTE’s College Section? Why not use teaching English at the college level as the bridge to not only collaborate across Elementary, Middle, and Secondary Sections of NCTE, but to continue to strengthen relationships (many of which already focus on teaching) with sister organizations like CWPA, RSA, MLA, and TESOL? We might even use the scholarship of teaching to further strengthen relationships with members from organizations like...
National Education Association (NEA) or International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE).

I know the focused work of teacher-scholars is already going on across all the organizations listed in this essay. What I’m proposing is that college members of NCTE acknowledge that NCTE is an organization dedicated to teachers, and as such, the College Section should embrace, specialize, and focus on that aspect. Some of this work has already begun. For example, at both the 2018 and 2019 NCTE Annual Conventions, the College strand was designed to focus on teaching and learning at the college level. In 2018, Roni Dean-Burren, a college faculty member from Houston, presented on student and local engagement. She then participated in the follow-up workshop-style activity. This November, Amanda Licastro will be presenting on using virtual reality (VR) to help teach empathy. Again, after her talk, she will facilitate a workshop that allows participants to experience VR and start imagining ways to incorporate VR into their classrooms. In short, over the past two years the College Section Steering Committee has tried to put the focus on college teaching while at NCTE’s Annual Convention. So too, current editor of College English, Melissa Ianetta, has shifted to include an emphasis on teacher-scholars when she started the AND GLADLY TEACH column. But there is still so much more to be done if we are to truly gather around our shared interests and concerns.

There was a point when I asked myself whether or not NCTE needed the College Section and College Section Steering Committee to do the work of the organization. I wondered if the reason the College Section was less well-known was because it was competing with the various other related scholarly organizations, both internal and external to NCTE. I’ve come full circle and now believe that instead of trying to compete with CCCC, TYCA, CWPA, RSA, MLA, and TESOL, I hope that NCTE’s College Section becomes the collaborative ground for projects about teaching English, defined broadly, at the college level.