The Rhetoric* of Writing Assessment

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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Abstract

The Rhetoric* of Writing Assessment uses strategic variations of rhetorical theory to reimagine writing assessment’s complicated disciplinary past and rethink its foundational concepts through its multifaceted rhetorical situatedness. Although scholars such as Bob Broad, Brian Huot, Patricia Lynne, Norbert Elliot, Edward M. White, and Kathleen Blake Yancey have long understood assessment as a rhetorically rich concept, this dissertation extends previous conceptions of writing assessment as a rhetorical act by adopting a generative theoretical framework that approaches writing assessment as a dynamic and relational rhetorical process influenced by a whole host of suasive forces. Situated at the theoretical crossroads of rhetoric and writing studies, this study relies on generative use of rhetorical theory and interpretive forecasting to frame the integrated analyses in each body chapter. In examining the rhetorical history of writing assessment as a field of study, the rhetorical circulation of writing assessment discourse, and the rhetorical relations between individuals and institutions, it articulates the complex rhetoricity of writing assessment as a theoretical construct and field of study. Through this rhetorical recuperation, the author argues that understanding the representations of writing assessment in and across discursive spheres—including technical and the public spheres—is a promising means of widening the critical aperture for writing assessment theory. This study is in harmony with the social justice turn in writing assessment theory, complements the public turn in rhetoric and composition, and contributes to broader academic conversations on the present challenges facing higher education.
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Introduction

This dissertation is about the way writing assessment is talked about, the way this talk affects assessment practices, and the way it affects those who do assessment work. The focus of this examination is on writing assessment as a field of study with histories, theoretical paradigms, research methodologies, everyday practices, and rhetorical tendencies that are at times harmonious and at times discordant. The thread that ties this dissertation together is one central question: what might we see if we look at the field of writing assessment through a renewed sense of rhetoric that considers multifaceted and dynamic processes of rhetoricity rather than isolated rhetorical acts?

Rhetoric, as I define it, is a confluence of suasive forces that are constitutive in nature and affect probabilistic thinking in contingent situations. As I explain in this introduction, I adopt this admittedly broad definition to develop a generative theoretical framework that borrows and blends rhetorical theories in ways that enlarge the scope of rhetoric in order to enable critical examination of the rhetoricity of writing assessment more broadly than previous studies. Although localism is the most prominent tenet of contemporary writing assessment theory and practice, this dissertation is premised on the claim that writing assessment as an academic field is rhetorical in order to resist tendencies toward pragmatism and hyper-localism that may inadvertently stymie the development of writing assessment theory.

The Rhetoric* of Writing Assessment

I am not the first scholar to examine writing assessment through a lens attuned to issues of language and rhetoric. Edward White discusses the role of language in defining
our work to outsiders and to ourselves; Brian Huot argues that doing writing assessment requires a rhetorical framework; Bob Broad advocates using discussion and deliberation to help articulate our values; and, Peggy O’Neill, Cindy Moore, and Huot describe the work of assessment as a rhetorical act involving consideration of exigency, to name several key ways others have discussed writing assessment as being somehow rhetorical. This dissertation is indebted to the seminal work of these scholars who laid the foundation of writing assessment theory and in dialogue with other contemporary writing assessment scholarship. However, my approach differs because I am interested in developing an overarching critical perspective to inform my use of various rhetorical theories suited to the study of the persuasive and material effects of writing assessment discourse. I call this the rhetoric* of writing assessment.

Readers are likely curious about that asterisk; allow me to explain. I do not use this symbol to call out a footnote or to denote a correction to a misstatement or misspelling. Rather, the asterisk is used here as a wildcard symbol. Such symbols can be used when searching within databases or search engines to widen a search by retrieving variations of a distinctive word root. For example, rac* would include variations such as race, racial, racism, racist, racialization, and racialized. The purpose of this study is to widen the scope of writing assessment theory by dilating our understanding of rhetoric in a way that enables agile use of rhetorical theory to study writing assessment discourse. I use rhetoric* to note my strategic use of variations of rhetorical theory to rethink writing assessment’s foundational assumptions and language practices. Such a generative theoretical framework allows me to attend to everything from the rhetoricity of writing as a theoretical construct, to the rhetorical histories of writing assessment as a field of study,
the rhetorical circulation of core writing assessment concepts, and (last but not least) to
the rhetorical relations between institutions (by institutions I mean the traditional notion
of brick-and-mortar institutions of higher education as well as for-profit testing
companies like Educational Testing Service and the College Board, which are just as
powerful, but perhaps not as well understood as rhetorically powerful institutions).

I study writing assessment from a rhetorical perspective because I have long
believed that writing assessment is, has always been, and will always be rhetorical. When
first learning about the field of rhetoric and composition as part of my preliminary
graduate training in 2007, I was introduced to an explosion of writing assessment
scholarship from the early 2000s that considered rhetorical elements of writing
assessment. As a member of the first generation of PhDs to be trained almost exclusively
by mentors with degree emphases in rhetoric and composition (as opposed to literature or
related fields in English Studies), I find myself entering the field at an exciting time in
terms of the state of the discipline and the state of sub-specialties united under the banner
of rhetoric and composition. In the wake of scholarship advancing writing assessment
theory in new directions—including Huot’s *What We Really Value*, Broad’s *What Really
Matters*, Patricia Lynne’s *Coming to Terms*, and Norbert Elliot’s *On a Scale*, to name but
a handful of the groundbreaking works of writing assessment scholarship that came out in
the first five years of the twenty-first century—I stumbled upon writing assessment at a
theoretically dynamic moment.

Yet, as I looked around the large state university system where I began my
graduate training, I saw the same assessment practices used for the last quarter century or
longer with little to no changes. I looked for the paradigm shift in action and simply did
not see it. I wanted to know why. Fast forward four years, and this curiosity remained unsatisfied even as my understanding of writing assessment theory and practice deepened. The tenor of my questions, however, began to shift; my line of inquiry took a rhetorical bent and I began to posit that the disconnect between theory and practice might be related to how we talk about writing assessment. I also began to wonder if rhetoric might be the way to bridge this divide.

My framework melds rhetorical theories to examine particular discourse objects related to writing assessment. Specifically, each chapter uses a different theory to examine a discourse object or set of objects. I have purposefully cast a wide analytical net because there is an acute need for more theoretical work in writing assessment. Assessment methods often do not align with our central principles in rhetoric and composition and almost all iterations of writing assessment theory remain somehow delimited to core educational measurement concepts of validity and reliability. Given this theoretical tethering to educational measurement, efforts to theoretically transform writing assessment of attempt to exploit the latitude available in application of theory by proposing new methods. Yet, such focus on practice has unintentionally hamstrung theory. This project is motivated by this disequilibrium; I endeavored to rhetorically study writing assessment in ways that would have theoretical import. The result is a dissertation bookended by theoretical chapters that deal with writing assessment discourse. As counterparts to the theoretical aims of chapters one and five, chapters two, three, and four consist of theoretically-informed analyses of specific discourse objects.

Contemporary writing assessment is experiencing a moment of historical and rhetorical opportunity, one in which scholars can begin to rethink our fundamental goals.
in light of the development of writing assessment theory and practice. Much like how scholars leveraged hard-fought disciplinary authority within English Studies to enable a fast-paced theoretical evolution of rhetoric and composition in the 1990s that resulted in a wealth of ideologies about and methods for teaching composition, writing assessment has reached a historical moment wherein we have opportunity to reconsider the fundamental goals of our collective project.

An initial step towards understanding the rhetoricity of writing assessment in this historical moment is to examine its disciplinary status. My exploration of writing assessment’s disciplinarity in the next section of this introduction is informed by a progression of thought about disciplines that is traceable between Stephen North, James Berlin, and Steven Mailloux, who each offer different criteria for disciplinarity. This discussion of writing assessment’s disciplinarity is followed by an overview of each body chapter in this dissertation.

Writing Assessment as a Quasi-Discipline

With conceptual and methodological origins in the educational and psychological measurement community, but most commonly recognized as a disciplinary daughter of rhetoric and composition, writing assessment is a field of study ripe with tension and anxiety about its disciplinary status. In a 2011 Assessing Writing article, Nadia Behizadeh and George Engelhard Jr. go as far as to claim “that a new discipline of writing assessment has emerged” (189). Although most scholars and practitioners involved in writing assessment would readily agree that it is a site of theoretical and practical convergence between the educational measurement and rhetoric and composition
communities, these same specialists would also likely be skeptical of Behizadeh and Engelhard’s proclamation that writing assessment should be understood as an emergent discipline. Whether writing assessment is firmly rooted in a new paradigm (as Huot, Broad, Lynne, and others suggest) or is indeed a new discipline (as Behizadeh and Engelhard contend), delimiting the characteristics of writing assessment as an academic field of study is an important first step to understanding its disciplinary status.

To better understand the field of writing assessment and its disciplinary status, it is helpful to consider North’s assertion that research practices shape a discipline. North contends that research practices shape a discipline and identifies three “methodological communities” within rhetoric and composition—scholars, researchers, and practitioners—that utilize particular “modes of inquiry” to produce new knowledge (1). He further subdivides the first two communities into additional categories; the scholarly community is comprised of historians, philosophers, and critics while the research community includes experimentalists, clinicians, formalists, and ethnographers. He argues that rhetoric and composition is a community united by inquiry, but his taxonomy of research methods and call for more consensus and cohesion is not without criticism. Berlin, for example, posits that a discipline can exist with little or no methodological consensus; in fact, Berlin’s taxonomy of the three epistemic paradigms that have risen to prominence in rhetoric and composition—the objective, the subjective, and the transactional—are each “rhetorical systems” with divergent “epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality, the nature of the knower, and the rules governing the discovery and communication of the known” (4).
The progression between North’s and Berlin’s conceptions of rhetoric and composition as a discipline reflects a progression mirrored in writing assessment’s development as a field of study. North helps us understand why it can be difficult to discern a shared theoretical orientation in writing assessment when theories have been developed by scholars from both the educational measurement and rhetoric and composition communities, and Berlin’s articulation of parallel paradigms assists us in recognizing disciplinarity amidst what seems to be “a variety of incompatible systems” within writing assessment (Berlin 3). Although North’s and Berlin’s conceptions adeptly describe academic fields of study as means of creating and disseminating knowledge that are distinguishable from other fields, they both fail to explicitly acknowledge the important function of interdisciplinary situatedness.

In Disciplinary Identities, Mailloux pays special attention to situatedness by illuminating the “rhetorical contexts where disciplinary identities are established and reinforced” (2). Mailloux’s relational model serves his purpose of articulating the parallel histories of English, speech, and composition as closely related disciplines within language arts, but it also helps us understand writing assessment from a disciplinary perspective. Mailloux presents a three-dimensional model for locating an academic discipline that includes three distinct axes: one, disciplinary practices, theories, and traditions; two, field boundaries and boundary crossing through interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work; and, three, cultural sites such as material institutions and public spheres (2).

Writing assessment may not have the consensus about modes of inquiry emphasized in North’s taxonomy nor the epistemological awareness emphasized by
Berlin, but it does have the rhetorical contexts described by Mailloux. However, these rhetorical contexts of writing assessment are only visible if we apply my sense of rhetoric as relational. In terms of disciplinary practices, theories, and traditions, we can consider the fact that scholarship on writing assessment as a subfield of rhetoric and composition has increased dramatically. Writing assessment literature now appears in the form of dozens of books, two specialized journals (Assessing Writing and Journal of Writing Assessment), and articles in journals in English studies including College English, Research in the Teaching of English, English Journal, College Composition and Communication, and WPA: The Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators.

Mailloux’s notions of boundary contestation and crossing pairs especially well with my dynamic sense of rhetoric. As chapter two will explain in more depth, writing assessment has always been transdisciplinary because of its origin in educational measurement and psychology and its relevance to the work of rhetoric and composition. Although writing assessment’s field boundaries are at times murky, interdisciplinary collections such as White, William Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri’s Assessment of Writing: Politics, Policies, Practices and Elliot and Les Perelman’s edited collection Writing Assessment in the 21st Century: Essays in Honor of Edward M. White demonstrate disciplinary identities being constructed, reflected, and contested in writing assessment scholarship. Even if theoretical differences persist, measurement specialists and writing specialists have increasingly found common ground in the construct of writing assessment. Such theories may be operationalize assessment, but the goals remain connected.
Mailloux’s last axis involving cultural sites such as material institutions and public spheres also illuminates writing assessment’s nature as an academic field of study. Disciplinary identities are very often at stake in writing assessment scholarship because assessment encapsulates, quantifies, and communicates what teachers do and how well they are doing it. In short, writing assessment is often the public face of rhetoric and composition because assessments are the means by which our work is rendered for increasingly broad institutional and public audiences. Public perception of college literacy instruction is understood and evaluated through the language of assessment. As Huot explains, writing assessment has “evolved into an intellectual and public site in which scholarship is conceived and implemented by people from various disciplines and subdisciplines” (Re)articulating 21). Writing assessment is both increasingly specialized and of perennial public interest.

Although the lack of methodological consensus, consistent gaps between the application of writing assessment theory and writing assessment practices, and the interdisciplinary tensions regarding writing assessment are among the reasons it may not be an emergent discipline as Behizadeh and Engelhard argue, writing assessment does appear to qualify as an academic discipline in many of the ways discussed by North, Berlin, and Mailloux. I settle on the description of writing assessment as a quasi-discipline because it is an area of knowledge and practice that is taught and researched at the university level, with robust theories, dedicated scholarly publication venues, interdisciplinary situatedness, institutional and public import, and emerging consensus on best practices.
Understanding writing assessment as a quasi-discipline opens up the possibility to understand multiple dimensions of its rhetoricity and address questions about the effects of our language practices. As an ideological structure, a discipline can shape individuals through processes of professionalization and the cultivation of particular attitudes and orientations. However, these rhetorical contexts of writing assessment are only visible if we apply my sense of rhetoric as relational. One emergent rhetorical context is the social justice turn in writing assessment.

**Social Justice and Writing Assessment**

Social justice is generally associated with the idea that all individuals should have equitable social opportunities, and most theories of social justice are undergirded by the belief that individuals have equal claims to basic liberties and that some regulation of inequalities is to insure advantages to the most vulnerable populations. Rhetoric and composition has always had an undercurrent of social justice, perhaps do to our own institutional marginalization within the academy and perhaps because the American phenomenon of college-level writing courses have long been inflected with egalitarian values.

Teaching academic writing is a way of operationalize these egalitarian values. Because writing is not mechanical and transparent, but interpretive, learning to be a successful academic writer is about more than learning to write error-free prose. Conventions differ from academic context to academic context and students need rhetorical agility to compose successfully in these various contexts. Some students come to college with preparation for discourse community code-switching; others do not. First-
year writing can be a way of democratizing higher education. So too, can writing assessment.

As a quasi-discipline, writing assessment has reached a moment wherein values have been brought back to the forefront of our discussions about the future of the discipline. I see a synergistic connection between the development of writing assessment as a rhetorical process and the very recent social justice turn in writing assessment theory. This dissertation endeavors to understand the rhetoricity of writing assessment in this historical moment by examining the persuasive effects of language practices in various scenes including the historical scene of its disciplinary development, its present professional technical and professional rhetorical scenes as a quasi-discipline closely related to rhetoric and composition, and its role within a public scene dominated by concerns about literacy standards in higher education. As I explain in the following section, each chapter of this dissertation uses a generative blend of rhetorical theories to explore these scenes in more detail in order to illuminate how writing assessment functions rhetorically in this important disciplinary moment.

Chapter Overview

As a non-teleological investigation of the rhetoricity of writing assessment, this project necessarily moves back and forth between macro and micro-scales and at times addresses multiple levels of discourse within one chapter. In chapter one I argue that writing assessment is, and has always been, rhetorical and further contend that historically understanding its rhetoricity is crucial for literacy educators because writing assessment functions as an ideological link between factual claims about literacy and
public deliberations about education policy and practice. To make this argument, I build upon Kathleen Blake Yancey’s 1999 article “Looking Back as We Look Forward,” which historicizes writing assessment using a wave metaphor. I illuminate the parallel evolution of the dominant methods of writing assessment and the rhetorical practices used to justify those methods in order to create a rhetorical history of writing assessment. I also extend Yancey’s wave metaphor by proposing a unifying framework for an emergent fourth wave of writing assessment that is rhetorically conscious, innately activist, and guided by relational notions of rhetoric.

Chapter two examines the persuasive effects of validity, a foundational measurement principle whose ubiquity in writing assessment is unparalleled, on a similarly large scale. I revisit the great validity debate through the lens of dramatism, which allows me to consider not what validity is, but, rather, what validity does rhetorically. My rhetorical inquiry into the persuasive effects of validity discourse is guided by Kenneth Burke’s theory of language as symbolic action and John Sloop’s method of rhetorical discourse analysis and articulates validity as a dynamic symbol rather than static and objective methodological concept. Examining the discursive practices surrounding validity helps us understand how discourse shapes individuals’ actions and attitudes and conditions certain habits of behavior. Furthermore, understanding validity as a complex symbol helps illuminate the ways it is deployed as an attempt to standardize social science practices that by definition must evolve reflexively to ever-changing cultural contexts.

Building from recent institutional critiques to analyze the professional subjectivities of writing program administrators (WPAs) (Porter et al.; Bousquet;
Strickland), chapter three explore how discursive relationships are drawn between knowledge and power in ways that delimit the agency of professionals in rhetoric and composition. Using White’s narrative of the 1971 English faculty protest of equivalency testing in the California State University system as an example of the way the referential frameworks of disciplinary narratives may obscure our consciousness about our labor practices, this chapter uses Michel Foucault’s theory of subjectivization to analyze how socio-economic changes in higher education work in tandem with political economic rationalities of neoliberalism. Through this analysis I argue that the field of writing assessment is informed by a cluster of rationalities that form a neoliberal unconscious that prioritizes managerial values in order to prescribe standards for professional behavior that ensure writing assessment labor serves the political economic agenda of the contemporary university.

Chapter four uses two tools from argumentation theory—topoi (or culturally shared commonplace arguments) and stasis theory (a series of questions to identify points at which lines of reasoning diverge)—to study how accountability generates multiple, even conflicting, commonplaces about education and assessment in the public and technical spheres. Grounded in analysis of public and professional responses to Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s 2011 book, Academically Adrift, which uses standard assessments of learning (including several writing tasks) to make claims about limited student learning in the first two years of college, this chapter identifies stasis theory as one potential way to understand why arguments informed by professional expertise that are efficacious in the technical sphere might unintentionally dismiss the most pressing exigencies in the public sphere, thus alienating public audiences. I conclude this chapter
by advocating rhetorical strategies for ameliorating the argumentative dissonance created by accountability-based arguments such as a new guiding ideography.

In chapter five, I adopt ethos as a non-teleological means of looking at the past and imagining potential futures for the field of writing assessment. I use ethos as a conceptual basis for synergistically connecting writing assessment’s past to the very recent social justice turn in writing assessment theory. Using a spatial metaphor for ethos derived from the translation of ethos as a dwelling place, I articulate a new ethos for writing assessment that reimagines its complicated disciplinary past, rethinks its foundational concepts, recontextualizes its foundational historical narratives, recognizes the circulatory nature of writing assessment discourse, and (most importantly) attunes itself to social justice goals. I end by presenting four interconnected propositions in the service of building this new ethos for the scholarly field of writing assessment: one, continuing to cultivate an institutionally recognized identity for writing assessment; two, embracing rhetoric and composition’s recent turn toward advocacy and activism; three, promoting writing assessment as a vehicle for social justice; and four, revising graduate-level WPA training to include training in writing assessment that is guided by a new metaphor of WPA-as-advocate.

Together, these propositions address the primary goal of this dissertation—to understand the rhetoricity of writing assessment—and unite the findings from my analysis chapters in a way suggests a theoretically informed path forward for future scholars of writing assessment. Although rhetorical understandings of writing assessment have been offered before, they have not been explored from this perspective or to this
level of depth. In short, the generative lens I call the rhetoric* of writing assessment provides:

- a distinction between rhetorical acts of writing assessment practice and rhetorical processes of writing assessment theory and discourse;
- a rhetorical history of writing assessment as a quasi-discipline;
- analysis of a handful of the many rhetorical relationships between individuals and institutions by whom and within which the work of writing assessment work occurs;
- the first extended examination of writing assessment discourse’s rhetorical situatedness.

This study is attuned to the philosophical commitments expressed in the emerging social justice turn in writing assessment theory and complements the broader public turn in rhetoric and composition. However, I also hope to contribute to broader scholarly and public conversations about the tremendous challenges facing higher education. We have much work to do, and this dissertation is intended to add new tools to the theoretical toolbox for writing assessment scholars. Use them and improve upon them as you wish.
Chapter One

Rhetorical Waves and The Rising Tide of Fourth Wave Writing Assessment

[It’s] only recently that assessment was seen as a knowledge-making endeavor. Which raises a good question: what (else) might we learn from writing assessment? And how would we learn? Underlying these concerns is a particular construct of writing assessment itself: as a rhetorical act that is both humane and ethical. In itself, that understanding of writing assessment is perhaps the most significant change in the last 50 years. (Kathleen Blake Yancey, 1999).

[W]e need not panic as the house of foundationalism crumbles before our eyes. For once we have dispensed with foundationalism we will rely on what we have, in fact, always relied upon: persuading one another through a process of disputing conflicting truth claims and negotiating contingent, communally sanctioned truths through discourse. In other words, we will rely on rhetoric. (Broad Broad and Michael Boyd, 2005).

In her 1999 article historicizing writing assessment, Kathleen B. Yancey argues that writing assessment at the dawn of the twenty-first century is constructed as a rhetorical act that reflects our disciplinary understandings of language, literacy, and the teaching of writing. She identifies this understanding as perhaps the most important development since post-secondary writing assessment’s emergence as a phenomenon in American higher education in the mid-twentieth century. When Yancey discusses writing assessment as a rhetorical act, she means assessment should ideally be purposeful, contextual, and ethical because it is “a shaper of students” and a “means of understanding the effects of such shaping” (“Looking” 498). I believe Yancey is right: writing assessment is rhetorical and this understanding is profoundly significant. However, in Yancey’s vision of assessment as a rhetorical act, she frames it within certain bounds as an act performed in response to certain exigencies. Although this is true in many cases, I propose we consider writing assessment as a rhetorical process...
rather than a rhetorical act. The rhetorical process of writing assessment is relational but not contained within a bounded rhetorical situation typically associated with rhetorical acts motivated by exigencies, and can be studied both synchronically and diachronically with consideration of the effects of a whole host of complex suasive forces.

In this chapter, I argue that writing assessment has always been a rhetorical process and that understanding its rhetoricity is crucial for literacy educators because writing assessment functions as an ideological link between factual claims about literacy and public deliberations about educational policy. The persuasive effects of rhetorical acts of writing assessment can be seen in many post-secondary contexts. For example, a placement exam for a university writing program not only evaluates student writing ability but also affirms the need for different levels of first-year writing and shapes the curriculum of those courses, affects faculty labor practices, and presents an indelible first-impression of college-level writing to incoming students. We could even consider writing assessment (especially pre-enrollment placement practices) as an instance of the genre of deliberative rhetoric because it is addressed to an audience who must make a judgment about what future actions should be pursued and which should be avoided, thus residing in rhetoric’s “domain of probable knowledge” (Goodnight 198). However, writing assessment is not only a rhetorical act in this productive sense, but also a mode of inquiry. As Bob Broad and Michael Boyd remind us in the epigraph to this chapter, Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) and English faculty responsible for writing assessment on college campuses have always relied on modes of inquiry and invention to craft arguments that negotiate contingent truths and consider not only probable knowledge, but possible knowledge. Writing assessment often serves as the rhetorical
link between facts and claims about literacy; it is an ideological pivot point for arguments ranging from pedagogical justifications to methodological rationales to proclamations about the purpose of education.

This dual function as a form of deliberative argument and a mode of rhetorical inquiry informs my understanding of writing assessment as a rhetorical process of defining and valuing elements of literacy education and articulating the purpose of education. In this way, writing assessment serves a broader civic purpose as a cornerstone of rhetorical practice (T. Miller). The imbrications of these two ideological structures—rhetoric and writing assessment—shape our perceptions, our understandings of why the world is the way it is, and our decisions about what we should continue doing or do differently in the future. As such, they warrant critical attention.

I build upon Yancey’s history in two ways: first, I write a rhetorical history of writing assessment to illuminate the parallel evolution of the dominant practices of writing assessment and the rhetoric used to justify those practices; and, second, I extend her wave metaphor by proposing a unifying framework for an emergent fourth wave of writing assessment that is rhetorically conscious, advocacy-based, and guided by a relational notion of rhetoric. Specifically, I demonstrate how the progression of writing assessment practices and theory from 1950-1999 mirrors an evolution of writing assessment rhetoric guided by shifting conceptions of rhetoric including rhetorical situation, to rhetoricality, to rhetorical circulation, to rhetorical relationships. The table on the next page aligns Yancey’s methodological waves (listed in the second column) with my rhetorical waves (listed in the third column) and their key concepts (listed in the fourth column).
The progression from wave one to wave four is explained in my rereading of writing assessment’s history in the remainder of this chapter. Each shift is a theoretical corrective that reorients rhetorical practices in light of new concepts and previously unforeseen possibilities for writing assessment. The trajectory of rhetorical theory has been shaped by such periodic reorientation. For example, the familiar Aristotelian notion of rhetorical situation where evidence and the agency of audience members are emphasized is challenged and extended by John Bender and David E. Wellbery’s notion of rhetoricality as a means of acknowledging competing ideological forces that influence persuasive language practices in less deliberate but nonetheless powerful ways. I see the discourse of writing assessment undergoing similar changes, and approach writing assessment as an ideological construct that exerts considerable constitutive force over people and social institutions. Moreover, within the context of public higher education in the United States, these two constructs have parallel evolution that is of significant import to rhetoric and composition scholars.

To clarify, I am not arguing for a wholesale revision of Yancey’s history, but a shift in analytic focus away from methods of writing assessment to the modes of
arguments about writing assessment. This reframing enables me to map rhetorical waves of writing assessment onto Yancey’s waves through such structured rhetorical inquiry in order to illuminate how waves of writing assessment (Yancey’s and my own vision of an emerging fourth wave) are generated and sustained by not only a salient shift in assessment methods (e.g., multiple-choice exams in wave one and holistically scored essays in wave two), but also by a change in the rhetoric used to talk about those practices. I identify these changes as shifts in the dominant rhetorical orientations evidenced by an uptake of key concepts within assessment discourse, such as competing ideologies and expertise in wave two.

I use Yancey’s characterization of the field to frame my own rhetorical history for two reasons. First and foremost, Yancey’s wave metaphor provides a useful explanatory tool to organize the complicated history of writing assessment. As I explain further in the next section, the wave metaphor is sensitive to the ebbs and flows of writing assessment theory and practice and resists the impulse to strictly taxonomize writing assessment’s history. Second, Yancey’s article is a credible and accessible secondary history written for an audience of composition scholars and teachers who may not be assessment experts and, as such, explicitly emphasizes writing assessment’s conflicted state as a practice intricately connected to teaching and learning but perhaps not fully understood and embraced by teachers because of its conflation with testing and grading.4

I am not the first to examine writing assessment through a lens attuned to issues of language and rhetoric—Edward White’s discussion of the role of language in defining our work to outsiders and to ourselves; Brian Huot’s rhetorical framework for understanding writing assessment practice; and, Bob Broad’s advocacy for using
discussion and deliberation to help articulate our values are but a few of the ways others have considered the intersections of rhetoric and writing assessment. Although writing assessment is arguably well understood as “a shaper of students” and “a means of understanding that shaping,” in Yancey’s terms, we know surprisingly little about the persuasive language practices associated with writing assessment (“Looking” 498). As a rhetorician of writing assessment, I develop theoretical lenses and tools for textual analysis of secondary texts that are capable of helping make visible the otherwise obscured rhetoricity of writing assessment, which I define as the persuasive effects of its discourse and associated language practices.

Just as Yancey identifies methodological tipping points marking each transition to a new wave, such as a new scoring genre like holistic scoring or an alternative collection method like portfolios, my rhetorical history of writing assessment investigates liminal moments emerging from not the practice of assessment but how assessment is represented in writing assessment literature. My approach to rhetorical history is informed by David Zarefsky’s description of rhetorical history as a process of “supplying a context or frame of reference that enables us to understand historical events differently” (26). Zarefsky differentiates four “senses” of rhetorical history: “the history of rhetoric, the rhetoric of history, historical studies of rhetorical practice, and rhetorical studies of historical events” (26). Of his four senses of rhetorical history, my rhetorical history of writing assessment most closely matches the study of historical events from a rhetorical perspective because I am using a rhetorically-sensitive perspective to augment Yancey’s history. Perspective is crucial because it is what distinguishes rhetorical histories from other forms of history (Zarefsky 30). I see each wave of writing assessment as a marker
of rhetorical impasse, some type of *aporia* that was overcome by a shift in persuasive practices. This perspective is also what distinguishes my approach in this chapter from the rhetorical analyses and critiques in chapter two, three, and four, for as Kathleen Turner writes, “whereas rhetorical criticism seeks to understand the message in context, rhetorical history seeks to understand the context through messages that reflect and construct that context” (2). Studying the rhetoric and history of writing assessment in this way moves us away from teleology and taxonomy and acknowledges rhetoric’s constitutive role in our sense of history and disciplinarity.

As prologue to my analysis of discourse emerging from each of Yancey’s three waves and my prospective fourth wave, the next section articulates the rhetorical nature of writing assessment more generally by highlighting the most important rhetorical features of the wave metaphor.

**Rhetoric and Writing Assessment**

This section provides an overview of key concepts in the rhetorical orientations of each wave of writing assessment discourse listed on Table 1, with emphasis on the transitional moments indicating a shift from one wave to the next. Strict distinction between the rhetorical shifts of these waves is not the ultimate goal of my rereading of Yancey’s waves; in fact, the bleed between and organic development from one wave to another is of more interest to me as a rhetorician than a taxonomy of assessment arguments. Taxonomies are usually only useful in retrospect because they make visible the kind of “non-discrete patterns whose outlines and effects become clearer over time and upon reflection—and whose observation allows us in turn to think in an informed
way about issues that might contribute to future waves” (Yancey “Looking” 483). The rhetorical trends in writing assessment discourse I identify in this chapter follow a similar, seemingly recursive but nonetheless forward, trajectory in which previous waves continue to exert force even as new waves emerge and rise to dominance.

Taking Yancey’s metaphor in the most literal sense, I see the generation, growth, movement, and decay of writing assessment waves depend not on the material (methods, practices), but on the energy that infuses that material (rhetoric). Waves move energy across vast distances—or in the case of Yancey’s waves, through time—and amid their constant motion, waves accumulate new materials (in the literal sense) that get swept up by momentum of the wave’s force and become physically incorporated into the wave itself. The metaphorical waves of writing assessment also accumulate new materials, such as theories of language and research on literacy. Although these new elements slowly alter the material composition of each wave, they do not create a wave; rather, it is a disruption of energy that creates a wave. Consider a coastal shoreline. When substantial amounts of energy in the form of oceanic waves slam into stationary material, such as a beach or rocky coast, that energy eventually sculpts the coastline. Likewise, the discourse of writing assessment is shaped and reshaped by rhetorical energies. Identifying these energies and their effects is a complicated process, which is why this section provides an overview of the wave progression displayed in Table 1. Understanding the bigger picture sets the stage for the wave-by-wave analysis in the next section.

Within the long history of rhetoric, the most pertinent concepts for this analysis of writing assessment discourse emerge as part of the New Rhetoric movement during the middle of the twentieth century. Rather than conceiving of rhetorical situations as
discrete and constant, rhetorical critics and theorists in the 1950s turned their attention to the relationship between discourses and the historical contexts from which they emerge. Such inquiry fostered new understandings of the rhetorical situation, including the way historical circumstances function as exigencies for rhetorical discourse (Lloyd Bitzer’s rhetorical situation) and, in direct contrast, the possibility that *kairotic* exigencies are themselves rhetorical constructions rather than *a priori* conditions for rhetorical response (Richard E. Vatz’s critique of Bitzer). Although these two views exist at opposite ends of a spectrum of causal arguments about the relationship between rhetoric and history, they exemplify an understanding of rhetoric as a complex of speaker, audience, subject, genre, and exigence that is navigated given the rhetor’s rational persuasive intent in a rhetorical act, which is a foundational point of departure for contemporary rhetorical theory.

Discourse emerging in the first wave of writing assessment mirrors much of the Neo-Aristotelian orientation of mid-century critically-minded rhetorical analysis because the exigency of a writing assessment appears to be the highest rhetorical priority. For example, the passage of the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (more commonly known as the G.I. Bill) and other federal legislation in the middle of the twenty-first century is often cited as the historical event that created an administrative and pedagogical crisis in post-secondary education. In short, an influx of students who appeared to be less prepared for college-level writing created the exigence from which first-wave assessment emerged. As a result of this exigence, arguments from the field of educational measurement gained traction in the 1950s and 1960s. Specifically, positivist arguments for standardized forms of indirect testing (i.e., assessments using indirect
measures such as multiple-choice exams focused on grammar knowledge rather than actual writing samples), bolstered by claims of psychological testing expertise by educational measurement specialists, were effective in persuading audiences of administrators and teachers to see writing assessment as a source of solutions to this dilemma.⁹

These assessment solutions, however, appear to be a one-size-fits-all response to administrative crises that varied by location and institution type. Neo-Aristotelian notions of exigence-based rhetoric, likewise, limited writing assessment arguments because they suppose language as neutral and transparent. Such a presumption proved particularly problematic for writing assessment amid new concerns about the validity of indirect testing practices that began to circulate in what Yancey identifies as the second wave of writing assessment.¹⁰ Testing specialists from the field of educational measurement utilized specific appeals emerging from an Aristotelian notion of rhetoric to persuade administrators and teachers that their assessments were valid and appropriate means to address these enrollment crises.

These arguments were received by members of the fledging field of rhetoric and composition at a time when postmodern skepticism elucidated the existence of competing cultural forces affecting discourse production, bringing language’s transparency into question. New rhetoricians had been questioning the transparency of language for several decades by this time. For example, Bender and Wellbery’s concept of rhetoricality (and the similar strategies of Big Rhetoric and the rhetoric of inquiry projects) transcends the limitations of the previous theories of rhetorical situation by shifting focus away from classical and Neo-Aristotelian notions of rhetoric as linear, neutral (i.e., not ideologically
informed), and situated and toward new notions of rhetoric as an ongoing process of contention that is circular, partisan, and globalized. In this way, rhetoricality is understood to be a means by which rhetoricians can work backwards to identify, understand, and critique the architectonic, constitutive cultural forces at play in specific instances of rhetorical discourse. That analytic function of rhetoricality advances a dynamic understanding of persuasion as something that results from not only rational and extra-rational elements of discourse, but also pressures external to language. Rhetoricality authorizes analysis of not only the way words are used to persuade, but also the way politics, economics, and our nature as social beings affects the ideas we produce and the processes of thought production and exchange.

Second-wave writing assessment arguments demonstrate an adoption of this stance of rhetoricality and thus surpass the limitations of a classical or Neo-Aristotelian orientation to rhetoric that is hyper-focused on exigence, audience, and constraints. Writing assessment discourse during this second wave is complicated not only by tensions regarding assessment methodologies, but also by contradicting forms of expertise and competing epistemologies surrounding evaluation of literacy skills. The dichotomy between rhetoric and composition and educational measurement, for instance, becomes even more salient in critiques from the 1970s and 1980s as scholars in English studies examine the pedagogical consequences of certain writing assessment practices. During this period, seminal writing assessment critics such as White use analytical strategies from rhetoric and composition to explore how cultural forces such as political pressure for increased standards and accountability exert tremendous pressure on post-secondary assessment practices. For example, White’s 1990 article “Language and
Reality in Writing Assessment” offers an explanation of the root cause of the contention between academic writing specialists and educational measurement specialists. In short, White sees the issue as a language issue; he applies the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to the professional discourse about writing assessment to help explain how “different disciplinary attitudes” propel professional arguments (“Language” 188). The different language used by measurement specialists is not just a matter of semantic difference because such variations are derivative of divergent disciplinary values and worldviews.

When considering the production and exchange of ideas, the circulation of rhetoric becomes a paramount concern. As a means of promoting a more globalized notion of rhetoric with both rational and extra-rational elements, scholars in rhetoric developed frameworks that emphasize discourse’s diffusion through various spheres—or its circulation—in the early 2000s. Jenny Edbauer (now Rice), for example, notes the theoretical limitations of conceiving of the rhetorical situation as a conglomeration of audiences, exigencies, and constraints and presents an alternative “ecological augmentation” that “adopts a view toward the processes and events that extend beyond the limited boundaries of elements” (20). Under this model, rhetoricians are less concerned with rhetoric’s situatedness than with its movement. With new models that posit rhetoric as something unbounded, the concept of situation becomes unfixed and variable temporally and conceptually, which makes untenable the logic of representation through which classical notions of rhetorical situations function. Edbauer’s concept of rhetorical ecologies and what Catherine Chaput has called rhetorical circulations offer a means of understanding rhetoric as unbounded arguments that circulate perpetually throughout different spheres.
Such attention to circulation parallels the third wave of writing assessment spanning from the mid-1980s to 1999, during which arguments crafted by assessment specialists within rhetoric and composition began utilizing the field’s expertise to analyze how writing assessment discourse becomes ideologically charged as it moves unpredictably through different spheres. For example, Michael Williamson critiques the effects of political economic themes that valorize efficiency in writing assessment over all other concerns and foreclose consideration of curricular revisions for pedagogical purposes. Other third-wave scholars similarly critique writing assessment practices and theories by asking questions about whose interests assessment should (and does) serve (Elbow and Belanoff; Williamson and Huot; White). Ever-present rhetorical questions about context, audience, and purpose are revised to consider the dynamism and fluidity of discourse.

As I argue in the final section of this chapter, if third-wave writing assessment emerges from a politics of location, as Yancey contends, the nascent fourth wave functions from a politics of rhetorical relationships, by which I mean fourth-wave writing assessment scholarship aligns with an orientation to language that assumes rhetoric circulates not only through different spheres, but also through networks and power structures (“Looking” 493, emphasis mine). For example, fourth-wave writing assessment considers not only the efficacy of disciplinary-based or practice-based arguments, but also how relationships to certain publics and institutions might affect the reception of claims. This shift is a logical extension of rhetorical circulation with its emphasis on the dispersion of rhetoric between various spheres to an understanding emphasizing how that diffusion occurs along certain contours based on relationships
constructed via social networks. Tracing the movement of writing assessment discourse through networks of rhetorical relations is important because the discourse becomes ideologically charged in different ways as it passes through nodes of the network.

Understanding how writing assessment discourse has made use of the concepts of rhetorical situation, rhetoricality, and rhetorical circulation establishes a basis for identifying an emergent fourth wave of writing assessment discourse that is oriented not around methodology, but rhetoric. Yancey ends her history by articulating how writing assessment scholarship in the twilight of the twentieth century has developed a new knowledge-making function, by which she means writing assessment becomes not only a mode for evaluating the nature, ability, or quality of writing, but also for creating the kind of social knowledge used to make judgments about literacy instruction. I take up her call to further explore this knowledge-making (read: rhetorical) potential of writing assessment in the final section of this chapter by identifying an emergent fourth wave of writing assessment that builds upon notions of rhetorical circulation by emphasizing rhetorical relationships.

**The Rhetorical Situation of First-Wave Writing Assessment**

According to Yancey’s history, the defining element of first-wave writing assessment is widespread use of standardized objective tests. Yancey writes that these tests “relied on an ‘indirect’ measure—a test of something assumed to be related to the behaviors, but not the behavior itself (e.g., comma usage questions and pronoun reference corrections)” rather than “a ‘direct’ measure—a sampling of the behavior that we seek to examine, in this case a text that the student composes” (“Looking” 486). We may also
consider such tests as assessments of a limited facet of the complex construct of writing; they captured students’ knowledge of conventions in a reliable way, but were limited by a narrow conception of writing as a construct. Despite this limitation, objective testing became the dominant practice in the 1950s because efficiency was the primary goal. As Yancey explains, “The first wave of writing assessment is dominated by a single question: …‘Which measure can do the best and fairest job of prediction with the least amount of work and the lowest cost?’ The answer: the reliable test” (“Looking” 489). In the 1940s college entrance exams designed by the College Entrance Exam Board (CEEB) that featured student writing samples were suspended because they were found to be unreliable and inefficient (Elliot Scale 100). In place of these exams, the CEEB added new multiple-choice test items to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), which had been administered since 1926 but was not used for college admissions purposes. The CEEB’s further experimentation with new testing formats continued in the 1940s and early 1950s including a three-part objective test containing forty-five multiple-choice questions on grammar and usage, an essay exam for which students wrote a one-paragraph response on a general theme, and a revision task that presented two paragraphs that were to be rewritten for improved style and correctness (Elliot Scale 138).

First-wave arguments on writing assessment came mostly from testing specialists who claimed these objective tests solved the problem of how to assess incoming students’ writing abilities in a reliable and efficient manner. These experts argued that objective tests proved to be significantly more reliable than samples of student writing scored by trained raters (Huddleson). From a rhetorical perspective, such early arguments about assessment reflect an understanding of writing assessment rhetoric as a composite of
exigence and constraints (e.g., rhetor, audience, and subject). Rereading this wave from a rhetorical perspective encourages and necessitates attention to these rhetorical elements.

The paramount element of rhetorical situations—exigence—can be understood as a relation between discourse and the preceding historical constraints. According to Bitzer, a rhetorical situation is a combination of the historical and material factors that give a situation exigency, and an audience that can make a change to ameliorate the imperfection or crisis that is the exigency of the situation. The key historical circumstance immediately preceding the first wave of writing assessment is a dramatic shift in student demographics that resulted from new federal student aid such as the G.I. Bill in 1944, which provided financial aid and logistical support to World War II and Korean War veterans seeking post-secondary education (Elliot Scale; Yancey “Looking”). The arrival of these new students with novel needs highlighted shortcomings in the status quo of college writing curriculum as composition instructors came face-to-face with students who “seemed more and different than students we’d seen before” (Yancey “Looking” 485). As a result of “the numbers and kinds of students that were beginning to attend school in the early 50’s,” writing instructors and administrators began to ask “genuine questions as to what to do with these students: where to put them, how and what to teach them, and how to be sure that they learned what they needed” (Yancey “Looking” 485). The arrival of this “new” kind of student invited or necessitated both discursive and material response, and thus explains the kairos of first-wave assessment discourse.

First-wave writing assessment arguments that sought to address the crisis of this new influx of students are rhetorical insofar as they function (or seek to function) as a
fitting response to the historical circumstance (Bitzer 7). In other words, first-wave writing assessment discourse is given rhetorical significance by this situation, just as a unit of discourse is given significance as an answer or as a solution by the question or problem (Bitzer 5). As the influx of these new students peaked in the 1950s, solutions to the crisis of unprepared students appeared from two different perspectives: the pedagogical and the administrative.

Yancey calls these two perspectives spheres of influence and argues that each sphere of influence involved a different process proposed to address the questions about how to best handle this crisis: the first sphere is pedagogical and involves “the process of deciding what to teach the students [and] belonged to educators, those who would become new compositionists” while the second sphere is administrative and involves “the process of moving students about” through various placement and proficiency assessments, which belonged to testing experts from the field of educational measurement (Yancey “Looking” 486). From a rhetorical perspective, these two spheres can also be understood as the two main audiences for first-wave writing assessment discourse. The tension between the pedagogical and administrative functions of writing assessment are an enduring theme in all waves of subsequent scholarship. In the first wave of assessment, the administrative function trumped the pedagogical function, in part because testing experts from educational measurement were able to design exams that meet the needs for efficiency and addressed the administrative concern about how to move students through systems of higher education.

The solution proposed by testing experts involved objective testing of knowledge about writing as opposed to actual evaluation of student writing samples. Although essay
exams were originally considered, multiple studies from educational measurement resulted in unacceptably low inter-rater reliability. For example, in 1960 Orville Palmer similarly proclaimed that achieving inter-rater reliability on essay exams was impossible because raters could not reach acceptable levels of agreement on student essays (14). Paul Diederich, John French, and Sydell Carlton had similar findings when they conducted a study with fifty-three judges who read and evaluated 300 student papers where ninety-seven percent of the samples received at least seven different scores on the nine-point scale. Objective multiple-choice tests, however, had no such reliability problem since there was only one correct answer. For this reason, objective tests met the administrative desires for efficiency by being cheaper, predictably reliable, and (consequently) more fair than essay exams.

The demand for these exams led to the creation of private educational testing companies. The APA’s establishment of Division 5 occurred at a time when private educational testing agencies such as Educational Testing Service (ETS) formed the foundations of a new industry of educational testing. In 1947, the testing offices from three different educational agencies—the College Board, American Council on Education, and Cooperative Testing Service—merged to form ETS (Elliot Scale 121). This new agency included contributions in the form of assets and key employees from each of its progenitors. The alliance between the field of educational measurement and private testing companies persists today. For example, all four editions of the educational measurement foundational text, *Educational Measurement*, were created under the guidance of the American Council on Education (ACE) and the National Council on Measurement in Education, which have membership from both academic and corporate
realms. Testing companies and educational measurement began and continue to exist in a symbiotic relationship that is common among scientific fields but appears quite foreign to humanities scholars.

As Yancey explains, educational measurement dominated the discourse of writing assessment during the first two decades, in part, because rhetoric and composition was just beginning to develop into the familiar contemporary disciplinary formation. Although as Steven North points out, “Any date chosen to mark the beginning of ‘modern’ Composition is bound to be arbitrary,” the dominant narrative of the field tells of the emergence of rhetoric and composition as a discipline in the 1950s after landmark events such as the founding of the Conference on College Composition and Communication as a professional association within National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1949 (North 9). Further disciplinary recognition came later in the 1960s when composition studies became “a serious research discipline” within the humanities by returning to what some consider to be its more legitimized counterpart: rhetoric (Connors 18). However, many would argue rhetoric and composition did not reach a fully recognized disciplinary status until the 1970s when programs in rhetoric and composition first began producing PhDs and many of the field’s journals were founded (Connors 208; S. Miller xxxv). Regardless of the exact timing of rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary establishment, it is clear that it occurred during the same epoch Yancey identifies as the first wave of writing assessment. Although both educational measurement and rhetoric and composition developed around the same time, both fields gained legitimacy through their respective professional organizations. However, the APA had a twenty-year head start on the disciplinary scene—the APA
formed in 1892 while NCTE was founded in 1911—which is part of the reason specialists in educational measurement arrived at the scene of writing assessment with more legitimacy than rhetoric and composition scholars.

With well-established testing theory and an attendant empirical logic, educational measurement arguments appeared well-suited to address the immediate exigence facing colleges and universities. For example, in 1954, a committee of the APA prepared technical recommendations for psychometric exam design, thus establishing the first standards for such testing (American Psychological “Technical”). One year later, a joint commission of the APA, American Education Research Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education published *The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. The purpose behind the creation of the standards was the lack of standardization on a wide range of tests including “interest inventories, personality inventories, projective instruments and related clinical techniques, tests of aptitude or ability, and achievement tests” (American “History” 5). According to the authors of the standards, their testing recommendations “apply to devices which are distributed for use as a basis for practical judgments rather than solely for research,” such as educational placement and proficiency (AERA, APA, and NCME 1966 6). Despite this acknowledgment of the practical purpose of certain evaluations, the recommendations are clearly not intended for those more intimately connected to the practice of teaching. Although the audience for the standards is broadly constructed, teachers are specifically designated as not an audience: “It is not expected that the classroom teacher who has not had a course in tests and measurement will himself use this report. The report, should, however, be helpful to directors of research, supervisors, and administrators who select
test to use for various school purposes” (AERA, APA, and NCME 1966 8). At a time when composition was just coming into its own as a discipline, answering these questions from a pedagogical perspective was an immense challenge.

The Rhetoricality of Second-Wave Writing Assessment

As further policy changes, such as the California Master Plan for Education of 1960 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 as well as social movements of the 1960s, expanded access to educationally and economically disadvantaged students, the exigence of changing student demographics that drove first-wave assessment waned as higher education became more democratized. Second-wave assessment continued to carry the momentum of the first wave in terms of attempting to answer the same general question: how can assessment most efficiently and reliably measure student writing ability? However, in the 1970s, new voices from rhetoric and composition began to question the assumptions driving such views of assessment, and in turn, challenged the authority of the testing specialists. During this period, educational measurement arguments celebrating the seemingly-bulletproof reliability of indirect tests were brought into question by counter-arguments for more valid measures, namely direct measures of student writing. Over a decade and half, such arguments proved successful. By the mid-1980s, direct writing assessment via holistically scored essay exams became the most common method of assessment (Huot “Literature”; White Teaching; Brossell; Yancey “Looking”).

These second-wave critiques of indirect testing emerge from a paradigm of persuasion attuned to new concerns such as rhetoric’s constitutive function and the
influence of competing forces. According to Bender and Wellbery, the concept of rhetoricality positions rhetoric as an intrinsic feature of language and a “condition of our existence” as language-using beings rather than a combination of discrete rhetorical elements in the classical sense (25). Given this focus away from rhetorical situation and onto rhetoricality, “We are dealing no longer with a specialized technique of instrumental communication, but rather with a general condition of human experience and action” (38). With such a perspective, it becomes essential to consider the role ideology plays in rhetorical exchanges. For example, in their edited collection, *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, and Judging*, Charles Cooper and Lee Odell name some of these forces as they outline a rationale for assessment that identifies nearly a dozen reasons to assess writing from the diagnostic (identifying issues in student writing) to the professional (evaluating teacher effectiveness). Each of these reasons also presupposes a particular function of writing assessment (e.g., assessment as gate-keeping). Second-wave scholarship emphasizes how writing assessments must meet the needs of various audiences such as administrators, writing teachers, and educational measurement researchers, all of whom have their own interests guided by particular worldviews.

The most salient examples of this kind of work are methodological critiques by scholars in rhetoric and composition. The second wave marked a key moment when arguments for particular assessment methods had to be carefully crafted in new ways because testing specialists and writing specialists began casting doubts on one another’s expertise. For example, armed with developing disciplinary knowledge about writing, an assessment expertise emerged from rhetoric and composition’s different epistemological orientation. According to Yancey, compositionists realized “it made increasingly less
sense to use tests whose chief virtues were reliability and efficiency” rather than pedagogical alignment (“Looking” 489). Rhetoric and composition scholars sought new tactics to deploy in order to alter the rhetorical situation of writing assessment for which boundaries and terms for debate had been established by the psychological and educational measurement community during wave one. Second-wave assessment scholars began to explore the nuances of the rhetorical situation of writing assessment discourse by foregrounding the conflict between professional expertise from both communities, which relates back to the notion of rhetoricality because disciplinary tension highlights ideological conflicts.

Scholars working in rhetoric and composition began by arguing that assessment should, in fact, be within the purview of rhetoric and composition even though many members of the field at that time felt that the methods of writing assessment and their justifications were antithetical to the disciplinary beliefs about the teaching of writing. Most notable among these early voices is White, who worked as a professor and English department head at California State University, San Bernardino in the 1970s and was directly involved in large-scale assessment decisions including the system-wide entrance, equivalency, and placement assessment the California State University (CSU) system developed in collaboration with ETS. Throughout his tenure at CSU, San Bernardino, White served as coordinator of the CSU Writing Skills Improvement Program, director of the CSU’s English Equivalency Examination program, and Director of the Consultant-Evaluator Program for the Council of Writing Program Administrators (Elliot and Perelman 7-10; Kmetz, Colombini, and Borrowman 87). Although others in English departments across the CSU were also consulted in local and system-wide policy
decisions related to assessment, White was the first and loudest voice to promote writing assessment as not only an administrative practice, but also an emerging field of study within rhetoric and composition/writing studies.

Before compositionists could confidently challenge the authority of educational measurement specialists, they first had to firmly place assessment back in the pedagogical realm, which has a crucial impact on Yancey’s description of the two spheres of influence that shaped writing assessment. In this second wave, momentum gathered to support arguments that certain assessment concerns—placement, teaching content and approach, and evaluating student learning—should be addressed in the pedagogical sphere of influence, where teacher expertise and experience could inform decisions, rather than the politically and economically inflected administrative sphere of influence that imagined writing assessment as the means for moving students through education systems and into the labor force. With the rise of writing assessment as a subfield within the now-well-established discipline of rhetoric and composition, the distinction between these two spheres begins to blur. Between 1970 and 1986, Yancey contends, “the two spheres merge and overlap, with administrators and then faculty taking on institutional and epistemological responsibilities for testing previously claimed by testing experts, and in the process developing a new expertise and a new discipline: writing assessment” (“Looking” 486, emphasis in original). As a result, new arguments rooted in the fledgling professional ethos of rhetoric and composition emerge during this second wave and gain the kind of rhetorical traction that could facilitate change.

But how exactly does one begin to assert this new expertise and participate in assessment decisions? White asks this question when he ponders, “how…can informed
teachers convince those in power to use and develop better types of writing-assessment procedures” (*Teaching* xiv)? Karen Greenberg, Harvey Wiener, and Richard Donovan similarly argue, “we know what good writing is, how to describe it, and how to assess it” (xiv). In other words, we have the knowledge, but perhaps lack the means to argue effectively using this new knowledge and expertise. White proposes knowledge of assessment and a willingness to take up responsibility for assessment as the answers to this query. For this reason, White presents his 1985 book as a collection of assessment “theories, arguments, and practices that will enable teachers to present a convincing case” for assessment programs run by teachers (*Teaching* xiv). This first edition of *Teaching and Assessing Writing* was written at a time when most large-scale writing assessment still relied on indirect measures such as multiple-choice exams. Contrary to this practice, writing teachers and WPAs, White argues, should be advocating for direct measures of student writing such as timed essay exams that could be scored holistically.

Elliot and Perelman describe White’s monograph as foundational because of its role in the formation of the field of writing assessment: “For a generation caught without safe haven in a hurricane of accountability demands the book stood as a monument of calm sanity” (10). White was one of the first to champion the unique expertise from teachers and scholars in rhetoric and composition as one that can (and should) challenge the assumed expertise of testing specialists from the measurement community. His work in the last two decades of the twentieth century began a process of centralizing knowledge and arguments about assessment that could serve as ammunition for resistance to arguments for indirect assessments that were informed by psychometricians from educational measurement. In the context of the early 1980s, much of this resistance
included arguments for holistic scoring of student writing samples rather than multiple-choice exams.

Compounding this disciplinary tension, other political economic pressures within the CSU system that fostered strong assessment impulses under the theme of accountability complicated this task of moving writing assessment discourse back in the pedagogical sphere in the 1970s. Seemingly objectivist calls for educational reforms through further standardization and accountability gained significant traction given the political and economic interests imbued within systems of public education. Although these issues came to a head in the 1970s, they emerge from a decades-long trend of questioning the purpose of higher education that actually began in the 1950s and resulted in what we now know as the accountability movement in education from the early 1970s.\textsuperscript{17} There are several social, political, and economic changes that fostered the perceived need for increased accountability.\textsuperscript{18} While retrospection illuminates these kinds of political economic pressures, White was able to crystallize the immediate negative impacts of such a shift toward standards-based accountability initiatives. Specifically, his work on assessment discusses the politics of educational testing and writing assessment, the benefits and limitations of educational measurement, and how research from both fields affects assessment as a practice and field of study.

Witnessing such a shift in momentum around assessment of writing skills, White sought to redirect this energy toward pedagogical aims rather than political economic goals. In their essay collection celebrating White’s long career, Elliot and Perelman identify one common argument as representative of White’s foundational work in assessment: “Assess thyself or assessment shall be done unto thee” (qtd. in Perelman and...
Elliot 1).19 This maxim encapsulates two of the dominant recurring themes of White’s work—that writing assessment is inevitable and that it is far better if we writing specialists embrace its positive potential rather than resist it because it seems antithetical to our core beliefs about the teaching of writing. The externally defined political economic goals for writing assessment in this wave strongly shaped the scene of writing assessment as White and other second-wave scholars understood it (e.g., Greenberg, Wiener, and Donovan).

In the second wave of writing assessment, specialists in rhetoric and composition reshaped assessment debates by bringing validity back to the forefront of assessment theory. Though both are requisite features of any assessment, there is often a disruption in the balance between the concepts of validity and reliability. Yancey describes how advocates for particular assessment methods tend to pit one concept against the other (e.g., second-wave arguments heralding the validity of direct assessment), and argues that each of three waves also features an oscillation between validity and reliability (“Looking” 487). During the first wave, reliability was paramount, but second-wave assessments via direct measure relied on new consideration of validity, and third-wave assessment arguments about portfolio assessment featured a reconceptualization of reliability as a process of negotiation among a community of raters. As the rhetorical potential behind validity and reliability (as well as the tension between them) demonstrates, whoever controls the research and design process of writing assessment also controls its function as a mode of inquiry. This important insight lays the foundation for third-wave arguments about writing assessment and rhetorical circulation.
Second-wave critiques of standardized testing and the use of indirect measures brought forth new understanding of the rhetoricality of writing assessment and inspired analysis of not only the way words are used to convey and exchange thoughts and ideas, but also the way politics, economics, and our nature as social beings affects the thoughts we produce and the processes of thought production and exchange. Although this form of analysis highlights important rhetorical elements of writing assessment, it was limited in two key ways. First, it relied on a narrow conception of static stakeholder groups (e.g., test makers, administrators, students, teachers) as isolated contingents. Second, many of these critiques focused on countering arguments and theories originating from educational measurement, which led to writing assessment discourse becoming very insular and bounded during the second wave. Third-wave scholarship, influenced by the rise of portfolio and programmatic assessment methods and new forms of ideological critique, breaks free from the bounds of second-wave assessment by recalibrating the notion of rhetoricality of writing assessment to rhetorical circulation of writing assessment arguments.

**Rhetorical Circulation and Third-Wave Writing Assessment**

According to Yancey’s history, the shift to direct assessment in the second wave opened the door for even more pedagogically informed methods of assessment. As such, the third wave of assessment is marked by the rise of one such method: a new genre of student writing called the portfolio. Given rhetoric and composition’s orientation to process pedagogy and social constructivism in the 1980s, the portfolio “model of writing assessment,” Yancey says, “seemed even more valid than a single artifact from a timed-
writing exam” (“Looking” 492). Portfolios were used in university writing programs such as Purdue University, University of Michigan, and Miami University (Yancey “Looking” 492). This time period also saw the building of an extensive assessment program at Washington State University that utilized portfolios for programmatic purposes as well (Haswell and Wyche-Smith). The development of portfolio systems at a variety of institutions is well-documented in narratives within one of the many edited collections on portfolio assessment (Belanoff and Dickson; Black, Daiker, Sommers, and Stygall; Yancey Portfolios; Yancey and Weiser).

The first two waves revolved around scoring techniques, but this third wave is centered on an alternative way to sample student writing. From a rhetorical perspective, this shift is crucial because it marks a shift in the understanding of the rhetoricity of writing assessment. Issues of fairness, validity, and reliability converged during the second wave, and the portfolio model emerged as one means of negotiating these concerns, especially in light of second-wave critiques connecting validity with the limited construct representation offered by indirect testing. Scholars arguing for the portfolio model inherited an expansive notion of writing assessment’s rhetoricity embodied by what I identify as a turn to rhetoricality in the second wave, including an awareness of rhetoric as an ongoing process of contention that is circular, partisan, and globalized. However, arguments for portfolio assessment take yet another turn in the third wave to not only consider the rhetoricality of writing assessment, but also the rhetorical circulation of assessment arguments. Momentum built for a third wave because of the unsolved dilemmas of the second wave; holistic scoring had assuaged some of the theoretical concerns about the validity of indirect testing methods, but a new scoring
technique was not enough to address all the underlying concerns about validity, reliability, and fairness. This new method of collecting student writing including multiple pieces written over a period of time and improved through an ongoing process of revision was revolutionary not only in terms of methodology, but in terms of rhetoric as well.

Third-wave arguments lauding the benefits of portfolios are more attuned to the circulation of rhetoric, both in terms of how pedagogical practices might productively inform assessment methods and an awareness of broader stakes of writing assessment. As Edbauer explains, traditional models of rhetoric as spatially and temporally bounded “are undeniably helpful for thinking of rhetoric’s contextual character, they fall somewhat short when accounting for the amalgamations and transformations—the spread—of a given rhetoric within its wider ecology” (20). Chaput extends this argument even further with her affective model of rhetoric that posits “rhetoric is not an isolated instance or even a series of instances but a circulation of exchanges, the whole of which govern our individual and collective decisions” (8). This notion of rhetorical circulation authorizes inquiry into the spread of writing assessment arguments not just in between two disciplines, but also through diverse audiences beyond the professional sphere. During the third wave there is a noticeable shift to a discussion of stakeholder audiences outside of either educational measurement or rhetoric and composition (Moss “Can”; Williamson “Worship”; White Teaching). Stakeholders represent interested parties including students, parents, teachers, testing experts, politicians, and concerned citizens.

While this external turn is taking place, writing assessment scholarship in the 1990s is also becoming more self-reflexive. In other words, the arguments circulating are both more attuned to stakeholder needs and attentive to the disciplinary principles of
rhetoric and composition. In fact, the mid-1990s marked a watershed moment when writing assessment scholarship moves away from the trends of documenting and theorizing about practical responses to immediate local exigencies and toward a new breed of critical studies of writing assessment (Huot and Yancey; White “Holistic”; Williamson and Huot; Williamson). In addition to more overtly and confidently discussing writing assessment as a subfield of rhetoric and composition, scholars also engaged in forms of critique and theorizations of writing assessment that set a new agenda for future scholarship to continue to establish disciplinary expertise and be responsive to the needs of various stakeholders. Specifically, the trend toward ideological and discipline-based critique that emerged in the second wave becomes dominant in the third wave.

To use Williamson’s words, “the promise of positivist empiricism” had faded by the third wave of assessment and as such, we see an explosion of arguments refining or redefining notions of reliability and validity that make use of rhetoric and composition’s new expertise about writing (“Worship” 68). For example, portfolio scoring required a new understanding of reliability “based not on statistics, but on reading and interpretation and negotiation” (Yancey “Looking” 492). As Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, pioneers of portfolio assessment, explain: “Our profession lacks any firm, theoretical, discipline-wide basis for deciding the right interpretation or evaluation of a text. The only way to bring a bit of trustworthiness to grading is to get teachers negotiating together in a community and make some collaborative judgments” (100). Although the Elbow and Belanoff model relied mostly on arguments about a new kind of non-statistical reliability, other third-wave critics focused on redefining the concept of validity. Efficiency is a valid concern
for those interested in assessment, but Williamson argues the “concern for efficiency…undermined the necessary next steps in developing approaches to writing assessment with even greater validity” (“Worship” 75). Similar to Smith’s and White’s work from this same year, Williamson notes the dangerous effects of this heightened concern with efficiency of assessments that overshadows other stakeholder concerns. In other words, administrative concerns about efficiency, while necessary, tend to eclipse the pedagogical functions of assessment. Third-wave writing assessment critics push back against this overvaluing of efficiency by adopting a stakeholder perspective that places validity, reliability, and fairness squarely in the pedagogical realm.

With its emphasis on the implications of collaborative reading by portfolio raters and the limitations of holistic scoring that relied on static evaluation criteria, the trend of portfolio assessment demonstrates “a new function of writing assessment during the third wave: creating knowledge about assessment” (Yancey “Looking” 494). Specifically, scholarship about assessment in this third wave facilitates reflection on that practice from a critical distance. Unlike second-wave critiques that valorized holistically scored essay exams as the lesser of two evils, third-wave research celebrated portfolios as a pedagogical and assessment tool. In this way, writing assessment became a way to hone our teaching practice while also gathering information about student writing ability. As Yancey explains, seeing assessment as knowledge creation in the third wave “helps us understand, critique and enhance our own practice…because it makes that practice visible and thus accessible to change” (“Looking” 494). This shift in the scholarship of writing assessment co-occurs with a new development in the way arguments about assessment expertise are made.
Residual notions of assessment as antithetical to teaching, however, disrupted writing assessment’s progress toward becoming a recognized field of study. Yancey argues writing assessment expertise undergoes a “bimodal” shift in the third wave in which writing assessment becomes a fully-recognized subfield of rhetoric and composition at the same time that composition at-large appears to take a stance of “reluctance at best, and aversion at worst, to writing assessment” (“Looking” 495). Writing assessment scholars at this time are aware that the reception for writing assessment discourse in the field of composition and rhetoric has been typically lukewarm. This trope of negativity about assessment appears in many of the more practical guides written for WPAs and others who might be charged with assessment but have little or no formal training. Many of these guides note the effect of this negative stance, but do not examine possible causes beyond conflicting discourses emerging from different stakeholders (e.g., O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 4; White, Teaching). Yancey attributes this resistance to the fact that assessment and assessment expertise remain misunderstood within rhetoric and composition: “Still associated with number-crunching and reductionism, assessment expertise is, at least sometimes, foiled against a teaching grounded in humanism” (“Looking” 495). In response, writing assessment scholars reframed writing assessment through the portfolio process, which was at this time a cutting-edge advancement in composition pedagogy.

Although this tactic helped invite composition knowledge and expertise back into writing assessment discourse in productive ways, several rhetorical problems persisted in this wave. For example, scholars from rhetoric and composition, Williamson submits, have struggled “to break free of the stasis in writing assessment” dictated by the debate of
direct versus indirect assessment (“Introduction” 4). In the forced binary of this debate, Williamson sees scholars from rhetoric and composition implying a “tautological defense of direct assessment” wherein direct assessment is preferable because it requires students to perform the actual behavior being assessed (i.e., writing) unlike multiple-choice exams that claim to measure writing ability based on students’ knowledge of grammar, syntax, and reading comprehension. In other words, Williamson warns that scholars got caught up in the argument that writing tests are better because they make students write (“Introduction” 3). Exerting all of our disciplinary energy on the promotion of direct writing assessment, he says, “prevented a critical examination of the limits of various approaches to direction assessment” (Williamson “Introduction” 3). Alternatively, Williamson remarks that writing assessment scholars should follow the lead of the authors in his collection, co-edited with Huot, whom he sees as collectively emblematic of a broader theory of writing based on two new core beliefs: one, writing is a complex mental activity, and, two, writing is highly contextual in the social, linguistic, and situational senses (Williamson “Introduction” 3). Williamson calls for writing assessment scholarship to transition to a new paradigm by “tearing itself loose from the theoretical foundations of psychometric theory and establishing itself with a foundation based in a theory of writing” (“Introduction” 38). Although scholarship from previous waves acknowledges the influence of educational measurement theory on assessment practices and the rationales surrounding those practices, Williamson advocates for more comprehensive theorizations of assessment that emerge from our own disciplinary paradigms and that are not solely concerned with defending (or attacking) particular assessment practices. In essence, he challenges scholars to begin disengaging from the
disciplinary debates with educational measurement because such exchanges have proven to be rhetorically unproductive.

White provides a first step in methodically and reflectively analyzing holistic scoring from a perspective imbued with the expertise about writing that rhetoric and composition established in the previous decades. “I see now,” he reflects, “that we were part of some major forces acting upon education at the time, of which we were only dimly aware” and that the valorization of holistic scoring was “brought about in part by the polemics of our time and situations” (“Holistic” 80). Among the “forces” to which White alludes was the political economic pressure to adopt multiple-choice tests developed with educational measurement principles that valued objectivity, but seemed dangerously reductive to writing teachers. White describes the “domination of teachers and curriculum by insensitive tests and testing agencies, and the distortions introduced into teaching socially biased tests over which nobody seemed to have control” (“Holistic” 82). Although there may have been an ambiguity about who controlled the tests, what White highlights are the political economic forces that influenced the adoption and justification of fill-in-the-bubble testing. This attention to the powerful forces at play can also explain White’s stance of deferment that relinquished much responsibility for assessment to educational measurement.

Overall, third-wave writing assessment emphasizes subjectivity as it functions from a politics of location (Yancey “Looking” 493). In the years following the publication of Yancey’s history of writing assessment, energy continues to build toward a fourth wave that overcomes the limitations of third-wave assessment methods and discursive trends. Specifically, third-wave arguments articulating the need for assessment
to be locally driven and context-sensitive led to the rise of communal writing assessment and attendant arguments highlighting the role of network-based rhetorical relationships.

**Rhetorical Relationships and an Emergent Fourth Wave**

Yancey ends her history by forecasting several possibilities for fourth-wave assessment:

> Perhaps this next wave will focus on program assessment as epistemological and ideological work; perhaps it will focus more on individual assessment as interpretive act; perhaps it will take on the challenges posed by non-canonical texts (email, hypertext, multi-generic writings); perhaps it will address the kinds of expertise and ways they can construct and be represented in writing assessment; perhaps it will include topics that are only now forming. (“Looking” 500)

In the years following the publication of Yancey’s article, scholars have noted energies beginning to accumulate for a potential fourth wave focusing on communal writing assessment (Broad “Pulling”; Broad *What*; Broad and Boyd; Huot *Re*)Articulating*, student identity and self-efficacy (Royer and Gilles), issues of race and writing assessment (Behm and Miller; Inoue *Antiracist*; Inoue “Technology”; Inoue and Poe), and big-data assessment methods (Moxley).

Possible trajectories for fourth-wave assessment might be rhetorically responding to limitations of third-wave assessment arguments, much like how a wave colliding with the shoreline is sent back in the opposite direction. Again taking Yancey’s wave metaphor quite literally, we can see how these potential trajectories for fourth-wave assessment result from refractions of third-wave assessment given some obstacle in the
same manner as the frictional force from a wave hitting the shore. For example, although case studies and narratives of individual programs have been the dominant form of assessment scholarship (along with portfolios) for decades, such approaches seem increasingly limited given the trends toward empirical research and the introduction of new big data methods. The industry of educational testing has long drawn on big data analytics as a means to demonstrate the reliability and validity of assessments; hyper-localized assessment appears less persuasive in such a context. Such situated assessment also fails to fully address concerns co-occurring with more distant but omnipresent calls for accountability from more distant and spectral sources like federal interventions into post-secondary assessment that go beyond the practice of institutional accreditation. Something needs to change: we must, as we always have, adapt to changing rhetorical environments of writing assessment.

Although the points of congruence may be difficult to spot at first, the unifying theme of fourth-wave writing assessment scholarship, as I see it, is a shift from rhetorical circulation to an understanding of writing assessment through the lens of rhetorical relationships. In other words, the guiding principle of such new-wave scholarship is a refinement of rhetorical circulation, the major force of the third wave. Although circulation is certainly still a concept drawing scholarly attention, the current discourse has taken up a new analytic stance that considers how rhetorical relationships forged through discourse and power affect the lifespan, circulation, and efficacy of arguments about assessment. The emerging fourth wave described and demonstrated in this dissertation extends that understanding of writing assessment as rhetorical by
highlighting how writing assessment is an ideological concept that emerges and exists within a complex of social and institutional networks.

Writing assessment scholars have long realized writing assessment is an ideologically rich concept, but in the fourth wave new critiques have been paired with strategies for compositionists to intervene in the writing assessment discussions both locally and more broadly: Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O’Neill’s tactics for reframing writing assessment narratives; Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington’s alternative rhetorical frame of “responsibility” rather than “accountability”; and, Chris Gallagher’s network model of power and arguments for trusting our professional judgment, are but a few such rhetorical interventions. At the heart of these critiques is the recognition that writing assessment is professional responsibility for compositionists (Gallagher and Turley; Moore, O’Neill, and Huot; White “Misuse”). Calls to recapture the positive power of writing assessment are emblematic of fourth-wave tendencies to see rhetoric both as a productive art and as a critical apparatus capable of better articulating what Gallagher calls the contemporary scene of writing assessment ("Being"). In this sense, fourth-wave writing assessment critiques focus not only on a predetermined rhetorical situation of writing assessment, but what I call the rhetorical relationships of writing assessment or, in other words, the way discourse moves through time and space as well as through individuals who are organized in relationships of power, that, in turn, both enable and constrain future discourse.

Adopting a stance of writing assessment as functioning from a politics of rhetorical relationships involves five tendencies:
1. Writing assessment is studied not only as a practice, but also as a construct and a cultural practice.

2. Professional writing assessment discourse is understood to no longer addresses audiences of static stakeholder groups defined by shared interest, but rather complex publics.

3. Scholars search for analytical and practical concepts in rhetoric to critique the construct of writing assessment and better communicate with these diverse publics.

4. The stakeholder theory of power is replaced with a theory of power as relational, but unevenly distributed.20

5. Fairness is elevated as a primary principle of writing assessment, especially in conjunction with calls to recognize writing assessment’s potential for social justice.

Writing assessment in the fourth wave is ultimately constructed as a rhetorical process with agency (as Yancey predicts) motivated by actual human beings with beliefs, interests, and ideologies who have relationships with other humans as well as with institutions. In the remainder of this chapter I provide further explanation of these five principles and offer examples of contemporary scholarship that reflects on one or more of these shifts.

Communal writing assessment, also called shared or dialogic writing assessment, is one of the most salient trends of fourth-wave assessment. By viewing assessment as an interpretive process laden with negotiation of meaning and judgment, writing assessment theorists have been able to focus on assessment as a meaning-making activity. For
example, Broad’s method of dynamic criteria mapping wholly adopts this communal principle. Broad argues that his method of organically creating “representations of our rhetorical values” serves as a kind of communal process of judgment (What 2). Broad identifies a crucial paradigm shift begun by Huot and Yancey in which assessments have become communal in nature, and uses that context as a strong background for his argument.

While publics theory generally assumes publics as discursive spaces where individuals produce and consume discourse about common social issues and deliberate about future courses of action, scholars have offered several different explanations of what leads to the emergence of a public. John Dewey, for example, argues that publics come into being when there is a perceived problem of public interest.21 Similarly, in his analysis of the emergence of publics, Jürgen Habermas articulates the public sphere as a space for ongoing “critical-rational debate” through which people can knowledgably discuss common concerns (211). Michael Warner’s theory of publics complements Dewey’s notion of publics as an unstable dynamic and contends that publics are not constituted by amorphous ideas or interests, but by discourse. Like Nancy Fraser, he contemplates the problems inherent in considerations of publics centered around monolithic notions of the public sphere.

The idea of assessment as a public issue is further developed in fourth-wave scholarship. For example, Broad argues “‘validity’ is not a quality of an assessment instrument…but rather a quality of the decisions people make on the basis of such instruments,” which is a shift that “takes validity out of the technical realm to which psychometrics had relegated (and thus controlled) it for decades and puts it back into the
realm of public discourse” (What 10). In their 2010 book, *Reframing Writing Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning*, Adler-Kassner and O’Neill use George Lakoff’s framing theory as a means to encourage WPAs and other writing assessment specialists in rhetoric and composition to advocate for particular pedagogical values of education amid competing narratives about the purpose of education. This impulse aligns with White’s claim that assessment “defines our work to outsiders and, in some ways, to ourselves and locates us within the faculty as well as the larger culture” (“Opening” 307). Borrowing from Lakoff’s theories, Adler-Kassner and O’Neill define a frame as “a perspective that shapes understandings of situations or circumstances” (15).

While this is similar to previous calls for the promotion of pedagogical values (e.g., White *Teaching*; Huot *(Re)Articulating*), Adler-Kassner and O’Neill’s call differs in the way they explain story telling as a crucial rhetorical tactic for engaging public notions about literacy and education. In other words, they are explicit not only about what WPAs should be arguing for, but also how to craft those arguments for public audiences. Adler-Kassner and O’Neill affirm that retelling the story of assessment from our expertise as teachers, scholars, researchers, and assessors of writing and writing programs is key to successfully reshaping stakeholder relationships and ultimately altering local assessment debates. They argue that WPAs should assume a stance of collaborator and advocate in order to open up avenues of discussion about assessment rather than just react defensively to assessment mandates.

As a result of this attention to publics, the pendulum begins to swing away from the principles of localism and contextuality that often guide communal writing assessment and toward principles of communication with diverse publics. Broad argues
such group judgment takes up assessment as a means of inquiry and communication. This is an example of the kind of shift Huot calls for when he expresses dissatisfaction with the state of the field and proclaims that scholars in writing assessment “need to talk about assessment in new ways” ((Re)Articulating 4). The key word in Huot’s title—(re)articulating—addresses the need for this new language. He explains that his choice of this term accomplished two rhetorical goals: first, the term articulation, encompasses Huot’s intention to construct a particular understanding of writing assessment; second, it introduces his goal of filling in the sketched outlines of writing assessment, which were tentative, as his use of parentheses indicates.

Another tendency of fourth-wave scholarship is renewed interest in power structures. As Huot points out, the problem with stakeholder theory is its assumption “that all stakeholders have an equal claim” ((Re)articulating 2). Gallagher echoes this concern when he argues the problem with stakeholder theory is that it “implies all interest groups are equal—equal stakes, equal say—and it assumes a ‘marketplace of ideas’ in which reasoned arguments among sovereign subjects will carry the day” (“Being” 459).

In her critique of writing assessments’ reliance on educational measurement testing concepts like validity and reliability, Patricia Lynne also explores the relationship between power structures and discourses. Such reliance on educational measurement theory, she contends, hampstrings the development of a new writing assessment paradigm originating from rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary orientation. She suggests we abandon the terminology of educational measurement completely as a means of escaping the attendant positivistic paradigm and create a new lexicon that is more closely aligned to a social constructivist paradigm familiar to twenty-first century rhetoric and
composition scholars. As such, Lynne extends third-wave arguments for disciplinarity, but does so while grounding her arguments in examinations of power.

Elizabeth Wardle and Kevin Roozen’s ecological model of writing assessment also considers the relationship between power and language, but does not have the same emphasis on disciplinary discourse as Lynne. Their model assumes a stance that “situates students’ writing development across an expansive ecology of literate activities rather than just any single setting” (Wardle and Roozen 107). Such a model, they claim, “recognizes and acts from the assumption that the breadth of students’ literacy experiences—in and out of school—impacts their ability to ‘do’ academic literacy tasks” (Wardle and Roozen 107). Such complex assessments require interdisciplinary cooperation and coordination, thus the diffusion of responsibility for assessment occurs through the construction and maintenance of particular kinds of relationships and a sharing of control and responsibility over assessment.

Broadly speaking, this dissertation endeavors to answer, however partially, Yancey’s question of what we might learn from writing assessment and to demonstrate ways we might go about such inquiry. My rereading of Yancey’s narrative offers a more explicit understanding of writing assessment as inundated with rhetoric in a myriad of ways. I have established four key rhetorical concepts—rhetorical situation, rhetoricality, rhetorical circulation, and rhetorical relationships—to frame my analysis of writing assessment scholarship both past and present, that help me articulate a new understanding of the rhetoricity of writing assessment. This understanding informs the remaining chapters of this dissertation, each of which applies a generative rhetorical lens to writing assessment discourse.
The history of assessment illustrates how scholars have developed writing assessment and rhetoric symbiotically. For example, work from the early waves tells a story of educational measurement’s powerful role in shaping the first wave of writing assessments (White *Teaching*; Yancey “Looking”). Fourth-generation scholars inherited that legacy and, consequently, their work calling for new paradigms or new understandings of rhetoric is inflected with testing concepts and tropes originating from educational measurement (Huot *(Re)Articulating*; Lynne; Adler-Kassner and O’Neill). But all this talk about a new paradigm seems relatively inconsequential if public beliefs are still pushing an accountability agenda. What we need to counteract that is a kind of critique that examines power in new ways. I propose overlaying our understanding of rhetoric unto our understanding of writing assessment as a way of turning the dial on our critical studies of writing assessment. This new orientation will enable us to better understand the past, present, and future of writing assessment.

So what do we make of all this? We may consider this fourth wave as a rhetorical turn for writing assessment, one that extends the theory and practice through new considerations of the past, present, and potential futures of writing assessment as a field of study. With a slightly broader scope, we may also consider how this new wave of writing assessment scholarship complements the public turn in rhetoric and composition more broadly. Broader still, adopting a professional stance that emphasizes the rhetorical nature of writing assessment also prepares us to engage with perennial public discussions about the purpose of education and how we document student learning.

The next chapter builds from the rhetorical history in this chapter in two ways. First, it similarly presents an alternative perspective on writing assessment by
reexamining a central concept—validity. Second, it enacts the kind of rhetorically-informed analysis I identify as a pattern in the emerging fourth wave of writing assessment. The discourse of the first two waves primarily focused on techniques of assessment, and third-wave discourse refocuses attention on the importance of sampling and collection methods as a vehicle for change, harmonizing writing assessment theory and practice with the tenets of composition pedagogy. In the fourth wave, rhetorical relationships and language practices become the site for invention, innovation, and intervention. In order to help articulate these rhetorical relationships, chapter two uses a variation of rhetorical theory that allows me to examine the persuasive effects of validity discourse.
Chapter Two

What We Talk about When We Talk about Validity:

Two Representative Anecdotes

[There is] a dilemma that has been central to evolving definitions: when we say that something is valid, what kind of a ‘thing’ are we referring? (Paul Newton, 2012)

Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is ‘meaning,’ there is persuasion. (Kenneth Burke, 1969)

Following the recent tradition of rhetorically informed writing assessment scholarship, this chapter explores the persuasive effects of validity, a foundational psychometric principle that renowned educational psychologist Robert Ebel calls “one of the major deities in the pantheon of the psychometricians” (640). Much of the professional discourse on writing assessment from both the educational measurement and rhetoric and composition professional communities has focused on debating specific definitions of validity. Because validity is concerned with accuracy and appropriateness of a measurement, such definitional arguments often hinge on the proposed purpose of an assessment. For example, if the goal is to efficiently measure the writing ability of an incoming class of college students, then a timed writing exam might appear to be a valid method of assessment. However, if the goal is to get a snapshot of an individual student’s development as a writer, then a portfolio assessment with multiple works written and revised over an extended period of time would appear to be a more valid method.

Assessment experts have dealt with this adaptability of validity—its most vexing quality as an assessment concept—by dividing it into many different forms: content validity, construct validity, consequential validity, and face validity, to name only a handful of its many variants. Given this collection of competing and potentially
incompatible definitions, one may ask, as Paul Newton does in the epigraph to this chapter, when we invoke validity, to “what kind of a ‘thing’ are we referring” (2)?

This question—what kind of thing is validity—has been answered in a number of ways in writing assessment discourse. Early psychometricians define validity as “the degree to which a test or examination measures what it purports to measure,” which makes it a quality of an assessment (Ruch 13). More contemporarily, Newton cites the consensus definition of validity from the 1999 *The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*: “Validity refers to the degree to which evidence and theory support the interpretations of test scores entailed by proposed uses of tests” (American 9).

In his 1985 foundational text for compositionists interested in assessment, Edward M. White argues that “one simple concept lies behind the complexity: honesty” (*Teaching* 10). “Validity in measurement,” he continues, “means that you are measuring what you say you are measuring, not something else, and that you have really thought through the importance of your measurement in considerable detail” (*Teaching* 10). As White’s pronoun use indicates, this notion of honesty is not an intrinsic quality of an assessment but a description the whole process undertaken by assessment practitioners. In other words, the validity of an assessment is created and maintained through not only its design but also its use. This general evolution of validity is often glossed in writing assessment scholarship, thus eliding the specifics of the concept’s complicated theoretical development over the span of a hundred years.

Validity has long been the most salient term in writing assessment literature and has served as a theoretical and practical touchstone in psychometrics and rhetoric and composition because it tells us something about an assessment process. It is reasonable
that scholars have devoted (and continue to devote) significant time and energy to debating these definitions. Some composition scholars, White and Brian Huot most notably, find this debate to be a potential pathway for further disciplinary collaboration between rhetoric and composition and the educational measurement community. Others, such as Linda Adler-Kassner, Bob Broad, and Patricia Lynne see the redefinition of validity as a keystone in arguments to reassert our disciplinary authority over writing assessment. Many arguments are often premised on a particular definition of validity somewhere on a spectrum anchored by these two extremes.

Although the emphasis on defining validity is sensible given the fact that many arguments for an assessment method are often premised on such definitions, this trend risks limiting writing assessment discourse to an ongoing interdisciplinary methodological debate between educational measurement scholars and compositionists. Michael Williamson noted this phenomenon in 1993 when he advised compositionists to move beyond the stalemate of methodological debate about the most valid measures of student writing (“Introduction” 3). Writing more than two decades later, I too am dismayed by the way validity determines the scope of professional writing assessment discourse. A more fruitful approach, I think, would be to pause such debates and refocus validity discourse not on what validity is, but, rather, what validity does. Such a rhetorical inquiry into the persuasive effects of validity discourse is a promising new intervention into these definitional debates because it promotes the notion of validity as a dynamic symbol rather than as a static methodological concept. The more we understand how we talk about validity and what relationships are invoked in our validity discourse (both
symbolic associations and material power relationships), the more potent our rhetorical, theoretical, and methodological interventions can become.

This chapter argues for a new way of talking about validity that goes beyond historicizing it as a measurement principle contested by two separate and equal fields—educational measurement and rhetoric and composition—with differing epistemologies and foundations. Reducing validity’s history to an epistemological tug-of-war between two academic fields on equal disciplinary footing washes out complicated aspects of assessment as a cultural practice, by which I mean assessment as a tool for shaping subjectivity in accordance with dominant cultural norms. Assessment has discursive conventions that are a result of its connection to other cultural institutions, such as education. In order to make these rhetorical relationships visible, I examine definitions and technical descriptions of validity in articles and book chapters that are representative of the overall evolution of validity theory over the course of the twentieth century and include voices from both educational measurement and rhetoric and composition.

Guided by Kenneth Burke’s theory of symbolic action and John Sloop’s construction metaphor of rhetoric, I put these fragments of professional discourse in conversation with historical studies of higher education and pieces of public discourse from key time periods in order to create a new discursive mosaic of validity. I then organize those patterns under two interconnected representative anecdotes of validity—validity as a methodological problem and validity as a pedagogical problem—and analyze how these anecdotes respond to the rhetorical energies of writing assessment discourse. As the final section of this chapter explains, these anecdotes highlight the paradox of validity as an impulse to standardize something that by definition adapts to
ever-changing cultural contexts. In sum, this chapter brings to the forefront the simultaneously constitutive and constraining rhetorical functions of validity in professional discourse on writing assessment. I further explain the method of analysis in the next section by infusing Burke’s method of representative anecdote with Sloop’s adroit attention to the productive and delimiting power of cultural narratives.

**Bricks, Mortar, and the Symbolic Energy of Validity**

Rhetorical theory is readily equipped to answer questions of what validity is and does because it highlights how meaning and persuasion commingle to produce the effects of language. For this analysis, I adopt a particular orientation toward rhetoric that accounts for the persuasive effects of unconscious motivations, such as social identifications and hegemonic cultural forces, instead of elements emphasized by classical rhetorical concerns like authorial intent. I call these the rhetorical energies of writing assessment. Burke’s famous theory of language as symbolic action is premised on the notion that humans create a social world through their language practices. In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke argues that “insofar as man is the symbol-using animal his world is necessarily inspirted with the quality of the Symbol, the Word, the Logos, through which he conceives it” (55). Stated differently, language not only communicates meaning, but is also precipitates or necessitates action. Burke refers to this as the symbolic action of language (*Language* 44). Burke explains that action is persuasion, and it occurs through unconscious motivations and identifications. We only see evidence of persuasive effect by tracking alterations to an individual’s or group’s beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes. From a Burkean perspective, then, symbolic acts not
only say something, they do something—they have an aspect of action, unlike such
nonsymbolic motion as a river flowing to the sea. In writing assessment discourse, for
example, practices are discursively and theoretically organized around the principle of
validity as a professional commitment to accuracy and appropriateness.

In essence, validity’s aspect of action is a shaping of professional behaviors and
attitudes—reminiscent of Ebel’s description of validity as a psychometric deity. In other
words, because validity is so intrinsic to a particular worldview wherein human ability
can be accurately and fairly measured, it cultivates both attitudes and behaviors. In
*Grammar of Motives*, Burke describes “attitude” as a way of understanding how language
can “modify [an individual’s] ways of action” (237). Burke further suggests “our notions
of ‘reality’ amount to a tendentious though unstable complex of ‘personal equations’ that
are implicit in such a simultaneously unique and socially infused ‘orientation’” (*Attitudes*
394). Definitions of validity are symbolic acts; they are social equations that alter the
behaviors and attitudes implicit in particular orientations. To illuminate the suasive
effects of symbolic acts, a critic must carefully select a means of analysis attuned to these
humanistic dimensions of rhetoric.

When discussing ways of studying the effects of symbolic language practices,
Burke differentiates between scientistic analysis and dramatistic analysis. Although
Burke notes that the two are “by no means mutually exclusive,” there are important
distinctions between the approaches (*Language* 44). On the one hand, scientistic analysis
“begins with questions of *naming or definition*” and assumes language and thought to be
conveyors of information, much like definitional arguments about validity (*Language* 44,
emphasis in original). Dramatistic analysis, on the other hand, is concerned with how
language is used by actors “in the social processes of cooperation and competition” (Language 44). Burke believes critics can use this theory of symbolic action to account for the relationship between language and rhetoric by examining the discourse surrounding an idea in order to uncover how discourse shapes individuals’ actions and attitudes.

Burke’s rhetorical orientation to language as symbolic action enables a dramatistic analysis of validity concerned with how the concept participates in a larger persuasive function of writing assessment as a cultural phenomenon. Validity is often explained as a core concept, and for that reason is generally introduced through a definition; however, as Burke reminds us, “definition itself is a symbolic act” (Language 44). When we communicate meaning—even something as seemingly foundational and nonsymbolic as a definition—we are undoubtedly using persuasion, and because professional discourse about validity is concerned with meaning (i.e., creating and disseminating knowledge), it is always already persuasive. Concepts that encapsulate epistemology, worldviews, or professional stances are especially persuasive. Validity is a crossroads for meaning and persuasion within professional writing assessment discourse and has markers of much persuasive potential. Although further refinement of validity definitions and the kind of rhetorical analysis in this chapter are not incommensurable critical projects, a Burkean analysis is capable of yielding different kinds of information about validity’s rhetorical function within professional discourse of assessment, precisely the type of information that would aid in the ongoing endeavor to better understand the rhetoricity of writing assessment by shedding light on how language and symbolic practices are animated by unconscious motivations to encourage certain actions, attitudes,
identities, and orientations. Burke’s theory of symbolic action provides a critical point of
departure that enables inquiry into what validity does as opposed to what it is, but such
analysis into the rhetorical functions of validity also requires consideration of the
constitutive forces of culture and power. For these purposes, I complement Burke’s
theory of language as symbolic action with Sloop’s method of rhetorical discourse
analysis.

Sloop seeks to illuminate the integration of power and language through
ideological critique of hegemonic discourses, or discourses that shape individuals’ beliefs
and constitute orientations and attitudes via their relationship to prevalent power relations
and seats of authority. Such discourses, he cautions, are not comprised of tidy canonical
collections of texts, but disparate fragments of discourse that upon examination may
constellate patterns. Sloop explains:

Based on the assumption that discourse and communications of
contemporary culture are fragmented, critical rhetoric gave over to critics
the role of pulling together the multiple layers of communication that take
place in culture and of drawing them together to show the ways particular
“objects of discourse” are created, how relationships of power aid in the
determination of these definitions, and the senses in which different
people have varying opportunities to speak on different topics. (5)

A critical rhetorician’s task, Sloop argues in this passage, is to draw together fragments
of discourse that may appear temporally, geographically, or intellectually discontinuous
in order to identify patterns that explain how culture informs our language practices.
The effects of culture and rhetoric are rendered visible in these patterns because discourse objects are created, sustained, and modified in everyday discourse practices.

In order to understand not only the effects of culture and rhetoric but also their relationship to each other, one must differentiate them. Sloop describes culture and rhetoric as equally constitutive forces, but offers a key distinction in the form of a construction metaphor: “If culture refers to the ‘bricks and mortar’ of everyday understanding, rhetoric is the ‘energy’ of culture. That is to say, just as energy in the material world represents the ‘work’ of material objects, rhetoric is that which is the energy or movement of the symbolic or cultural world” (Sloop 4). Through this metaphor we can understand the work of a discourse object (what it does) by exploring its rhetorical relationships from the associated language practices to power networks and their connected orientations. For example, in his rhetorical analysis of public discourse about the American prison system, Sloop examines popular periodicals as a way to track the everyday cultural conception of prisoners. Collecting fragments of what Gerard Hauser might call vernacular discourse through media such as these allows Sloop to investigate how people talk about prisoners and the corresponding representations of the function of the correction system as both an ideological construct and social tool (3).

I take up Sloop’s construction metaphor to make visible the relationships between the bricks and mortar (i.e., the culture of assessment) and the rhetorical energies of professional validity discourse. Specifically, I examine how the rhetorical energy of professional assessment discourse facilitates the construction of a discursive structure of writing assessment capable of fulfilling ideological and social functions. The effects of this larger structure can be understood through the collection of discourse fragments and
their contextualization within the cultural drama of writing assessment. My analysis of how these bricks and mortar of writing assessment congeal into a dramatic scene illuminates the bivalent rhetorical force of a principle like validity as a symbol that simultaneously constitutes and constrains writing assessment discourse, much like Raymie McKerrow’s critical notion of rhetoric.24 I do this by approaching validity discourse less as an epistemological tug-of-war and more as narratives responding to cultural shifts—both on the national cultural scene and on the professional scene—and animated by rhetorical energies. These narratives both produce and constrain future discursive possibilities. Blending Burkean representative anecdotes with Sloop’s concern about the cultural limitations of such narratives creates a means of highlighting the persuasive effects of professional writing assessment discourse. As I explain in the next several paragraphs, these anecdotes are representative in the Burkean sense, by which I mean they make visible the unconscious patterns organizing particular language practices.

The term representative anecdote emerges from Burke’s methodology of dramatism, an approach to studying language practices via a central metaphor of the drama. Burke argues that all symbolic action (linguistic or otherwise) is like a play wherein what people say and do are the essence of the action. Even discourse that is not narrative in structure or fictional in form can be analyzed through this methodology because all language is symbolic action. A representative anecdote is a critic’s tool for developing a vocabulary and organization scheme that fits the discourse being analyzed. Through a representative anecdote, a rhetorician can create a vocabulary for studying the persuasive effects of a particular form of discourse. Communication scholar Bryan Crable
describes a representative anecdote as “a way to unify otherwise-disconnected bits of discourse” by creating “a narrative structure shared by the texts under the critic’s gaze” (319). As a representative story or tale, such an anecdote contains a central claim or series of related claims. As a critical tool, a representative anecdote unites concepts and discursive elements in ways that suggest how discourse reflects and shapes reality.

The two representative anecdotes of validity—\textit{validity as a methodological problem} and \textit{validity as a pedagogical problem}—are a means of widening our critical aperture on validity to consider what suasive representations are invoked alongside and within professional discussions of validity. As media critic Barry Brummett explains, an anecdote’s treatment of discourse as if it is emerging from a drama with a narrative plot “represents (and thus, \textit{reveals}) the essence of that discourse” (480). This dramatistic notion of representation is crucial to Burke’s approach because it requires that a critic take up a broader rhetorical perspective toward the essence of the discourse and, thus, minimizes the risk of ungenerously reducing the discourse serving as subject matter of an analysis. Through such a perspective, one can see how representative anecdotes reflect a culture’s ideology, values, and concerns vis-à-vis the Burkean trinity of selection, reflection, and deflection, much like a terministic screen (\textit{Grammar} 59). As a result, the anecdote becomes the narrative through which future discourse emerges. The narrative exerts a simultaneously constructive and constraining rhetorical force. Validity—how we define it and the values animating a definition in a particular cultural moment—has this bivalent rhetorical energy.

In an effort to avoid dichotomous thinking misrepresenting these two anecdotes as merely conflicting arguments with competing rhetorical energies, I consciously frame
them as connected historically while giving special attention to key differences. For example, the methodological representative anecdote of validity emerges first in intelligence testing discourse at the turn of the twentieth century and the pedagogical representative anecdote develops later in the 1980s as an extension and revision of the methodological anecdote. However, and more importantly, the pedagogical anecdote not only offers a different solution to the cultural anxieties at the heart of the first anecdote about intelligence, literacy, and American national identity, but also addresses new concerns about the shifting purpose of higher education. In other words, while the two anecdotes have contradictory tendencies and aspects, what is more rhetorically important is the way they similarly construct validity as a means of standardization and justification of writing assessment as a cultural practice. In the next two sections, I use a two-part structure to detail each representative anecdote’s (a) emergence from a historical drama laden with cultural and political anxieties and (b) persuasive effects on professional discourse about validity. Examining validity discourse through these anecdotes sheds new light on the rhetorical valences of validity to suggest new opportunities for teachers and writing program administrators who oppose the reductive tendencies of standardized assessment of writing to act as agents of change in the complex scene of writing assessment. I begin chronologically with the emergence of validity as a methodological problem in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Validity as a Methodological Problem

The first representative anecdote emerges from a nascent professional scene laden within anxieties about intelligence and the new science of human measurement. As the
actors within this scene, early psychometricians call for an official list of testing terms and procedures that could serve as a means to standardize measurement practices. This purpose was achieved, in part, via specialized discourse on a new testing principle: validity. As psychometricians engaged in professional discussion about how to refine and standardize their practice, validity became constructed as a problem of methodology. Part of the conundrum of defining validity was that early measurement of intellectual aptitude was heavily influenced by physical science methodologies and, thus, relied on the quantitative study of literacy abilities such as writing, reading, and speaking as indicators of intelligence. Such quantitative methods seemed ill-suited for an object of study like intelligence that does not lend itself to empirical investigation.

In light of this mismatch between object and method, early intelligence testing experts developed a rationale for applying such objective methods to study of mental ability through estimation rather than direct measurement. For example, Lewis M. Terman uses a metaphor of intelligence testing as the assaying of ore:

In order to find out how much gold is contained in a given vein of quartz it is not necessary to uncover all of the ore and extract and weigh every particle of the precious metal. It is sufficient merely to ascertain by borings the linear extent of the lode and to take a small amount of the ore to the laboratory of an assayer, who will make a test and render a verdict of some many ounces of gold per ton of ore. (1)

In other words, Terman suggests that the enterprise of educational testing not attempt to measure the whole of human intelligence, but design procedures for collecting and testing data that could offer an approximation of a target trait, similar to boring into a lode of ore
to estimate its content of precious metal. Like the assayers tasked with metallurgic analysis, psychometricians became the experts responsible for analyzing raw material in the form of objective test data of literate ability in order to quantitatively approximate a person’s intelligence. The principle of validity is constructed as a means of judging the quality of such expert estimations. However, in order to more fully understand the rhetorical energies of this first anecdote, we must begin at the beginning. Professional discourse embodying elements that can be organized under this methodological representative anecdote of validity arose historically in response to a complex of concerns about intelligence, literacy, and national identity in the early part of the twentieth century. Thus, to understand the purpose of validity discourse we must first understand how intelligence testing ameliorated these national concerns.

Assessing America’s Emerging Character

Three cultural events—universal education policies, American engagement in WWI, and the Immigration Act of 1917—exacerbated concerns about the character of America at the turn of the century. With the passage of state-based mandatory universal education laws between 1900 and 1920, public primary and secondary schools faced an influx of “a population of students they did not know how to teach” (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 19). Public schools suddenly faced more diverse student populations of children whose parents were likely not formally educated or who were themselves not native speakers of English, for example. In response to this anxiety about changing educational demographics, educators turned to the new science of psychometric testing to sort students into ability groups. Much of this early educational assessment practice was
influenced by Terman’s Intelligence Quotient, which was developed at Stanford and published as the Stanford-Binet IQ test in 1916. Terman’s work “set the stage that would make the term ‘IQ’ part of the texture of American life” (Elliot Scale 59). In other words, the idea of measuring mental ability as a static and quantifiable element of a person’s character became a familiar cultural concept in the early part of the twentieth century and as a result the use of IQ tests to sort students and place them on different educational tracks was a reasonable practice. Often described as illiterate, non-proficient, or otherwise intellectually deficient, students placed on below average tracks received a very different educational experience with less access to educational resources and dramatically lowered academic expectations. Ability grouping became a core element of public education that was previously built around a common educational experience, and assessment was the mechanism for deciding such differentiation.

Two other influential cultural events that coincided with universal education policies are America’s engagement in WWI and the Immigration Act of 1917 (Elliot Scale; O’Neill, Moore, and Huot). In the wake of World War I and the first widespread use of psychological tests to evaluate and sort millions of incoming troops, psychometricians produced not only new methods for standardized mental measurement at a national scale, but also arguments to justify the use of such assessment in high stakes decisions ranging from sorting military recruits to controlling the flow of immigrants. The passage of the Immigration Act of 1917 further associated intelligence as a mental trait that can be tested through literacy, but also implicitly connected literacy to national identity. The Act, often referred to as the Literacy Act of 1917, required immigrants to be literate in either their home language or English before being allowed entry to the
country. Literacy proficiency was often assessed through recitation of passages written on slips of paper (Elliot Scale 73). In his extensive history of writing assessment, Norbert Elliot explains that these literacy assessments functioned pragmatically as valves for controlling the number of immigrants allowed into the country, and in the wake of the Literacy Act, the number of immigrants dropped dramatically. These policies established literacy as an indicator of intelligence and a requirement for immigration into the United States. Furthermore, these three federal policies created a particular vision of the national character of America as a quality that must be shepherded by scientists.

Such reliance and trust in science at this time was unfortunately animated by racist and xenophobic beliefs about the intelligence of immigrant populations. Carl Campbell Brigham’s 1923 book, *A Study of American Intelligence*, perhaps best reflects the imbrication of these anxieties about intelligence, literacy, and national identity. Brigham analyzed data from a battery of military psychological examinations called the Army Alpha and Army Beta Tests (which combined the Stanford-Binet IQ test and literacy tests) to gauge overall American intelligence (*Study* xxii). In his “national inventory of our mental capacity, and the mental capacity of those we have invited to live with us” Brigham sounds the alarm about a drastic decline in American intelligence (*Study* xx). This crisis, he warns, “will proceed at an accelerating rate as the racial admixture becomes more and more extensive” (*Study* 210). The deterioration, however, is not “inevitable,” he says, but “the steps that should be taken to preserve or increase our present intellectual capacity must of course be dictated by science” (Brigham *Study* 210). As such, educational and psychological testing appeared as a virtual panacea for
impending cultural decline by offering a scientistic means of preserving American intelligence.

Rituals of evaluation and statistical analysis of individuals in relation to aggregate populations became a permanent fixture of American public education, and diffusion of arguments about the validity of such methods into the greater national consciousness worked hand-in-glove with other efforts to promote patriotism through a renewed sense of national identity of the United States as a progressive modern nation. As Elliot explains:

To identify America’s emerging character—progressive in its idealism, systematic in its orientation, scientific in its proof, literate in its communication—and test its ability as a global power, America’s leaders turned to their new belief expressed so well by Thorndike: whatever exists does so in quantity and, thus, can be measured. (Scale 58)

Empirical evidence of literacy and intelligence—whether as an individual’s ability or a national characteristic—became the goal of psychometrics, testing became the means to this end, and validity the justification for the means. Using statistics, educational and psychological assessments could enumerate and assign value to specific observable phenomena. As such, the stage was set for validity to emerge as a psychometric principle for evidencing the meaning and worth of any assessment of human ability. In the next section, I analyze validity discourse emerging from this historical drama in terms of its major contradictions as a contingent principle that gets subsumed within an expansive methodological discourse emphasizing procedural standardization and the role of psychometricians as its primary agents.
Standardization and Psychometricians as the “Corporeal Evidence” of Validity

As described in the previous section, the dramatic scene from which the first representative anecdote emerges stars psychometricians as the sole voice of the new science of human measurement. Although it would be tempting to discredit these voices for their racist tendencies and ties to the eugenics movement, I take seriously their function as the founding fathers of validation theory. These negative elements remain—and the rhetoric of validity will always be tinged with this racist past—but I suggest a more generative treatment of the rhetoric of validity that illuminates the formative role of a scientific worldview that valorizes accuracy and the resulting evolution of validity from a principle rooted in an ethical commitment to truth telling to an axiom assumed to result from sound methodology. In other words, by examining validity discourse that emerges from this first representative anecdote, we can begin to see how validity discourse responds to a confluence of rhetorical energies that are historically and culturally informed. I organize my analysis through two primary questions asked by early psychometricians: What is being measured and how is it being measured?

Early intelligence and literacy testing is fueled by an impulse to measure culturally important but poorly understood mental traits and, consequently, professional discourse among educational and psychological testing experts reflects the challenge of defining the variable(s) under examination in such testing. Intelligence and literacy are impossible to empirically measure in the same manner as physical phenomena—height, weight, or head circumference, for example. Validity discourse served as a bridge between what was empirically observable and the mysterious mental traits, much like a
Toulminian warrant. For example, S. A. Courtis describes validity as “agreement between name and substance, between symbol and truth it purports to represent” (31). Giles Ruch similarly defines validity as “the degree to which a test or examination measures what it purports to measure,” or, put another way, the rhetorical need to have agreement between what is the variable under examination and the way that variable is represented by the assessment (13, emphasis in original). Both Courtis and Ruch are writing in the 1920s from a scene saturated by the effects of universal education, WWI, and immigration restriction. Whether early definitions emphasize accuracy, as Ruch’s definition does, or agreement, as Courtis’ does, they respond to the same impulse to empirically measure human ability.

Quantifying America’s character through new technologies and methodologies developed by psychometricians in the 1920s and 1930s marked what some feared to be a materialist turn that threatened core ideals about education. In a 1921 address at Columbia University, for example, Thorndike acknowledges “the general fear that science and measurement, if applied to human affairs…will deface the beauty of life and corrode its nobility into a sordid materialism” (qtd. in Joncich 282). However, Thorndike maintains that to not measure humankind is a disservice—“It does not dignify man to make a mystery of him”—and describes measurement as a completely disinterested and impartial practice—“Whatever exists, exists in some amount. To measure it is to simply know its varying amounts” (qtd. in Joncich 282). As such, he concludes, “Of science and measurement in education as elsewhere, we may safely accept the direct and practical benefits with no risk to idealism” (qtd. in Joncich 283). Informed by an extreme faith in science and the unquestioned authority of quantification, the task of psychometricians
was to measure the varying amounts of mental attributes without consideration of such idealist concerns as social consequences. Thorough examination of the variable being counted and construction of persuasive claims about the possible correlations between the variable measured and the underlying trait or virtue of interest became the task of psychometricians. Validity became adopted as a means of judging the strength of these correlations.

Explanations of criterion validity, a core element of validity theory developed in the 1920s, rely on similar language and logic as Terman’s metaphor of psychometricians as assayers of ore: in other words, criterion validity operated under the logic that testing a particular criterion could provide sufficient evidence to “render a verdict” of an individual’s full ability (Terman 1). Criterion validity is widely adopted especially after the first edition of *Educational Measurement*—a standard text for researchers and practitioners of educational measurement first published in 1951 by the American Council on Education (ACE)—describes it as “the correlation between actual test scores and the ‘true’ criterion score” (Cureton 623). Criterion validity relies on two related subtypes of validity: concurrent validity (which studies other criterion scores obtained at the same time as potential proxy measures that might be cheaper or easier to use than the criterion) and predictive validity (which extends the tested criterion to future performances in an employment or academic setting) (Kane 18). Although this system worked well for certain trainable traits closely related to job performance, psychological tests developed in the 1950s that aimed to similarly measure mental traits such as ego or resilience were problematic because there was no satisfactory criterion to use as a starting point (Cronbach 462).
The fracturing of validity into different subtypes provided a rhetorical workaround for psychometricians in the middle of the twentieth century who had to increasingly adjust empirical and quantitative methods to measure human traits. *The Educational and Psychological Testing*, the first technical standards for educational and psychological assessment as a united field published in 1966, delineates four types of validity—content, predictive, concurrent, and construct—but cautions that “it must be kept in mind that these four aspects of validity are not all discrete and that a complete presentation about a test may involve information about all types of validity” (American 1966 16). By explaining types of validity as non-discrete aspects, the *Standards* appear to rhetorically construct validity as a multifaceted way to produce information about an assessment, such as its estimation of overall skill based on a sample performance (content validity), the limits of subsequent predictions that can be based on assessment data (predictive validity), the comparison between data collected simultaneously (concurrent validity), and criteria not-yet definitively defined for measurement purposes (construct validity). The 1974 revision of the *Standards* collapses the four aspects down to three—content, criterion-related, and construct, or what Newton calls the Trinitarian conception of validity—and criterion validity still functions rhetorically as a statement of strength of a correlation between test scores and the “‘true’ criterion score” (Kane 18). This tripartite understanding of validity remains a foundational element of methodological discourse about writing assessment, but to understand its evolving three-part definition is only one thread in this narrative of validity’s conceptual development. To paint a fuller picture of validity’s change over time, we must also examine the purposes behind these shifting definitions.
With the assumption that mental traits were static, psychometricians proceeded logically that such variables could be ethically measured through standardized and careful procedures. Citing results from a 1921 survey of members of the National Association of Directors of Educational Research, Buckingham and his coauthors report “a practically unanimous sentiment in favor of the publication of an official list of terms, procedures, etc.” for educational testing (78). Validity appears within the pages of measurement journals throughout the 1920s and 1930s as a means of communicating the merits of an assessment practice (Brueckner; Courtis; Sims; Edgerton and Toops). Part of this discussion includes explanation of the suitability of certain assessment practices. In 1925, for example, Courtis offers a tool metaphor to explain validity as a judgment of suitability: “A tool may be suited to the end for which it is used or it may not be. The best saw made, while valid as a means of cutting a board into two pieces, is not a valid tool with which to drive a nail” (32). This apprehension about standardization in the professional literature from this time period also reflects concern about ensuring the merit of new scientific methods of human measurement, but also a new belief that adequate methodology would produce valid results.

The first representative anecdote shows the evolution of validity discourse from a principle of intelligence testing to an axiom of educational assessment. Counterarguments from writing specialists that emerge from the second representative anecdote imply that testing specialists may have lost sight of the commitment to truth telling implied in the definition of validity amid the fervor to justify the measurement of human traits and virtues. However, this temporary elision of truth and trustworthiness also evinces the commitment to accuracy and honesty once overtly present in measurement
literature in the 1920s and 1930s becoming more implicitly melded in psychometric discourse as the field professionalizes in the middle of the twentieth century. Not until validity experiences a renaissance in the 1970s when Samuel Messick argues for social consequences as an essential element of validity do these ethical dimensions become explicit again.

The naturalization of validity as a testing principle, even with its many forms, results in an erasure of these valences of social responsibility to justify psychometric practice. These social valences are embodied more explicitly in contemporary discourse about validation as a two-step process: one, considering the intent of the assessment; and, two, reviewing the execution of the assessment protocol, both of which are reflections on actual human actions. Under such a paradigm, test developers in their authorial role are the only ones capable of judging whether a test was valid since they were the ones most intimately familiar with the intent and procedures of the assessment. Elliot goes as far as calling test developers in the first half of the twentieth century “the corporeal evidence of validity” (Scale 266). On the one hand, with a potent mix of truth claims, faith in science, and methodology rather than the social function of validity, professional discourse emerging from the anecdote of validity as a methodological problem constructed an unquestionable authority for educational measurement discourse and testing expertise. On the other hand, validity discourse is constrained in this selection of a positivist worldview wherein the technical expertise of test developers authorizes them to both define the parameters of the validity problem and offer potential solutions. Even more contemporary validity discourse relies almost exclusively on educational measurement theories and practices because the testing expert is often the interpreter of assessment data.
and 2014 versions of the *Standards*, for example, validity is no longer separated into different types but unified as an overarching concept (Newton 4). Under this unitary concept, “different lines of validity evidence, all in service of providing information relevant to a specific intended interpretation of test results” must be considered (American 1999 9). Validity, as a part of an interpretive process rather than a characteristic of a test characteristic, still amplifies testing expertise over other technical and professional expertise.

A glaring contradiction results from this narrative of validity as a methodological problem within a strictly professional scene with psychometricians and educational measurement researchers as the actors and the purely scientific work of standardization of practice as the action. Namely, such a narrative identifies validity’s rhetorical functions as both a scientific and social justification for assessment as a cultural practice but never reconciles these two functions. For example, the prominent role of eugenics within intelligence testing is justified solely through consideration of the methodology of evaluation, not social consequences. The contradictions in this first representative anecdote sow the seeds for a second narrative with a different (though still professional) scene with new actors driven by a different agency and intention, which means they have different purposes guiding their action. The next section presents this second anecdote of validity as a pedagogical problem set within the shifting scene of American higher education in last half of the twentieth century with writing teachers as the main actors. As with the first anecdote, I begin with a portrayal of the historical drama from which the anecdote emerges and then analyze the anecdote’s persuasive effects on professional discourse about validity.
Validity as a Pedagogical Problem

The second representative anecdote—validity as a pedagogical problem—also emerges in response to parallel cultural anxieties about intelligence, literacy, and the purpose of education but tells a different narrative of validity (and writing assessment more broadly) from the first representative anecdote. Specifically, the second narrative occurs in a new scene where American higher education is diversifying and expanding at a breakneck pace. Within this scene, compositionists, with their pedagogical expertise and intimate proximity to students, position themselves as professionals with relevant expertise who should be central agents of validity because they can best identify the immediate consequences of assessment.

Complementing this shift in scene and actors, the main action of the second narrative is a redefinition of validity as a pedagogical concern rather than just a methodological one. Instead of aiming to justify an assessment based on procedural methodological evidence (which was the primary purpose of the first anecdote), discourse under this second anecdote explicitly aligns assessment with disciplinary tenets of rhetoric and composition wherein writing is represented as a multifaceted, dynamic, and social activity that can be improved over time with training and practice. In other words, because the assessment of writing inherently affects the teaching of writing, this second anecdote brings new attention to the consequences of assessment. Rather than only ensuring the accuracy and appropriateness of an assessment via sound methodology, validity under the second anecdote also serves as a check for instructional and social consequences of assessment.
Discourse embodying this representative anecdote arose chronologically in the 1970s and 1980s as a professional protest by compositionists to the indirect testing of writing advocated by educational measurement scholars in the mid-twentieth century. White’s christening of 1971 as the beginning of the modern era of writing assessment in which writing teachers play an agentive role in the development of large-scale assessments and evolution of assessment theory, and Yancey’s demarcation of 1971 as the beginning of second-wave writing assessment wherein the holistically scored essay ruled the day are examples of this narrative of pedagogical resistance. Although professional protest of increasingly standardized testing of writing via multiple-choice exams is an important part of the history of writing assessment, starting the story there elides the influential political and cultural shifts that facilitated a complete restructuring of public higher education in the United States and authorized an unprecedented expansion of educational testing. For that reason, the next section explores pivotal points within the complex historical drama beginning with national public legislation on higher education in the 1940s and ending with the publication of the Carnegie typology for research universities in the early 1970s. Following this description of the historical drama is an examination of contradictions of validity within the narrative.

_Egalitarianism, Access, and the Reengineering of American Higher Education_

Public higher education in America underwent tectonic changes in the decades following the end of WWII—made possible through such federal legislation as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 and accompanied by new rhetoric espousing egalitarian ideals about the democratization of higher education and the function of
higher education as a public good. Materially, however, such expansion put enormous pressure on institutions of higher education. Just as the first representative anecdote of validity responded to concern about cultural decline, validity discourse emerging from this second representative anecdote responds to the notion of immense opportunity for cultural advancement in the antebellum period through a new social commitment to higher education.

In the decades between 1940 and 1970, higher education enjoyed popularity as a site for cultural advancement. Higher education was seen as serving a public good; and increasing access and funding for post-secondary education was justified through revisions to the common story about who should go to college. The 1947 President’s Commission on Higher Education, for example, recommended at least half of high school graduates attend college (a view repeated in the Commission on Financing Higher Education in 1949) (Cohen 237). Such federal endorsement of higher education was imbued with messages of optimism and possibility for cultural advancement. Such shifts in the rhetoric about post-secondary education in the 1940s was augmented by further governmental intervention to increase access for previously under-represented groups in the 1950s and 1960s, such as the extension of Brown v. Board of Education to higher education in 1956, the Adult Education Act of 1966, and Title IX in 1972. These social justice reforms not only explicitly increased access for previously underrepresented groups, but also further propagated the belief that anyone could go to college. The tenor of discourse about the purpose of higher education shifted as federal policies increasing favored egalitarianism and access. The Higher Education Act of 1965, for example, extended financial aid and authorized federally backed student loans in an effort to create
more post-secondary education opportunities for students from lower socio-economic status. Increasing access to tertiary education was assumed to be one of the major means of capitalizing on the cultural benefits of education.

Structural changes in state systems of higher education followed these legislative moves toward mass access to higher education, including the creation of multi-campus institutions, conversion of state colleges (many of which were Normal Colleges until the 1930s) into regional comprehensive universities with the new missions, and a more robust system of community colleges. The articulation of the three-tiered hierarchy of higher education in the California Master Plan for Higher Education in 1960 exemplifies this diversification and subsequent restructuring of American public higher education. Separate but cooperative systems of higher education allowed for multiple answers to the questions of what knowledge would be accessed via post-secondary education and for whom that knowledge was intended. In other words, “Instead of competing, they would cooperate in providing education for every purpose” (Cohen 239). Other states adopted similar plans—New York, most notably. By the centennial celebration of the Morrill Act in 1962, the landscape of public higher education had changed dramatically and the Carnegie Commission taxonomy of research universities created in the early 1970s was a culmination of the restructuring of American higher education to meet the demands of a changing national political economy.

Educational testing played a major role in the reengineering during this period in two ways: directing students to specific divisions of higher education and diverting less prepared students into remedial courses. The increase in the number of students applying to college put immense and immediate pressure on administrators to update pre-war
application processes. Not only did application decisions need to be made faster and more efficiently, but also with less reliance on preparatory records such as high school transcripts that returning veterans and other non-traditional students might not be able to provide. In short, the admission process born from elite east coast institutions appeared antiquated and insufficient for mass higher education. These pressures resulted in a new exigence for standardized testing for admission and placement decisions. Educational Testing Service (ETS), which the College Board founded in 1947, was strategically poised to dominate what would become the immensely profitable industry of educational testing by harnessing the popularity of the SAT as a proven means of ranking college applicants. In 1950, Henry Chauncey, then-president of ETS, reported that, “the possibilities of constructive use [of tests] are far greater than those of misuse” and described the “opportunities for ETS [as] almost limitless” (14). The opportunities were, in fact, nearly boundless as institutions of all levels struggled with the administrative challenge of not only admitting students but also placing them on one of several curricular tracks. With the cascading effect of open admissions policies in the 1960s and push for equality in educational opportunity, remedial programs developed in the 1970s as an administrative response to how to organize students of vastly different preparation for college work.

As both a justification of admission decisions and reflection of the values of higher education, assessment rhetoric was the linchpin in this restructuring because it justified who belonged where in the new complex landscape of open access tertiary education. As the next section explores, discourse emerging from the second anecdote of validity emphasizes the sociopolitical functions of writing assessment and reintroduces
the need for validity as a justification for ever-expanding assessment practice. Specifically, the second anecdote conceptually and rhetorically adapts validity by highlighting the social consequences of assessment. This adaptation evinces a shift in the drama of writing assessment wherein new actors take the stage with a new purpose and agency. By examining the act—the redefinition of validity—we can better understand this new anecdote and its rhetorical effects.

*Teachers as Pseudo-Experts and the Purveyors of Pedagogically Informed Validity*

Just as composition’s process movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s pushed back against current traditional pedagogy, writing assessment discourse embodying the pedagogical representative anecdote of validity rebuked indirect assessment methods, their characterization of writing as a quantifiable skill, and the co-occurring assertion of psychometric authority over all other forms of educational assessment. In this second representative anecdote, teacher-scholars used the concept of validity as a rhetorical wedge to divorce assessment from testing by focusing on assessment’s formative rather than summative functions and consequently resituating writing assessment within a pedagogical rather than methodological context. By making validity a pedagogical concern, the anecdote amplifies the needs for professional oversight by teachers, not educational measurement specialists. Rather than only ensuring the methodological accuracy and appropriateness of an assessment, validity under the second anecdote also serves as a check for instructional and social consequences of assessment. Even in a period when higher education enjoyed increased financial and social support as a vehicle
for cultural advancement, the growing reliance on standardized testing elicited new concern about the consequences of educational testing.

While compositionists supported discussion of the consequences of assessment, educational measurement scholars resisted such consideration of social implications. Messick, a psychologist and researcher at ETS first directed attention to the consequences of assessment with his introduction of consequential validity into educational measurement parlance in the early 1970s, but the idea became more widely circulated (and hotly contested) after publication of his chapter on validity in the third edition of the *Educational Measurement* in 1989. In that chapter, Messick explicitly argues that the “social values and social consequences cannot be ignored in consideration of validity” (“Validity” 19). Although construct validity of the 1980s “embraces” all validity evidence, Messick argues, the “only source not yet explicitly incorporated is social consequence” (“Validity” 17). Other educational measurement specialists viewed the idea of consequential validity as a complex social process far beyond their purview as test designers and interpreters. For example, Linda Crocker’s editorial in a 1997 issue of *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, identifies the core of the “great validity debate” to be “whether validation is to be regarded as a scientific, empirical enterprise or a sociopolitical process as well” (4). Writing in the same special issue as Crocker, W. James Popham argues “Cluttering the concept of validity with social consequences will lead to confusion, not clarity” (9). Such sociopolitical concerns, Popham continues, have led “heavy hitters” in the field of educational measurement (e.g., Messick; Moss; Shepard) to inappropriately “cram social consequences were they don’t go” (9). The resistance to considering social consequences as part of the validation process
demonstrates not only an epistemological difference but also an anxiety about who would be capable of rendering such a judgment. If assessment of human traits is not just an empirical endeavor like the assaying of ore, but a philosophical one, then educational testing experts preoccupied with methodology are ill-equipped to serve as experts.

The reframing of validity as a pedagogical rather than methodological problem suggests a construction of writing professionals as pseudo-experts in assessment. Those forced into the ad hoc role of English assessment experts in the 1970s and 1980s (most often writing program administrators and department chairs), became new voices in educational assessment conversations. White is a notable example of a self-taught English assessment expert who won a seat at the table of system-wide assessment decision makers for the California State University (CSU) system in the 1970s. Yancey refers to this phenomenon as the development of a “hybrid expertise” for writing teachers such as White, who through self-study and alliance-building became the first-generation of assessment experts during the 1970s and 1980s. This hybrid expertise paired well with advanced training in the liberal arts, and early voices from English departments were willing to engage the philosophical questions dismissed by Crocker and Popham. These new experts in writing assessment became agentive actors who revised the narrative representing validity with more explicit focus on the pedagogical effects of assessment within writing programs and writing classroom, and such effects become prominent in the distinction between formative assessment and summative testing.

Yet, because of the tension between testing and assessment, the hybrid expertise of teachers as assessors was not an easy melding. Teachers’ values about writing and learning often foster strong anti-testing beliefs. For example, Rexford Brown writes in the
Journal of Basic Writing in 1978 that “Few of us in the English teaching profession feel comfortable with the associations of precision and icy objectivity that accompany the word ‘measurement,’ and most of us were brought up thinking that you can’t ‘measure’ writing” (1). In a 1975 English Journal article, Charles Cooper reports that measurement concepts such as task analysis, behavioral objective, and mastery learning that were proven “psychometrically valid and reliable” and becoming increasingly common in educational measurement parlance were received skeptically in composition (114). Some of the anti-testing sentiment comes from the fact that teachers of writing have difficulty conceiving of the composition process as the kind of task that can be easily measured. Nor do they believe strictly summative assessment complements a process approach to teaching writing.

A particularly clear case of validity being deployed as a rhetorical wedge by these new hybrid experts is the successful protest by English faculty across the CSU system in 1971, a case that I examine in more depth in the next chapter. In light of a system-wide administrative initiative to increase the use of equivalency testing, including the English Equivalency Exam (EEE), which included no writing, English faculty—especially faculty committed to the teaching of first-year composition—argued that the initiative trivialized composition as a merely preparatory or remedial subject. The faculty resistance was effectively disruptive and ultimately led to a major revision of the EEE under faculty supervision rather than being completely controlled by ETS. Several prominent members of the CSU English faculty collaborated with ETS to write a new version of the EEE, which featured direct measures of student writing in the form of two 45-minute essays rather than the previously proposed multiple-choice exam.
Two principles related to validity undergirded the CSU faculty’s response to the original EEE. According to White, who participated in the events preceding the exam’s revision and oversaw the new EEE program, two central claims guided the CSU faculty’s response: “(1) there must be writing on a writing examination, and (2) English teachers who were teachers of writing should establish the goals of the examination and be responsible for designing and grading it” (“Opening” 309). Both of these claims deconstruct the expertise of educational measurement experts as the primary agents responsible for designing and evaluating writing assessments, and did so through a validity argument, albeit an implied argument. From the faculty perspective, the equivalency exam was a poor summative assessment because it lacked what Messick calls face validity, or a form of validity concerned with “what a test appears to measure to the untrained eye” (“Validity” 19). As Kane further explains, “The notion of ‘face validity’ refers to the apparent relevance of test tasks to the proposed interpretation or use of scores, and efforts to build face validity into tests are intended to enhance acceptance of the test by those taking it and by various stakeholders (e.g., parents, employers)” (Kane 36). Like consequential validity, face validity is more attuned to the social and cultural functions of writing assessment than previous definitions, such as equivalency testing decisions for first-year college students. Discussions of consequential and face validity appear to acknowledge educational assessment as an administrative pressure on curriculum, an influential force on instruction and even a “shaper of students” (Yancey “Looking” 498). The 1971 CSU protest was sparked by faculty reaction to the indirect multiple-choice test for composition equivalency as not only perpetuating reductive notions of writing, but also threatening to undermine college-level writing instruction. In
other words, the consequences of equivalency testing were extended beyond the scope of individual test takers to a wider vision of how such testing practices might affect university writing programs.

The professional reclamation of validity expertise had lasting effects on the discourse of writing assessment, especially in regards to how teachers feel about assessment. We can see evidence of assessment being framed as a threat in the discourse from the 1980s that is accented by dichotomous claims that represented assessment as an almost metaphysical, omnipotent, and ubiquitous power with both productive and destructive potential. In his 1985 book, *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, White begins with a chapter titled “Assessment as Threat and Promise,” in which he characterizes teachers’ “hostility” toward writing assessment as a defensive reaction to the intrusion of testing on teaching (1). In his opening paragraph, which sets the tone for the book, White uses a series of dualities to describe the power of assessment: “Assessment of writing can be a blessing or a curse, a friend or a foe, an important support for our work as teachers or a major impediment to what we need to do for our students. Like nuclear power, say, or capitalism, it offers enormous possibilities for good or ill, and, furthermore, it often shows its benign and destructive faces at the same time” (*Teaching* 3). Huot’s historical chapter in *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment* similarly explores the positive and negative effects of assessment: “assessment was supposed to disrupt existing social order and class systems… However, as we all know, assessment has rarely delivered on this promise. Instead, assessment has been used as an interested social mechanism for reinscribing current power relations and class systems” (7). The second representative anecdote emerges from this context in which teachers raised concern about the validity of
objective testing that embodied so many of these threatening elements and seemed vastly
different from the writing work done in composition classrooms.

Validity serves as a key element of this counter narrative as both a theoretical
safeguard against the more negative effects of writing assessment and a means for more
productively linking assessment and instruction. The effect of this dual function can be
seen in the refocusing of the general “purports-to” definition of validity on the
unintended social consequences or harms of an assessment. In other words, if a valid
assessment “measures what we intend it to measure and not something else,” then for
writing teachers that means an assessment must be a direct test of writing (Cooper 112).
Given these criteria, “Validity can only be determined by an expert in the process or skill
being measured. Writers and writing teachers, not psychometricians or school-district
evaluation specialists, must make the determination for writing” (Cooper 114). Validity
claims are prefaced by truth claims about what precisely writing is and value claims
about why one would assess it.

The Cult(ure) of Validity and its Strategic Ambiguity

So what is it about validity that made educational measurement scholars adopt it
as their raison d'être and compositionists adapt it as their pièce de résistance in a new
paradigm of writing assessment? This chapter has sought to answer this question by
developing a new way of talking about validity, one that escapes the tendency to
historicize it as a native measurement principle contested by the separate and equal
epistemologies of educational measurement and composition. Validity’s psychometric
roots are undeniable, and I do not intend to argue that validity comes from elsewhere;
rather, it is the representation of that origin in writing assessment histories that is of prime rhetorical interest to me. Using Burke and Sloop as guides, I have conducted a recontextualization of professional discourse on validity that is organized around two representative anecdotes that tell very different stories of writing assessment. On the one hand, the first anecdote represents validity as self-evident in assessments that follow proper protocols and methodological norms. Testing experts, as the material agents of validity, propel the story of writing assessment within this first anecdote by standardizing assessment terminology and methodology. On the other hand, the second representative anecdote casts writing teachers as the agents of a parallel narrative redefining validity in ways that complement composition theory and practice of the 1970s and 1980s.

We must, however, resist the temptation of dualistic and dichotomous tendencies that misrepresent these two anecdotes as merely conflicting arguments with competing rhetorical energies. The two representative anecdotes of validity are connected conceptually and historically; the methodological representative anecdote of validity emerges first in intelligence testing discourse at the turn of the century and the pedagogical representative anecdote develops later in the 1970s and 80s as both a critique and revision of the methodological anecdote. However, and perhaps more importantly, the pedagogical anecdote not only offers a different solution to the cultural anxieties at the heart of the first anecdote about intelligence, literacy, and American national identity, but also addresses new concerns about the shifting purpose of higher education and questions about who gets access to which kind of knowledge. Although the two anecdotes have contradictory tendencies and aspects, what is more rhetorically important is the way they similarly construct validity as a means of standardization and justification.
of writing assessment as a cultural practice. In other words, these two representative anecdotes illuminate two sides of validity that impede a definitive answer to Newton’s query—what is validity?

My answer to Newton’s question is that validity is a paradoxical set of values that animates assessment. It is an attempt to standardize something that by definition must evolve reflexively to ever-changing cultural contexts. Acknowledging this contradictory nature of validity brings to the forefront its simultaneously constitutive and constraining rhetorical functions in professional writing assessment discourse. As the two anecdotes explained in this chapter underscore, validity holds a formative role as a shaper of assessment theory and practice. Whether it is as a deity of psychometrics, as Ebel describes it, or a contextually-bound methodological principle, or a widely encompassing philosophical principle, validity can best be understood by examining its contradictions because that contradiction illuminates the way validity is adapted as it circulates between different professional communities. In short, the contradictions show its rhetoricity.

As a fundamental principle of assessment, one might expect validity’s definition to be set; however, as a proposition that serves as the foundation for a system of beliefs or a chain of reasoning about assessment, validity is a designation of the right conduct for assessment. Specific definitions of validity are symbolic acts meant to elicit such conduct through what Burke calls social equations that modify the actions of others (Grammar 237).

It may be more productive to consider these competing notions of validity as having a strategic form of rhetorical ambiguity. The representative anecdotes of validity are a means for “clarifying the resources of ambiguity” for validity and examining how
the two controlling anecdotes determine the trajectories of validity discourse (Burke *Grammar* xiii). Understanding how and to what the speaker attributes motive, allows a critic to understand the space between the speaker’s terms and the audience’s terms, a space that must be bridged not through forceful persuasion, but through induced cooperation (Burke *Rhetoric* 43). Ambiguity is a pre-condition for such cooperation. This notion of cooperation is essential to a Burkean study of representation and is a key element of the relational dimension of persuasion. Writing assessment scholarship would benefit from further examination of processes that are semi-conscious, inconspicuous, and mundane, because it is such everyday processes of persuasive representation that invite individuals to collaborate with others via identifications and collaborative symbol sharing. The specific rhetorical energies animating the professional discursive scene of writing assessment are made visible by examining the way validity is deployed as an organizing principle of assessment and the rhetorical relationships drawn within such a deployment. Validity is responsive to these unstated rhetorical energies and is capable of adapting precisely because of the contradictions in its history.

Validity’s dynamism and strategic ambiguity is emblematic of the larger rhetorical function of assessment as a cultural practice. Assessment can be adapted to be whatever is culturally necessary at a certain time. The accountability movement within public education is an example of an extreme adaptation of assessment into surveillance that serves a cultural function far beyond disinterested measurement of human traits. This provides a much better understanding of the contradictory nature of validity as a principle designed to ensure standardization of a practice that is always already keyed to contingent cultural elements. Using Burkean representative anecdotes provides a
dramatic vocabulary for such cultural elements and illuminates the constitutive and constraining effects of validity discourse specifically and writing assessment discourse more broadly.

Deciphering the persuasive processes and effects of writing assessment is one of the overarching goals of this dissertation, but the objective at hand in this chapter was to examine the persuasive effects of the professional language practices by exploring the ways validity is discussed in assessment scholarship. In a time when new political economic changes, such as the rise of corporate educational testing and incentivized educational funding, have dramatically changed the way we look at testing we cannot pretend technical discourse is quarantined from cultural forces of change, including rhetoric. Sloop’s impulse to focus on the visible, accepted truth(s) that accompany a discourse object is essential in an analysis of what experts are willing to claim in professional communities. Burke similarly contends that a rhetorician “must think of rhetoric not in terms of some one particular address but as a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill” (*Rhetoric* 26).

I see professional identifications of both educational measurement scholars and compositionists occurring through a similar pattern of reinforcement and habituation. Careful analysis of commonplace professional language practices (such as invoking validity as a means of justifying or critiquing an assessment practice) reflects some of the external influences informing assessment theory and practice. Through such a perspective we can see validity is a synecdoche that enables simultaneous understandings within the broader rhetorical structure of writing assessment. As dynamic symbols, synecdoches are
problematic for the critic because they are full of paradoxes (Burke *Grammar* 509). For example, arguments using validity as a pivot point for more humanistic arguments—such as the kinds of claims falling under the rubric of the representative anecdote of validity as a pedagogical problem—are an example of validity’s ability to function as a synecdoche in assessment scholarship. However, validity still retains the meaning scribed to it by psychometricians in the early twentieth century.

Boyd and Broad rightly argue that the future of writing assessment will rely on negotiating communally constructed truths through discourse, and I submit that these truths must always be connected to validity because validity is the axiom from which professional representations begin. Scholars and practitioners of writing assessment persuade each other through conflicting truth claims, and representative anecdotes present versions of reality that are sanctioned by a community of experts. Our arguments about validity are of great importance, and I am not proposing we exit the longstanding debate about definitions of validity. As Moore, O’Neill, and Huot rightly contend, our presence in this debate is essential: “We can’t afford to leave the debates about validity to others because chances are good that they won’t share our knowledge, theoretical frameworks, and values” (W117). However, I am suggesting we shift our thinking about the foundational concepts in ways that are attuned to rhetorical questions about writing assessment.

Representative anecdotes such as the two anecdotes of validity explained in this chapter help us see how representations of writing assessment in professional discourse reflect and shape beliefs about the teaching of writing but also reflect and shape beliefs about writing assessment work as part of the labor identity of WPAs. In the next chapter,
I analyze White’s narrative of the 1971 CSU faculty protest as an example of the way the referential frameworks of disciplinary narratives can obscure our consciousness about writing assessment labor.
Chapter Three

Professional Subjectivity and the Neoliberal Unconscious of Writing Assessment

In 1971, English faculty in the California State University (CSU) system publically protested an administrative proposal to significantly expand independent study and equivalency testing programs as part of a move toward offering degrees based on demonstration of academic competencies rather than accumulation of credit hours. English faculty, especially faculty committed to the teaching of first-year composition, responded vehemently to CSU Chancellor Glenn Dumke’s argument that “If a student can demonstrate that he can write well, there is no need for him to sit through a course in elementary composition” as an attack on their professional ethos (“New” 3). As a main player in the faculty resistance, Edward M. White participated in the events preceding the Chancellor’s announcement of the competency-based degree model, the subsequent coordination of faculty resistance, and the eventual design and implementation of a new English Equivalency Exam (EEE) under faculty supervision.

As one who would become a seminal voice in the field of writing assessment, White also interpreted the meaning of this protest for scholars in English Studies in a 2001 narrative in College English. Serving as historian for the field, he christened 1971 as the beginning of the “modern era of writing assessment” in which faculty “gained actual power over the assessment of writing” (“Opening” 307). As a young scholar interested in writing assessment and in the process of being disciplined into the study of rhetoric and composition, I was strongly compelled by this story of a faculty uprising against a seemingly monolithic institution. Indeed, White tells a dramatic tale of valiant
proto-writing program administrators (WPAs) toppling a testing goliath by strategically wielding expertise and rhetoric.  

White’s narrative of the events of 1971 and their aftereffects is emblematic of an impulse to frame the history of college writing assessment within a foundational narrative of disciplinary development wherein it emerges as a recognized sub-field of rhetoric and composition. This origin story of writing assessment parallels much of rhetoric and composition’s own fraught journey toward full recognition in the academy: it focuses on underdog writing teachers who struggle to win a seat at a table dominated by other professionals (in this case, testing specialists from educational measurement and psychometrics) so that they may use their expertise to effect positive change (in the case of assessment, fairer test practices) for themselves and their students and concludes with an improved (although not perfect) situation. Progress wins. However, in such a grand narrative of writing assessment, material historical circumstances receive unequal attention compared to the lofty ideals about disciplinary paradigms. Celebrating faculty control of a system-wide standardized assessment as unquestionably progressive—while warranted given the amount of work put into resisting the Chancellor’s move for increased equivalency testing—elides faculty concerns about the construct validity of the test, omits acknowledgment that the test and equivalency program were still realized despite faculty objections, and glosses over the fact that faculty were shunted into a managerial role for which they were not prepared. In this chapter, I analyze White’s narrative as an example of the way the referential frameworks of disciplinary narratives can obscure our consciousness about labor.
In the last decade, writing assessment scholars have started exploring how discursive relationships are drawn between knowledge and power in ways that benefit capitalism and investigating how these relations delimit the agency of professionals in rhetoric and composition. William Condon, for instance, identifies the early 2000s as a tipping point in writing assessment where a new paradigm blending the traditional emphasis on responsible assessment practices (i.e., fair, valid, reliable) with an understanding that teaching (and teachers) should be integral to assessment design. I agree there is such a tipping point; however, in this chapter, I propose that the “next stage of the conversation” might include increasing sensitivity to political economic pressures and power relations that impinge on writing assessment (Condon “Review” 163). In fact, one of the pillars of fourth-wave writing assessment, as I have defined it, is increased attention to the proliferation of the political economic ideology within educational parlance (e.g., Adler-Kassner and Harrington; Gallagher “Being”).

Writing assessment scholars have explored the influence of technocratic terminology on writing assessment (Lynne), the relationship between assessment and the “troubled economics” of first-year composition (Scott and Brannon 275), the rise of accountability as a lever used in the marketization of higher education in the modern university (Gallagher “Being”), and the unapologetic promotion of efficiency and mechanization in commercial writing assessment (Neal; Perelman). This political economic turn in fourth-wave writing assessment takes seriously the political nature of our labor position within academic institutions embroiled in capitalist economic rationalities and examines how socio-economic changes in higher education work in tandem with neoliberalism.
Defined as doctrines and campaigns for increased deregulation and privatization that operate from the ideology that a competitive free market will result in economic and social progress, neoliberalism is focused on ensuring the economic production of individuals rather than the social welfare of the citizenry as a whole. Because neoliberalism compels behavioral and attitudinal changes through power structures and knowledge-making practices, its ascension in the 1970s brought seismic changes to the university. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades describe these changes as a “blurring of boundaries among markets, states, and higher education” that encourages colleges and universities to act as entrepreneurial entities seeking out opportunities to generate revenue (11). Such boundary blurring can also be seen in subtle changes to university practices that are aligned with neoliberal ideology.

Neoliberalism’s complementary calls for greater accountability and increased productivity, for instance, introduced free market thinking into universities facing drastic funding reductions after decades of robust federal support. The effort to minimize labor costs by creating a more flexible academic workforce arose from this neoliberalization of American public higher education. Reducing labor costs often meant that departments that traditionally relied on tenured positions were restructured to make use of an increasingly insecure workforce of adjunct instructors and graduate teaching assistants managed by a small corps of tenured faculty. Departmental moves in hopes of extracting more labor from teachers are characteristic of universities operating synergistically with neoliberalism. Slaughter and Rhoades identify other such discursive practices as amplifying the vocational relevance of a college education and adopting the language of competition and commerce as further evidence the fact that institutions of higher
education have adopted an economic role of serving the capitalist interests and abandoned (at least in part) higher education’s traditional role of providing opportunity for upward mobility (71).30

Although contemporary writing assessment scholars have begun to address this important theoretical gap with political economic methodologies in writing assessment, there is much more work to be done. My contribution to this endeavor to understand the political economy of writing assessment is a reconfiguration of professional agency as professional subjectivity, which I define as an institutionally assigned identity that is established and maintained within a system of labor. Rather than examining fixed agents working in preexisting and stable rhetorical situations, the revision of agency into subjectivity posits relational forces that shape an individual and the available means of persuasion, which better accounts for the neoliberal milieu that affects writing assessment. If agency is the ability to act on knowledge, then subjectivity is the demand to identify oneself within a hierarchical system. So conceived, professional subjectivity illuminates neoliberal pressures on English faculty tasked with designing, conducting, and interpreting writing assessments and yields investigation of what those discourses do to professionals who work in institutions of higher education and by what process those effects occur.

I use the term subjectivity in a Foucauldian sense. In his many discussions of subjectivity as subjugation, Michel Foucault presents three key premises that are essential to my notion of subjectivity: first, subjectivity is historically constituted (Power 117); second, subjects constitute themselves (Discipline 31); and, third, subjectivization occurs through disciplinary practices (Discipline 137). Foucault’s notion of a historically self-
constituted subject stands in contrast to traditional notions of identity as fixed, historically invariant, and transcendent. Relieved of static and deterministic notions of identity, such an orientation to subjectivity enables investigation of the process by which one is disciplined into a subjectivity. Although a subject may have agency—in other words, may consciously act upon knowledge—a subjectivity differs from agency in that it appears stable while constantly undergoing adaptive change as a result of a never-ending relational process. A professional subjectivity is the result of situating oneself in relation to seats of power (including institutional powers as well as political economic ideologies such as neoliberalism) in a formal labor setting.

Combining Foucault’s three propositions, I understand professional subjectivity to be a disciplining force. By this I mean that subjectivization highlights how cultural practices such as ethics, religion, and politics create individuated bodies well-suited for ideological work in educational institutions (Discipline 136). Disciplined bodies, as Foucault describes them, are molded not only by training in techniques or skills, but also by conditioning individuals to act in certain ways. Foucault emphasizes conduct as a key term in understanding subjectivity and power because “to ‘conduct’ is at the same time to ‘lead’ others…and a way of behaving within a more or less open field of possibilities” (“Subject” 789). This conditioning is an ideological process. Ideology is typically defined in two ways: first, a collection of beliefs and doctrines that is shared by a social group; and, second, a collection of doctrines and beliefs that explicitly forms the basis of a system of power, such as a political or economic system. Rationality, then, as the state of being (or believing oneself to be) rational, implies congruity between one’s beliefs and
one’s actions. If subjectivity is a disciplining force that conditions individuals, then we
must consider how it is maintained.

A Foucauldian subjectivity is reinforced by the specter of surveillance (both
external and self-imposed) rather than by explicit coercion or brute force. In other words,
subjectivization involves individuals’ internalization of a certain subject-specific conduct
that, in turn, influences a subject’s self-regulation. Foucault’s often-cited example of a
stop sign as a means of controlling traffic—not through fear of legal repercussions but
through the evaluation of the action of not stopping at a stop sign through a particular
disciplinary lens as being wrong—demonstrates such self-governing. Likewise, in
professional contexts, subjects regulate their own and others’ conduct within a bandwidth
of acceptable behavior. The hierarchy of the classroom, contemporary workplace
dynamics, academic codes of conduct, and discipline-specific best practices advocated by
professional organizations are but a handful of examples of the kinds of ideological
messages that inform professionals’ processes of reasoning and condition a particular
subjectivity. Although we may presume leading a writing program would be governed by
judgments from a disciplinary level (e.g., best practices in composition studies), I
speculate that there are other layers of institutional pressures informing WPA work. In
analyzing the narrative example in this chapter, I aim to illuminate how institutional
power relationships create a particular writing assessment subjectivity that professionals
in rhetoric and composition may have unconsciously adopted.

Rhetoric and composition functions as Foucauldian disciplinary structure in two
ways. First, as an academic discipline, it is built around a specialized knowledge base,
utilizes methodologies of inquiry, and has standards for ethical conduct typical of most
modern academic disciplines. Second, unlike other disciplines, rhetoric and composition shapes individuals into subjectivities that are well-suited to work in administrative capacities in hierarchical institutions of higher education. Given these functions, investigating professional subjectivization requires complementing the conception of the individual as an agentive subject with an understanding of institutions as systems of power. Analyzing the process of professional subjectivization experienced by rhetoric and composition faculty working in WPA roles disrupts the grand narrative of writing assessment’s march toward disciplinary and institutional legitimation to focus on the discursive process of creating professional subjectivities via disciplinary narratives. In other words, I reexamine White’s narrative to better understand the rhetoric effects of such disciplinary narratives in terms of the formation of professional subjects.

Disciplinary narratives are powerfully rhetorical because they are not only interpretations of past events but also a means of disseminating a particular vision of rhetoric and composition faculty as professional subjects. All academic professionals, authorized by virtue of their membership to a community of workers with a shared understanding of the scope of their work, a core body of knowledge, and standards for ethical behavior, are constrained by their formal labor relationships within an institution of higher education and by political economic ideologies about what it means to work as an intellectual within an institutional setting. I adopt a critical lens attuned to professional subjectivities to examine power relationships and explore the ideological complexities of the administrative WPAs and other English faculty in charge of assessment, which are elements normally obscured in professional narratives of writing assessment. As attempts to make sense of the world through storytelling, narratives tell how individuals come to
terms with elements of their experiences by coding them through ideological values and emotional preferences. Through such ideological coding and decoding, narratives model what to believe and how to feel. Professionals in rhetoric and composition use these codes to make sense of these experiences and self-regulate their behaviors and attitudes.

In this chapter, I argue that writing assessment is informed by a cluster of rationalities forming a neoliberal unconscious that prioritizes managerial values in order to prescribe standards for professional behavior that ensure writing assessment labor serves the political economic agenda of the university. Because ideologies are not necessarily consciously acknowledged, articulating the rhetorical linkages between discursive choices and ideology is not as simple as identifying an underlying warrant in the Toulmin analysis that unveils a direct chain of reasoning connecting evidence to claims. Our behavior may be governed by sources of reason (like ideologies and their attendant rationalities) that are unconscious. However, unconscious ideologies can be unmasked by asking the right questions about the generic practice of narratives in professional writing assessment discourse.

To examine the neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment, we might begin by asking how an internalization of free-market logics has shaped the formal and informal disciplining of rhetoric and composition professionals by establishing an interpretive framework that unconsciously affects us. When analyzed through a political economic lens, rhetoric and composition narratives written in forums such as academic journals refereed by members of professional organizations provide evidence of this neoliberal unconscious at work. Using the framework of professional subjectivity to examine narratives makes sense of the apparent contradictions in disciplinary narratives such as
White’s narrative about 1971 that simultaneously reproduces market logics concerned with economic imperatives such as efficiency, and valorizes individual activism against seemingly monolithic institutions. What at first appears contradictory becomes harmonious when read through layers of institutional rationalities.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I further explain my conceptual pivot from professional agency to professional subjectivity by reviewing the Porter et al.-Bousquet debate about sources of agency available to WPAs who aim to change institutions and Strickland’s interjection into this polemic that highlights how individual professionals are shaped into institutional subjects by unconscious rationalities. I use this political economic scholarship on WPA as a context in which to build a framework for discerning professional subjectivity from agency that is suitable for examining WPA subjectivities. Studying adaptations made by faculty in managerial roles in response to institutional pressures as precisely that—alterations in behavior or attitude in response to political economic forces—opens up new understandings of how discourses discipline professional subjects. Second, I use this framework of professional subjectivity to reexamine White’s reflection about 1971 as an anchoring example by comparing his narrative to Chancellor Dumke’s speech announcing the English equivalency testing program. I analyze White’s narrative not to cast doubt on his retrospection, but to illuminate how such a narrative memorializing the actions of individuals as agents of change ushering in a new epoch of writing assessment gives attention to faculty agency while obscuring professional subjectivities one must adopt to access that agency. I conclude by exploring the pervasiveness and persuasive effects of unconscious
engagement with the neoliberal rationalities in professional narratives and consider the political impact of new critical approaches.

**Neoliberalism and the Professional Subjectivization of WPA as Assessors**

A conceptual reorganization that replaces agency with professional subjectivity might begin by abandoning the idea that all rationalities governing individual and collective attitudes and behaviors are consciously knowable. Accounting for an unconscious ideological frame of interpretation and its attendant rationalities establishes limits and domains of agentic power and may even identify potential paths of action. Traditional models of agency are not capable of fully explaining the role of ideology and rationality because they assume rhetoric to move audiences through encoded messages those individual auditors then consciously decode and act upon. An alternative model would illuminate the persuasive effects of the underlying rationalities that affect those coding and decoding processes.

One cluster of rationalities that govern writing assessment emerges from a neoliberal political economic ideology. Neoliberalism exists dually in political economic and cultural discourses. As a political economic ideology, neoliberalism promotes competition as the prime economic rationality. So conceived, neoliberalism constructs uneven power dynamics that result in perpetual and ubiquitous economic competition. In other words, everything proceeds through an economic logic of competition. As a cultural ideology, neoliberalism marketizes everyday life activities, including education.

To understand institutional structures and their influence on the professional subjectivities of WPAs, who are most often in charge of post-secondary writing
assessment, we must first adopt an understanding of the university as an institution. In their 2000 *CCC* article, James Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles define institutions as spatially demarcated “rhetorical systems of decision-making that exercise power” (621). A university is one such rhetorical system imbued with power by its geography, mission, history, and control over knowledge-making practices. Porter et al.’s insistence on institutions as specialized entities counters the tendency to consider institutions as monolithic. On the contrary, they define institutions as inherently changeable because they “contain spaces for reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action” (Porter et al. 613). Consequently, the “rhetorical action” of individuals can critique but also “rewrite” an institution (Porter et al. 613). Porter et al. offer the example of an administrative move to establish a usability lab at Purdue University as an “argumentative lever in securing administrative support for professional writing” (629). The authors maintain that the dedication of material resources to the lab signaled the importance of professional writing at Purdue and contributed to a slow but progressive change in the institution. The usability lab example demonstrates Porter et al.’s claim that rewriting the purpose of a physical space within the university—what they call a “micropolitical and rhetorical use of space”—can constitute effective institutional change (630).

The lab example also communicates their belief in the agency of academic workers in administrative positions to effect change by maneuvering more effectively within institutional constraints (Porter et al. 630). Referencing universities as institutions of human design, they remark that if “we made ‘em, we can fix ‘em” (Porter et al. 611). Thus, they advocate WPAs rely on their individual agency to enact micro-changes as a
means of reshaping local institutions from the bottom up. According to them, previous methodologies for action against institutions—especially administrative, classroom, and disciplinary critique—are inadequate because they lack “pragmatic mechanism[s] for change,” such as the fight for the usability lab at Purdue (Porter et al. 612). Individual academics, they argue, should exploit opportunities for productive change that exist in every institution. No doubt, Porter et al. locate the possibility for change within the individual human agency of academics who adopt such “an activist methodology” in their administrative work with the goal of improving the lives of those engaged with the institution in some form—part-time and full-time academic workers, students, writers, and local community members (611). Within Porter et al.’s conception of the university as a human-designed institution, WPAs are especially well-positioned to take advantage of opportunities for rhetorical action because of the professional agency available to them by virtue of their administrative role.

Given these two complementary elements of Porter et al.’s institutions—they are spatial entities and individuals who maneuver within them have the power to change them—it is clear that for the authors the key institutional identity to examine and critique is one’s own local brick-and-mortar institution. Their methodology for institutional critique marks the local institution as the point at which change is possible. Engaging in this individual agency allows WPAs to effect change at the departmental level in hopes of slowly changing the institution. However, this presumes a notion of an agent as an active doer capable of changing institutions and gives inadequate attention to the ways in which institutions shape academic professionals. Although the theory of action Porter and his colleagues posit works well in material institutions that are the physical workplaces of
rhetoric and composition professionals, there is a second kind of institution that profoundly disciplines rhetoric and composition workers: political economic institutions.

In his response to Porter et al.’s methodology for institutional critique, Marc Bousquet expands the scope from local institutions to global ones. Specifically, he identifies the political economic institution of neoliberalism as impinging forcefully on rhetoric and composition. As an extension of liberalism, which assumes all individuals act rationally to maximize their own personal benefits, the economic rationality behind neoliberalism dictates that unfettered free enterprise is essential to capitalism’s aim of maximizing profits. Toward this goal, neoliberals argue government regulations should be lifted in order to allow businesses and individuals to more freely pursue their capitalist interests. This faith in free enterprise is incompatible with the notion of the welfare state wherein the government’s role is to provide services for the public good, thus ensuring the welfare of the citizenry as a whole rather than maximizing profits of individuals.

At the disciplinary level, Bousquet sees the effects of neoliberal ideology in new emphases on competition, individualism, and privatization that force a turn away from critical theory and toward pragmatism, increased professional acquiescence to new market rationalities, and a proliferation of rhetoric that frames education in a vocational and technical way. His critique of Porter et al.’s methodology highlights how such a management theory of action reflects all of these neoliberal ideals. Neoliberal doctrines and policies dictate that money spent on education is wasted unless it can be proven to enhance efficiency of the system and improve outcomes in terms of global economic competition. To achieve these aims, neoliberal ideologies deploy market place metaphors to incite institutional change. For higher education, this means students become not
learners but future workers who come to college to gain the skills necessary to be effective in a global labor market; and, consequently, competition and accountability are adopted as means of encouraging efficiency and high standards.

Instead of making the most of pragmatic agency in local settings, as Porter et al. suggest, Bousquet insists on a collective labor-based agency organized in resistance to neoliberalism’s creep into higher education. He asserts rhetoric and composition professionals should “shed the desire for control and embrace the reality of collective agency” as the best solution to address the many problems within institutional contexts (Bousquet 518). In doing so, Bousquet introduces an alternative theory of action: a Marxist labor theory (494). Such a theory, he clarifies, would rely on a rhetoric of solidarity and would aim to empower individuals to act collaboratively in groups, thus harnessing a group agency that is not bound to managerial positions such as that of the WPA. A labor consciousness may not be necessary for Porter et al. because of their contrasting notion of an institution as a local rather than global entity. Bousquet, however, believes that in its reliance on isolated agents concerned only with pragmatic moves for local change, Porter et al.’s vision of WPAs as independent agents capable of maneuvering adroitly within a single university setting forecloses the kind of group identity he sees as an essential ingredient for global institutional change. Yet, one could argue (and, in fact Porter et al. do so in their responses; see Grabill, Porter, Blyth, and Miles) that Bousquet’s collectivism so strongly favors a labor-based identity that it dismisses the political potential of smaller-scale change in local settings that Porter and his collaborators advocate in their postmodern theory of action.
This is not to suggest that Porter et al.’s theory ignores labor concerns; in fact, their method of institutional critique is specifically designed for WPAs as members of a managerial class. In a footnote clarifying a WPA’s institutional positionality, the authors acknowledge they are “assuming an agent of fairly powerful status working within an institution: probably a member of the managerial or professional class who has entered an institution…in some employee status that allows him or her to begin to make changes at least at a local level” (634). In other words, Porter and his coauthors identify the position of the WPA as one with intrinsic agency because it is institutionally constructed as a management position with some degree of power and authority within a material university. Bousquet, on the other hand, contends that neoliberalism makes most WPA positions far more precarious than Porter et al. presume them to be. Indeed, Bousquet reminds us, a WPA’s position as manager of a writing program does not come with any increased job security; in fact, in a neoliberal political economy, “lower management is particularly vulnerable, highly individuated, and easily replaced” (Bousquet 497). This precarity is part of what gives the WPA professional-managerial position a “contradictory class status” (Bousquet 497). These contradictions include the fact that WPAs and higher-level institutional administrators have different relationships to the institutions that employ them. WPAs, in particular, remain closely connected to the work of teaching, but adopt a managerial persona that creates an emotional connection to other positions that are higher in the status economy (Bousquet 497). Ultimately, neither Porter et al.’s argument for embracing the managerial role nor Bousquet’s call to reject the managerial role entirely and envision the university without a WPA are satisfactory answers to the question of how best to change institutions.
This dissatisfaction comes, in part, because Porter et al. and Bousquet linger on three interconnected questions about institutional change—one, where is the institutional site; two, how does a professional’s position in relation to the institution alter the available means of persuasion; and, three, how does it alter one’s understanding of these available means? These questions are essential to the kind of tactical and strategic response Porter et al. and Bousquet respectively advocate. However, their vigilant emphasis on the means of resisting institutional pressures leapfrogs over an even more fundamental question: by what means do these institutions shape rhetoric and composition professionals? In other words, how exactly do these educational and political economic institutions condition us to act in certain ways and not others?

Strickland offers an answer to this question by defining educational institutions as discursive entities, by which she means they are conduits for professional subjectivization that materially reward certain behaviors while condemning others and fostering emotional predispositions that work to maintain the dominant political economic ideology. Her material history of composition identifies capitalist managerialism as one such means that disciplines rhetoric and composition. She names this phenomenon the managerial unconscious of rhetoric and composition. Modeled after Fredric Jameson’s framework of the political unconscious as a means for interpreting history, the managerial unconscious emphasizes how rhetoric and composition has always been “connected to material, hierarchical workplaces” even though disciplinary histories emphasize pedagogical and research imperatives as the forces animating the discipline (Strickland Managerial 5). According to Strickland, the fact that our disciplinary gaze is directed toward teaching and research is no idiosyncrasy: the emphasis is a result of
divisions of labor in response to the new corporate university that assigned differing values to different forms of intellectual labor (teaching and researching) and rewarded programmatic development that reinforced stratification of labor.

Instead of assuming the perspective of an individual maneuvering within an institution (as Porter et al. do) or a collective of workers aiming to deconstruct it (à la Bousquet), Strickland adopts a critical stance that is external to individual rhetoric and composition professionals. She turns her attention to the ubiquitous fog of discursive forces—oral, written, and performed messages about how and why one should administrate—and tries to figure out by what means those forces shape individuals through subjectivity. Subjectivity is not something intrinsic to a professional, but relational: a subjectivity is discursively created by an individual’s rhetorical relationships to the institution and to other ideological structures (e.g., disciplines and professional affiliations). According to Strickland, writing programs were made possible by composition’s centrality in institutions where writing is not only an essential skill, but also a management tool to observe and organize rhetoric and composition labor by disciplining rhetoric and composition professionals.

Strickland argues that this underlying managerial imperative within rhetoric and composition, however, is obscured in the generic tendencies of disciplinary histories and narratives of the field of writing assessment. Such obscuring, Strickland claims, can be seen in “the disjunction between the usual, official schooling provided by and produced in rhetoric and composition graduate programs and the unusual, unofficial one (the one that has often never been provided until after a job is taken)” (Managerial 3). She explains this disjunction as the result of an unconscious framework that conditions
rhetoric and composition professionals to value teaching and research by representing such work in the canonical histories of the field and annexing administrative work into specialized forums sponsored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA). This managerial unconscious codes certain practices and behaviors as ideologically important given the values of the field.

As an example of the effects of this unconscious, we can compare the pedagogical logics implied by the foundational disciplinary histories to Strickland’s claim that managerial rhetoric and composition labor—including programmatic writing assessment—emerges from the “corporate logic of scientific management,” wherein labor is divided in order to increase efficiency (Managerial 31). Historians, such as James Berlin and Robert Connors, identify the unpreparedness of student writers entering the university as the exigency that instantiated the ubiquitous first-year writing requirement and, consequently, called into being the modern discipline of rhetoric and composition. Berlin and Connors further attribute the lowered status of composition to this crisis of student unpreparedness: rhetoric and composition’s pedagogical imperative, they separately claim, was problematic in English departments that prioritized research over teaching in the 1960s. At this time, English departments consisted almost entirely of literature scholars rushing to professionalize and specialize (Ohmann). Strickland contends that when Berlin’s and Connors’ foundational histories were written in 1987 and 1997, respectively, the scientific management logic organizing rhetoric and composition labor in the 1970s was obscured in favor of lines of reasoning that ascribe the feminization of writing instruction—evidenced by gendered divisions of labor, pay inequities, and differentiated prestige—to the teaching-research dichotomy within
English Studies rather than labor practices being influenced by neoliberal calls for more management.

To account for this difference in representation of the discipline’s guiding logics, one must recall Foucault’s second and third propositions—subjects constitute themselves and subjectivization occurs through practices. An author writing a history of a discipline is going to provide a means for others to self-discipline into bodies appropriate for academic work in the new economy. Following this line of reasoning, a history of professional work in a disciplinary forum such as a journal published by a professional organization is not just exposition—it is a persuasive text that function unconsciously to make a specific subjectivity appealing to a particular group of professionals through ideological codes and emotional connections (i.e., influencing people’s actions and behaviors through positive connections to practices like teaching). Just as narratives in rhetoric and composition create a positive emotional relationship to professional practices (a teaching subject in Strickland’s case), writing assessment narratives create a positive emotional connection to a professional practice that is central to the desired subjectivity of an assessing subject.

An example of concealing managerial elements of WPA work can be seen in the celebrations of the figure of the heroic WPA, a trope Porter et al., Bousquet, and Strickland each address. Porter and his co-authors promote the heroic WPA figure because they believe individuals and autonomous agents can change institutions through conscious rhetorical action—specifically, rhetorical action that better aligns programs and curriculum with the principles of rhetoric and composition. On the other hand, Bousquet fully rejects the trope of the heroic WPA as dangerously inaccurate and imagines instead
a university without a WPA as the only way of truly changing institutions. Strickland mediates these two extremes by advocating an operative approach to WPA work that honors the informed intuition of rhetoric and composition professionals, but also resists the tendency to narrate the WPA as a heroic figure because such a tendency typifies the managerial unconscious.

If vigilant focus on the agency of the WPA blinds us to the managerial function of that labor position, then my pivoting from professional agency to professional subjectivity aims to better illuminate the neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment. Understanding institutions as discursive entities, not material specialized places, forces us to ask different questions as rhetorical critics. Although it may well still be valuable to theorize how best to maneuver local institutional geography and politics (which was the most asked question when White went on a series of campus consultations after the 1971 CSU protest), I venture that we may get more from asking what institutional discourse does, consciously and unconsciously, to affect our agentive capacities. Exploring the neoliberal unconscious is one means of asking how institutions shape us through the process of subjectivization. My framework for analysis of the neoliberal unconscious adopts Porter et al.’s conception of institutions as rhetorical entities that can be changed by human agents, but augments it with Bousquet’s concern about neoliberalism as an overarching institution that exerts force on WPAs even though it exists outside the material and spatial context of an individual academic institution.

Answering Strickland’s call for more robust materiality to counterbalance the unconscious framework of rhetoric and composition, I propose we think of the generic practice of narratives in professional writing assessment discourse as existing within four
concentric circles of discursive influence delineated by these four key terms (see Figure 1 below).

![Figure 1 - The Neoliberal Unconscious of Writing Assessment]

Moving inward, the outermost sphere of the political economy of neoliberalism subsumes the discursive sphere of the discipline, the local institution—such as one’s home university—and finally, the immediate working conditions of a typical WPA. The arrows illustrate the different vantage points afforded by an emphasis on agency versus subjectivity. Positing agency as something intrinsic to the WPA position, narratives of writing assessment typically adopt the perspective of a WPA looking outward toward the local institutional context and political economic terrain. An emphasis on subjectivity, however, takes a perspective that examines the compounding rhetorical force of
institutional (both local and global, material and discursive) contexts on WPAs. This approach to subjectivity allows one to analyze professional narratives as texts that are embedded within the rhetorical dynamics of disciplinary and political economic discourses, encouraging identification as an academic worker who is subjected to a managerial labor position within an institutional system that does not reward that managerial labor as traditional intellectual work.

A subjectivity framework enables analysis of professional agency as something that is not generated by one’s spatial situatedness within the geography of a brick-and-mortar institution (as Porter et al. suggest) but as something that emerges from subjective positionality. Returning to the example of the WPA as an agentive subject in Porter et al. and Strickland’s conceptions, we can see how aspects of WPA work can be reinterpreted if we ask questions of subjectivity in addition to agency. Table 2 presents several key aspects of the heroic WPA trope that can be understood very differently through a subjectivity lens rather than an agency lens.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Subjectivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WPAs have a “powerful status” (Porter et al.)</td>
<td>WPAs experience an intensified subjectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPA is an employment status that allows one to make changes at local level (Porter et al.)</td>
<td>WPA is a managerial position with subjective restraints and mandated responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPA is a contradictory class status (Bousquet)</td>
<td>WPA has a designed precarity typical of middle management (i.e., it occurs not as a matter of circumstance)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – The Analytic Shift from Agency to Subjectivity

Such rereading of agency as subjectivity highlights otherwise obscured ideological forces impinging on WPA work, including writing assessment. To better understand the
political economic forces informing writing assessment, we need to adapt our notion of agency to account for rationalities that govern individual and collective behavior.

One cluster of rationalities that governs writing assessment emerges from a neoliberal political economic ideology. Academic workers in the fledgling field of rhetoric and composition felt the discursive influence of neoliberalism’s rise in the 1970s as the accountability movement and “back to basics” approach to educational reform ushered in expectations for reform that were inflected by the language market competition. Many local institutions adapted in light of this reform discourse by establishing basic writing programs in the 1970s that, in turn, created a need for new administrative appointments, such as directors of writing centers and directors of freshman composition (Strickland “Making” 129). As Strickland’s research suggests, these shifts in program structure and administration shaped the discipline: many PhD programs in rhetoric and composition were created in 1970s and 1980s, in part to train people who could direct university writing programs (Strickland “Making” 129). According to Strickland, the rapid increase in junior faculty being hired into WPA positions hastened the establishment of the CWPA in 1976, which further ingrained this administrative element into the identity of rhetoric and composition because writing program administration became an official position rather than service task. This shift from ephemeral work to an institutionally recognized labor position created the need for a WPA group identity or what Strickland calls a “collective consciousness,” which, in turn, informs self-image and agentive capabilities (Managerial 86).

Writing assessment’s foundational narratives display a similar tendency to obscure the managerial elements of assessment labor in favor of the more positive
ideological connections to the work of teaching writing. This inclination can be seen in
the many calls to align assessment practices with writing pedagogy so that the paradigm
of assessment is reflective of the values of rhetoric and composition (e.g., Broad; Huot;
Lynne). Yet the uptick in writing assessment narratives in the 1970s represents a
watershed moment in the development of professional subjectivities and deserves more
critical attention than it has yet received. Professional narratives about writing assessment
are always already entrenched within the disciplinary discourse of rhetoric and
composition and political economic rationalities that shape institutions of higher
education, and are designed as a way to discipline faculty responsible for writing
assessment by compelling them to adopt a particular professional subjectivity in relation
to institutional powers. Early narratives that feature a prototypical WPA as a heroic figure
are, in particular, coded and sustained by local priorities of particular institutions,
disciplinary values from English studies, and ideologies of neoliberalism. Yet, this
function is concealed: the influence of institutional and political economic pressures are
unmentioned or under-explored in professional writing assessment narratives. In the next
section, I use this professional subjectivity framework to illuminate an otherwise
obscured neoliberal unconscious in White’s narrative of 1971.

The Professional Subjectivity of Proto-WPAs in the CSU System

In this section, I use the framework of professional subjectivity as something that
is not generated by one’s spatial situatedness within the geography of a specific material
institution, but in relation to institutions as ideological systems that exert power on
human agents to reexamine White’s narrative historicizing the events of 1971 in the CSU
system. In other words, this analysis follows the direction of the subjectivity arrow in Figure 1 to proceed from the broadest sphere of discursive influence (neoliberal political economy) to the narrowest (the local working conditions of a typical WPA position). To provide adequate context, I first review Dumke’s 1971 proposal, then offer a brief overview of White’s accounts of the faculty protest spanning the 1971 and 1972 academic years before applying the professional subjectivity framework to illuminate ideological perspectives and rhetorical elements signaling the neoliberal unconscious animating both Dumke’s proposal and White’s narrative.

On January 27, 1971, Dumke, then-Chancellor of the CSU (known then as the California State Colleges), delivered a speech announcing his “new approach to higher education” designed in response to “the increasing numbers of persons who want to be educated and the increasing pressures upon the tax dollar, both in California and throughout the nation” (“A New” 1). According to Dumke, “Students and faculties and publics alike” were already questioning the efficacy of the current system and were not confident the system could withstand the predicted enrollment increase (“A New” 1). His vision sought to ameliorate these concerns by accomplishing three goals: expand opportunities for current and potential students, improve quality of educational programs, and increase the value the university provided to students and taxpayers (Dumke “A New” 1). To accomplish these goals, Dumke outlines two specific proposals. First, he suggests transitioning from a credit-hour model to a competency-based model of education. Second, he announces a reevaluation of operational practices such as facilities use and course scheduling to open up more sections of classes in the evenings and weekends.
The first proposal is what sparked faculty resistance. Dumke admits his first proposal “will be considered by some as revolutionary in nature,” but explains its role in redesigning education to be “more appropriate to our times” (“A New” 2). Dumke’s proposal explains that an appropriate educational system must be more efficient and economical than the present model given the decrease in federal funding for education in the 1970s. Instead of the “lock-step, time-serving practice of offering a degree based the accumulation of credits, hours, semesters, and classes attended,” Dumke proposes that the nineteen campuses of the university award “degrees based on academic achievement, carefully measured and evaluated by competent faculties” (“A New” 2). He specifically proposes students be excused from general education course requirements through “the effective use of advanced placement, comprehensive entrance examinations, and challenge examinations” (Dumke “A New” 3). Citing significant improvements in secondary education in the decades after Sputnik, Dumke endorses a competency-based system relying on achievement testing (a term he uses interchangeably with equivalency testing) as “more economical, both in dollars and time” than traditional credit-based approaches because it would allow higher-ability students to test out of general education courses (“A New” 2).

The chancellor’s proposal depicts faculty as laborers whose workloads can be dramatically reorganized without their consent to meet the changing economic needs of the system for which they work. In Dumke’s words, the change would essentially alter “the task and function of the college faculty” (“A New” 4). Instead of primarily teaching, “The individual faculty member would serve more in the capacity of adviser and resource consultant for students, and evaluator of student achievement” (“A New” 4). In this
advisory capacity faculty would direct students through independent learning processes and then evaluate their achievements through assessments. Given this increase in time spent advising and evaluating individual students, Dumke’s plan for reform includes a commensurate reduction of classroom teaching. He predicts that the adoption of an achievement-based model of education would eventually free up faculty time for such advising and assessing because the overall amount of class offerings would be lowered (“A New” 4). In light of this redistribution of time, Dumke foresees the need for a new method of calculating faculty workload that could replace the “outdated” twelve-hours-in-class standard, but he offers no details about such a method other than encouraging revision of “existing methods of providing workload credit for faculty” (“A New” 3-4).

Although Dumke is clear in his intent to transition faculty from the role of classroom teachers to advisors and assessors of individual student learning, he is less exact about the design and management of those achievement assessments.

Early in his proposal, Dumke states that it will be the responsibility of faculty members “to identify the skills, knowledge, appreciations, and understandings which they seek for students” as part of the process of designing “broad, demanding, thorough, and perceptive examinations” (“A New” 3). However, he later advocates campuses in the CSU system change their policies to accept national test scores in the same manner they accept transfer credits “sight unseen” (Dumke “A New” 3). At this time, programs such as the Educational Testing Service’s College Level Achievement Program offered “recognized examinations used nationally in the areas of general education breadth requirements,” and Dumke implies that campuses could adopt such exams in lieu of faculty designing their own local versions (“A New” 3). He also calls for rewarding
departments and programs for “more aggressive and flexible use” of pre-existing challenge exams that were already in use across all campuses (Dumke “A New” 3).

White’s version of events starts several months after the Chancellor’s January address, a speech White says “received moderate press coverage and was quickly forgotten” (“Opening” 312). According to White’s narrative, Dumke covertly struck a deal with the ETS over the summer of 1971. Per the agreement, ETS would offer College Level Examination Program (CLEP) examinations free of charge to all incoming students at two CSU campuses in exchange for publicity for the organization and its CLEP program (“Opening” 312). Dumke persuaded the campus presidents at San Francisco and Bakersfield to allow students to earn up to six credits for passing scores and realized the first step in his vision of a competency-based education model in the CSU system (White “Opening” 312).

Gerhard Friederich, the vice chancellor of academic affairs for the CSU at the time and former English faculty member, leaked details of this arrangement to White and two other Executive Board members of the CSU English Council, a regional affiliate of the California Teachers Association and the National Council of Teachers of English that held two annual gatherings for all CSU English department chairs and select faculty representatives. Together the three prepared a resolution in opposition of equivalency testing for the Council’s fall 1971 meeting, which was passed by the general membership. White recalls that the resolution expressed faculty “outrage” about the idea of using five CLEP general exams because all of them, including the English exam, were “multiple-choice tests, necessarily trivializing their extensive subject matter” (“Opening” 312.). In addition to the professional response against the CLEP exams articulated in the
unanimously approved resolution, White and fellow English Council members simultaneously launched a public protest. “Several among us were stringers for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle,*” White explains, “and we called in all debts on those newspapers” to mobilize journalists—“our natural allies on these matters”—in publically lambasting the chancellor’s plan (“Opening” 314). As a result, “The same day our outraged (or was it shocked?) resolution reached the chancellor, he was reading front-page stories mocking his personal creation of ‘instant sophomores’” (White “Opening” 314).

After this dually professional and public rebuke of the chancellor’s plan, a compromise between English faculty and CSU administration was reached. The chancellor dissolved his partnership with ETS and instead transferred management of the CSU English equivalency program to the English Council, which aligned with the Council’s argument that if equivalency testing must be done, that faculty should be the ones evaluating students, not an outside agency like ETS (White “Opening” 314). White reflects that “We hardly noticed that by including that concession to the overall goals of the chancellor we had planted the seeds of compromise” (“Opening” 314). White and several other department chairs subsequently designed and implemented a new test for credit-by-examination of English composition, the English Equivalency Exam (EEE), which included an impromptu, holistically-scored essay alongside a multiple-choice test. This incarnation of the EEE operated between 1973 and 1988 when it was replaced by English Placement Test (EPT) (White “Opening” 315).

White memorializes the important events of the fall of 1971 as the dawn of a new era of writing assessment in which English faculty use their expertise to influence large-
scale assessments and writing assessment theory. At the same time, his narrative necessarily delimits the rhetorical situation of writing assessment and elides the political economic forces motivating Chancellor Dumke’s call for reform. In order to highlight these otherwise obscured rhetorical elements, I next examine how Dumke’s vision of the university as a system to be managed through a market rationale replaces faculty expertise with a professional subjectivity that is irrevocably tied to a highly managed labor system.

Dumke was a manager of a large system of higher education undergoing tectonic change in the 1970s after the passage of the Donahoe Higher Education Act of 1960, more popularly known as the California Master Plan for Higher Education. The California Master Plan was the result of decades of ideological change and state-level policymaking. Although it was strongly aligned with egalitarian principles, the plan also explicitly linked public higher education institutionally and ideologically with the changing political economy in the mid-twentieth century. This linkage required a reorganization of the California system of higher education to clearly articulate differentiated political economic functions for the three segments of public tertiary education, each of which would be governed by separate administrative bodies. As outlined by the Master Plan, the CSU system has a deeper commitment to undergraduate education than the research universities, but is still considered more comprehensive and less vocational than community colleges. In this middle-ground, the CSU philosophically epitomizes much of the mission of mass higher education with an open-admissions policy guaranteeing admission to the top one-third of California high school students. At the same time, the CSU is also a crucial training ground for future middle-class workers,
especially K-12 teachers. Dumke’s role was to lead this newly articulated middle-tier of higher education, which was a task he believed required reconceiving academic governance.

In a paper prepared for a 1970 collection on the complexities of academic governance in a large state system of higher education, Dumke writes that, “The dispersed decision-making process, the one-man-one-vote principle, the concept of faculty and/or students being the nucleus of campus governance, simply did not work” in the CSU in the 1960s (“Academic” 9). This democratic system was, in his words, “unworkable” (Dumke “Academic” 10). To reign in the unwieldy institution of the CSU, faculty must assume a professional subjectivity in relation to the Chancellor and Board of Trustees as two heads of a system-wide administrative hydra, which was a relatively new hierarchy of power established by the Master Plan.35 According to Dumke, granting unquestioned authority in central administration solved the nagging “issue of advice versus consent” (“Academic” 10). He adamantly argues, “there is a difference between listening and obeying, between advice and consent. There is a difference between communication and input and allowing decisions to be made by those providing the input” (“Academic” 10). The difference, he says, is that “The latter is unacceptable and what is more to the point, unworkable” in a system like the CSU (“Academic” 10). What is workable and acceptable, according to Dumke, is a centralized strong administrative authority. His leadership of the CSU in the 1970s reflects this vision of “a clearly delineated and understandable hierarchical organizational pattern where faculty and student input is received but where authority and responsibility are vested in the accountable administrator” (“Academic” 11).
Within this hierarchical system, Dumke presumes faculty to be workers whose labor should be determined by the system that employs them. Although he recognizes that faculty support for such a reform is essential—“The changes I propose cannot be brought about effectively without the support of the colleges and their faculties. …The use of all our best talent will be essential” (“A New” 8)—neither Dumke’s speech nor the written version of his new vision for the CSU mentions consulting with faculty members about shifting job expectations from teaching and research to advising and assessment. The article version of his proposal notes that he formally presented his proposals to the Trustees and discussed the plan for reform with campus presidents and chairman of the academic senate, but does not include any mention of discussion with faculty members at large (“A New” 1). Such elision of faculty input is noteworthy because the chancellor’s plan supposes a role for faculty that strips away both disciplinary identity and an ethos of professionalism, replacing those identifications with an academic worker subjectivity through which faculty members serve new bureaucratic purposes for the campus that employs them. In short, faculty are represented as workers whose job duties can be reassigned per the needs of the system without their consent. In the chancellor’s reconceptualization of the CSU, the educational values that privilege students and faculty are subsumed by market demands and arguments framed by neoliberal rationalities.

White’s narrative is emblematic of rhetoric and composition’s tendency to respond to reform rhetoric in pragmatic ways. Such pragmatic responses appear to be an effect of a neoliberal unconscious because they evince how those positioned in a particular professional subjectivity are conditioned to respond in certain ways. Writing to
document writing assessment’s development toward a professional status and to celebrate the contributions of prototypical heroic WPA figures as singular agents working pragmatically within hostile institutional environments, White explains:

What made the California experience unique was the actual implementation as a statewide policy of what had previously been seen as special pleading by English teachers. The CSU system faculty senate, the central chancellor’s office, the legislature, the governor, and the state funding agencies all in turn were persuaded to follow the lead of the English faculties, a situation as astonishing as it was unprecedented. (“Opening” 309)

For White, this transition from a marginalized special interest group to a central stakeholder was accompanied by a heightened sense of agency available to English faculty as writing experts. This shift is especially noteworthy for White because it occurred at a time when rhetoric and composition was not yet a fully recognized academic discipline; for White, such an achievement marks a significant evolution for the field of writing assessment.36 Others have echoed this sentiment, albeit at times with subtle sensitivity to the dramatic undertones of White’s narrative. William Condon, for instance, calls the EEE a “breakthrough” (“Rev.” 164), but Norbert Elliot refers to the CSU English faculty’s actions as “the emergence of the new order” in writing assessment’s history (Scale 204).

At the same time, in selecting the construct validity of ETS’s equivalency exams as the major issue with the Chancellor’s proposition (rather than questioning the idea of equivalency testing entirely), the faculty delimited their own response and ultimately
created opportunity for the Chancellor’s response of transitioning responsibility of the program to the CSU English Council. According to White, the original proposal for more equivalency testing included a multiple-choice exam on what ETS believed to be national norms of knowledge about the conventions of standard academic English, a test decision that vacated the professional authority and expertise of faculty and was tone-deaf to the diverse student populations in the CSU system. He and other English faculty adamantly opposed the use of an indirect writing assessment consisting of error recognition and editing tasks because such assessments sacrifice construct validity in the name of expediency and cost-effectiveness. But in their English Council resolution, faculty argued that their expertise in teaching writing made them more adequately prepared to assess student writing than test designers with ETS, and, consequently, opened the door for the continuation of equivalency testing under the auspices of faculty control rather than an outside testing agency. A professional subjectivity perspective illuminates the CSU faculty assumption of responsibility for the EEE as part of a process of professional subjectivization. From a subjectivity perspective, the preponderance of pragmatic language in White’s history is problematic in that it obscures how these functions support a neoliberal ideology.

Disciplinary responses to reform rhetoric typically reflect an overarching pragmatic tendency, and the CSU English faculty’s protest against and subsequent adoption of responsibility for the English equivalency testing program in 1972 is a prime example of such pragmatism and its rhetorical effects. A complementary rhetoric of professional responsibility in response to calls for reform both abates external calls for accountability (as Adler-Kassner and Harrington and Gallagher suggest) and softens the
psychic and emotional impact of being forced to adapt to changes beyond our control. In other words, instead of lamenting our powerlessness in the face of institutional determinism, we feel better if we frame our adaptations as accepting responsibilities that we believe belong under our professional purview. What has become known as White’s Law—assess thyself or assessment will be done unto thee—is perhaps the epitome of this pragmatic move of adopting a stance of responsibility in light of seemingly non-negotiable mandates. In its rationality that assessment is an intrinsic element of education and its resignation of rhetoric and composition professionals to self-regulate their work and the work of those they manage, White’s Law is reflective of neoliberalism’s pervasive insinuation and generally camouflaged status in the discourse of writing assessment.

A professional subjectivity frame highlights how the institutionalization of neoliberal practices forecloses certain methods of rhetorical action on the part of the English faculty working in their immediate local institutions. For example, the faculty opposing Dumke’s plan offered rational arguments based on the educational needs of their specific student populations and their own professional expertise in meeting the needs of those students; however, such arguments were virtually unintelligible to an administration operating through neoliberal rationalities that privileged administrative ease and market-based measures of success. The chancellor’s plan to increase equivalency testing was underscored by a systematic power differential that minimized faculty agency. Indeed, as White explains, power was the core issue at stake in the faculty resistance to the chancellor’s plan and it was central to the protest. For faculty, “the imbalance of power was particularly disheartening: the combined strength of a
determined system-wide administration and the Educational Testing Service seemed all but overwhelming” (White “Opening” 308). This power relationship was particularly threatening to English faculty because the professional subjectivity of English faculty was in flux in the 1970s; responding to changes in the profession, developments in English Studies, reorganization of the CSU system, and larger political economic shifts.

An analysis attuned to issues of professional subjectivity finds that White’s narrative demonstrates an internalization of an administrative subjectivity that is imbued with neoliberal ideology. The celebration of increased faculty control—while warranted given the amount of work put into resisting and reconstituting the exam—elides faculty concerns about the construct validity of the test, omits acknowledgment that the test and equivalency program were still realized despite faculty objections, and glosses over the fact that faculty were shunted into a managerial role for which they were not prepared. Concerns about vacating the professional judgment of teachers, potential racial biases in the exams, and misrepresentation of the complex work of teachers were three of the major themes in the faculty objections not entirely ameliorated by the faculty-designed and implemented EEE. Instead of emphasizing the persisting concerns, however, White’s retelling commemorates the protest of 1971 as a success story. Bracketing off agency helps resist the narrative impulse to invoke it as the moral of the story and, alternatively, highlights unintended professional consequences of increased faculty control over assessment.

There are lingering professional effects of English faculty’s under-preparation for the responsibility of designing and managing a system-wide assessment. According to Elliot’s appraisal of the 1971 faculty protest, “At the end of the day, the faculty captured
the right to determine which examinations would be used. Yet the responsibility of designing, conducting, and reporting the assessment process would fall to the faculty as well” (Scale 204). As White describes it, this realization weighed heavily on the faculty. Upon realizing they had won responsibility to design, administer, and publish results from the new equivalency exam, he and his fellow department chairs “looked at one another in dismay” because “these were the days before composition studies, before holistic scoring was well known, before anyone in an English department had more than the vaguest notions about assessment theory” (“Opening” 315). This dismay White speaks of is rooted in the fact that faculty may have felt as though they may have prematurely taken over responsibility of the EEE. Indeed, when examined through a lens of professional subjectivity, what White describes as gaining “actual power over the assessment of writing” as a result of their professional and public protest of the chancellor’s vision of a competency-based model of education is refigured as an assumption of responsibility over an assessment mechanism that complements neoliberal political economic shifts (“Opening” 309).

To be clear, there is power in that responsibility: White is not wrong when he identifies management as a form of power. However, the conflation of “actual power” with managerial responsibility is reflective of the neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment and contributes to the theoretical-practical tension experienced by subsequent generations of rhetoric and composition scholars assuming WPA positions. The faculty dismay about unpreparedness is almost entirely excised in the framing of the faculty takeover of the EEE as an unqualified progressive development in the modern era of
writing assessment. As such, formal training in large-scale writing assessment remains absent in graduate training in rhetoric and composition.

The belief that knowing about how to teach writing automatically translates to assessment expertise as well delays the injection of more assessment theory and other WPA-related scholarship into the canon of rhetoric and composition and creates a breakdown in professional training of individuals who will more likely than not eventually be tasked with programmatic writing assessment. Writing in 2009, Chris Gallagher argues that rhetoric and composition has yet to meaningfully incorporate writing assessment into the formal training of WPAs. “Graduate students in Rhetoric and Composition might enroll in an isolated course in writing assessment; more commonly, they may be introduced to it in a unit within a pedagogy course,” he says, but this introduction is overshadowed by the reality that “most of us continue to learn how to ‘do’ assessment on the job—and on the fly” (Gallagher “What” 31). The fact that WPAs are still learning about assessment on the fly at the same time that writing assessment theory has grown dramatically in the fourth wave is not only disheartening, but it is indicative of the profound effects of our pragmatic preoccupation with immediate institutional pressures and the tendencies of rhetoric and composition to deny workers the tools they need to succeed. As Gallagher explains, “While institutional exigencies make us quick learners, their sheer volume can create a triage mentality that does not necessarily result in deep and meaningful knowledge of what we are doing” (“What” 31). White’s narrative reflects a fear-based reaction, even as he celebrates the faculty takeover of the EEE. In terms of our professional self-image, Gallagher argues that “when we act from fear, we seek control: we think small, avoid risks, tighten the reins, guard the process, and above
all protect our fragile sense of self” (“What” 31). In seeking control over the system-wide assessment of English equivalency, WPAs institutionally wedded themselves to the standardized testing.

White sees the ramifications of this union when he reports that WPAs in the CSU later became fiercely protective of the English Placement Test (EPT), a direct descendent of the EEE that all incoming students are required to take in order to be placed within a sequence of first-year writing courses. While discussing the resilience of placement tests with dubious construct validity as the dominant practice in most American institutions of higher education, White recounts trying to persuade WPAs in the CSU to replace the “outdated” EPT with “a more modern and more valid portfolio requirement” (“Misuse” 27). Their response was shocking to White: “‘Keep your hands off our EPT,’ they said, unified for once. ‘All of our financing depends on those scores’” (White “Misuse” 27).

However, considering the process of subjectivization for WPAs, this protective reflex is not surprising at all. In fact, it is a natural effect of the neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment. When our professional practices are adapted in response to political economic pressures and we do not talk about it, the political economic rationalities behind those economic claims become internalized in profound, immutable, and unconscious ways.

Agency, Subjectivity, and the Rhetorical Situations of Writing Assessment

If neither protest nor pragmatism is enough to change how institutions work, what options for rhetorical action remain? Analysis of the professional subjectivization of WPAs through writing assessment narratives tells us something about the roots of
rhetoric and composition’s ambivalence toward writing assessment. The coding of assessment as both a threat and a promise, a burden and an opportunity, creates a troubled subjectivity one must adopt when doing assessment work. Instead of focusing on agency as a resource for counteracting that which troubles this subjectivity, I have attempted to step back and understand the complex rhetorical forces that shape WPAs and their subjectivity as professional assessors of writing. This chapter has argued that a neoliberal unconscious has insinuated itself into the professional lives of rhetoric and composition professionals. It permeates our professional environment so that individuals not only encounter, but also absorb its messages.

Such a neoliberal unconscious is by definition pervasive, naturalized, and virtually imperceptible without analytic tools attuned to the circulation of messages. However, when one does apply the right lens, the effects of a neoliberal unconscious are rendered intelligible. For example, the shift from agency-focused analysis to a subjectivity-focused analysis reconfigures the entire rhetorical situation of the 1971 CSU protest. The table on the next page summarizes the key differences in Dumke and White’s perspectives, which are undergirded by guiding concerns of subjectivity and agency, respectively.
As the top three rows indicate, Dumke’s speech and White’s narratives envision two very different rhetorical situations. According to Dumke, historical and material factors including rising student enrollment, decreasing federal funding for higher education, and changing K-12 curriculum created a crisis that must be remedied. Such a situation “invites utterance” in Llyod Bitzer’s terms, and Dumke’s speech can be understood as a rhetor (Dumke) preparing a rhetorical discourse (a public address) to persuade an audience (constituents of the CSU system) of his solution (equivalency testing) to an immediate crisis (too many students and ineffective production of value) that has resulted from historical circumstances (post-war boom in higher education) (4). In other words, Dumke uses the exigence of historical events to persuade an audience of CSU constituents to support his efforts to insure greater accountability, which is a classic
instantiation of a rhetorical situation in Bitzer’s conception. In White’s version of events, on the other hand, the Chancellor’s speech reflects Richard Vatz’s notion of exigencies being constructed by rhetorical discourse rather than historical events. For White, Dumke’s proposal was an example of “utterance invites exigence,” rather than the result of historical circumstance (Vatz 229). Friederich, White, and the other main agitators were compelled to intervene in this situation because they interpreted the proposal as creating new problems—namely creating a test that violates ethical beliefs associated with the teaching of writing and circumscribes English faculty’s agency. Written thirty years later, White’s narrative explains this situation to an audience of post-secondary English faculty, an audience that might not fully appreciate the importance of the English Council’s actions in 1971 but that would share a similar sense about the importance of faculty agency.

As the remainder of the table indicates, Dumke and White also have divergent ideological perspectives that result in rhetorical linkages to different institutional rationalities. Dumke’s proposal rhetorically constructs the CSU as an ineffective system in need of adjustment in order to meet shifting expectations of efficiency and efficacy. His reform initiative responds to neoliberal calls for accountability in higher education and is intended to create a more economically robust university that is measureable through performance metrics. In conceiving of the university as a system in need of better management, something as foundational as general education becomes rendered through market terms. Goals of a liberal arts education are compartmentalized into collections of assessable competencies. In contrast, White’s narrative rhetorically constructs the CSU as a cherished egalitarian ideal to be protected. Because White envisions education, and
especially a liberal arts education, as experiential and holistic, such a commodification of
competencies is dangerously reductive. Students are also reconceived in this perspective: instead of viewing students as learners, Dumke’s depiction of the CSU constructs students as workers-in-training.

The final three rows on the table demonstrate how the English faculty’s role in the CSU is another major a point of friction between White and Dumke. White depicts faculty as the defenders of the ideals behind the CSU. He conceives of faculty as agentive subjects capable of using their content knowledge and professional expertise with teaching and learning to combat the chancellor’s plan. Unable to intervene in the policy decision through a democratic process, White and his collaborators engaged a coalition of English faculty across the entire CSU system. He characterizes the English Council’s resolution against the original design of the EEE and subsequent faculty-led redesign of the exam to include direct assessment of student writing as a “demonstration of political power [that] had immediate national repercussions” (“Opening” 308). The efficacy of the resolution, in White’s words, is a result of the fact that “English faculty were able to define their own work and take charge of its implementation in the political sphere” (“Opening” 309). In this new EEE program, teachers “ran the show,” and, as White describes it, the “large testing firms…were no longer to be the only players in this high-stakes game and that the political powers that normally determined the policies and goals of education had been reduced, at least temporarily, to funding agencies for faculty managers” (“Opening” 309). This language of English faculty as managers is reminiscent of Strickland’s managerial unconscious; her “understanding the history of the field of composition studies as the history of the increasing importance of managers of the
teaching of writing,” could be complemented by White’s discussion of faculty as managers of the testing of writing (Managerial 17). What White describes as a victory by English faculty is actually an unconscious meeting of another managerial imperative through which faculty were implicated in further neoliberalization of post-secondary education.

Dumke’s vision of the university as a system to be managed through a market rationale replaces faculty expertise with a professional subjectivity that is irrevocably tied to a highly managed labor system. As such, Dumke presumes faculty to be workers whose labor should be determined by the economic needs of the system that employs them. Although he recognizes that faculty support for such a reform is essential— “The changes I propose cannot be brought about effectively without the support of the colleges and their faculties. …The use of all our best talent will be essential” (“A New” 8)— neither Dumke’s speech nor the written version of his new vision for the CSU mentions consulting with faculty members about shifting faculty job expectations from teaching and research to advising and assessment. The article version of his proposal notes that he formally presented his proposals to the Trustees and discussed the plan for reform with campus presidents and chairman of the academic senate, but does not include any mention of discussion with faculty members at large (Dumke “A New” 1). Such elision of faculty input is noteworthy because the chancellor’s plan supposes a role for faculty that strips away both disciplinary identity and a sense of professionalism, replacing those identifications with an academic worker subjectivity through which faculty members serve new bureaucratic purposes for the campus that employs them. In short, faculty are represented as workers, whose job duties can be reassigned per the needs of the system
without their consent. In the chancellor’s reconceptualization of the CSU, the educational values that privilege students and faculty are subsumed by market demands and arguments framed by neoliberal rationalities.

These divergent views also shape incompatible notions of what writing is and the purpose of a first-year writing course. As more corporate tendencies emerged in higher education throughout the 1970s, managerial function of rhetoric and composition became an organizing force that reoriented the goals of first-year writing from the training of citizens for democratic participation to the movement of students through an education-to-work assembly line where teaching labor exists in a hierarchical workplace and is managed by WPAs as a professional class of faculty. Writing, then, is framed as a vocational skill from Dumke’s perspective, which greatly contrasts with White’s notion of writing as a fundamental intellectual practice and worthy object of study. Within Dumke’s highly systematized notion of the CSU, first-year writing becomes increasingly managed, subject to more accountability measures, and further standardized, all of which makes it appear to be a potentially unnecessarily allocation of time and resources for able students. Alternatively, White identifies the first-year writing course as a designed step in a trajectory of learning that is foundational to the rest of a university education. This disparity is part of why White interprets the proposal for increased equivalency testing as “a way to economize and speed up production of college graduates by moving them quickly and easily though an abstraction called the first year of college” (White “Opening” 308). White addresses Dumke’s proposal for curricular reform as “a power move to define the work of that first year as trivial and disposable, hardly worth a few half hours of testing time” (White “Opening” 308).
These rhetorical differences between Dumke’s and White’s perspectives is no idiosyncrasy: the divergent notions of the rhetorical situation before them are a result of their unconscious engagement with the neoliberal rationalities. Understanding the neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment is a useful preliminary step, but we must also develop a better understanding of the relationship between common spheres of discourse, especially the public and technical spheres. In the next chapter, I use two tools from argumentation theory—sphere theory and stasis theory—to study how accountability functions as an ideograph that disguises a whole host of potentially contradictory arguments and shapes argumentative structures in the public sphere and the professional sphere. This ideographic function of accountability is in many ways a derivative effect of the neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment outlined in this chapter, and understanding how accountability generates multiple, even conflicting, arguments about education and assessment in the public and technical spheres directs our attention away from discussions of values and ideology and toward argumentative spheres as the wellsprings of arguments.
Chapter Four

Topoi of Accountability and the Stases of Writing Assessment Discourse

Uttering objections is not clear or straightforward work. (Goodnight, 1984)

Writing assessment scholars have recently turned their attention to the negative effects of accountability discourse: Linda Adler-Kassner and Peggy O’Neill’s tactics for reframing writing assessment narratives away from accountability; Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington’s alternative rhetorical frame of responsibility rather than accountability; and, Chris Gallagher’s critique of the accountability movement’s underlying neoliberal logics are several of the most-cited proposals for how to counteract the pervasive and powerful concept of accountability. These interventions have primarily called for changes intended to reconceive the foundational values and guiding ideologies that make accountability appear to be a naturalized concept within writing assessment. These previous critiques rightly argue that issues of power and politics come into play in policy decisions, especially regarding cultural institutions such as education. For example, although they may disagree with proposed interventions invited by accountability, scholars from writing assessment cannot dismiss or minimize calls for increased accountability without alienating concerned publics. This is a dilemma.

However, to distill the tension between public calls for accountability and professional objections to specific means proposed to ensure accountability into a dualistic value conflict assumes a stability of values (either unique to one sphere or shared across spheres) that may not exist. Adler-Kassner and O’Neill’s and Gallagher’s focus on the generative role of ideology and values elides the generative function of other elements. It is crucial to bolster previous efforts to ideologically deconstruct
accountability with analysis of the generative and constraining force of argumentative spheres in order to better understand the contemporary scene of writing assessment.

This chapter uses tools from argumentation theory—sphere theory and stasis theory—to study how accountability functions as an ideograph that disguises a whole host of potentially contradictory arguments and shapes argumentative structures in the public sphere and the professional sphere. Ideographs, according to Michael Calvin McGee, are words or phrases that encapsulate and communicate abstract ideological concepts. Rather than having a direct referent, an ideograph communicates an abstraction with many possible meanings to different individuals, such as common values like equality or liberty. Accountability is one such abstraction that has had tremendous influence on writing assessment discourse; it is often used in political and educational discourse to invoke concepts and draw associations, but which concepts are being invoked and which associations are being drawn in a particular argument are not static because an ideograph is by nature dynamic and flexible. An ideograph allows people to proceed in an argument as if they share similar assumptions when in reality they may hold very conflicting beliefs and different value positions about the concept at hand. As an ideograph, accountability generates multiple, even conflicting, arguments about education and assessment in the public and technical spheres.

Arguments about accountability are undoubtedly value-laden, as Gallagher and Adler-Kassner and O’Neill suggest, but the ideograph of accountability communicates contradictory *topoi* or commonplaces. Approaching accountability as an ideograph engendering such commonplaces as the need for higher standards, the benefits of the marketization of education, and the need for a more global competitive education system
refocuses attention away from discussions of values and ideology and toward argumentative spheres as the wellsprings of arguments.

Examining the stasis (or lack thereof) in the public and technical spheres offers one potential way to understand why arguments informed by professional expertise that are efficacious in the technical sphere might unintentionally dismiss the most pressing exigencies in the public sphere, thus alienating public audiences. Arguments are in stasis when they settle on a shared point of contention in a dispute and, therefore, are in equilibrium regarding the issue at hand. As I explain in more detail in the next section, rhetoricians see the quest for stasis as a particular process of decision-making that moves from simpler questions to more complex ones; where there is disagreement in how to answer a question, there is opportunity for argument. Because each question in a stasis progression builds on the previous one, a debate usually moves up and down the stases before a decision is agreed upon and judgment can be rendered. Once the lower stases are decided, the argumentative trajectory becomes delimited, though not entirely set in stone.

In order to study the structure of arguments about writing assessment in higher education, I identified a conversation shared across the technical and public spheres. The discourses I analyze respond to Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s 2011 book, * Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, a book that jumped the fence around the ivory tower and entered the court of public opinion about higher education. News reports and reviews of the book appeared in popular periodicals such as *Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, Gawker*, and even the *Doonesbury* comic strip. Using data from standardized learning assessments (including writing assessments), Arum and Roksa argue that students learn very little in their first two years of college. The
publication of their book precipitated much public discourse about the lack of rigor in higher education, especially in terms of writing and critical thinking skills. Rhetoric and composition scholars unsurprisingly interpreted such arguments as attacks on first-year writing programs, which are commonly the campus units most overtly responsible for helping students develop academic literacy skills. *Academically Adrift* became a flashpoint in debates about the status of American higher education and the responses it generated are prime examples of the accountability ideograph at work.

In these arguments about Arum and Roksa’s book, accountability is used to tap into readily available and culturally familiar deliberative arguments about higher education, such as the argument that more accountability is an unassailable good. Such arguments are *topoi* or commonplace arguments that regulate lines of reasoning that help individuals imagine themselves to be in affinity with others via a shared concern. The use of one *topos* over another can lead to divergent patterns of argument in the technical and public spheres. For example, although education reform arguments might proceed from the *topos* of more accountability being an unquestioned good, educators and scholars skeptical of accountability-based reforms would likely initiate arguments from a *topos* of accountability as a threat to core educational principles. There is, of course, much grey area between these two value dualisms, but a comparison of the overtly positive or negative stances toward accountability help us illuminate its function as an ideograph and the way it can be used as argumentative shorthand by calling forth particular *topoi* that, in turn, shape argumentative possibilities. In *Citizen Critics*, Rosa Eberly describes *topoi* as architectonic because “they manifest themselves as propositions” and “serve as probabilistic foundations for the invention and judgment of arguments” (5). The
ideograph of accountability at once appears to unite social communities because it initiates arguments about what should be done to fix the problems within education, but also initiates conflicting *topoi*. To understand and track these *topoi* stemming from accountability, we must study the structure of arguments.

Seen through argumentation theory, *Academically Adrift*’s publication did not engender a value conflict, as previous critiques have suggested, but a lack of stasis. In comparing the typical progression through the stases in a representative sample of arguments from both spheres, I seek to understand the argumentative dissonance or the breaking point when arguments in the technical and public spheres are no longer in conversation due to a lack of stasis. Scholars in rhetoric and composition encounter this dissonance when they must choose between either embracing or objecting to the *topoi* engendered by the ideograph of accountability.

The spheres themselves also play a role in shaping the arguments that stem from the accountability ideograph. According to G. Thomas Goodnight, an argumentative sphere is “grounds upon which arguments are built and authorities to which arguers appeal” (200). Spheres are not, he clarifies, “ephemeral contexts or mere points of view” (Goodnight 200). They are spatial metaphors for the way arguments are produced. For Goodnight, what differentiates the three spheres—personal, public, and technical—are the “standards for arguments” (200). Certain avenues for criticism, Goodnight explains, open up when arguments are examined through sphere theory. For example, sphere theory draws attention toward the practices used in the invention of arguments and uncovers camouflaged ideographs that invoke certain *topoi* (Goodnight 201). According to Goodnight, spheres also “offer a range of taken-for-granted-as-reasonable rules,
norms, procedures, and styles of engagement” (198). For example, what might seem to be a reasonable style of argument in the public sphere may not be reasonable at all in the technical sphere (and vice-versa). Studying the ideograph of accountability, the topoi it engenders, and the effect of these commonplaces on the stasis between the public and technical spheres, will help writing assessment scholars understand the groundings of accountability and consider the efficacy of alterative groundings. The upshot of a stasis analysis is an alternative understanding the relationship between rhetorics and publics as they pertain to writing assessment.

An approach sensitive to accountability’s topical functions and derivative commonplaces illuminates how a writing assessment scholar speaking out about the negative effects of standardized testing is always in relation to myriad other arguments about reform, standards, opportunity, and fairness, to name but a few of the lines of reasoning that originate from the ideograph of accountability. Scholars in rhetoric and composition have discovered a similar phenomenon when examining arguments about writing that circulate in the public sphere. For example, in After the Public Turn, Frank Farmer argues that public figures whose arguments are well-received in the public sphere, such as Stanley Fish and Louis Menand, both of whom are academics who write frequently for popular news sources like the New York Times and Atlantic Monthly, “provide readers not expertise but an affirmation of popular commonplaces regarding, among other things, what the public believes to be the wretched state of writing instruction” (136). Effective public arguments by academics in this sense are not a unidirectional communication of expert knowledge. Fish and Menand appear to exploit the permeability of the spheres by highlighting controversy and contestation, both of
which Goodnight identifies as “boundary conditions” for argumentative spheres (198). In writing assessment discourse, accountability is often exploited in such ways as well and sphere theory and stasis theory are ways of understanding how the ideograph of accountability affects the origin and structure of arguments.

To better understand how the ideograph of accountability affects publics and complicates attempts by writing assessment experts to engage in public debate, I compare public and professional arguments to highlight an implicit struggle for stasis in these seemingly parallel forums for debate. As an ideograph, accountability appears to invite deliberative discourse from all interested and informed parties; however, by presuming the existence of an educational crisis, accountability creates argumentative dissonance for writing assessment scholars arising from the stasis struggle. Once we examine that argumentative dissonance, we can better understand the problematic topoi associated with the accountability ideograph and be in a more suitable position to remedy those problems by engaging with publics in new ways. In other words, the goal is to revise the relationship between rhetorics and publics as they pertain to writing assessment with the goal of promoting change from the status quo in the era of accountability by reimagining how WPAs and writing experts can engage accountability arguments, which is the kind of change Adler-Kassner and O’Neill might call reframing writing assessment and Gallagher would likely see as remaking the assessment scene.

Toward that goal, this chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I offer a brief history of the accountability movement in higher education, introduce previous frameworks for understanding the complex rhetorical terrain of public discourse about writing assessment in the era of accountability including Adler-Kassner and O’Neill’s use of framing theory
and Gallagher’s persuasive critique of stakeholder language, and propose stasis theory as an alternative framework that gives particular attention to the way arguments in the public sphere are pulled upward toward value-based questions of action and policy. In the second and third sections, I analyze the stases in public and professional arguments written in response to *Academically Adrift*. I end by advocating rhetorical strategies for ameliorating the argumentative dissonance created by accountability as an ideograph, including using the stases to develop an ethics of writing assessment that accommodates the argumentative dissonance between the public sphere and the technical sphere. In the next section, I briefly review the major elements of the accountability movement in higher education, synthesize previous frameworks for understanding accountability’s rhetorical effects on public discourse about writing assessment, and further explain stasis theory.

**The Topoi of Accountability and the Need for Stasis Theory**

Although the exact origins of accountability remain unsettled, most histories note its rise to prominence in the decades of debate about the purpose of higher education in the mid-twentieth century. For example, Richard Ohmann identifies three political economic factors that led to the 1970s accountability movement in education. First, he argues the cessation of the Cold War funding boom for higher education and graduate programs created “an intense fiscal crisis of the state” and reflected a general “disillusionment with Great Society programs” (Ohmann 28). Second, he claims conservative responses to the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to restore the old status quo by manufacturing a literacy crisis and correlative need for
higher standards and more accountability measures in education (Ohmann 28). Third, he explains how the spread of global capitalism in the latter part of the twentieth century challenged America’s role as a unitary economic force (Ohmann 28). In short, Ohmann contends that “accountability emerged and gained strength as a coherent movement exactly when the postwar U.S. economy was tearing at the seams, and when the right began to organize itself against sixties movements” (28). In his identification of accountability as a unifying political economic concept that was extended into higher education, Ohmann explains the political origins of accountability that led to its rapid rise to the status of common sense in the public sphere and the consequent perceived need for postsecondary institutions to change.41

What is often referred to as the accountability agenda in education has three elements: setting higher standards, measuring student achievement of those standards, and attaching consequences to the results of those measurements. An often-cited example of the ubiquity of accountability in contemporary public discourse about higher educational is the 2006 Department of Education report titled A Test of Leadership, but better known as the Spellings Commission Report after then-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. The report contains the three previously mentioned elements; with a tone reminiscent of the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s 1984 A Nation at Risk report, the Spellings Commission Report warns that the United States’ ability to educate its citizens at advanced levels has been eclipsed by other advanced nations and proposes a recommitment to the “core public purposes” of higher education: to be a “means of achieving social mobility” (Commission ix). The tenor of the Spellings Report is reminiscent of post-Sputnik calls for higher standards in order to increase
international competitiveness. This tone has dominated educational discourse since the late 1950s and exemplifies the adoption of political economic priorities as a guide for educational reform. Arguments such as the Spellings Report, which unapologetically places higher education under an economic lens, identify a crisis visible through that lens, and offer accountability as the means to address this crisis. The three elements of accountability—establishing higher standards, measuring achievement of those standards, and incentivizing continual progress—all become interwoven in political discourse such as the Spellings Report, discourse that then circulates in the public sphere. Accountability as the grounds for argument is now commonplace in the public sphere.

The Spellings Report is a potent example of accountability’s rhetorical effects because while it appears to invite deliberation in the public sphere, it forecloses certain argumentative pathways by presuming education is in crisis and in need of serious reform. Recent scholarship in writing assessment has pointed to the Spellings Report as an example of accountability, including Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington’s identification of accountability as a thread that ties together federal and state policy statements, popular news reports, and research findings into a master narrative of a crisis in higher education. They argue that accountability is a frame, or an abstraction that shapes a perspective about writing assessment. The core concept of framing is the “idea that there are conceptual and ideological boundaries shaping what is ‘common sense’ and what is not” (Adler-Kassner and O’Neill 10). A frame in this sense is an abstraction that creates value-based ideological structures that, in turn, shape an understanding of writing assessment and its relationship to education. Adler-Kassner and Harrington argue the accountability frame has become so pervasive in the public sphere that it is now “the
starting point of a ‘common sense’ narrative about the current state of American higher 
(and lower) education” (75). This sense of accountability as a frame for writing 
assessment implies that the state creates (through policy) commonplaces about 
accountability that then get circulated in public discourse until they reach the coveted 
status of common sense and are thus camouflaged but nonetheless influential. We see 
accountability’s common sense status especially in popular media, such the 2010 
documentary Waiting for “Superman” that blames the decline of the public K-12 school 
system on such elements as union-supported tenure protections for teachers and touts 
accountability as a means of weeding out underperforming educators and reshaping the 
culture of education.

Because of this common sense status, Adler-Kassner and O’Neill maintain that 
arguers must proceed in relation to the frame of accountability but without reaffirming 
that dominant frame. Instead, they suggest reframing writing assessment by tapping into 
existing value-based narratives. The way to change how writing assessment is talked 
about and conceived of, according to Adler-Kassner and O’Neill’s reframing 
methodology, is to first understand the current frame and work to reframe it by creating 
“a new ‘story of us’ that brings together the interests and values of others and the values 
and interests we hold as individuals and as writing professionals whose work is rooted in 
researched-based best practices” (88). A story of us, they claim, provides one way to 
navigate the public sphere wherein our expertise is unintelligible or irrelevant to publics 
preoccupied by urgent concerns about accountability. In framing a local story of us, 
Adler-Kassner and O’Neill argue, we position ourselves in a more effective stakeholder 
position and slowly change the rhetorical scene of writing assessment. Yet, reframing
does not fully address accountability’s ability to shape argumentative possibilities by enabling certain kinds of arguments and disabling others.

In his critique of accountability as a neoliberal god-term, Gallagher begins to explore how accountability shapes not only conceptual relationships, but also material relationships, that then influence argumentative possibilities. Specifically, he analyzes how accountability discursively re-draws the power relationships between educational decision makers in order to prioritize certain political economic values. Accountability, he explains, becomes shorthand for a now-familiar narrative of educators’ failure to prepare all students for a globally competitive workforce. In his analysis of the Spellings Commission Report, Gallagher argues accountability is presented as “the lever that will force U.S. higher education to recognize itself for, and start behaving as, what it is: both a competitor in a global market and itself a market in which individual institutions compete” (“Being” 55). Stated differently, Gallagher sees the Report using accountability on two levels as a mechanism that will enhance two nested markets: one in which individual institutions of higher education compete with one another and a second global market of higher education where the U.S. competes against other nations.

To disrupt the use of accountability as a lever to reform higher education, Gallagher proposes a network theory of power. Writing assessment scholars have long acknowledged assessment as a site of value conflict, but Gallagher astutely notes, “it is not difficult to detect, even in our most sophisticated assessment scholarship, a certain defensiveness and a sense of resignation to our limited role in the writing assessment scene” (“Being” 458). Accountability, for Gallagher, highlights how in a scene shaped by neoliberalism, a WPA is but one stakeholder among many who “jockey for position” as
assessment leaders and decision makers ("Being" 458). He warns that our use of stakeholder language—discussing future employers and elected officials as having an equal stake in the success of institutions of education and their students, for example—may be harming the efficacy of arguments made by professionals in the public sphere because stakeholder theory collapses a wide range of personal, professional, civic, and economic interests driving stakeholder beliefs into a collection of discrete but equal stakes. Although such language appears egalitarian, it also reinforces the current power arrangement that “prioritizes remote ‘experts’ over teachers and students” because they can serve as objective and disinterested assessors ("Being" 459). Given this incursion by external experts, Gallagher argues the assessment scene must be remade in a manner that more accurately reflects the intertwined civic and professional stakes of higher education.

In order for writing assessment experts to be in a rhetorical position to debunk beliefs associated with accountability and reassert the centrality of teachers, Gallagher claims they must adopt an entirely new theory of power—a networked theory of power. A networked theory of power differs from a stakeholder theory of power in its reorientation away from an antagonistic notion of competition among stakeholders to a scene built by relationships. In this network model, teachers become a more integral element because of their proximity and relationship to students and learning. As a privileged central figure in the network model, teachers have more agency within educational enterprise rather than being resigned to a position of equal standing with other external stakeholders, which corresponds with decades-old arguments in writing assessment that the values of teachers and students should be weighed more heavily than those of other stakeholders (Broad What; Huot (Re)Articulating; Smith). Furthermore, the
antagonism and competition implied in the stakeholder theory of power is diffused in the network model, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that the voice of teachers and students will be heard above the reform calls inspired by accountability. Gallagher’s reorientation toward a network model attempts to disempower the concept of accountability as an organizing principle for reform without ignoring the need for educational institutions to adapt to twenty-first century contexts. He offers new answers to accountability’s key questions; he suggests teachers should be holding institutions accountable by using multiple localized assessments and their own professional judgment to measure student learning against context-appropriate standards.

Both Adler-Kassner and O’Neill’s reframing theory and Gallagher’s network theory of power are premised on an assumption that a stable set of shared values exists within and between the technical and the public spheres. For example, Gallagher claims that accountability is understood as “self-evident” or “self-evidently good” in the contemporary scene of writing assessment (“Being” 455). I am in agreement with Adler-Kassner and O’Neill and Gallagher that the scene and story of writing assessment needs to change and that our language practices can affect values and beliefs in an effort to make that change happen. However, I do not think that reframing accountability with a new narrative or dispersing its political power through a redrawing of relationships among agents is enough. A promising next step is to study how arguments about education and the purpose of education are influenced by accountability as a structuring principle.

When a concept like accountability becomes a culturally shared ideograph, the result is an unquestioned need for accountability; with the need assumed, what is
seemingly open for debate is how to move forward, which is precisely why stasis theory is such a useful tool for understanding the argumentative dissonance between public and professional discourse about accountability. The ideograph of accountability elicits several commonplace arguments about reform, marketization, and competition that provide a starting point, but the stases help us see where lines of argument emerging from accountability cease to engage one another. Adler-Kassner and O’Neill describe contemporary writing assessment discourse as an “ever widening series of conversations,” directed by a “galaxy of questions” about the purpose(s) of education in the twenty-first century (4-5). Within this galaxy, answers to some of these questions circulate more readily and have more obvious rhetorical effects—in other words, some answers become commonplace of certain topics.

Although accountability-based arguments are undoubtedly value-laden, as Gallagher and Adler-Kassner and O’Neill adeptly explain, understanding the role of values is only one piece of the puzzle. In order to more fully understand the impact of accountability, we must also consider how it connects to topoi for writing assessment arguments in both the public and professional spheres. Approaching accountability as an ideograph engendering commonplaces such as the need for higher standards, marketization of education, and emphasis on global competition, refocuses attention away from discussions of values as argumentative starting-points and toward argumentative spheres as the wellsprings of arguments. Examining the stasis (or lack thereof) in the public and technical spheres offers one potential way to understand why arguments informed by professional expertise that are efficacious in the technical sphere might unintentionally dismiss the most pressing exigencies in the public sphere, thus
alienating public audiences. Stasis theory identifies argumentative patterns in the public and private spheres and may help explain where in the course of a line of reasoning accountability may be dismissed or objected to by writing assessment scholars.

First developed by Hermagoras and subsequently refined by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian as part of the Roman legal system, the stases are a signature series of points at which an argument could commence; where there is disagreement in the question posed, or a stasis, there is opportunity for argument. There are several models consisting of either three or five stases, but all systems describe a process that can be segmented into a series of questions, each representing one step in the stases from simpler to more complex queries. I use a five-stases model developed by Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor. The table below names the five stases and their corresponding questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stasis</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Fact</td>
<td>What happened?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Definition</td>
<td>What sort of thing was this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Cause</td>
<td>Who or what caused it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Value</td>
<td>What is the quality of this thing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Action</td>
<td>What should we do about it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 – The Five-Stases Model

We can demonstrate the progression of the stases with a scenario from the opening moments of almost any Law & Order episode: the discovery of a dead body. The first stasis asks the question of fact—did something happen? In our case, yes, someone has died, but we do not yet know how the individual died or who might have been responsible. Those are the second and third stases. We might ask, for example, was it homicide? If the answer is yes (as determined by evidence), then we would proceed to the third stasis: cause. The search for a suspect relies on a causal claim: Person A stabbed
Person B, which caused him to shed his mortal coil. We must settle upon one among many possible rival causes in this whodunit step because we cannot bring charges against an infinite number of defendants. Once the accused perpetrator is identified, then the value must be set: with what will the person be charged? Was it murder or manslaughter? Were there any circumstances such as willful intent and premeditation? Was it done in the heat of the moment? Was it done in self-defense? Such questions help us determine the quality of the act, or its value stasis. Once the charges have been brought, the case is argued in a court of law and then a judge or jury renders the verdict and action is taken. That verdict answers the final stasis question: a decision of what must be done, such as imprisonment of the accused.

Rhetoricians of science have adapted stasis theory as an analytical means of understanding the intersections of the technical and public spheres (Fahnestock and Secor; Walsh). Fahnestock and Secor were the first to develop the modern five-stases model composed of fact, definition, cause, value, and action to analyze arguments in scientific and literary discourses. Such a model, they contend, demonstrates how the stases can “become a sensitive tool of audience analysis” (431). Fahnestock and Secor contend that rhetoricians could use the stases to consider why an audience is addressed at a particular stasis level. Such analytical use of the stases can be applied to consideration of writing assessment publics. Although framing theory and the network theory of power provide two promising tools to use to understand the ideological valences of accountability, stasis theory provides a more fine-grained tool for analyzing the rhetorical choices arguers make when they aim to persuade a public audience, particularly in regard to the lines of argument that originate from factual accountability claims. The generative
and constraining force of argumentative spheres can be illuminated by tracing the typical progression through the stases in arguments from both spheres and the sticking points of arguments, or the stasis questions at which lines of reasoning diverge, reveal an argumentative dissonance that might otherwise be misunderstood.

The stases, as adapted by contemporary rhetoricians, draw our attention to various steps in a deliberative argument and the way certain argumentative spheres might influence the stasis of the argument. For example, Fahnestock and Secor note that public audiences “often read arguments in the lower stases by pushing at their implications for action” (431). In her application of Fahnestock and Secor’s five-part stasis model to scientific discourse, Lynda Walsh more specifically explains how “as the questions move up the stases, answering them requires engaging the values of communities outside the scientific community (parents, lawmakers, etc.) in order to establish criteria for evaluation” (41). She later describes how scientific statements, even when carefully crafted in the lower stases of fact and definition, “are perceived as arguments at the stases of value and action by rhetorical implicature” (42). This tendency is especially prevalent in the public sphere and, in the case of writing assessment, may likely be the cause of poor deliberation about how to improve higher education. Although the discourses analyzed in this chapter do not come from a particular scientific community, they are written in response to quantitative arguments by Arum and Roksa in their analysis of the CLA data that were likely perceived to be scientific, so we see a similar interplay between the lower stases (fact, definition) and audience values as criteria for judgment. In other words, rather than beginning with a discussion of values and value conflicts,
contemporary use of stasis theory in rhetoric of science highlights how lines of reasoning that originate from factual claims and definitions are then subjected to value judgments.

Identifying the argumentative dissonance between arguments in the public sphere and the technical sphere is a more concrete form of comparative rhetorical analysis suitable for juxtaposing decidedly non-specialized discourse in popular media to expert discourse within a specialized academic journal in order to investigate the effects of accountability and its co-occurring commonplaces. Accountability generates a whole host of relational claims about education and thus serves the inventional function by creating *topoi*. In the case of ameliorating the crisis of contemporary higher education, for example, more accountability is assumed to be a sound approach to improving student learning. As Gallagher and Adler-Kassner and O’Neill argue, the precise definition of accountability may remain unstated or may be ambiguous, which is precisely why stasis theory is important: definitions are a foundational element in the structure of an argument. Accountability, for instance, invites factual arguments that allow external educational reformers to write themselves into the scene of writing assessment as decision makers and promote standardized testing as the best means of fixing tertiary education. If schools are in crisis and students are not learning (two examples of the kinds of factual commonplaces related to accountability), then those alarming facts jump to more complex questions about how to solve the crisis through new testing practices, higher standards, fiscal policies, and other reform initiatives. At the same time, those more closely tied to writing assessment practice (e.g., students, teachers, writing assessment scholars) find their expertise in question within accountability-based arguments, especially when they voice objection at the lower stases of fact and definition.
This particular dynamic between the arguments in the public sphere and the technical sphere emerges in the analysis in the following sections.

**Understanding *Academically Adrift*’s Public Impact via Stasis Theory**

Guided by this definition of publics as groups of concerned citizens and the understanding of accountability as an ideograph that generates *topoi*, I collected, read, and studied public discourse about Arum and Roksa’s book. Using the LexisNexis Academic database available through my university library, I collected 170 newspaper articles published between 2011 and 2013 that included the key terms “Academically Adrift.” In order to more fully capture public response, I also added online texts from other news sources such as *Huffington Post, Salon.com, National Public Radio, The Economist*, and several high-traffic blogs that included the same key terms, bringing the total number of texts to 180. I eliminated any duplicates, including some highly similar versions of op-eds written by the same author published in different newspapers. I also eliminated a handful of texts such as press releases from the publisher, abstracts of academic journal articles, articles written for publications outside the U.S., summary articles without any commentary, and articles that merely mention the book without actually discussing its content (e.g., a profile of a dean for the University of Central Oklahoma lists the book as one he has recently read).

From this larger corpus, I selected ten representative texts that included accountability-related *topoi* to use for my stasis analysis. Publics are most robust when they have an exigency or public problem to solve. To say higher education is in crisis and those in charge need to be held accountable to public constituents creates an exigency
wherein the public must pass judgment about how to proceed. The purpose of my protocol for selecting representative texts was to identify texts that helped create such a public by making use of accountability *topoi*. To select a representative sample of public discourse that would likely be circulating through such publics, I looked for texts that appeared to engage this exigency; in other words, they seemed to build deliberative arguments by foregrounding the decline of tertiary education and suggesting accountability is the solution via a call-to-action. In this smaller sample, I also controlled for a balance of national and regional publications, included a range of publication types (short op-eds, letters to the editor, commentary articles, news reports, blog posts), and selected articles that were longer than 500 words.

Within this representative sampling, the stases are used fairly consistently. Accountability generates a whole host of arguments about education and thus serves an invention role. In the case of ameliorating the crisis of contemporary public education, much public discourse is generated from the commonplaces of accountability. For example, more accountability is assumed to be a sound approach to improving student learning. Arguments at the stases of value and action invite external educational reformers into the scene of writing assessment as decision makers who are committed to standardized testing as the best means of creating more evidence of student learning.

One would expect that reviews of the book written for a popular audience might demonstrate a pushing of Arum and Roksa’s arguments to the more complex stases of value and action, especially given the commonplace status of accountability in educational arguments; indeed, I anticipated that the unquestioned *need* for accountability in public discourse would allow readers to push arguments up to the higher stases
because accountability implies value-based action. I also anticipated that the technical discourse in the more insular technical sphere of an academic journal would pull the arguments down to the lower, foundational stases of fact and definition. Although the public discourse did present patterns matching my initial hypothesis, the professional discourse did not, perhaps because of genre constraints and the way that accountability seemingly invites public deliberative discourse from all interested parties, as I will explain in more detail later. Unlike official discourses like the Spellings’ Commission Report, *Academically Adrift* insinuated itself within the public sphere where accountability serves as an entry point to identify oneself in relation to the scene of an education system in crisis.

Arum and Roksa make the provocative claim that, “American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students” (10). According to their data, forty-five percent of students “did not demonstrate any significant improvements in learning” over the first two years of college study, and thirty-six percent “did not demonstrate any improvement in learning” over four years of college education (12). In short, Arum and Roksa argue that students “are not learning much” (14). Arum and Roksa’s data appear to support their pointed critique of higher education.

The evidence backing up Arum and Roksa’s claims comes mainly from results from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a standardized assessment consisting of three constructed-response tasks—Performance Task, Make-an-Argument, and Critique-an-Argument—each of which purports to require students to use critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and written communication skills (Klein, Liu, and Sconing 13). The ninety-minute Performance Task portion of the CLA presents students
with a writing situation, such as composing an advisory memo to a supervisor using a description of a hypothetical scenario along with access to a collection of documents to consult as they write (Klein, Liu, and Sconing 13). The Make-An-Argument prompt identifies an issue and directs students to write a persuasive essay in forty-five minutes. Lastly, the Critique-an-Argument task gives students thirty minutes to evaluate the reasoning behind an argument by identifying logical fallacies and cogently writing about the effects of particular logical flaws. Although the Performance Task is evaluated by human readers, the writing produced in the Make-An-Argument and Critique-An-Argument prompts are scored by automated essay scoring software (Klein 13). Utilizing a value-added modeling approach (VAM) to analyze student scores, the CLA sought to quarantine the positive effect, or value-added, provided by a specific teacher, program, or unit of curriculum such as general education. In higher education, VAM purportedly provides “scores that estimate whether growth in performance between freshman and senior year is below, near or above what is typically observed at schools testing students of similar entering academic ability” (Steedle 638). Some specialists in educational measurement and others have lauded the CLA (and its successor the CLA+) as a state-of-the-art learning assessment, which would seem to bolster Arum and Roksa’s findings, but others find Arum and Roksa’s collection methods and data interpretation suspect because they do qualify their claims in light of the limitations of the CLA. This dispute notwithstanding, Academically Adrift had an undeniable instant impact on discussions about student learning in higher education in the public sphere.

Public arguments took two routes in terms of establishing facts, the first stasis: some took the publication of Arum and Roksa’s study as the triggering factual event. The
first line of an *NPR Morning Edition* story begins with the following statement of fact:

“A new study shows significant room for improvement in America’s colleges and universities” (Inskeep). Others begin with Arum and Roksa’s findings as their foundation stasis. One article in the *Huffington Post* uses the often-cited forty-five percent statistic as its title: “45% of Students Don’t Learn Much in College” (Gorski). In a post about the book on his personal blog, Bill Gates is subtler, but he still sets up a scene and then introduces the publication of the study and the data within it as the launching point for his argument:

> We’ve seen for some time the disturbing data that America is falling behind other countries in the number of students who attend and complete post-secondary education. Now, new data suggests that many U.S. students who make it to college, and even succeed there, are actually learning very little.

Echoing the tone of *A Nation at Risk* and the Spellings Commission Report, Gates draws a concerning picture of American Higher education. Gates then provides a bullet list of key findings including the often-cited statistic that forty-five percent of students showed no improvement. Each text in the representative sample uses one of these two options—the study’s findings or its publication—to answer the question of what happened.

Once the fact is established, the public discourse samples tended to use bombastic journalistic language when describing the book. For example, *Academically Adrift* is called “a crushing exposé” of higher education (Berk) full of “dismal results” (Gates). These descriptions appear to happen at the stasis of definition, defining the book’s findings as revealing the troubling state of higher education. The publication of the book
is defined as a moment of reckoning for public audiences already suspicious of higher education.

With the facts established and defined as alarming, the arguments move on to the stasis of cause. The cause stasis is a crucial point in the sequence because it asks us to name a cause for the thing defined in the second stasis. Defining the book as an exposé immediately makes us feel pulled toward the higher stases. We cannot stop at that definition. Exposing something or someone as discreditable implicates questions about what should be done in light of that revelation. We feel drawn up to questions about the quality of discredit (how bad is this thing in light of the revelation?) and action (what should be done about it?). The waypoint between definition and value is the cause and effect stasis; it is where an argument must pin the problem on someone or something. The articles I examined took several paths here.

Unsurprisingly, many blamed the institutions and those who work within them, which makes sense given Arum and Roksa’s implication of institutional priorities in the discussion of their findings. For example, Gorski identifies “a culture at colleges and universities that values research over good teaching” as the root cause. Gates uses the word culture too in his discussion of cause, but he also blames professors for being complicit in a broken system. According to him, Academically Adrift depicts a culture in academia where undergraduate learning is only a peripheral concern; where the professors don’t want to assign complicated papers because grading them is hard work; where the main feedback is course evaluations from students who dislike writing complicated papers;
where there’s an attitude of, ‘Don’t mess with us and we won’t mess with you.’ And there’s no accountability for any of it.

Such comments about the culture of academia direct attention the institutions and individuals within those institutes as the cause for the poor results in Arum and Roksa’s study. Menand likewise argues “professors have little incentive to make their courses more rigorous” because “professors say that the only aspect of their teaching that matters professionally is student course evaluations, since these can figure in tenure and promotion decisions.” Rather than an indictment of the course evaluation system, Menand appears to blame professors for acting in their own self-interests by making their classes easy and entertaining.

Several articles took a laundry list approach here, which is one of the perks of writing about books rather than investigating a murder: you can bring more than one person to trial in the court of public opinion, unlike our homicide example. In her review, Adele Melander-Dayton writes that the troubling findings are indicative of “declining academic rigor” which we can see in the students’ attitude toward work, professors’ skewed priorities, and institutions’ greater concern about revenue reports than learning outcomes. In an interview within Melander-Dayton’s article, Arum similarly casts a wide net: “It’s not clear to me that the stakeholders in the system today — administrators, faculty and students — have prioritized undergraduate learning.” In an article for The Economist, Emma Duncan writes that no agents in the tertiary system of education are “primarily interested” in undergraduate student learning, a claim she suggests is evinced by the fact that tenured faculty chose to spend the least amount of time with
undergraduates. An implied progression of fact, definition, and cause brings about this argument that undergraduate education is under-prioritized.

With causes and effects established in these specific or broad senses, arguments can move on to the top two stases—value and action. Value, recall, is where forensic rhetoric would take into account the context surrounding the event that might serve as a qualification, such as premeditation or mitigating circumstances like an accused attacker acting in self-defense. In civic discourse, questions of value are often intertwined with the next stasis of action. Discovering that a particular food additive is certain to cause life-threatening health risks might lead us to ask if genetically modified foods are worth regulating or banning outright. Why? Because we value life. This is an example of the crucial role of questions of value for arguments in the public sphere. As Walsh explains, value is an important divide between the kinds of questions we expect experts to answer and the kinds of questions we expect to answer as citizens. Deliberative argument in the public sphere uses values to make judgments about what ought to be done in light of a line of reasoning about facts, definitions, and causes. Civic judgment relies on shared civic values while technical judgment relies on technical values privileging knowledge and expertise.47

Although education is arguably not on the same level of belief as matters of life and death, it is entangled with other ideals at the level of value. As Adler-Kassner and O’Neill’s work reminds us, framing results in the construction of ideological structures, and a cultural practice like education is imbued with value because of those ideological structures (19). What do we believe to be the purpose of higher education—economic advancement, opportunity equalization, productive citizenship, a liberal education, civic
training? Such beliefs will determine how we proceed at the stasis of value. If we believe economic advancement to be the primary purpose of higher education, then one would care less about learning outcomes and more about post-graduation job placement rates. These beliefs are also related to definition in terms of what an education should be.

The simplest answer about what belief is dominant could be the belief that higher education should function well. By well we may mean that it meets expectations as measured by metrics (i.e., graduation rates) or that it meets more context rich definitions. This belief easily segues an argument from the stasis of cause to action. Several articles use the *topos* of appearance vs. reality to imply this kind of belief statement. Menand, professor of English at Harvard and a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, for example, begins his review of the book in the *New Yorker* by ominously warning readers “that the higher education system only looks as if it it’s working” (26). In a slight variation of this theme, Kevin Carey discusses the faulty perception that higher education guarantees higher learning: “Deep down, everyone knows that learning has long been neglected. But they don't want to know.” And, in *Vanity Fair*, Brett Berk describes how the book “reveals precisely what parents, grandparents, and anti-intellectual naysayers have long feared: university students spend nearly five times as much of their day in bed, playing Frisbee golf, and updating their Facebook status as they do attending class and studying.”

Another more complicated answer could be the belief that colleges should serve a social good and do no harm. In an interview with *Salon.com*, Arum describes the lack of rigor as “a serious social problem that threatens the foundation of our society, our economic competitiveness and our ability to govern ourselves democratically” (Burns). Gorski goes one step further, describing such effects as having “irrevocably injured
education and put many students at an economic disadvantage” (emphasis added). In his commentary, Carey explicitly posits the rhetorical question, “Who is hurt the most by all this?” His response:

Students saddled with thousands of dollars in debt and no valuable skills, certainly. Even worse, workers who never went to college in the first place, languishing in their careers for lack of a college credential. To them, the higher-education system must seem like a gigantic confidence game, with students and colleges conspiring to produce hollow degrees that nonetheless define the boundaries of opportunity. (Carey)

As Burns and Carey exemplify, much public discourse about Academically Adrift describes the declining rate of learning (purported by Arum and Roksa’s interpretation of data from the CLA) as an unacceptable violation of the civic belief that higher education should be a social good.

The final stasis is action. Arum and Roksa end their book with a chapter titled “Mandate for Reform” in which they explore proposals to reverse the trend of limited learning illuminated by their study under headings such as Student Preparation, Higher Education Leadership, and Institutional Transparency and Accountability (126-136). Although Arum and Roksa make general comments rather than a specific mandate (which is typical of social science research), the public response follow through to the stasis of specific action. For example, Carey writes that “the way forward is clear…Colleges can start by renewing their commitment to the liberal arts” (Carey). Likewise, Heffer offers a four-point plan to “restore community” by more thoroughly vetting potential students and faculty, conducting “thorough intra-school evaluations,
assessing personal engagement in the academic and civic realms,” and providing a “civic orientation for freshmen—as well as for returning students and faculty.”

Although the finding that nearly fifty-percent of students fail to demonstrate any significant improvements in learning after two years of college is certainly alarming, Arum and Roksa’s study has so much cachet in popular news sources because it resonates with pre-existing concerns about the decline of American education. In other words, its resonance with certain publics is due, in part, to the fact that it reflected a commonplace argument elicited by accountability: the value of a college education is not what it used to be. In other words, economic value emerges as a commonplace of accountability rhetoric. Consider, for example, how Arum and Roksa’s arguments coincided with economic hypotheses that higher education in the U.S. might exist in a financial bubble similar to the U.S. real estate market bubble that burst in 2007 (Cronin and Horton). In the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008, new economic realities for higher education emerged including skyrocketing tuition, crippling student debt, and unparalleled funding cuts. These economic forces converged with existing rhetoric of educational crisis, calling for economic accountability in higher education. What was once a guarantee of improved economic status is now under new scrutiny. These claims of economic uncertainty alter the way that higher education is viewed. No longer a guaranteed public good, postsecondary education must now measure up to more empirical metrics of success to prove its worth. As a result of this accountability commonplace, the public discourse about the book is pulled up into the stasis of value, especially economic value.

Academically Adrift and the public discourse about limited learning in higher education are notably emblematic of accountability and its commonplace arguments,
especially commonplaces of crisis that insist on deliberation about potential solutions in the public sphere.\textsuperscript{\textast}} The crisis of confidence in higher education and a destabilization of the notion that the rate of return for a college education is a near-guarantee enable arguments that renew public concerns about the purpose of post-secondary education. Such questioning is not new; the public arguments written in response to \textit{Academically Adrift}'s indictment against lowered standards and ineffective teaching echo previous uses of accountability \textit{topoi}. They argue that colleges and universities have failed to prepare all students for a globally competitive workforce (at the stases of cause and value) and propose additional accountability measures as a means of rescuing postsecondary education (at the stasis of action).

Read through stasis theory, we can see this effect in the upward pull of the stases. Because public debates usually terminate in political action, there is a tendency for an upward pull from factual arguments toward policy arguments. In accountability discourse, the education crisis is sometimes not even mentioned or proven—instead, the crisis is assumed while the debate about whom to hold accountable and by what means becomes the sticking point of the argument. In other words, the discussion becomes about solutions and not about problems that may or may not exist. For example, while remaining lukewarm about federal reform mandates in K-12 education, such as No Child Left Behind, Gorksi uses Arum and Roksa’s study as leverage to argue “accountability should be emphasized more at the institutional level, starting with college presidents.” Instead of definitional claims to convince publics that the problem exists, the public arguments about Arum and Roksa present further assessment as a solution to broader educational crises, which is the stasis of action. In the next section, I explore responses to
Academically Adrift in the technical sphere of rhetoric and composition by analyzing the stases in four book reviews that appeared in College Composition and Communication (CCC) in 2012.

The Stases in the College Composition and Communication Forum

CCC published a lengthy book review forum on Academically Adrift in February 2012 that included critical reviews from four scholars in the field. In the editor’s note introducing the first review, Kathleen Yancey writes “Given the national attention received by the volume Academically Adrift, especially its conclusions about the success (or lack of same) in our writing programs, I invited four scholars to share with us their views of this study” (Haswell “Methodologically” 487). The technical arguments in these four reviews appear to show the opposite trend as the public discourse’s tendency to push arguments up to the stasis of action: that is, the CCC reviews mostly demonstrate a downward pull toward the lower stases of definition and fact. Some of this descending trend might a consequence of genre, for as John Swales and others have shown, the genre constraints of academic journal articles often mandate the use of all five stases. However, the reviews in question are not typical academic research articles. They have a different purpose and are a distinct genre even though they appear adjacent to research articles; namely, they are critical reviews intended not only to respond to the content of the book but also to react to the attention it received from public audiences (as explained in Yancey’s editorial note). Fahenestock and Secor’s core question—which asks why a particular audience is addressed in a particular stasis—becomes very pertinent because unlike a typical book review in an academic journal, the reviews in the CCC forum
discuss the book with an imagined audience of experts whose gaze is directed inward toward concerns of the field and is also aware of public arguments that may be infringing on the perceived territory of writing experts.

The first review is written by writing assessment scholar Richard Haswell who in no uncertain terms attacks the credibility of the Arum and Roksa study in several ways. First, he notes the study’s seeming disconnection from previous research—a violation of proper research writing in virtually every discipline: Haswell claims “Not one piece of past research—and there are hundreds—appears in the authors’ discussion or their bibliography, although both are aswim with think-tank books and blue-ribbon papers opining the opposite” (“Methodologically” 488). In his deconstruction, Haswell does not just question the interpretation of the data, which he sees as a validity of evidence issue; rather, he argues “their findings cannot be interpreted at all” (“Methodologically” 488). He is skeptical of the meaningfulness of the data because the analysis of the CLA Performance Task scores cannot be replicated due to their protection as trade secrets of the Council for Aid in Education (who developed the test), which brings their reliability into question, and the precise meaning of task scores remains too ambiguous (what precisely does a high score in the criterion of critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing mean?). In his rejection of Arum and Roksa’s methodology, Haswell draws attention to the stases of fact and definition. Examining what students learn in the first two years of college (as Arum and Roksa do) occurs at the stasis of fact and the classification of those findings (such as good, sufficient, insufficient) occurs at the stasis of definition. By pulling the stasis down to the level of fact, Haswell discredits every step in the stasis progression of public arguments that use Academically Adrift as a starting
point. No valid definition, cause, value, or action argument can be made from faulty data.49

In the second review, Jeanne Gunner argues that “the sticking point is clear: unless you’re willing to accept the CLA as a highly meaningful measurement of student learning, then little in this book will impress you” (492). Gunner, like Haswell, firmly plants the argument at the level of fact and definition. She calls the methodological discussion “surprisingly inert” and says she finds “how little incisive thought the study provoked in the authors themselves” to be “disheartening and telling” (492). But Gunner’s review also uses a political economic lens to critique factual claims in the book. For example, she argues that by assuming all faculty employment is secure within a tenure track system that favors research as a criterion for retention and promotion and limited consideration, Arum and Roksa are guilty of “acknowledging and then sidestepping economic realities” such as the material conditions in which faculty work (494). Here, Gunner is also directing attention to the next stasis: definition. She points out the implied homogeneity of university structures, an implication that is not accurate given the existence of two-year colleges, specialized institutions, and private liberal arts colleges.

Carolyn Calhoon-Dillahunt argues in the third review of the forum that Arum and Roksa’s findings are suspect because of yet another methodological misstep: the fact that the student cohort they studied “does not accurately reflect today’s college student body,” a comment that identifies fact and definition as the argumentative sticking points (496). Community college students are notably absent from the cohort studied by Arum and Roksa, even though thirteen million undergraduate students are enrolled in community
college and nearly half of students completing bachelor’s degrees attend community college at some point in the course of their undergraduate careers (“Community”). She also argues they ignore other important realities of today’s college students, such as the fact that students are less and less likely to be traditional eighteen-year-old first-time freshman and are more often combining traditional face-to-face courses with some online education.

However, unlike the first two reviews, Calhoun-Dillahunt and Teresa Redd, the fourth reviewer, overtly engage the ideograph of accountability and its related *topoi*. Calhoun-Dillahunt contends “the limited learning demonstrated in *Academically Adrift* is troubling and demands attention regardless of the study’s limitations” (498), and Redd describes the statistics as “particularly troubling” and argues that scholars in writing studies “cannot easily dismiss” their overall findings (500). “Rather than resist Arum’s and Roksa’s findings,” Calhoun-Dillahunt argues, “we should embrace *Academically Adrift* for its focus on what matters most: learning” (498). The book, she argues, should be seen as “a starting point for a national dialogue on improving student learning on college campuses” (499). In this way, she views the factual claims in the book as a first step toward a deliberative discussion rather than an end-point for accountability-based reform. This line of reasoning differs from the kinds of action-based arguments in the public discourse in terms of the agent responsible for insuring accountability, but still reflects an overt use of accountability *topoi* that Haswell and Gunner appear to avoid.

After using a *topos* of accountability to begin, Calhoon-Dillahunt oscillates between praising the study for its strengths and qualifying the strength of its findings. Arum and Roksa earn more praise from her than the other reviewers. In fact, she argues
that the data in *Academically Adrift* “indirectly supports effective writing programs” because overall findings imply the need for increased rigor, increased writing across the curriculum and across all four years of college, and strong liberal arts programs (498).

She also praises the study’s use of the CLA to focus on measuring learning rather than using other metrics (pass rates, graduation rates). But, as she notes, this focus does not ensure that the CLA Performance Task is an authentic measure of student learning.

This is not to say that Calhoon-Dillahunt is without critiques for *Academically Adrift*. She accuses Arum and Roksa of “perpetuating reductive two-year college stereotypes” that all community college students are underprepared and in need of remediation, and she notes that they “neither acknowledge the neglect nor recognize the significance of this omission in their work” (497). Another drawback in Arum and Roksa’s findings that Calhoon-Dillahunt notes is the lack of consideration for student motivation in completing the CLA Performance Task. The lack of motivation to do well in the task, she notes, could have negatively impacted the results. In other words, students may have appeared to underperform because they simply didn’t take the test seriously given they had no stake in the assessment. These critiques appear to settle at the stasis of cause and effect.

Much of Redd’s review puts Arum and Roksa in conversation with other research on race and education, thus addressing a limitation pointed out by Haswell when he contends that Arum and Roksa ignore previous research and qualifying the findings as even more alarming at the level of value. She does occasionally find issues at the stasis of definition, but in a way that questions the accuracy of a specific interpretation rather than their foundational claims. Like Calhoon-Dillahunt, she also questions some of the
particulars of Arum and Roksa’s findings (especially their focus on page counts as the measure of quality writing instruction), but appears less skeptical overall than Haswell and Gunner (502).

Redd’s review proceeds all the way up to the stasis of action, much like the arguments in the public sphere. She concludes her review with a synopsis of her “Writing Matters Campaign,” which asks faculty to state high expectations for writing, hold students accountable for writing, and refer students to the WAC program website for help with writing (504). Such a program, she claims, can be “a small but significant step toward cultivating the kind of institutional culture Arum and Roksa recommend” (505). Such an upward trend toward action parallels the tendencies found in the public discourse. The stasis struggle is around facts and definitions like it is in Haswell and Gunner; instead, Redd engages accountability and deploys a set of facts, definitions, and causes from Academically Adrift to set up arguments in support of writing-based programmatic initiatives. Her use of rhetorical questions indicates this upward pull of her stases, especially her concern about “what accounts for their results and what should colleges and universities do?” Unlike Haswell, she does not dismiss the study as severely methodologically flawed.

The last two reviews are much more in sync with the public discourse. Although this difference between the first two reviews and the last two is an interesting development, the technical discourse in the technical sphere of rhetoric and composition still appears rather insular overall. It exists in a self-contained realm of discourse, which is certainly not unusual for technical discourse, but it can appear dismissive and defensive when put adjacent to public discourse on the same topic (as Gallagher adeptly explains in
“Being”). The professional discourse puts agency in our writing programs and in the work of writing teachers. It is in the institutional role of programs and faculty leadership positions that the culture of learning in colleges can change, according to the professional discourse. Rather than externally imposed accountability, the authors of the CCC review forum appear to advocate for the responsibility model articulated by writing assessment scholars such as Adler-Kassner and Gallagher.

The stasis analysis shows that the CCC reviews mostly serve as a professional counterpoint to the public discourse. I expected such arguments to attempt to counter the public argument by crafting arguments that have a downward pull, back to the stases of definition and fact. Some did: most obviously Haswell’s review. Walking back down the stasis ladder allows Haswell to make different choices at the stasis of fact and definition and, consequently, chart a new argumentative path. Others seemed to emphasize value arguments as exemplified by Gunner, highlight accountability _topoi_ as Calhoon-Dillahunt does, and discuss the study’s alarming results as a starting point for new action such as Redd’s discussion of her university’s Writing Matters campaign. This diversity in the chosen stasis for response indicates a struggle for stasis and a resulting argumentative dissonance for scholars of writing assessment.

**Conclusion**

As the previous section demonstrates, perhaps the most significant argumentative dissonance occurs among the arguments in the technical sphere. In my case study of discourse written in response to _Academically Adrift_, I note the association and disassociation with _topoi_ of accountability and the changing stasis progression when
certain contradictory topoi are used. By presuming the existence of an educational crisis, accountability creates an argumentative situation that pushes arguments up the stases toward action in both public and technical arguments. When attempting to engage or respond to arguments initiated by the accountability ideograph, writing assessment scholars experience a struggle for stasis because arguments initiated by accountability that occupy the public’s attention assume crisis-oriented lower stages and are thus “heard” at the higher stages of value and action. As a result, arguments that should be a deliberative discussion are structured in ways that lead to accountability-based reform. Accountability appears to invite civic discourse from all interested parties and serve as an entry point to position oneself in relation to the scene of an education system in crisis, but in reality the commonplaces associated with accountability imply so much at the lower stages that the arguers in the public sphere focus on action rather than on understanding the problem at hand.

Stasis theory helps us understand accountability’s upward pull and see how writing assessment scholars who attempt to translate their expertise into arguments for the public sphere face a struggle for stasis that begins at the level of fact. It also helps us see how each time a scholar makes an argument, she engages related claims, assumptions, and beliefs and helps us organize those claims into a predictable pattern and allows us to find points of argumentative dissonance. This dissonance may be inevitable due to the upward push of the stages in public discourse and the downward pull of the stages in professional arguments. However, as scholars such as Paul Butler and Farmer suggest, rhetoric and composition scholars appear ill-equipped to navigate such discord because we expect our professional ethos that is drawn from a well of expertise to
support an effective public persona. Yet, expertise may not be as persuasive to publics as affirmation of preconceived beliefs. Scholars in rhetoric and composition must choose between either embracing or objecting to the use of accountability as the best way to improve student learning in public forums, and in that moment they must also choose whether to affirm public beliefs.

How might we proceed differently? Our biggest challenge remains that we typically fail to engage the most pressing exigencies in the public sphere. Accountability remains a culturally shared starting point for the invention of public arguments about education and writing assessment’s role in reform efforts. The progression of questions in the stases allows rhetoricians to see the unresolved matter at hand or the point at issue within a conflict. Looking at these arguments, the unresolved matter is not how to fix education—which is the kind of policy argument the accountability ideograph initiates—but how to ethically measure student learning. If the rhetorical function of *topoi* is cooperative meaning-making that is equal parts invention and interpretation, perhaps we need a new guiding ideograph. An ideograph of ethics that is intended as a tool for both invention and interpretation might help foster rhetoric that may eventually shift publics. Indeed, if we are to have a rhetoric of our own times, as Farmer says, then we must use our informed understanding of the mutual construction of publics and rhetorics to “remodel the existing public sphere” (5).

This chapter has proposed and demonstrated how stasis theory can be used to explore writing assessment’s strained relationships with publics and potentially help us understand our less-than-desirable status as public rhetors. The next chapter concludes this dissertation with a proposal for a new kind of professional ethos that is connected to
recent work on theories of ethics in writing assessment and that considers a new ethical grounding for writing assessment arguments.
Chapter Five

The Promise of Our Past

We cannot tell what the future will bring, but we need not sit passively by and wring our hands in frustration at the forces swirling about us. We know that we can gather together and collectively influence that future in the interests of our students and our society. Indeed, we must do so, or we will not live up to the promise of our past. (White, 2001)

This dissertation has been guided by a central question: what might we learn if we look at the field of writing assessment rhetorically? My generative framework that melds contemporary rhetorical theories to examine specific discourse objects provides an alternative understanding of writing assessment as a sub-field of rhetoric and composition and educational measurement. Each chapter uses a different theory to examine a discourse object or set of objects. In chapter one, I examine the construct of writing assessment and its history as a field of study through a rhetorical historiography. Chapter two revisits the great validity debate through the lens of Burkean dramatism, which allows for a rhetorical discourse analysis of technical validity discourse. Examining the histories told of writing assessment, chapter three interprets Edward White’s narrative of 1971 from a perspective informed by recent institutional critiques to analyze the professional subjectivities of writing program administrators (WPAs). In chapter four, I use stasis theory and sphere theory to explore public and professional responses to Academically Adrift in order to study the inventional structure of arguments about writing assessment in higher education within and across the technical and public spheres.

In this final chapter, I tie together the implications from my analyses to promote ethos as a unifying conceptual basis for synergistically connecting writing assessment’s
past to a very recent social justice turn in fourth-wave writing assessment theory. My
definition of ethos is derived from the conception of ethos as a dwelling place, and this
spatial metaphor is a non-teleological means of looking at our past and imagining
potential futures. Specifically, the new ethos for writing assessment I propose reimagines
its complicated disciplinary past, rethinks its foundational concepts, recontextualizes its
foundational historical narratives, recognizes the circulatory nature of writing assessment
discourse, and (most importantly) is attuned to these social justice goals.

Ethos and Social Justice

In his reflective narrative on the modern era of writing assessment, White writes
that understanding writing assessment’s past is a useful start, but fixing our gaze on the
future should be the ultimate goal of writing assessment scholarship. This dissertation has
endeavored to understand what White refers to in the epigraph of this final chapter as
“the forces swirling about us” by articulating the rhetoric of writing assessment in ways
that recognize the constitutive force of language, the permeability of discursive spheres,
and circulation of ideas and ideologies (“Opening” 319). Because writing assessment
exists in dynamic relation to a plethora of institutional and everyday practices, the
traditional tripartite notion of a rhetorical situation (speaker, audience, and subject) is
perpetually created and recreated in adaptive and evolutionary ways. In other words,
there is no preexisting rhetorical situation for writing assessment, but a complex
confluence of rhetorical energies, practices, and ideologies. What White calls the swirling
forces, I consider part of the rhetoricity of writing assessment. The next step is to
consider possible ways forward informed by that new rhetorical understanding of writing assessment.

Writing assessment needs a new ethos to move from potentiality to actuality. Instead of addressing current problems in writing assessment theory with infinite new beginnings through disconnected critiques, I suggest we pause to draw attention to the ways current writing assessment scholarship is shifting away from technocratic and deterministic views of methods and focusing more on how writing assessment can advance learning. In other words, I am suggesting a focal shift away from technologies and toward people. If we re-center writing assessment on the human element (both in terms of the professionals doing the work of assessment and the students who face the consequences of assessment), then we can more effectively work toward the goal of creating the fairest assessment theories, practices, and policies possible.

The political and intellectual stakes that undergird this dissertation and inform writing assessment’s future trajectory are higher than ever. University writing programs face more pressure to assess student learning at the same time that our disciplinary understandings of learning and literacy in rhetoric and composition have become much more nuanced. Understanding these stakes requires illuminating the tacit and pervasive assumptions we and others make about the assessment of writing and proceeding from an explicit assumption that writing assessments as they are typically constructed are not politically neutral. The path forward that I envision addresses these stakes head-on in both theoretical and practical ways.

The ethos for writing assessment I am positing here relies on an older, perhaps less familiar definition of ethos as an artistic proof. Aristotle describes three qualities that
make a rhetor trustworthy: *phronēsis* (practical wisdom), *aretē* (virtue), and *eunia* (good will) (112). More contemporary scholars of classical rhetoric argue that these three qualities are reconstructed as derivative elements of the social and intellectual habits practiced in specific, material spaces wherein individuals participate in rhetorical exchanges and undergo a form of non-institutional rhetorical education. In the introduction of his edited collection, *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, Michael J. Hyde explains that the collection’s theme was intended to inspire work that reached back to an older and more “primordial” meaning of ethos as “dwelling place” where individuals come together to discuss and deliberate particular matters of civic concern (xiii). This definition complements Karen Burke LeFevre’s argument that “ethos arises from the relationship between the individual and the community,” and thus, “cannot exist in isolation” (45). Judy Holiday extends this discussion of ethos as dwelling places that appears in Hyde’s collection by examining the linkage between the study of invention and ethos, especially in regard to rhetorical education that occurs in these “gathering places” (389). As we aim to invent possible futures of writing assessment, one such way to gather together as White suggests and collectively influence that future is with an agenda of social justice. The metaphor of gathering together in these ethical dwelling places allows us to consider the process of cultivating certain sensibilities, attitudes, and beliefs attuned not only to individual interest but also communal concern. Much writing assessment literature is inflected with implied and explicit claims about expertise—both our own developing assessment expertise as researchers and teachers of writing as well as arguments about the competing expertise of the psychological and educational testing community and the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Arguments of expertise imply
that our arguments must draw from a well of expert knowledge, yet such knowledge is
often rendered as *phronēsis* (practical wisdom), which leaves out the other two
dimensions. The spatial metaphor of location emphasizes the formative role of habitude
and conversation to develop not only practical wisdom, but virtue and good will. I
propose that such an understanding of the ethos of writing assessment be used as a
unifying concept for contemporary writing assessment scholarship driven by the goal of
creating the fairest assessment theories, practices, and policies possible. Fairness cannot
be achieved solely through sound judgment informed by practical wisdom; endeavoring
to create the fairest assessments possible requires attunement to complex questions about
the social effects of our work and the political nature of writing assessments.

One means of cultivating a new ethos for writing assessment is to reconsider our
stance toward writing assessment as a form of inquiry. Rhetorician Jenny Rice
(previously Edbauer) describes inquiry as habit, not precursor to something else. In other
words, rhetorical inquiry should have no greater *teleos*. As we attend to the dwelling
place of writing assessment, we can consider how that place might cultivate a new kind
of professional rhetorical inquiry. For example, a shift from epistemology to inquiry
opens up new ways of conducting writing assessment research. Instead of aiming to
bolster or challenge particular assessment practices, we might ask more inquiry-based
questions, especially axiological ones attuned to social justice concerns. Both ethos and
social justice call for critical awareness of what is implicit or tacit in our theories and
practices of writing assessment.

Generally associated with the notion of assuring equitable social opportunities,
social justice work is guided by a commitment to the protection of the least advantaged
members of a society. Political philosopher John Rawls describes his conception of “justice as fairness,” by which he means that the principles of justice must be applied in ways that benefit the most disadvantaged segments of a society (11). Because his primary justice principles are liberty and equity, Rawls’ theory of justice is undergirded by the belief that every individual has an equal claim to basic liberties and that some regulation of inequalities is necessary to ensure advantages to the most vulnerable populations.

Relying heavily on Rawls’ conception of fairness, Elliot describes the pursuit of fairness in writing assessment as the identification and creation of “opportunity structures” (“A Theory” 1). Adopting fairness as the foundational principle of writing assessment reconceives validity and reliability as means for creating opportunity structures; they are the means to an end, rather than the ends in and of themselves.

In writing assessment theory, social justice has been taken up as a way for scholars to intervene against a status quo of writing assessment policies, practices, and politics that by design offer advantages to students of certain social backgrounds and disproportionately disadvantage students of other backgrounds. In response to a confluence of socially-conscious writing pedagogy and theory and growing anti-testing sentiment at all levels of public education, two strands of recent writing assessment scholarship explore potential ways to right the wrongs done against the least socially advantaged groups. In the first strand, scholars argue we must recognize how race, class, and socioeconomic status function covertly or implicitly in writing assessment. The first section of Asao Inoue and Mya Poe’s collection on race and writing assessment, for example, focuses on what the editors call the “absent presence” of race in writing assessment, by which they and their contributors mean the way race is unaccounted for or
unconsidered in the design of writing assessments. This absent presence of race impedes examination of consequences for students of color or the working class. To remedy this non-discussion of race, the contributors contend that race, class, and socioeconomic background must be integrated into our notions of validity.\textsuperscript{51} Inoue’s more recent work on anti-racist writing assessment ecologies further extends some of the groundwork laid in \textit{Race and Writing Assessment}.

A second strand of writing assessment scholarship informed by social justice principles is Chris Gallagher’s (“Review”) promotion of fairness and ethics as foundational concepts in writing assessment and Elliot’s call for fairness to be recognized as the “first virtue” of writing assessment (“A Theory”). Gallagher and Elliot’s respective social justice orientations similarly draw our attention to the human element of writing assessment and ground our theories in real-world concerns about the consequences of writing assessment practices (“A Theory” 1). Poe, Elliot, John Aloysius Cogan Jr., and Tito G. Nurudeen Jr.’s use of constitutional law to examine the disparate impact of standardized testing practices on minority groups is a prime example of scholarship effectively using an analysis of writing assessment consequences to argue for change. A forthcoming 2016 special issue of \textit{College English} edited by Poe and Inoue also addresses the topic of writing assessment as social justice.

In light of this recent social justice turn, writing assessment appears in need of new frameworks to understand the political and intellectual stakes of our work. Much like how James Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Sylvia Blithe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles characterize their methodology for institutional critique as being born of a “desire to humanize research practices,” this conclusion is born of my own desire to humanize
writing assessment (612). In this conclusion I propose we reconstruct the ethos of writing assessment in a way that captures the social justice concerns of writing assessment scholars. The approach I have enacted in this dissertation is relational, by which I mean we create something new from the old as we recognize the fluid nature of change and the force of shifting interests. Just as this dissertation has mined writing assessment scholarship to construct a new understanding of writing assessment as a practice and field of study, the way forward must re-examine the past with an eye toward the future. We need to pause, reflect, invent, and then move forward. To interrupt the reductionist thinking about writing assessment discourse requires both a political and pedagogical intervention—in other words, we need not a new procedure for writing assessment, but a new ethos of writing assessment.

Crafting a new ethos for writing assessment is not a purely theoretical task, for ethos in the classical understanding is concerned with the practice of persuasion. In the following sections, I explore each of these topics in more depth by reviewing discoveries from the last four chapters and suggesting possible practical and theoretical interventions. Each section roughly corresponds with one body chapter, in the order they appear, but together they establish a new ethos for writing assessment as social justice.

**Reimagining Writing Assessment’s Disciplinary Past**

Disciplines, institutions, and networks are designed to endure, which is not to say they never change. Indeed, they do, but incrementally and with glacial speed. Writing assessment—with its quasi-disciplinary status, institutional utility, and embroilment within networks of power—has certainly changed over the last century. However, as the
scholarly field of writing assessment blossomed in the last two decades, the pace of change in terms of writing assessment practice appears insufficient in light of the bevy of critiques about writing assessment practices. What are WPAs do to, then, in light of writing assessment’s ambiguous disciplinary status? Many responses have been pragmatic: we do what we can. Others have focused their attention on theoretically reorienting the field of writing assessment in hopes of sowing the seeds for better writing assessment practices (Broad What; Lynne).

I propose our next step forward include pausing these insightful critiques in order to draw them together into a common project that is historically informed and rhetorically focused. Expanding the notion of writing assessment as rhetorical and seeing rhetoric as an equally powerful driving force for innovation alongside technology and methodology allows us to consider the past, present, and potential futures of writing assessment. For example, examining writing assessment scholarship both diachronically and synchronically in order to illuminate other engines of changes in writing assessment was the aim of the first chapter of this dissertation. Understanding other mechanisms for change not only allows us to understand our past differently, but also illuminates ways to shape the future of writing assessment. Perhaps we do not need a new assessment method or technology to spur change in our theories and practices; perhaps a reimagination of our past might be enough to challenge the rationales undergirding certain theories and practices.

Reimagining writing assessment’s disciplinary origins and current disciplinary positionality also helps us better understand the construct of writing assessment. This conceptual struggle is not unique to writing assessment. Indeed, several scholars have
asked similar questions about the construct of composition. John Duffy, for example, writes that composition studies’ most significant questions rest with understanding the construct of writing studies itself. The “greater disciplinary problem,” for him, is “our failure to explain to the general public, to colleagues in other disciplines, to our students, and perhaps even to ourselves what we do, why our work matters, and what is at stake in the teaching of writing” (Duffy 212). Much the same could be said about the assessing of writing. Our work is not well understood by stakeholders beyond our familiar disciplinary borders of writing studies, and the stakes of our assessment work are often not well defined.

Reimagining writing assessment’s disciplinary history might require consideration of new guiding metaphors. For example, instead of Kathleen Blake Yancey's wave metaphor, (which is certainly a useful lens to understand practices and their attendant epistemologies), perhaps we consider writing assessment’s heritage through a biological metaphor where assessment is an organism that is born in the positivistic paradigm of educational testing and psychometrics but evolves and adapts due to economic, social, and political exigencies that are part of its ecology. The core DNA of writing assessment—the impulse to measure writing ability in some kind of accurate and meaningful way—remains the same, but per the usual process of evolution, some adaptations are maintained and integrated into that DNA while others are discarded as writing assessment emerges as a sub-field of rhetoric and composition. Instead of perpetuating the notion of writing assessment as a field wrought with interdisciplinary tensions, we might use new metaphors such as this evolutionary one to highlight the mutual desire to better understand how we make judgments about student writing and
how those judgments inform how we educate. Such a disciplinary crossover occurs in Elliot and Les Perelman’s edited collection, *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century*, which features work from both rhetoric and composition and educational measurement communities. The editors describe the collection as “testament to White’s ability to work across disciplinary boundaries” (Elliot and Perelman 2). The collection is also an update to the 1996 collection *Writing Assessment Politics, Policies, and Practices*, edited by White, William Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri, but more balanced in terms of incorporating voices from both communities of experts, experts who within this biological metaphor for writing assessment’s disciplinary development are by-products of natural section.

The disciplinary history of writing assessment is one of hybridization, and one can no longer deny the influence of either the educational and psychological measurement community or rhetoric and composition at this point. Given the premise of this dissertation—that writing assessment is rhetorical—the metaphors we use matter. They set the conceptual frames within which we understand the past and present of the field and name. Likewise, the central concepts of disciplines are entrenched in these disciplinary histories, as exemplified by the centrality of the psychometric concept of validity in contemporary writing assessment. In the next section, I consider how we might rethink the core concepts of writing assessment in adaptive ways in order to manipulate them in ways that are aligned with goals such as the social justice agenda in recent writing assessment scholarship.
Rethinking Writing Assessment’s Core Concepts

In chapter two I argued that validity has a strategic ambiguity. As I contended, validity can be a synecdoche that enables simultaneous understandings within the broader rhetorical structure of writing assessment. As dynamic symbols, synecdoches can withstand paradoxes, and I extend that attribute to validity, which I define as a paradoxical set of values that animate assessment because it is an attempt to standardize something that by definition must evolve reflexively to ever-changing cultural contexts. Using Burkean representative anecdotes, chapter two illuminates the constitutive and constraining effects of validity discourse. As the term through which visible, accepted truth(s) about assessment are communicated among a community of experts, validity is a rhetorical opportunity to analyze the collection of identifications reinforced through trivial repetition and questioned through critique. I see professional identifications of both psychometricians and compositionists occurring through a similar pattern of habituation, a process I argue in the last section of this conclusion that we need to be more conscious of in terms of its role in the greater ethos of writing assessment.

While we may not be able to dislodge validity as the axiom from which professional representations begin, we may be able to overlay fairness as a precondition for validity and by doing so exploit its rhetorical plasticity. Elliot makes such an argument in his theory of ethics for writing assessment as a framework of principled inquiry structured to achieve an ethical outcome (“A Theory” 1). Echoing in some ways Patricia Lynne’s call for ethics to be a key methodological concept, Elliot offers a robust understanding of fairness as a core principle of all forms of writing assessment. “Understood as the first aim of writing assessment,” he writes, “fairness disallows the
value dualism between ethical and validity inquiry; both validity and reliability are
unified under the core referential frame of fairness” (“A Theory” 27). By identifying the
“pursuit of fairness” as the prime objective of all writing assessments, Elliot sets a
foundation for ethics as the overarching organizational framework for writing assessment
theories.

Other writing assessment scholars have also begun foregrounding our ethical
obligation to consider how writing assessments can unfairly impact our increasingly
diverse student populations based on their race, ethnicity, gender, multilinguality,
sexuality, and other social markers. For example, Asao Inoue argues that we have not yet
adequately addressed race and racism in our theories of writing assessment. In Antiracist
Writing Assessment Ecologies, Inoue challenges readers to not only take the stance that
our classroom assessments of student writing should do no harm to minority students, but
to go a step further by using writing assessment as a vehicle to promote social justice.
Such an understanding can enable practitioners of writing assessment to reconceive of
their work as a means of “cultivating and nurturing complex systems that are centrally
about sustaining fairness and diverse complexity” (Inoue Antiracist 12). Inoue’s
argument is familiar in its implication that writing assessment will always cast a shadow
on pedagogy because what you assess “trumps what you say or what you attempt to do
with your students” (Antiracist 9). However, Inoue invites us to reexamine our pedagogy
and assessment practices to ask if writing assessments are not only productively
connected to programmatic objectives like course outcomes, but also informed by a sense
of social justice as the endeavor to ensure fairness. In this way, Antiracist Writing
Assessment Ecologies complements recent work on writing assessment as social justice,
including a forthcoming special issue of *JWA* on ethics and writing assessment and the special issue of *College English* on writing assessment as social justice.

Although a social justice agenda is a compelling place to start, it is not without ethical complexity. For example, scholars of writing assessment compellingly debated whether a social justice agenda is itself immune to reifying the same racial or racist structures that it attempts to dismantle. In his response to Inoue and Poe’s collection *Race and Writing Assessment*, Richard Haswell argues “any writing assessment shaped by anti-racism will still be racist or, if that term affronts, will be stuck in racial contradictions.” In *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*, Inoue agrees with Haswell that all professionals working in writing assessment are implicated in racism, even as we take-up an antiracist agenda. Inoue argues that such contradictions become less problematic if we consider that the point of such work is to eradicate racism, not race itself. However, he says, “We cannot eradicate racism in our writing classrooms until we actually address it first in our writing assessments, and our theories about what makes up our writing assessments” (Inoue *Antiracist* 9). Inoue acknowledges that his argument may rub some the wrong way because teachers as practitioners of classroom writing assessment might be uncomfortable with his assertion that our judgments are racially informed. While he agrees that students should not be judged on a different scale because they happen to be from minority groups, he emphasizes that it is the judgment that should be under examination because those judgments might be biased in their orientation to a discourse that privileges standard edited academic English and other discourses of whiteness or might exist in broader ecologies of writing assessment that might be themselves racist.
Part of the dilemma that Inoue and Haswell’s exchange points out is that social justice is an end that we appear to be using as a beginning, but criticism of the idealism innate with a theory of writing assessment shaped by social justice goals can be mitigated if we think of social justice as not only an end-goal but as a foundational principle that should inform our disciplinary histories, core concepts, and everyday practices. In this way, striving to make our writing assessments as fair as possible in the name of social justice becomes part of professional identifications. The longstanding absence or elision of race in writing assessment is telling, and the rethinking of our core concepts I am advocating for here is intended to rectify that absence. Rhetorician Cheryl Glenn brought attention to silence as a rhetorical practice, one long off-the-radar of rhetoric because it appeared passive and even arhetorical. In her exploration of silence, she argues it can be as strategic as speech and writing. It is crucial for writing assessment to begin to attend to the absences—in other words, we must look for what are we not yet talking about and make the implicit explicit.

Using fairness as a lens for validity inquiry is one such way to attend to what is silent in Glenn’s terms or absent in Inoue’s. A theoretical exploration of fairness as a candidate for the new core principle of writing assessment would benefit from a method of listening for silences and absences in our theories. One such method is Krista Ratcliffe’s methodology for rhetorical listening. Ratcliffe builds her methodology for rhetorical listening from Glenn’s work on silence, and her four strategies for rhetorical listening. She defines rhetorical listening “as a trope for interpretive invention” (Ratcliffe 1). Interpretive invention is perhaps a more fertile starting point than a social justice agenda. As Ratcliffe explains, her method consists of four moves: one, promoting an
understanding of self and other; two, proceeding with an accountability logic; three, locating identifications across commonalities and differences; and, four, analyzing claims as well as the cultural logics within which these claims function. Such a method may help writing assessment scholars consider identification of race, gender, and class in intersectional ways. Cultural and legal injustices can (and must) be remedied; however, these remedies only become viable if underlying cultural logics that support these injustices are reconfigured. Promoting a sense of self and other and beginning from an accountability logic attuned to the historical unfairness of standardized testing might alleviate some of Haswell’s concern about overtly antiracist theories and practice while still maintaining focus on overarching social justice goals.

**Recontextualizing Foundational Historical Narratives**

To some degree, all disciplines use storytelling as a means of legitimizing and positioning themselves within the broader academic discourse community. Thomas Kuhn’s famous 1962 *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for example, uses the language of paradigm shifts to acknowledge how fundamental changes in basic concepts and practices define and redefine empirical sciences. Work done within a dominant paradigm meets the conventions of an established and shared understanding of members of a specific scientific community. As a common model, a paradigm establishes the bounds of what he calls “normal science” or a coherent tradition of inquiry for a particular type of science (5). In his treatise, Kuhn argues that current paradigms are informed not only by theories and practices, but by a worldview shared by a community of scientists. Such worldviews are cultivated by disciplinary training, which, in turn, is informed by
disciplinary narratives including origin stories and narratives of disciplinary transformations or revolutions, in Kuhn’s terms.

Writing assessment has several such narratives now, including Yancey’s methodological history I use as a frame for chapter one, White’s narrative I analyze in chapter three, and Elliot’s expansive social history in *On A Scale*. As my analyses in chapters two and three uncover, writing assessment’s foundational histories are often highly contextualized within the scope of rhetoric and composition. This restriction leads to two noticeable outcomes. One, the shorter anecdotes that appear in the more practice-oriented edited collections and source books on writing assessment use a compare and contrast *topos* to differentiate what are seen as disciplinarily foreign understandings of these concepts (e.g., validity and reliability) and composition’s appropriation of them. Second, writing assessment narratives of paradigmatic change often rely on the trope of a WPA as a hero who wins the day by winning control over assessment procedures, but do not offer a wider social and political context for these changes and their repercussions.

Recontextualizing our foundational histories of writing assessment does not mean we must extrapolate it from composition, but it does require that we put those narratives into cultural contexts to understand the political stakes for those affected by writing assessment. My third chapter in this dissertation recontextualizes White’s narrative of the 1971 California State University faculty protest of equivalency testing in ways that demonstrate a wide understanding of the scene. For instance, there we may even recognize a potential second narrative in which the administration could very well be seen as the agent of equity who questions why students with a high writing ability should not be exempted from repetitious and unnecessary coursework. Placing White’s narrative
Into a broader political economic context allows us to see how in this particular case the assessment of writing occurs in a highly contested space and calls for non-teleological reasoning that resists the kind of triumphalism seen in White’s narrative. Taking seriously the political nature of our workplace within academic institutions embroiled in capitalist economic rationalities allows us to consider how many recent changes in higher education work in tandem with neoliberalism. In chapter three I identified a neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment, by which I mean writing assessment is informed by a cluster of rationalities that form a neoliberal unconscious that prioritizes managerial values in order to prescribe standards for professional behavior that ensure writing assessment labor serves a political economic agenda of the university. More work needs to be done in order to recontextualize our foundational historical narratives and widen our critical aperture on writing assessment diachronically and synchronically to attend to power relationships and explore the ideological complexities of the administrative WPAs and other English faculty in charge of assessment that are typically obscured in professional narratives of writing assessment.

The current social justice turn in writing assessment may help us do such recontextualizing. For instance, one of the limitations of Elliot’s social history is its focus on institutions such as ETS. Although these institutions are key central agencies of writing assessment, such an institutional history may not consider the broader effects of writing assessment at the time. In the first three chapters of this dissertation, I explore how the modern field of writing assessment has been shaped by professional, institutional, and disciplinary forces. In fact, chapters one and two are such historical rereadings that I advocate we must do more of in order to paint a fuller picture of writing.
assessment’s past. There are many other possibilities for recontextualizing the stories we tell ourselves about writing assessment’s history and development. Inoue’s notion of writing assessment ecologies and sensitivity to institutionalized racism, for instance, might offer a way to look back at writing assessment’s history, especially in terms of the political struggles over placement assessments that long functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms for higher education. The past is prologue for the future, and disciplinary narratives encapsulate visions of the past that support a particular epistemological worldview.

Reaffirming critical inquiry as the heart of writing assessment work is one of the prime arguments of this dissertation, and this section has explored how critical recontextualization of writing assessment’s foundational narratives helps us reject teleological reasoning and dichotomous thinking. Understanding our past and recontextualizing our narratives through contemporary theoretical lenses is an important step to making writing assessment theory more robust.

Recognizing the Circulatory Nature of Writing Assessment Discourse

I have argued that the impulse to assess is a rhetorical process, a mode of inquiry with often persuasive ends, and the previous chapters have sought to further understand the persuasive effects of writing assessment discourse in various spheres—disciplinary, institutional, and public. By strategically using variations of rhetorical theory, this dissertation extends the work of scholars who have long understood assessment as a rhetorically rich concept by applying a particular conception of rhetoric as something that is not situationally-bound. Rather, I see rhetoric as something that circulates and
flows between discursive spheres and situations, which me allows me to attend to
everything from the rhetoricity of writing assessment as a theoretical construct, to the
rhetorical history of writing assessment as a subfield of rhetoric and composition, to the
rhetorical circulation of core concepts like validity and reliability, and (last but not least)
to the rhetorical relations between institutions. Working from G. Thomas Goodnight’s
definition of spheres, understanding the representations of writing assessment in and
across discursive spheres—especially the technical and the public spheres—requires this
circulatory notion of discourse and rhetoric because the sphere metaphor emphasizes the
“grounds upon which arguments are built and authorities to which arguers appeal”
(200). Spheres are not preconstructed spatial contexts within which arguments occur;
rather, spheres are beginnings, the groups from which arguments emerge.

The upshot of my stasis analysis in chapter four, for example, is an alternative
understanding the relationship between rhetorics and publics as they pertain to writing
assessment that focuses more on the origin and structure of arguments than on values
and ideology. I use sphere theory as a metaphor for the way arguments are produced and
circulate freely among various discursive contexts. Such a theoretical orientation opens
up certain avenues for criticism by drawing our attention toward the practices used in the
invention of arguments and uncovering otherwise camouflaged commonplaces. For
example, the topos of accountability remains a culturally shared starting point for the
invention of public arguments about education and writing assessment’s role in reform
efforts. A wholesale dismissal of calls for increased accountability is not a productive
engagement in this topos. As I suggested in chapter four, if the rhetorical function of a
topos is cooperative meaning making, perhaps we need a new topos. In this next section,
I explore an ethical *topos* intended as a tool for both invention and interpretation that might help foster rhetoric that may eventually shift public discourse. But, perhaps more importantly, a new *topos* might help us address matters of public concern in a slightly different way. Writing assessment discourse emerging from the accountability *topos* usually calls for empirical data to help answer questions related to validity, reliability, and fairness. These questions do deserve answers and such data can help inform public discourse. Our well-intended resistance to the *topos* of accountability need not discount these sorts of questions. In fact, a new *topos*, which is part of my discussion of the ethos of writing assessment in the next section, acknowledges the importance of such empirically-minded questions.

An example of such work is White, Elliot, and Irvin Peckham’s *Very Like a Whale*, which discusses programmatic writing assessment issues and their central role in defining higher education. White and his coauthors situate their design approach for assessment within a whole host of forces shaping and reshaping higher education. Their title is a reference to a line in Hamlet that occurs at a pivotal moment in the drama wrought with many questions, and they identify this moment as “one at which past and future swirl into that labyrinth of questions” (2). They argue the field of writing assessment has reached a similar moment filled with “complexity and contingency, irony and indeterminacy” (3). The way forward, they advise, is to take action and understand the complex context of our work in contemporary post-secondary writing assessment. We work now “in uncertain times, in which claims are tenuous and logic nuanced, in which language must be fluid to encompass new ideas” (White, Elliot, Peckham 3). I agree that the language we use must be malleable, but so must our
understandings of writing assessment discourse and rhetoric and their relationship to one another.

Building our disciplinary knowledge-base and working to unquarantine our work are not incommensurable projects. In fact, I see these endeavors as working in tandem because as we broaden our horizons, especially our research horizons, we should do so with an eye toward the concerns of publics and other stakeholders of writing assessment and with more nuanced understandings of how discourses are shaped by rhetorical forces not easily accounted for in traditional notions of a bounded rhetorical situation.

**A New Ethos for Writing Assessment**

In this final section, I present three interconnected propositions in the service of establishing a new ethos for the scholarly field of writing assessment. First, I suggest we continue to create an institutionally recognized identity for writing assessment. Second, I propose we put advocacy and activism at the forefront of writing assessment scholarship. Third, I posit a revision of graduate level WPA training to include training in writing assessment that is guided by a new metaphor of WPA-as-advocate.

Better associating scholarly work as a subfield of rhetoric and composition will help create new identities within institutional structures that create dwelling places and institutional space for professionals involved in the assessment of writing. An example of such networks would be Standing Groups and Special Interest Groups (SIGs) at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). Such groups have a history of being a means to not only increase the visibility of certain issues within composition, but create spaces for professionals to network with others involved in
particular kinds of work. For example, the International Writing Center Association and Council on Basic Writing SIGs are gathering places for professional who share similar interests or concerns. Right now, writing assessment has no institutionally recognized identity at the largest annual conference on composition, as these other groups do, and the accompanying lack of a gathering place means that conference sessions featuring assessment research and theory become the informal locale to discuss both concerns related to writing assessment as a field of study and hyper-localized assessment concerns based in individual institutions or programs. Although I certainly advocate the Freirean praxis that blends theoretical and practical concerns, in a conference setting these two types of concerns can be disharmonious because the understandable quest for pragmatic solutions can appear dismissive of more theoretical work (e.g., an audience member’s critique that theoretical work is too idealized and out of touch with the everyday concerns of WPAs). Having a CCCC SIG or Standing Group could potentially offer a new space and opportunity to address these practical concerns and offer the expert advice of assessment scholars without hamstringing theoretical discussions.

Embracing and promoting the use of quantitative methods in composition and rhetoric might also help achieve this goal of establishing more institutionally secure places for writing assessment scholarship. As White, Elliot, and Peckham observe on several occasions, there is not a designation for writing assessment research within the National Research Council’s taxonomy of research disciplines, which uses the Classification of Research Programs (CIP) codes to recognize and organize research programs. While it may seem like a point of little relevance, the omission becomes curious when we note the inclusion of other sub-specialties of English studies such as
literature (CIP code 23.14) and other sub-specialties of rhetoric and composition such as professional, technical, business, and scientific writing (CIP code 23.1303). The development of two academic journals—*Assessing Writing* and the *Journal of Writing Assessment*—is a great advancement for the field, but to have a CIP code would help to validate a variety of academic work and add legitimacy to writing assessment as a coherent area of research that straddles traditional disciplinary boundaries. Such a codifying of writing assessment as a sub-specialty might draw together scholarship that might otherwise not cross paths. For example, Kendall Phillips’ insightful analysis of educational reform rhetoric and accompanying discourse justifying educational testing, which he argues “degraded the position of professional educators,” appears far removed from contemporary writing assessment discourse because it is classified as a rhetorical study. We need to broaden our theories and we do that through scholarly conversation.

My second proposition is for the field of writing assessment to enthusiastically embrace rhetoric and composition’s recent turn toward advocacy and activism, which in many ways mirrors the concerns and trends in writing assessment scholarship inflected with social justice concerns. Peter Mortensen argued in 1998 that composition “must go public” (182). That imperative is fueled by what he describes as “an evolving sense of ethical obligation to the individuals and groups whose literacies we study and to the publics we serve” (183). Scholarship from the early 2000s examines a similar public advocacy turn in WPA work (e.g., Adler-Kassner; Rose and Weiser). Shirley K. Rose and Irwin Weiser, for instance, locate their volume *Going Public: The WPA as Advocate for Engagement* within three interrelated conversations: the public engagement movement in higher education, the interest in public discourse and civic rhetoric, and the service-
learning movement in higher education (1). More pointedly, Linda Alder-Kassner’s argument in *Activist WPA* discusses three forms of organizing—issue-based, value-based, and interest-based—but favors interest-based organization because she believes that the persona one can inhabit within that particular form of organizing is the most promising because it allows a WPA to shift frames and build alliances. Cultivating cross-disciplinary alliances is an important aspect of writing assessment work as well, one that has perhaps been stifled by some third- and fourth-wave critiques aimed at cleaving writing assessment theory from its psychometric roots.

My last proposition—to incorporate writing assessment into graduate level WPA training—might take several forms. For example, most rhetoric and composition graduate programs require a foundational research methods course, but very few offer any formal training in quantitative methods. If programs in the consortium of PhD programs in rhetoric and composition began offering or requiring an empirical course in quantitative methods, writing assessment would be an ideal vehicle for making statistics, mathematical algorithms, and corpus research relevant to writing studies. Graduate students with an interest in WPA work would benefit immensely from such training because they would learn how to design assessments as a form of empirical research employing descriptive statistics as one among many other research methods. Indeed, White, Elliot, and Peckham make a compelling case for such empirical training in their book. Although *Very Like a Whale* offers a wealth of information, its empirical bent may appear quite unfamiliar to graduate students unaccustomed to quantitative methods. In much writing assessment literature, quantitative methods are viewed with skepticism given their assumed relationship to positivism and psychometrics. I agree with Bob
Broad and Michael Boyd’s contention that our most cherished writing assessment practices (such as portfolios and communal writing assessment) “remain vulnerable to critique from those wielding well developed and thoroughly institutionalized discourses such as those of positivist psychometrics” (18). Yet we need not only think of those institutionalized discourses and the empirical methods they most often employ as weapons to be wielded.

Yes, many have adopted this weapon metaphor to signal a pragmatic need to brandish the weapon of assessment for our own purposes, but what if these empirical and quantitative methods could be more of a shield than a sword? What if we wielded these methods not with the intent of fighting for our pedagogical and philosophical interests, but to protect those most vulnerable? Understanding the potential of using quantitative methods might help assuage the typical perception of disharmony between our humanist instincts and empirical, quantitative methods.

An implication of the ethos of writing assessment as I have defined it here is the need for a new metaphor for understanding the WPA’s role in programmatic assessment. The identity of a WPA has been articulated in a number of ways. Recent scholarship, for instance, has described WPAs as mangers, researchers, theorists, activists, and teachers, to name but a handful of the many identities described by scholars (Adler-Kassner; Strickland; Rose and Weisser). If we understand WPA work as a communal process of inquiry and empirical research, then we can imagine the WPA role as one that balances ethical advocacy and empirical research. Such identities help us articulate our work as occurring in a complicated ecosystem of beliefs, practices, and politics, and these metaphors also become important elements of graduate education. A new metaphor of
WPA-as-advocate merges elements of activism—intentional action done to bring about social or political change—with the social justice commitment to protect the least advantaged members of a society. As an advocate, one speaks on behalf of another person or group, and an advocate WPA, as I envision it, would speak on behalf of minority students who are disproportionally affected by certain assessment practices. The process of advocacy is different from activism: to advocate requires working dialogue and negotiation rather than the kind of direct action or protest often associated with activism. To persuade others through advocacy typically requires a strategy tailored to working within the current system, and for advocacy-based WPA work, writing assessment can be a source of data that can be of tactical use within a broader strategy for promoting positive change in the teaching of writing at an institution. For example, the kind of empirical and quantitative research that White, Elliot, and Peckham promote would be highly useful in such an instance because it expeditiously communicates information to a variety of audiences and bolsters arguments for change by grounding them in evidence-based claims.

The key to the future is our past. We need not reinvent the wheel of writing assessment, but we do need to focus our work on more theory in order to improve our systems. As Elliot writes in the conclusion of his social history of writing assessment, we compositionists have the knowledge and expertise most relevant to the assessment of writing: “It is we who know better and need to do better,” he tells us (Scale 354). We do need to do better, but we need not proceed alone in desperate solitude. With an ethos of writing assessment—a guiding ethic and a dwelling place where we find kindred spirits—we can initiate collaborative endeavors and work collectively for a more socially just
future.
Works Cited


2 Like most beginnings, there is little consensus about the specific start of post-secondary writing assessment. Norbert Elliot, for example, begins his extensive social history of writing assessment in America in 1874 with Harvard’s transition from classical to modern languages and the subsequent changes to the University’s entrance examinations and creation of a new college composition course, English A (*Scale* 8-10). In their history chapter, Peggy O’Neill, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot, acknowledge far older uses of writing tests, but similarly identify Harvard’s English A as the origin of a complicated relationship between writing assessment and the field of composition. Yancey’s 1950 start date corresponds with the establishment of the National Council on Teaching English’s College Composition and Communication Conference and is strategically chosen to situate writing assessment within rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary history.

3 In a 2010 book chapter, Yancey argues that “self-created exigencies” can turn into new structural frameworks for supporting collaborative writing assessment models as a means of “identifying critical questions, of organizing methods to inquire into them, of producing new knowledge, and of designing new ways of sharing both their knowledge and progress” (“Rhetorical” 477). The rhetorical structuring power of exigencies is a crucial point, especially given the seas of change within the context of federal education policy away from test-based incentive programs such as No Child Left Behind. In fact, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which is the federal legislation replacing NCLB, forbids the Secretary of Education from incentivizing the Common Core State Standards and instead promotes state-driven performance targets and school ratings using multiple measures beyond standardized test scores on national assessments (“Every”).

4 Writing several years after Yancey’s 1999 article, Huot examines the troubled discourse of assessment by teasing out the way language of grading, testing, and assessing are often conflated despite their distinction as separate practices informed by very different beliefs and assumptions (“Toward” 164).

5 Yancey’s wave metaphor is especially useful because it characterizes changes that in retrospect seem to have a discernibly forward momentum with “one wave feeding into another but without completely displacing waves that came before” (“Looking” 483). The rhetorical trends in writing assessment discourse I identify in this chapter follow a similar forward trajectory in which previous waves continue to exert force even as new waves emerge and rise to dominance. For example, arguments reflecting the understanding of rhetoric as rhetoricality—wherein discourse exists amid many competing forces and language is no longer believed to be transparent representations—initially appear in wave two, but remains a residual element of writing assessment discourse in third- and fourth-wave assessment.

6 Both Yancey’s metaphor and my own adaptation are reminiscent of Raymond Williams’ description of how culture is actually composed of a series of relations between dominant, emergent, and residual cultural elements and cultural power relationships in *Marxism and Literature*. Williams investigates sites and processes of hegemonic influence including traditions, institutions, and discourse, and Yancey explores processes that have shaped writing assessment including development of new modes of practice and the development as an academic field of study within rhetoric and composition. In Williams’ terms, my rereading elucidates how residual remnants of earlier waves still circulate today, such as the dichotomy between the testing expertise of educational measurement and the teaching expertise of rhetoric and composition.

7 Vatz argues in opposition to Bitzer’s major premise that exigence prompts rhetorical discourse by alternatively positing that exigencies are shaped by rhetorical discourse. He finds Bitzer’s “realist” approach to be problematic because it assumes meaning can reside in events rather than be part of human interpretation of events (226). Vatz counters this notion of intrinsically meaningful events by arguing that a rhetor’s choices rather than historical context delimit the possible interpretations of events.
Public higher education in America experienced tectonic changes in the decades following the end of WWII. The G.I. Bill is one example of a slew of federal legislation and public address espousing egalitarian ideals about the social value of higher education as a democratizing force that plays a formative role in the history of writing assessment. I gloss this history here but offer a more in-depth discussion in chapter two.

Indirect testing had also been gaining momentum at this time due to large-scale educational assessments occurring in both California and New Jersey as well as the beginning of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NEAP), a national assessment developed in the 1960s and first conducted in 1969. See Elliot’s *On A Scale* for a more thorough history of the California and New Jersey assessments and Hilary Persky’s history of writing assessment as it relates to the NEAP.

The rhetorical import of validity as a foundational concept in writing assessment is addressed in chapter two, in which I conduct a dramatistic analysis of validity discourse in order to understand its persuasive effects.

The relationship between these two professional communities is explored in much more detail in chapter two.

This shift attuned to rhetorical relationships mirrors the public turn in compositions studies more broadly (Adler-Kassner; Farmer; Mathieu; Rose and Weiser).

My use of the term social network here refers broadly to the social network analysis paradigm (Wasserman and Faust; Scott and Carrington) and more specifically to Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory and material-semiotics and Manuel Castells’ *Rise of the Network*.

Such social knowledge is essential to G. Thomas Goodnight’s definition of deliberative rhetoric as “a form of argumentation through which citizens test and create social knowledge in order to uncover, assess, and resolve shared problems” (198).

The scope of this history and my rereading are necessarily limited by Yancey’s choice of 1950 as the beginning of writing assessment as an interdisciplinary field of study. Some argue writing assessment in American college and universities began with the Harvard entrance exams in 1874 (O’Neill) while others trace a much longer history of writing assessment dating back to the Chou period (1111-771 B.C.) (Hansen; Hamp-Lyons; Huot (Re)Articulating). For more holistic histories of writing assessment see Elliot’s *On a Scale* or Elliot and Perelman’s edited collection *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century*.

The volume’s most recent edition was supervised by an editorial advisory committee consisting of two employees of ACE, four scholars in educational psychology, and two employees of major educational testing companies such as ETS and ACT (Brennan xv).

I address the rhetorical impact of accountability in more detail in chapter four.

Richard Ohmann identifies three specific factors that led to this 1970s push for accountability: one, as the Cold War funding boom for higher education and graduate programs ceased, “an intense fiscal crisis of the state” was created that reflected a growing “disillusionment with Great Society programs”; two, conservative responses to the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to restore the old status quo by manufacturing a literacy crisis and correlative need for standards and accountability measures in education; and, three, the spread of global capitalism in the latter part of the twentieth century challenged America’s role as a unitary economic force (28). Ohmann also notes how “accountability emerged and gained strength as a coherent movement exactly when the postwar U.S. economy was tearing at the seams, and when the right began to organize itself against sixties movements” (28).
Elliot and Perelman explain the origins of this phrase in the first chapter of their collection. White concluded a discussion thread on the WPA-L listserv with the statement: “I give you White’s Law, the truth of which I have noted for over twenty years: Assess thyself or assessment shall be done unto thee” (1).

Gallagher presents a similar critique when he argues writing assessment scholars should discard the stakeholder theory of power in favor of a network logic (“Being”).

Dewey’s distinction between public issues and privates one relies on the nature of direct vs. indirect consequences for one’s actions.

This claim must be warranted with a discussion of the other widely-cited principle: reliability. The two terms have a complex relationship, to say the least. On the one hand, they have often been described as two sides of the same coin. Scholars in writing assessment have called them twin concepts (Yancey 487; Moore, O’Neill, and Huot W117), parallel threads that comingle throughout assessment’s history (Huot and O’Neill), two horns on the same bull (Slomp and Fuite), or even interchangeable terms (O’Neill, Moore, and Huot 22). On the other hand, the two concepts emerged simultaneously because they address two separate but equally important goals of psychological testing—accuracy and consistency (Buckingham et al. 80). I have chosen to sunder validity from its partner reliability to keep the scope of this chapter manageable, but also because reliability is a much more limited concept concerned with the generalizability of assessment scoring and identifying potential sources of scoring errors (Moore, O’Neill, and Huot W117). Furthermore, the two concepts have very different rhetorical valences that would muddy the waters of my analysis. For example, reliability is generally a negatively charged concept dependent upon minimizing the degree of measurement error (either between readers or between in an individual’s true score and actual score) (Slomp and Fuite 191). The only way for an assessment to be reliable is to demonstrate consistency in scoring. Validity, however, is a positively charged concept. It describes the value of an assessment, its suitability, appropriateness, or general goodness. Lastly, reliability is evidence through mathematical whereas validity is evidence by Toulmin-type warrants for interpretations of assessment data. In short, the language practices associated with the two concepts differ too dramatically to be analyzed through the same rhetorical scheme.

Sloop’s description is reminiscent of McGee’s fragment theory of discourse and culture.

Echoing other critical rhetoricians (McGee; McKerrow), Sloop argues that studying public discourse rather than expert discourse is the best because of the impact vernacular rhetoric has on everyday lived experience. To illuminate the “cultural meaning” of a term, Sloop says, is to accentuate “what is in the open, what is accepted as true, what people are willing to claim in public places” (6). Deciphering the cultural meaning of writing assessment is one of the overarching goals of this dissertation. In this chapter I do this by examining the rhetorical relationships surrounding validity.

According to Elliot, the total number of immigrants entering the United States dropped from 4.5 million between 1911 and 1915 to 1.3 million from 1916-1920 (Scale 71).

Seven years after publishing A Study of American Intelligence, Brigham wrote an article in Psychological Review recanting most of his race and ethnicity-based arguments based upon recent developments in psychological testing. He cites new findings “which show that comparative studies of various national and racial groups may not be made with existing tests, and which show, in particular, that one of the most pretentious of these comparative racial studies—the writer’s own—was without foundation” (“Intelligence” 165).

The fissures between educational training (which includes job placement and proficiency tests such as the Army Alpha exams) and psychological testing become more pronounced in the 1950s but are mostly resolved in the 1960s with the publication of The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing in 1966.
Another aspect of the rhetorical import of validity is its function as a conduit between the fields of educational measurement and composition. Although many histories of validity appear to suggest a unidirectional flow of influence, there is evidence of composition’s impact on the field of educational measurement as well. Elliot offers both textual evidence and a personal anecdote about his summer employment with ETS in 1984 to make precisely this point. He writes, “a great deal of attention was paid to the newly emerging college composition research community” (Scale 296). Further evidence of this bidirectionality can be seen in the work of Pamela A. Moss, an education researcher whose work was once firmly rooted in the psychometric orientation of the educational measurement community but develops an increasingly philosophical bent in the 1990s and 2000s, who argues that “all of us who work within the field of educational research have a role that we can play in the dialogue on validity and…a responsibility to participate in the dialogue within our own research communities in critical and generative ways” (“Joining” 92). For example, her 2008 edited collection Assessment, Equity, and Opportunity to Learn explicitly explores the synergistic interplay between “a psychometric perspective, with its roots in mathematics and psychology, and with the conceptual and statistical tools of educational testing” and a sociocultural or situated cognition perspective that “locate knowledge not primarily inside the read, but rather in the relationship between a person and an environment in which that person thinks and feels, acts and interacts” (Haertel, Moss, Pullin, and Gee 3-4). See also her response to Richard Haswell’s article in Writing Assessment (“Testing”). Moss’s work is but one example of how validity can be both a bridge between educational measurement and composition studies and a point of productive interpretive divergence.

I use the term proto-WPA here to designate faculty positions that function in a WPA role, such as directors of composition and department chairs, who oversaw first-year composition programs in the years before the rise of WPA as a recognized specialty within rhetoric and composition. Strickland traces the beginning of term WPA to the creation of the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 1977. Susan McLeod similarly argues that although the work of writing program administration has existed since the beginning of first-year composition in 1874 at Harvard and exploded in the 1950s during the antebellum the higher education boom, it was not until the 1970s that the work was “dignified with a title that aligned it with other administrative positions the university” (3). Until that designation was used, such the job was a service responsibility assumed by one faculty member in the English department. McLeod makes the distinction between WPA as a task and WPA as a position. I use proto-WPA to signify the task of program administration related to writing and WPA to signify the more typical arrangement where such a job is a recognized administrative position with commensurate release from teaching obligations, some direct authority over a recognized university program, who engages the growing body of research in WPA as a scholarly field.

Although Slaughter and Rhoades argue such practices illuminate “processes by which universities integrate with the new economy,” others have conceptually and temporally extended this integration argument much further (14). Chaput, for instance, refutes such claims by insisting that public research universities in the United States have always been integrated with ascendant capitalist economies. See Inside the Teaching Machine for further explanation of this political economic function of pubic research universities.

In “The Trouble with Outcomes,” Gallagher critiques the pragmatism of White’s Law (see end note 19 in this dissertation for an explanation of White’s Law).

Considering the hypervigilance about managerial aspects in writing assessment, it might appear that the managerial imperative is better understood in writing assessment. For example, the 1996 collection Writing Assessment Politics, Policies, and Practices edited by White, William Lutz, and Sandra Kamusikiri, which considers the managerial work from multiple perspectives. However, even if this managerial imperative is rather well understood and even embraced in writing assessment, this chapter maintains the neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment that prioritizes managerial values in a way to ensure that writing assessment labor serves the political economic agenda of the university.
Competency-based education (CBE) has recently reemerged as a trend in higher education. See Gallagher’s 2015 article, “Disrupting the Game-Changer: Remembering the History of Competency-Based Education,” for more information on this recent incarnation of CBE as part of a broader tendency of “innovation fugue” and historical amnesia surrounding supposedly revolutionary curricular and pedagogical innovations (“Disrupting” 18).

In his biography of Henry Chauncey, Elliot identifies Clark Kerr as one of the key players in the development of the California Master Plan. As president of the University of California system from 1958-1967, Kerr was an instrumental figure in the development of the hierarchy between the colleges and universities and the overarching system of academic governance outlined in the Master Plan (Henry).

The Master Plan established a Board of Trustees for the California State Colleges, which became the California State University in 1974 (Douglass 316).

White does temper his description of this sea of change by acknowledging that the permanency of these changes was still in doubt thirty years later: “We imagined that we had permanently changed the power relationships of faculty and the funding managers of higher education; perhaps we in fact did, although that assertion is still in doubt” (“Opening” 301).

Some of these tools include training in empirical research methods that are typical for programmatic assessment, including quantitative methods such as descriptive statistics. White, Elliot, and Peckham argue that, “In the very near future, a doctoral program in writing studies that does not include training in empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative, will not be behaving responsibly toward its students” (114). As I explain in more detail in chapter five, I concur that training in quantitative methods will be an invaluable professional resource for future WPAs, is a cornerstone of ethical practices in administration writing programs, and can help begin to address the displacement of power perpetuated by the neoliberal unconscious of writing assessment.

Vatz argues in opposition to Bitzer’s major premise that exigence prompts rhetorical discourse by alternatively positing that exigencies are shaped by rhetorical discourse. He finds Bitzer’s “realist” approach to be problematic because it assumes meaning can reside in events rather than be part of humans’ interpretations of events (226). Vatz counters this notion of intrinsically meaningful events by arguing that a rhetor’s choices rather than context delimit the possible meanings of events.

Although this chapter does not adopt a publics approach, I use a definition of the public sphere informed by publics theory. I define a public as a collection of citizens in a democratic populace who share a common concern. This definition gives a particular sense of publics as multiple and of discourse as constitutive of these publics rather than a notion of publics as pre-existing, stable stakeholder groups. In other words, I follow Nancy Fraser and Rosa Eberly, whose works articulate publics as dynamic groups constituted via the circulation of discourse on topics of common interest. Publics theory directs attention to the way that publics participate in the circulation of discourse and the preceding conditions that mark certain discourses as public.

Chris Gallagher marks this shift as the extension of the accountability agenda to postsecondary education (“Being”).

To document the pivotal shift around 1970, Ohmann conducted a keyword search for “education” and “accountability” in the Educational Index database. Although 585 titles were published between 1970 and 2000, only six were published prior to 1970. Adler-Kassner and Harrington’s 2010 replication of this keyword search yielded similar results—seven sources published before 1973 and 5,817 after (76). They also reported that combination of “accountability and education” resulted in over 17 million hits on a Google search.
42 For analysis of the Spellings Commission Report, see Gallagher “Being,” Angela Green’s “The Politics of Literacy,” and Huot’s “Consistently Inconsistent.”

43 Gallagher’s argument is convincing, especially in light of the Commission’s identification of accountability as the core of its reform agenda: “We believe that improved accountability is vital to ensuring the success of all the other reforms we propose” (Commission 4).

44 Eberly uses a similar sampling method in Citizen Critics.

45 The CLA has since been replaced with a new exam: the CLA+

46 The tradition of urgent calls for reform to improve global competitiveness is carried on by such entities as the Educational Testing Service, which published a policy information report titled “America’s Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation’s Future” in 2007 and another report in 2015 titled “America’s Skills Challenge: Millennials and the Future,” which was produced by ETS’s Center for Research on Human Capital and Education.

47 For more on the relationship between the stasis of value and the “is/ought” divide in STEM discourse, see Walsh’s article “Before Climategate.”

48 Rhetorician Jenny Rice (previously Edbauer) writes that a crisis-related topos can attract so much argumentative attention that it becomes a substitute for the crisis, and such a phenomenon appears in the public arguments about Academically Adrift.

49 Yet, Haswell (and the other reviewers) are careful not to veer into ad hominem or frame the argument through an ethical lens. Twice he pauses his critique to clarify that although he finds the data and interpretations suspect, he is not questioning the motives and intentions of Arum and Roksa (“Methodologically” 489, 491). Gunner denies intention to “insult scholars who have done extensive and serious work” (494). This reflects a desire to keep the argument in the technical realm, where questions of fact, definition, and cause are the primary concerns.

50 See Melissa Lazarín’s Testing Overload in America’s Schools and Michael Casserly, Renata Uzzell, Moses Palacios, and Amanda Cocoran’s Student Testing in America’s Great City Schools: An Inventory and Preliminary Analysis for two recent reports of the negative effects of overuse of standardized educational testing.

51 Inoue has previously argued that “if we care about addressing racism and unequal racial social arrangements in our schools, communities, and writing assessments, then we must look at racial formations explicitly in our validity inquiries” (“Technology” 113). He also promotes the notion of “racial validity,” which he defines as a kind of validity argument “that explains the degree to which empirical evidence of racial formations around our assessments and the theoretical frameworks that account for our racial formations support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions made from the assessments” (Inoue “Technology” 110).

52 While others (see Hawsell’s and Condon’s reviews of On A Scale) have also critiqued Elliot’s history for precisely this reason, Elliot does pepper his historical narrative with many instances of critique of ETS and dominant testing practices, but his task as a historian is to write a fuller history of writing assessment that informs our dominant understanding. His is not an alternative history, per say, but it is a social history that emphasizes essential players who have until recently remained on the periphery of writing assessment’s history. Furthermore, Elliot does complement his history with a Burkean pentad analysis that maps the ratios of agency-agent in an analysis in the final last chapter. He titles this last analytical chapter lagniappe (something given as an extra gift) and encourages the reader to do with the analyses as they please.
By the phrase institutions I mean the traditional notion of brick-and-mortar institutions of higher education as well as for-profit testing companies like ETS and the College Board, which are just as powerful, but perhaps not as commonly understood as institutional forces.

Originally developed by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics in 1980, the CIP has undergone revisions in 1985, 1990, and 2000. White, Elliot, and Peckham note that the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition’s 2004 Visibility Project led a concerted effort to establishing a presence for the field within the CIP (5).