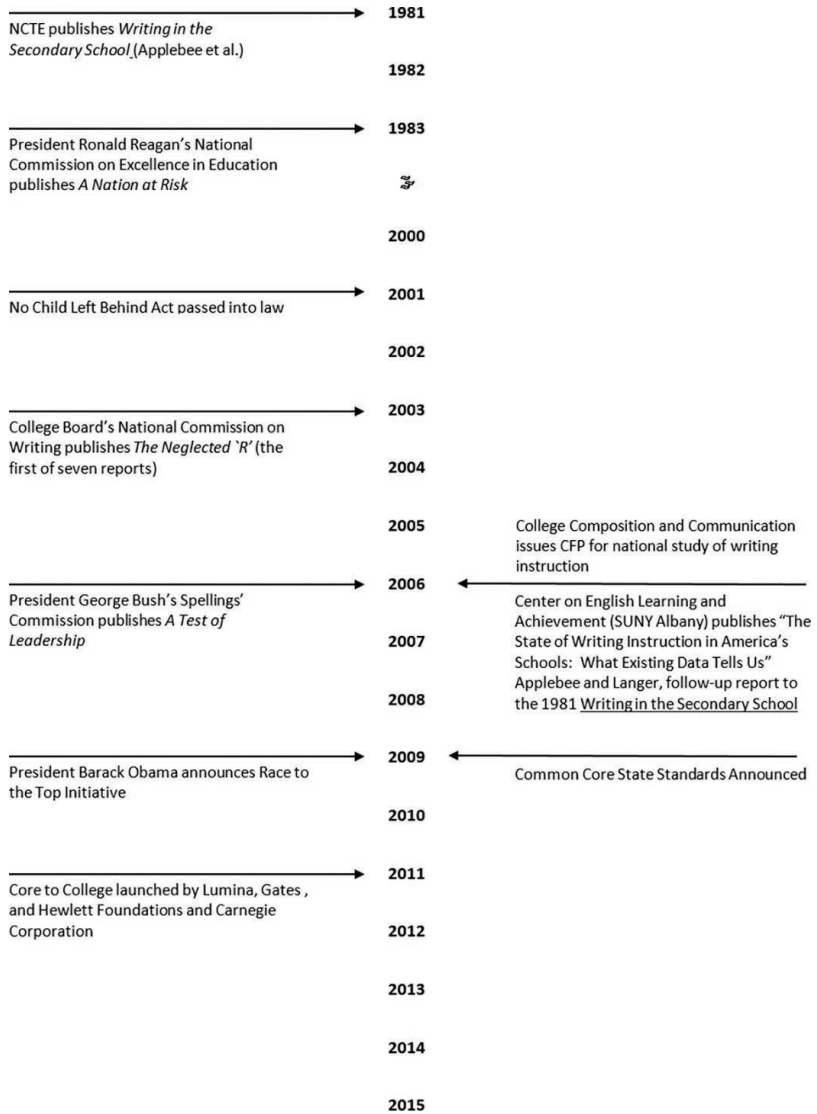


WRITING AND SCHOOL REFORM:
WRITING INSTRUCTION IN THE
AGE OF COMMON CORE AND
STANDARDIZED TESTING



A timeline of movement toward testing and accountability and away from best practices and standards

INTRODUCTION

At a 2004 venture-capitalist meeting in California, Stanford economist Paul Romer reminded us: “A crisis is a terrible thing to waste” (qtd. in Rosenthal). He was talking about an educational crisis related to the perceived competition the United States was facing as educational levels rose in other countries. Since that time, numerous headlines have pointed to a national crisis in education:

“U.S. Could Fall Behind in Global ‘Brain Race’” (*USA Today*, February 8, 2006)

“In Test, Few Students Are Proficient Writers” (*New York Times*, April 3, 2008)

“Study: College Students Not Learning Much” (*CBS News.com*, January 18, 2011)

“American Students Fall in International Academic Tests, Chinese Lead the Pack” (*U.S. News and World Report*, December 3, 2013)

Social critics and educational researchers have questioned the validity of our many educational crises over the years—crises that have required the expenditure of much political and monetary capital in order to manufacture consent around the need for unprecedented amounts of standardized testing and accountability, as well as major educational initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and, more recently, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The movement toward testing and accountability and away from best practices and standards is eroding teacher and student agency as greater measures of control over our classrooms are enacted. Understanding the origins of these crises, as well as their effects on writing instruction, is a crucial step toward charting a path forward that reasserts teacher and student agency in the research and practice of writing instruction and assessment.

One well-known effort to counter the most recent crisis can be found in the work of David Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle’s *The Manufactured Crisis: Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America’s Public Schools*. This best-selling book counters myths surrounding America’s schools and student achievement, including:

- Declining student achievement in U.S. primary schools
- Falling performance among U.S. college students
- Falling status of U.S. schools compared with schools in other countries

- Deficient productivity of U.S. workers tied to inadequate training received in U.S. schools
- U.S. production of far too few scientists, mathematicians, and engineers, resulting in industrial leadership losses
- Inadequately qualified teaching staff in U.S. schools (5–6)

Berliner and Biddle contend that none of these myths are supported by a careful collection and analysis of available data, and they set out to prove that these charges against public education in the United States are false. More recently, Berliner renewed his efforts in his 2014 book, co-authored with Gene V. Glass, *50 Myths and Lies that Threaten America's Public Schools: The Real Crisis in Education*.

In both books the authors address charges that U.S. students are falling behind, especially when compared to students in other countries. These charges, they claim, are based on a presentation of data to the U.S. public that is incomplete and misleading, not the careful and thoughtful analysis that should be used to chart a path for our educational policies and practices. For example, in *50 Myths and Lies that Threaten America's Public Schools* the authors point out that following the release of the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test scores, national media sources declared: “Wake-Up Call: U.S. Students Trail Global Leaders” and “Competitors Still Beat U.S. in Tests.” “The frenzied media attention given to international test results, ranking countries from best to worst, has been supported by commentary from apparent experts like U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who said the 2009 PISA test results were an ‘absolute wake-up call for America,’ showing that ‘we have to deal with the brutal truth’ and get much more serious about investing in education” (*50 Myths*, 12–13).

Berliner and others rely on the work of Gerald Bracey, former director of research, evaluation, and testing for the Virginia Department of Education (1977–1986), fellow at the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University, and author of books such as *Reading Educational Research: How to Avoid Getting Educationally Snookered*, to help dispel this myth of low comparative achievement:

Many critics cite the performance of American students on international comparisons of mathematics and science. The most often used comparison comes from rankings on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). . . . It should be noted that these rankings are determined by nations’ average scores. . . . A publication

from OECD itself observes that if one examines the number of highest-scoring students in science, the United States has 25% of all high-scoring students in the world. . . . The picture emerging from this highest-scorer comparison is far different than that suggested by the frequently cited national average comparisons; it is a picture that suggests many American schools are actually doing very well indeed . . . it is only when we look beyond the mean and consider the distribution of students and schools that we see the true picture. Students attending American schools run the gamut from excellent to poor. Well-resourced schools serving wealthy neighborhoods are showing excellent results. Poorly resourced schools serving low-income communities of color do far worse. (Bracey, *The Bracey Report on the Condition of Public Education* 2–3)

According to the OECD itself, among nations with high average scores, the U.S. actually outperforms Japan, Korea, Taipei, Finland, and Hong Kong. As Bracey, Berliner, and others argue, the problem is not a relatively new decline in student achievement requiring a wake-up call. The problem is that students living in poverty in the United States, and especially students of color living in the United States, continue to underperform their wealthier peers. It is no wonder, then, that *on average*, a country like Finland that has a child poverty rate of less than 5 percent, scores better on PISA than a country like the United States where the child poverty rate often exceeds 20 percent. The perpetuation of this myth of comparative decline is also taken up by Patrick Shannon, Anne Elrod Whitney, and Maja Wilson in their discussion of the ways CCSS are being framed by corporations and private testing companies in order to sell them to the public (“Framing”).

If the problem really is one of poverty and wealth distribution in the United States, and not overall levels of academic achievement, why manufacture an educational crisis and create widespread concern and even panic about our educational system as a whole? The cynical among us would argue that there’s not much money to be made off poverty. But America’s educational system as a whole is a multi-billion dollar enterprise from which those with the needed capital and political support can profit. As Jonathan Zimmerman, an educational historian at New York University, quips, “When the federal government starts doing things like requiring all states to test all kids, there’s going to be gold in those hills” (as qtd in S. Simon). Through this lens, we can see how the serious investment in education called for by Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and others has led largely to investment in private testing companies. Because these

companies realize, as Paul Romer reminded us, you never want a crisis to go to waste, especially, we would add, one that has been manufactured with the potential for huge profits.

We can look at the publishing company Pearson as a case in point. According to the article “No Profit Left Behind”—based on a review of Pearson’s contracts, business plans, email exchanges, tax filings, lobbying reports, and marketing materials—half of its \$8 billion dollars in global sales comes from its North American education division (S. Simon). In addition to its command of the textbook industry and online learning in both K–12 and higher education, Pearson dominates the standardized testing market in the United States, maintaining contracts with twenty-one states as well as Washington, New York City, and Puerto Rico (S. Simon). Estimates from the Brookings Institution put Pearson’s annual revenue from standardized testing in the K–12 market alone in the United States at \$258 million (Chingos). In fact, Pearson has displayed a unique ability to capitalize on the need for standardized tests as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, Race to the Top funding initiative, and implementation of Common Core State Standards. And, of course, to prepare students for Pearson exams, schools can buy Pearson textbooks, workbooks, test preparation books, online tutoring services, learning management systems, and teacher consultants. From this standpoint, it seems that Pearson is writing the curriculum, training the teachers, and designing the tests, all at a huge profit.

But Pearson is currently experiencing significant backlash—much of it from former and current Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) member states. In the spring of 2010, twenty-three states and the District of Columbia joined PARCC. As of the spring of 2015, only eleven states and the District of Columbia remain PARCC members. Pearson signed a contract with PARCC to develop and administer standardized tests tied to the Common Core State Standards in all member states. So problematic has this effort been that in June of 2014 the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation called for a two-year moratorium on enacting negative consequences for teachers and students based on standardized tests related to CCSS (Rich); Pearson is in the midst of a bid-rigging lawsuit; and in some school districts in PARCC member states, the opposition from parents and students has threatened the ground upon which these tests stand. A promising example is that of Fairview High School students in Boulder, CO (which happens to be the home school of one of the authors of this book). Colorado is one of the PARCC member states. In November of 2014, only 7 out of 538 seniors at Fairview High School took the test as the others protested the new testing requirement (Garcia).

Perhaps as Grover Whitehurst, former director of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) within the U.S. Department of Education and current senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, suggests in his article “The Future of Test-Based Accountability:”

we’re in a transformative period fueled by a kind of restlessness that nobody is getting accountability right, the achievement problem remains, and ideas are not manifold about what to do next. At some point the prevailing standards and accountability approach to education reform will be replaced with new designs that are more productive, or at least different.

Further, as Patrick Shannon suggests, we might view the Common Core State Standards as “a value-laden, open project in continuous development—just waiting for teachers, parents, and students to step forward in order to negotiate their design as well as their enactment in classrooms” (3).

It is not our primary intent in this book to support or challenge arguments concerning the most recent manufactured crisis in education—Bracey, Berliner, Shannon, Wilson and others have and continue to do so in more depth than we can in the space of this volume. Whether the most recent crisis, as well as the crises that came before, are manufactured or not, they result in serious material consequences for writing instruction. This is increasingly true not only in our K–12 classrooms, but in higher education as well. Because for better or worse, the Common Core State Standards “have made writing and the teaching of writing an integral part of the school reform movement . . . provid[ing] benchmarks for a variety of writing skills and applications students are expected to master at each grade and across grades” (Graham et al. 879), within traditional language arts classrooms as well as across the curriculum. CCSS and their attendant high-stakes standardized tests will certainly have an effect on the ways students enter our writing classrooms, as these tests have been clearly linked to “changing the nature of teaching, narrowing the curriculum, and limiting student learning” (“How Standardized Tests Shape—and Limit—Student Learning”). It is our intent to understand the positive and negative consequences for those of us concerned with writing instruction—teachers, students, professional organizations, administrators, researchers, policy makers, and others—and respond to the perceived literacy crisis on multiple levels.

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In the spring of 2006, the Conference on College Composition and Communication issued a call for proposals to study the types of writing American students

do in high school and college. This is the same year that a collaborative report issued by the National Writing Project, the College Board, and the Center on English Learning and Achievement called for a large-scale study of schools across the United States in order to better understand the current state of writing instruction in the nation. Shortly thereafter, the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College, a joint effort between the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Council of Writing Program Administrators, emerged in part to “create a national portrait of the ways writing is used in four-year colleges and universities in the United States” (Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, and Paine). These research efforts came on the heels of several reports issued by the National Commission on Writing and others stating that writing instruction in the United States had gone largely ignored and that students and recent graduates were increasingly unprepared for writing tasks in both school and the workplace.

Why does it seem that in 2006 our profession lacked sufficient collective knowledge of the types and quality of writing instruction in U.S. schools as reports of the demise of writing skills began to proliferate? Have we, as a profession, paid enough attention to how state and federal governments, private testing companies, deep-pocketed granting agencies, and large corporations have framed these reports and how they have begun to claim unprecedented power and authority over the work of faculty and students? And, what does this mean for writing instruction now and in the future?

The answers are, of course, quite complicated. We could start by looking at departments of English since most writing at the university level remains in their domain. And departments of English continue to privilege reading over writing. These are the issues Peter Elbow takes up in his article “The War Between Reading and Writing:”

Of course writing is assigned in a fair number of courses (though some students in large universities learn to avoid much writing for their whole college career). But when writing is assigned, it is traditionally meant to serve reading: to summarize, interpret, explain, or make integrations and comparisons among readings. In the last couple of years, there has even been a widespread move to change the first-year writing course into a reading-and-writing course, even though it is usually the only writing course—the only place in the entire curriculum where writing is emphasized more than reading. In every other course in the university, reading is privileged, and writing, when used at all, is used to serve reading. (10)

There has been some positive change on this front, perhaps most notably by those working in the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, but not enough has changed to suggest that the reading/writing hierarchy has even come close to being leveled.

The privileging of reading over writing is not just a matter of English Department debates. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act further enshrined the reading/writing hierarchy and the entailments that followed. A brief history of NCLB can help us understand how it so forcefully compelled our nation to focus on test scores in reading and math to the exclusion of all else. While NCLB is most often thought to have been a signature policy of President George W. Bush's administration, its foundation was firmly established in the early 1980s, during President Ronald Regan's administration, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. The drafting of this report was commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education with the charge to "review and synthesize the data and scholarly literature on the quality of learning and teaching in the nation's schools, colleges, and universities, both public and private, with special concern for the education experience of teen-age youth" (39). In the end, the authors found that existing educational practices put nothing less than fundamental ideals of U.S. society at risk:

Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent: All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost. This promise means that all children by virtue of their own efforts, competently guided, can hope to attain the mature and informed judgment needed to secure gainful employment, and to manage their own lives, thereby serving not only their own interest but also the progress of society itself. (*Nation 8*)

Tapping into the collective fear that arises when our cultural narratives of the "American Dream" and the "Common Good" are threatened, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* advocate for educational reform in many areas. For example, they advocate for the adoption of the New Basics curriculum in which all students should receive in-depth instruction. These basics include English (explicitly including writing), math, science, social studies, and to a lesser extent, computer science (24). Despite the relatively broad scope of their recommendations, the one recommendation in *A Nation at Risk* that perseveres is "Standards and Expectations":

Standardized tests of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work. The purposes of these tests would be to: (a) certify the student's credentials; (b) identify the need for remedial intervention; and (c) identify the opportunity for advanced or accelerated work. The tests should be administered as part of a nationwide (but not Federal) system of State and local standardized tests. This system should include other diagnostic procedures that assist teachers and students to evaluate student progress. (28)

Clearly, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* intended for students to be tested in all five of the New Basics. Perhaps more importantly, they also intended for there to be a system of state and local tests that are used in conjunction with other means of assessing student progress. But, these recommendations were drastically diluted and very narrowly interpreted when acted upon in the No Child Left Behind Act. Through NCLB, academic achievement is defined primarily in terms of reading and math scores on standardized tests. Perhaps more important is that NCLB marks the first step toward an unprecedented emphasis on accountability and testing through punitive measures that forced schools to expend so much of their effort and money on improving math and reading scores that little time and money was left for other subjects.

While it took some time for No Child Left Behind to grow out of *A Nation at Risk*, it has taken relatively little time for the law to unravel. NCLB was passed in 2001 and implemented in 2002. By 2006, however, its effects were widespread and becoming increasingly clear. In 2006 the Center on Education Policy conducted a survey of 299 school districts in fifty states, along with case studies of thirty-eight diverse districts and forty-two schools. Among the center's findings was a pervasive narrowing of the curriculum in 71 percent of the school districts as they increased time spent on reading and math while minimizing and even eliminating other subjects. This narrowing of the curriculum, designed to ensure schools would meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks required by NCLB as evidenced by test scores in reading and math, continues today. Despite this testing mandate, a number of recent research reports show no significant increase in reading ability on multiple measures. For example, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics found that in the National Assessment of Educational Progress's 2009 results, there was only a slight increase in the reading scores of fourth and eighth graders from 1992–2007 (*The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2009*) and no significant increase

from 2007 to 2009, when we would expect to see some of the greatest gains as a result of NCLB.

Perhaps the best way to understand the unraveling of NCLB is through the stories of major architects and once staunch supporters of the law who have become so disillusioned by its effects that they are now actively working against it. One fairly well-known story is that of Diane Ravitch, a research professor of education at New York University as well as a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. From 1991 to 1993 she was the assistant secretary of education under George H. W. Bush, and one of the prime movers in the testing, accountability, choice, and free market approach to education that are the hallmarks of NCLB. As described by Arthur Levine, former president of Teacher's College and current president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, Diane Ravitch "has done more than anyone I can think of in America to drive home the message of accountability and charters and testing" (qtd. in Dillon, "Scholar's School Reform U-Turn Shakes Up Debate").

In Ravitch's 2010 account of NCLB, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, she describes the intellectual crisis she experienced related to the educational reform movement that led to NCLB: "Where once I had been hopeful, even enthusiastic, about the potential benefits of testing, accountability, choice and markets, I now found myself experiencing profound doubts about these same ideas" (1). She continues, characterizing the implementation of NCLB as a "hijacking" of the standards movement:

Although it [NCLB] is often claimed as a natural outgrowth of the standards movement, it was not. It demanded that schools generate higher test scores in basic skills, but it required no curriculum at all, nor did it raise standards. It ignored such important studies as history, civics, literature, science, the arts, and geography. (16)

Ravitch now describes NCLB as the "Death Star" of U.S. education, something that cannot be fixed and that must be abandoned ("NCLB: The Death Star of American Education").

As much as we agree with Ravitch's assessment of the destructive effects of NCLB, we need to point out that the "basic skills" being tested by NCLB as required for federal reporting include only reading and math. Further, Ravitch's list of forgotten studies also forgets an important area of study—writing—not writing as it serves history, civics, literature, and other subjects, but writing as a subject in and of itself.

The fact that NCLB required measures of student performance in only reading and math drew significant criticism and created an opening for private testing

companies. For example, shortly after the bill became law, College Board created the National Commission on Writing. While College Board acknowledges that “the decision to create the commission was animated in part by the Board’s plans to offer a writing assessment in 2005 as part of the new SAT,” they also claim “the larger motivation lay in the growing concern within education, business, and policy-making communities that the level of writing in the United States is not what it should be” (*The Neglected R* 10). This claim was used to authorize a series of reports by College Board showing just how dismal our writing skills have become, arguing for improved practices and, of course, justifying the need for even more standardized tests such as theirs.

Much closer to home for many of us in higher education, this issue became a matter of national debate again when “On March 2, President Obama signed a bill eliminating direct federal funding for the National Writing Project (NWP), the nation’s leading effort to improve writing and learning in the digital age” (Washington). Importantly, the National Writing Project is a federally funded program that truly believed in and supported teachers and their agency. This cut was made at the same time that President Obama began arguing for a historic \$4 billion to fund his Race to the Top initiative. Obviously, eliminating funding for NWP was not simply a matter of fiscal crisis, as legislators and policymakers would have us believe, but rather a logical culminating event on the road to testing and accountability wherein private testing companies are subsidized and largely unregulated by the federal government. Indeed, as we discuss in Chapters One and Four, while the federal government ultimately restored a small amount of funding to the NWP, many local sites across the United States are now funded in significant part by private foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in return for their support of the Common Core State Standards, exemplifying the types of entanglements we will work to unravel throughout this book.

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Let’s return to the question of how it came to be that in 2006 the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the National Writing Project, the Center on English Learning and Achievement, and others were issuing calls to study writing instruction in U.S. schools and colleges. It seems that by 2006, Ravitch and other early supporters were fully convinced that NCLB was not raising student achievement and the choice and accountability movements were a grave threat to the U.S. public education system. This is the same year the Center on English Learning and Achievement at the University of Albany, in collaboration with the National Writing Project and the College Board, published

“The State of Writing Instruction in America’s Schools: What Existing Data Tells Us.” Written by Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer, two well-respected scholars in education, literacy, and writing studies, this report became a launching pad for their National Study of Writing Instruction. This is because, as it turns out, there has been no large-scale, empirical study of writing and writing instruction in the middle and high school years since Applebee’s *Writing in the Secondary School*, a study that gathered data in 1979–1980. Thus, we can see that by 2006, the field of writing studies was long overdue for large-scale empirical studies of writing in our high schools and colleges.

We don’t want to suggest that no significant work has occurred in this area since Applebee’s study in 1979. In recent years, many national surveys have been conducted that primarily measure the *attitudes* of teachers, students, employers, and the general public concerning writing instruction in U.S. schools and colleges. Prominent examples include the national public opinion survey conducted by the National Writing Project, reports issued by the National Commission on Writing (an arm of College Board), and the ACT National Curriculum Survey. While these surveys are useful in helping us understand the felt importance of writing instruction from a very broad perspective, they don’t provide us with detailed information concerning what kinds of writing and writing instruction is actually practiced by students and teachers across the curriculum in high schools and colleges throughout the United States.

Notable exceptions exist such as the Harvard Study of Writing, the Stanford Study of Writing, and the Denver Longitudinal Study of Writing. But these projects, while very important, provide a limited picture of writing and writing instruction as they are local in nature and bound by a lack of generalizability beyond elite institutions of higher education. A need existed to determine the kinds of writing undertaken at a diversity of institutions of higher education as well as the high schools that feed into them. With grant support from the Conference on College Composition and Communication, we offered an initial response to this need by conducting research at both the national and local level, gathering direct and indirect evidence, in order to offer an empirically based description of the types of writing and writing instruction students and teachers engage in over the course of a semester. Our final data includes faculty and students from diverse high schools¹ and colleges: one suburban public high school in a relatively affluent neighborhood (27 percent free/reduced lunches and 7 percent dropout rate), one urban public high school in a relatively poor neighborhood (63 percent free/reduced lunches and 26 percent dropout rate), and one private all-girls Catholic high school, as well as two community colleges, two four-year public institutions, one four-year private institution, one public master’s-granting institution, and one doctoral-granting, flagship institution.

Participating in our research were 544 faculty and 1,412 students from a wide range of disciplines.

After gathering data, presenting it at conferences, and publishing it, we were still very much drawn to this line of inquiry. As teachers who work with teachers, primarily graduate students who are also teaching in our public school systems, we are reminded on a daily basis of their struggles to meet the demands of our current system of testing, punishment, and reward. As we struggle with them to sort through what is and isn't possible in U.S. classrooms, we continue to be motivated to understand the forces that shape writing instruction in U.S. high schools and colleges. However, we are also motivated by yet another happening in 2006—a trend we thought would fade away but seems to be gathering force as shrinking state budgets are used to justify systems of accountability, punishment, and reward not seen before in higher education and that parallel the path K–12 has been led down by NCLB.

In 2006, the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education released its report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* (Spellings Commission). Echoing the same threats to the American Dream and the Common Good as *A Nation at Risk*, the new report “urge[s] the creation of a robust culture of accountability and transparency throughout higher education” (20). It names specific standardized tests, such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, for use in our colleges. Writing in 2007 in response to this effort, Christopher Gallagher notes: “Some believe the machinations of these usual suspects, the famously autonomous culture of higher education and its diversity make it inhospitable to the kind of test-based accountability that NCLB has imposed on schools” (“Believe It”). He cautions us against this view and, as we will show throughout this book, his caution has become too well founded.

While no national requirement exists at this moment, an increasing number of institutions have implemented standardized tests anyway, often to answer increasing calls for accountability by cash-strapped states and by a public increasingly skeptical about the value of higher education. As the *New York Times* reported on April 7, 2012, an alliance of more than 300 colleges and universities, as well as organizations such as the Association for Public and Land-grant Universities and ACT, formed the Voluntary System of Accountability in response to the Spellings Commission report. This group both approves and encourages the use of the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Proficiency Profile, the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) (Perez-Péña). Further, the ongoing implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), their attendant tests, and the Core to College initiative represent some of the most well-funded systems of

accountability we have ever seen. While the stated goal of the CCSS is to create a common set of milestones, or standards, for grades K–12, we will show how this effort is also working to change the educational landscape in our college classrooms, threatening our autonomy and diversity through a narrowing of articulation processes as well as our curricula in ways not unlike NCLB. However, we want to be clear that there is much within the CCSS that we applaud, it is how the standards are being funded and implemented, as well as how private testing companies are coopting and profiting from this effort, that causes great alarm.

We are especially concerned about what this might mean for writing instruction. Indeed, as Christopher Gallagher so clearly establishes,

upper administrators, policy makers, and the general public continue to imagine faculty and students as targets of assessment rather than generators of it. In current educational discourse surrounding both K–12 and higher education, . . . assessment is envisioned primarily as a lever for institutional accountability and competition, rather than a teaching and learning practice. (“Being There” 452)

Similarly, Lil Brannon, in her 2011 CCC’s presentation, “Public Spaces, Private Interests: Teaching Writing in a Global Economy,” traces the ways higher education is becoming increasingly privatized and, in the process, eroding the agency of faculty and students. This loss of agency is occurring as questions about curriculum and achievement are decided less and less by classroom-based educators and more and more by government entities, private testing companies, textbook companies, deep-pocketed think tanks, and private donors. The real danger, as Brannon argues, is that so very few of us even know what’s going on. Perhaps this danger is nowhere more evident than in the implementation debates surrounding the Common Core State Standards. While forty-eight states initially signed onto the development and implementation of CCSS, a number of states have already rejected the standards or are considering doing so, offering reasons that vary from concerns about the developmental inappropriateness of the standards for young children to objections of a federal takeover of states’ rights to determine the education of their citizens, to criticism of the ways the aligned standardized tests have been funded, designed, and implemented (Strauss).

In response to mounting criticism of CCSS, a group called Higher Ed for Higher Standards has formed. This is a project of the Collaborative for Student Success—a group that some view as little more than the public relations arm of the CCSS because the same groups that are designated as “backers” of CCSS are also backers of the Collaborative for Student Success and other CCSS

outreach efforts. Higher Ed for Higher Standards has partnered with a long list of higher ed organizations representing hundreds of public and private schools including the American Association for Colleges and Universities, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) associations. In addition, they count among their supporters prominent college and university presidents, chancellors, and other academic officers from every state (a full list can be found at <http://higherforhigherstandards.org/supporters>). In effect, just as criticism of CCSS reached a worrisome point, it looks like the higher education community has strongly positioned itself in support of CCSS, ready to defend these new standards as the best way to ensure college-ready students. But how many of us in higher education have read the Standards, let alone been given the opportunity to have a voice in defining the position of our institutions in relation to the Standards as well as their aligned standardized tests? And, for those of us in writing studies, how are the Common Core State Standards already shaping writing instruction in the United States—not just in K–12 classrooms, but in college classrooms as well?

This book offers a moment for all of us to take a look at the path higher education in general (and writing teachers and students in particular) are on, as calls for reform increasingly echo those of the later 1800s (a history we will discuss in Chapter One) and, more recently, those that led our nation to NCLB. We hope that this book will create opportunities to enter the national and local debates shaping writing studies, and embolden us to intervene in the current state of large-scale assessment primarily as a means of accountability and return it to a teaching and learning practice. It reminds us as teachers and researchers not to lose sight of the hard work of writing and writing instruction. We strive to understand what available data-driven research can and cannot tell us as we argue for a movement away from testing and accountability and toward best practices and standards at both the institutional and classroom level. We join Diane Ravitch, Christopher Gallagher, Lil Brannon, Kathleen Yancey, George Hillocks Jr., and others in their call to assert faculty and student agency in the form of leadership in the research and practice of writing instruction and assessment, as we all strive to reestablish the importance of writing in the twenty-first century.

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In the chapters that follow, we untangle past, present, and emerging forces on the study and practice of writing at all levels of the curriculum. Included in this unangling is a report of our own large empirical study of writing instruction in a representative sample of U.S. secondary and post-secondary educational

institutions. We provide historical and empirical grounding to support our call for teachers to pay greater attention to what is happening around us as well as to argue for the importance of genre, transfer, vertical curricula, empirical research and professional development, showing that these can help us meet the challenges and opportunities presented to writing teachers in the twenty-first century.

We begin in Chapter One with a historical exploration of calls for reform in writing instruction and assessment, going back to the 1800s, so that we can better understand the competing interests of our current moment. In particular, we examine calls for reform in writing instruction with a specific focus on how these calls have grown into demands for accountability as measured by standardized tests at all levels of the curriculum. Emphasis will be placed on the current state of the standardized testing movement at the college level, especially as it is shaped by the U.S. Department of Education's Report *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, widely discussed critiques of writing in college such as that promoted in the popular book *Academically Adrift* (Arum and Roska), and recent reports on the use of standardized testing at the college level (e.g., a recently published report by the Council of Independent Colleges, "Catalyst for Change: The CIC/CLA Consortium"). In this chapter we will also touch on the probable effects the CCSS and their attendant standardized tests such as the PARCC assessment; their assessment was originally developed as a test of how well students in member states have mastered the CCSS, but is morphing into a college admissions test to rival the ACT and SAT, thus raising the stakes for standardized tests in our nation's high schools to a level not seen before. Chapter One paves the way for the rest of the book, which focuses on our analysis and response to calls for reform. We respond to calls for reform in four ways: (1) looking through an empirical lens at the actual practices of students and teachers through our own research, as well as a synthesis of multiple large-scale research projects; (2) scrutinizing the conflicts of interest and financially driven motives of private testing companies, deep-pocketed investors, and our own organizations such as the National Writing Project in the struggle for control over our educational systems; (3) highlighting curricular reforms that respond to the needs and values of learners, educators, policy makers and employers; and (4) providing examples of best practices at both the institutional and classroom level.

In Chapter Two, we report on our own empirical study of writing instruction in U.S. secondary and post-secondary education, systematically synthesizing the results of our study with the findings of recent survey and assessment research focused on the teaching and learning of writing. This will include large-scale studies such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the National Commission on

Writing, institution-wide studies such as the Harvard Study of Writing, the Stanford Study of Writing, the Denver Longitudinal Study of Writing, and others, as well as our own research funded by the Conference on College Composition and Communication. In doing so, we offer a much needed corrective to the historical march outlined in Chapter One toward measuring the progress of our classrooms primarily through the lens of standardized tests at all levels of the curriculum. Instead, we offer a mixed-mode approach to articulating what is and isn't happening in writing classrooms. Our final goal in this chapter is to reveal patterns and relationships among the findings from various studies in order to argue for future directions in teaching and research.

While Chapter Two is rooted in a comparison of findings or results across studies concerning what does and doesn't work, Chapter Three is rooted in a comparison of conclusions or recommendations across studies based on these findings. Here we begin plotting a path forward, finding a surprising level of consensus about the path we should travel. We find the level of consensus surprising because of the wide-range of stakeholders involved, and because it varies significantly from the public rhetoric of accountability and testing so prevalent in our national discourse. At the same time, we begin to more fully integrate local and national discussions about the relatively new CCSS and how they are already influencing higher education in general (and writing studies in particular) into our overall argument. Indeed, the highly concerted efforts of the private and public entities backing the CCSS, as well as the unprecedented depth of their financial support, has already had a lasting effect and will continue to ensure that they and their aligned standardized tests have a significant place in our discussions for many years to come.

In Chapter Four, positioning ourselves as optimistic skeptics, we take a closer look at the potential role of CCSS in the future of writing instruction as we continue to scrutinize the conflicts of interest that permeate so much of the current state of educational reform. We also make a case for three very specific points of convergence that writing researchers and teachers in high school and college must pay attention to as we move forward, providing empirical evidence as well as tales from the field to argue for the value of forefronting these points of convergence. It is our belief that if we position ourselves as agents of change, aware of our potential roles as sponsors of literacy within the current historical moment, then we can effectively intervene in current efforts to shape writing instruction at the high school and college level. To do so, we argue for positioning ourselves at the confluence of Core to College initiatives, research on transfer emerging within rhetorical genre studies, and an investment in K–college professional learning communities at the local and national level. Based on the conclusions we reach in Chapters Three and Four, our final chapter, Chapter Five,

argues that our ability to enact the policies and practices championed by our professional organizations rests on nothing less than a reassertion of the agency of students and teachers in the twenty-first century and beyond.

NOTE

1. Securing the participation of high schools was very difficult, in no small part due to the environment of surveillance and punishment, instead of exploration and inquiry, fostered by NCLB.