

## CHAPTER 8.

# THE INDIVIDUAL, THE INSTITUTION, AND THE ADMINISTRATOR'S DILEMMA

“Power was not the province of those who made choices. Power was the ability to set the context in which those choices were made.”

-Baru Cormorant, *The Monster Baru*  
*Cormorant* (2018) by Seth Dickinson

Narrative—particularly western narratives—often end in a heroic outcome for the narrator. Often the story of assessment ends with the heroic writing administrator who resists standardization and develops local, meaningful writing assessments (Kelly-Riley, 2012, p. 34). This book is not that kind of story. You will find no heroes in this conclusion. Dr. Z does not get his comeuppance as one of my peer reviewers hoped; no writing specialist saves the students who fail the portfolio at St. Rita's; nor does Brad suddenly involve Shirong in radicalizing the writing program at Oak. Rather, by telling multiple stories from different institutional standpoints, institutional ethnography resists a heroic narrative. There are no heroes in the story of writing assessment, only complex individuals carrying out the everyday work of writing assessment within complex systems of institutional power.

So, too, does IE resist final conclusions. Upon the completion of an institutional ethnography, the problematic is explored, but the researcher resists arriving at the *answer* to a question—doing so implies a positivist stance that such an answer can be defined rather than the post-positive approach taken by IE (Smith, 2005). As defined in Chapter 3, the problematic that grounded this study was non-writing specialists adapting national writing rubrics, specifically the AAC&U's Written Communication VALUE rubric. Nearly every part of the problematic invites further questions, from who is a writing specialist to what “adapting” actually means. However, one solid conclusion is that rubrics, whether national or local, are boss texts that are inextricable from systems of power. Even if we feel rubrics do not reflect our values as a discipline (Broad, 2003), the values they do import affect the work of writing assessment and instruction across higher education.

Using IE to study the adaptation of national writing rubrics brought forth many additional questions regarding how power manifests at institutions of

higher education—from how mega philanthropists fund educational initiatives to how individual bullies enact White racial privilege within their personal interactions. Adding genre theory to institutional ethnography helps us place rubrics within these systems of power. Rubrics are neither agents themselves, nor are they neutral tools. Rather rubrics are designed—and activated—by individuals and organizations with particular political purposes in mind. As a genre, rubrics exist at the “nexus between an individual’s action and a socially defined context” (Devitt, 2004, p. 31). Individuals at the AAC&U may write and assess the VALUE rubrics but are constrained by larger systems of power, including philanthropy in higher education as well as national policy. Individuals on the writing committee at Oak and the general education committee at St. Rita’s adapt the rubric but are constrained by the funding they receive from grants and the need for accreditation. Individual teachers, such as Jeremy who teaches basic writing at St. Rita’s, then teach in ways that students need to “pass” the rubric, balancing pedagogical needs and the very real financial needs of students who may not be able to pay the tuition to retake the course. Studying rubrics as a genre that is activated by individuals invites us to connect individual actions to larger institutional contexts. Whether viewed from the perspective of national organizations, local universities, or even the classroom, rubrics are formed at this nexus of individual and institutional power.

For LaFrance (2019), “one of the most powerful imaginative moves of IE is its insistence that we are the institution” (p. 133). The concluding question then becomes: what power do individuals have within the broader institution of higher education? How do administrators and instructors exist at the nexus of the individual and the institution, and how to they channel this power to make institutional change? Inoue (2015) noted that “consequences... occur because of the ecology or complex system, not because of individual actions by students or a teacher or a rubric alone” (p. 120). Yet, the data from this institutional ethnography shows the “undeniable influence of local conditions to reshape the pedagogies championed by national standards and statements” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 130). While consequences never occur in a vacuum and individual power is inherently tied to institutional systems, it is still valuable to recognize local conditions. The catch-22 is this: How do we shape our institutions for more ethical practice while also existing within the power structure? I dub this the administrator’s dilemma.

Here I invoke the epigraph to this chapter, which comes from the fantasy series *The Masquerade* by Seth Dickenson. Dickenson’s series engages with philosophical questions about the role of education as a means of colonization, and his main character Baru Cormorant finds herself at this intersection of power, both a part of the institution and working against it. Baru learns that real power is not in making choices but in setting the *context* that allows for and constrains

choices. This theme permeates my study. As seen at both Oak and St. Rita's, the faculty make choices about what to include in their outcomes and their rubrics, but they do not challenge the very notion that outcomes and rubrics should guide their practice. To do so is to challenge the dominant institutional logic currently ruling education. But if we are, in fact, the institution, then we can also use our individual power to shape the institution—if we can only step back, “look up” as LaFrance calls for, and see how we enact ruling relations in our own everyday practice. This step back is nearly impossible to do when we limit ourselves to only one institutional context, which is why a key practice in IE is studying multiple institutions outside the home context of the researcher. Yet, such research can be used to shape our interactions with and within institutions: “Our research doesn't just describe social realities, it creates them” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 132). In this conclusion, then, I offer a combination of stories from this study and thoughts about how national, local/programmatic, and classroom settings work together to create the institution. I hope to spark ideas and discussion about how we then intervene in and shape power through our national institutions, our local institutions, and our classrooms.

## SHAPING THE INSTITUTION NATIONALLY

The literature in writing assessment asks us to “rethink rubrics” (Wilson, 2006), to “reframe writing assessment” (Alder-Kassner & O'Neill, 2010), and even to “reclaim accountability” (Sharer et al., 2016). Sometimes that call has been connected to issues of equity and race in college classrooms (Balester, 2012). But new rubrics and new terminology have not solved our administrator's dilemma—we are each constrained by our position within the power structure. It is easy to critique national practice and then move on to how we can and should influence local practice—to say that we should just change, adapt, or ignore national rubrics in our local programs or classrooms. Yet, such arguments fall into the same trap that Brad (the art history professor at Oak) defaulted to, thinking that his classroom *could* be a space separate from assessment with a capital A, that his role as pedagogue could be pure in a way that academia as a whole could not. The narratives of local practice in this book show no fewer flaws than national practice. They are no less acts of institutional power than those we see at the national level. So, too, national efforts are no less acts of individual agents—real people with their own everyday work lives and institutional constraints. I thus challenge the oft-heard wisdom of our field that local assessment inherently equals good assessment, that it is somehow not subject to the same pitfalls we see at the national level. Rather, I ask how we can shape assessment at all levels of the institution in ways that best serve us and our students.

Since the emergence of writing assessment as its own field in the 1990s, the field has sought to balance critique of traditional assessment practice with collaboration between composition and educational measurement (Behizadeh & Engelhard Jr., 2011, p. 204). Those who focus on collaboration stress the need to bring our expertise to national efforts and to build alliances with national assessment professionals. Wendy Sharer et al. (2016) argued that those involved in administering writing programs need to “be involved in defining the terms and setting the parameters of large-scale writing assessment” (p. 3). Alder-Kassner and O’Neill (2010) provided extensive advice on how to move beyond our traditional role as academics and engage in community, organizing with those in more public sectors of education. When those in composition operate at this national level—whether it is on a faculty team constructing the VALUE rubric for Written Communication or creating the CWPA Outcomes Statement—they seek to make the values of our field transparent to a wider circle. But not all writing scholars agree that collaboration is a useful strategy. Patricia Lynne (2004) argued that “large-scale assessment is conflicted at the level of theory,” and that writing professionals operate under a different paradigm that is irreconcilable with that of assessment professionals (p. 167).

Whether we call for opposing or working with national assessment professionals, the literature within writing assessment tends to separate an “us” (composition scholars) from “them” (educational measurement/assessment professionals), despite our mutual everyday involvement with the work of writing assessment. There are two ways of looking at the history of writing assessment. One is to define a historical “lack of alignment between writing theories and the practice of writing assessment in the United States” (Behizadeh & Engelhard Jr., 2011, pp. 205-206). The other is to note that “our” work has *always* been intertwined with “their” work. This second view is hard. It means owning the historical failures in assessment and the history of White supremacist ideology from which they sprung. Elliot (2005) does not shy away from either the historical connection with eugenicists that created early writing assessment nor the real impact writing assessment has had on students over time, such as the role literacy testing has played in limiting immigration or determining which individuals are placed on the front lines in war-time. Yet, the effects of these practices are not only historical; they are also current.

White writing program administrators are likely to say they work toward anti-racist practices, but teachers and administrators of color challenge that these efforts go deeper than surface level. Carmen Kynard (2021) stated, “I have never worked in a writing program where Whiteness was not the *fait accompli* of its structure and yet... the folk at the helm would tell you they are striving toward and have achieved justice” (p. 187). Similarly, when Genevieve García de

Müeller and Iris Ruiz (2017) conducted a survey about race and racism in writing programs they found that there was a “perception gap” between White survey participants and participants of color on whether or not diversity efforts in writing programs are successful (p. 36). Tyler Branson and James Chase Sanchez (2021) noted that the strategies presented by participants in this survey for combating racism “happened more or less at the *individual level*” (p. 72). As shown throughout my study, the individual is always intertwined with the institution. Thus, change must go beyond the individual to the institutional, even the national level. On this front, the most promising development is the creation of the *Institute of Race, Rhetoric, and Literacy* in 2021 to make race a central issue in national writing studies organizations. Addressing the systemic harm done by writing assessment and writing professionals must be a national effort.

### BEYOND THE TERMS OF ASSESSMENT

Writing scholars have long concerned ourselves with influencing *terms* of assessment—the words we use and put in outcomes and on rubrics. Anderson et al. (2013) noted the similarities between the VALUE Written Communication rubric and the CWPA Outcomes Statement, saying that they are “almost indistinguishable” from one another (p. 95). This connection is not surprising considering that the faculty team creating the VALUE Written Communication rubric began with existing practice in the field and referenced such norms in the preface to the rubric itself. Some might say that this similarity is a positive attribute of the VALUE rubric. Yet, genre matters. The original CWPA Outcomes were meant to provide *guidance* for curriculum, they were not meant to “require agreement on the best way to achieve those outcomes” (White, 2005). Is the similarity between the VALUE Written Communication rubric and the CWPA Outcomes then a cause for concern as it seems to corrupt this original intent?

We must go beyond terms to examine the *circulation* and use of these national texts. In 2010, Adler-Kassner and O’Neill lauded the AAC&U for their LEAP initiative and its initial focus on educators shaping and adapting a set of open-ended outcomes. In both this book and elsewhere, I have expressed concern that the use of the rubrics is diverging from this initial purpose and moving toward certifying mastery (Grouling, 2017). We see this happening when administrators and faculty change the language of the dimensions to deficit-based language, establishing a category that reifies students as “insufficient,” “unsatisfactory,” or otherwise lacking. Too, we often find slippage between using the data from rubric-based assessment as “discovering and improving what students are doing” to a “demonstration of achievement” (Adler-Kassner & O’Neill, 2010, p. 86). As I describe in Chapter 7, observing that a large number of zero

scores were issued in the area of “Evidence and Sources” can give us a clue that something further should be investigated in that area. However, it does *not* tell us that students are unable to use evidence and sources. This point is one I have not only written about here but have stressed in presentations I have done at the state level through our LEAP organization.

The key becomes not the original words used on the rubrics but how the rubrics are used in everyday assessment practice. Lynne (2004) worried that by using psychometric terminology, we are subject to a “ventriloquist’s trick” where educational measurement theorists have put words in the mouths of compositionists (p. 16). Her metaphor also works in the opposite direction. Over time, our words become used in ways that are unfamiliar to us. Gallagher (2012) described an event at which he interacted with accreditors who seemed to be using our theories about writing portfolios only to find that it was “a Trojan horse” (p. 23). The accreditors used writing studies terms but twisted them to their own agendas. Is this not what we have seen happen with the VALUE Written Communication rubric? The rubric, created by a team of writing professionals, using our disciplinary terms, was meant to be used with portfolios, with assignment prompts, with student reflections that established the context for writing that writing specialists so highly value. We did our part. We worked together. But we do not ultimately define the context in which our work is used without further action.

To continue the metaphor, to enact change we must not fixate on the ventriloquist figure but to the ventriloquists themselves. When we look at the philanthropic forces behind higher ed, we often see only a large number of impenetrable institutions. It is true that “these movements are larger, more powerful, and better funded than any writing teachers, or even any group of writing teachers, will ever be” (Alder-Kassner, 2012, p. 136). But it is also true that individuals working with institutions have agency. For example, Terry Rhodes, the first Executive Director of VALUE and Vice President of AAC&U’s Office of Quality, Curriculum, and Assessment, often expressed an interest in e-portfolios, and I suspect that his connection to Kathleen Blake Yancey—composition e-portfolio specialist and a member of the VALUE Advisory Board—has been influential to his thinking. Similarly, the former Director of LEAP, Susan Albertine taught composition at multiple colleges and universities, no doubt rubbing elbows with multiple compositionists and WPAs. In a talk titled “Writing for Lives Our Students Will Live” in 2016, Albertine drew heavily on her own background as a composition teacher. She argued for “boundary pushing writing assignments” and told of a project where a woman literally wrote on her own body to make an argument about body positivity. She also advocated for Black English being as valid as SEAE. When Adler-Kassner (2017) talks about the EIC, it is easy

to see a number of powerful entities working for their own interests in higher education, but it is important to remember that all institutions are made up of actual individuals, and they, too, are agents behind movements such as the VALUE initiative.

That relationship is also not one way—these individuals also interact with and influence our discipline. A 2021 book on outcomes edited by Kelly-Riley and Elliot concluded with a chapter on accreditation and the VALUE multi-state collaborative by Terry Rhodes. Meanwhile, on April 1, 2021, the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum held a virtual event for members that engaged with issues of equity and assessment. On the program was current Executive Director of VALUE, Kate McConnell with a presentation about equity and the VALUE rubrics (Johnson, 2021). Those who directly impact national practice through the VALUE rubrics are participating in our disciplinary venues and doing the work of writing assessment. By interacting meaningfully with these individuals on a professional level—whether they are temporary teachers at our institutions or presenters at our conferences—we influence the forward direction of higher education as a larger, national institution.

Yet, they too are individuals with limited means to act within these power structures. In a personal conversation I had with McConnell, she also expressed frustration with ways the VALUE rubrics had been used outside of their intended purpose, sometimes without the knowledge of the organization itself (personal communication, October 25, 2021). In a follow-up email, McConnell told me that she often sees people cite this misuse to make the argument that the rubrics are not helpful tools. For her and the AAC&U, partnering with those using the rubrics and creating resources with and for them is key to “making sure these pieces are working in concert” (personal communication, February 17, 2022). McConnell is conscious of the way the VALUE rubrics exist within their own system, one that she hopes to intentionally support: “While we can’t, of course, control how rubrics get used ‘out there,’ we do nonetheless feel responsible to ensure that ‘bad’ or unintended uses are not resulting from a lack of support or guidance from the initiative itself” (personal communication, February 17, 2022). The frustration and concern about how boss texts circulate within power structures, then, is also something that impacts the work of the “bosses” themselves. The AAC&U takes their call as stewards seriously, but part of having a freely available and widely used resource means it will be implemented outside of the overall framework. In fact, it may be that those that most lack support, such as the faculty at St. Rita’s, are the most likely to find and implement an approach they do not have the resources to fully use. To distribute the rubrics only to those who undergo training in how to use them, like Kristen and others at Oak did, would mean the resources are less widely distributed.



What I have often characterized in this book as a means of exerting control or power is not done with malintent but rather from a desire for what McConnell refers to as “implementation fidelity,” an issue she sees not only with the VALUE rubrics but with any assessment tool. The administrator’s dilemma at this national level is how to make sure that the tools provided are adaptable while still ensuring that they are used the way they were designed. In my study, we see how difficult that balance can be when faculty from all disciplines, backgrounds, and opinions on assessment are involved in the process. So, too, the AAC&U relies on a variety of entities with their own agendas for funding and support themselves. Currently, the AAC&U is committed to revising the rubrics and are in the process of seeking funding to do so. If funding is secured, then another group of stakeholders and their views will need to be considered as a part of the process. McConnell is passionate about the revisions going forward, with or without funding. She sees the need to think about equity and involve both students and faculty in the process. Like local leaders, it is important for key officials at national organizations to think deeply about their own role in higher education and the power embedded within those roles, and McConnell is interested in such conversations.

It is not only interaction with the members of national organizations that matters, but also who these individuals are and what backgrounds they bring to their work that matters. Inoue (2021b) reminded us that the authors of the CWPA outcomes statement “are White academics, most of whom do not specialize in racial theories.” So, too, are the faculty teams writing the VALUE rubrics. When authorship of these boss texts is granted only to the organization, it obscures both the expertise of these authors and their Whiteness. I call on organizations, such as the AAC&U, to make the individual names behind these documents visible: to list the faculty teams as authors on the rubrics themselves so that all can have a better understanding of what backgrounds—both helpful and harmful—they may have brought to their writing. Such transparency can also help us identify what expertise is missing from the conversation, whether that is the lived experiences of scholars of color, of contract faculty members, or of international English speakers. Organizational authorship implies consensus. Yet, consensus is itself a grand narrative, one steeped in White assumptions (Martinez, 2020). The assumption that a boss text represents consensus shuts down critique of systems, and the inability to contact individual authors curbs future discussion.

## CUTTING OUR STRINGS

In addition to recognizing that those who speak for and through national organizations, such as the AAC&U, are also individuals, we must recognize that the



national organizations within our own discipline are not homogenous. When we rally behind the values of composition, we assume and promote a consensus that is unlikely at best and dangerous at worse. While there are threshold concepts that connect us as a discipline, we are a diverse set of individuals with our own standpoints in relation to higher education and the field itself. We have often failed to recognize and honor these differences, and thus it comes as a shock to some—a disruption—when someone challenges our assumed consensus. Rather, such challenges should be an integral part of our regular practices.

For example, for years there has been an assumption that the CWPA outcomes are common wisdom in the field and are what first-year composition students should be striving for. Much like the LEAP outcomes and VALUE rubrics, the CWPA Outcomes Statement began as a way to resist movement toward standards in higher education (Ericsson, 2005). Yet, they circulate in similar ways as other boss texts. As Gallagher (2012) maintained: “Outcome statements take on an aura of finality, of achieved and unimpeachable institutional authority” (p. 45). Perhaps this is why when the CWPA created a task force co-chaired by Asao Inoue and Beth Brunk-Chaves to apply anti-racism to the outcomes, the result was not what the board seemed to expect. That is, the recommendations of the task force did more than reword the outcomes; the task force challenged the very notion of outcomes to begin with. They attempted to change the very context of the choices presented to WPAs by their national organization, and they encountered enough resistance to this change that they ultimately split off from the CWPA and formed their own national organization, the *Institute of Race, Rhetoric, and Literacy*.

In June 2021, this group released their statement on first-year writing goals, clearly stating: “Each goal is structured after the previous CWPA outcomes, but they are not outcomes. They do not identity preconceived ideas about what students will produce in a writing course” (Beavers, et al., 2021). Interestingly, like the original LEAP outcomes, these “goals” are vague areas rather than statements that lead with “students will” and begin with verbs. Such work can begin to change the context of our choices. Yet, it is still too early to know how this work will grow, shift, and be applied by WPAs. Although I personally hope to apply this new work to the curriculum in my home writing program, I am skeptical that any new syllabus that breaks from “students will” plus Bloom’s taxonomy verb format will be approved through official channels and curriculum committees at my university. This genre is too entrenched in academia. Are we willing to go as far as to *not* have our first-year writing courses approved as a part of a core curriculum? This is a potential real consequence and one that we should examine carefully.

Or do we propose one set of “outcomes” for the official documents of the university, knowing the audience is committee members and accreditors, and

another set of “goals” for students? If so, does this do anything to actually change the context of writing across the university? Does it create any kind of real, sustainable change within the practice of teaching writing beyond our own classrooms? I agree with Inoue (2021a) that: “Doing antiracist and anti-White supremacist work in an organization is about *dismantling the structures and policies that those in the org have heard dearly*, such as the Outcomes Statement.” But I am curious how, and if, this work can ultimately shift the actual practice of everyday administrators as well. Will we soon see these new antiracist goals turned into outcome statements turned into rubrics, or can we cut the strings binding us once and for all? If we were to bring these goals to the revision of the VALUE rubrics, for instance, could that produce meaningful change, or would it only twist the good work of our newest professional organization in unintended directions?

Perhaps more importantly, how will this work reach those who do the work of writing assessment but who do not circulate in writing studies arenas. It is important to remember that at both Oak and St. Rita’s administrators went looking for national practice in writing assessment for a reason. They did not necessarily seek out best or most current practice but sought *national* practices that would bring them the social capital their schools needed. In this age of austerity, philanthropists provide funding that these schools may not otherwise have to gain recognition, meet accreditors standards, and stay in business. In the case of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics, funding and assessment work is linked to the collection of student artifacts and their assessment with rubrics. While some faculty may have no idea where the rubrics they use stem from, in this study we have also seen faculty invoke these systems of power strategically for their own ends. Dwayne purposefully and strategically puts St. Rita’s on the radar of the AAC&U. He writes a piece about St. Rita’s for them to publish, and even though it ends up being more aspirational than he hoped, it helps his own tenure case. Even surly Gerald notes that what Dwayne is doing with the VALUE rubrics is important for the recognition of a school like theirs. And when the VALUE rubrics are not implemented, they are “re-discovered” by the next St. Rita’s administrator, also wanting to link to national norms.

Meanwhile at Oak, Associate Provost Philip takes advantage of the funding provided by the AAC&U grant to give the writing program support to build their own rubric—one that ultimately bears very little resemblance to the VALUE rubric. While Brad scoffs at assessment on the national level, even he admits that it keeps the doors open and his paycheck coming in. It allows him to do the work he values as an individual teacher, not through providing rubrics for his own classroom but by placing the burden of assessment on other shoulders. Because the university performs well for accreditors, he can do what he wants

in his classroom—throw out the syllabus, bring in translingual pedagogy: take risks. Meanwhile, Jeremy at St. Rita's is tied to a competency-based model of basic writing in part because St. Rita's has not solidified their status in the way that Oak has. Closure was, and remains, a very real threat at St. Rita's. That anxiety manifested multiple times in the interviews I conducted.

The ones setting the context for these practices that compositionists may find problematic are those who fund and cut funding to higher education in the first place. Nicholas Behm and Keith Miller (2012) called for “the rebuke of public policy makers and accrediting agencies who attempt to prescribe Standard English—the language of Whiteness—as the ultimate template and touchstone for evaluating all student writing” (p. 137). Being able to take up this call means better understanding systems of power. It means understanding both social and *financial* power structures. It also means being aware of national sources of data that carry institutional weight. For example, I have frequently used the National Census on Writing to gather data that may be persuasive to administrators. Yet, my own WPA training did not include learning about where to get such data or how to use it. It was only in talking to Dwayne during this research project that I learned about the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and the wealth of data that is collected nationally on institutions there. Such knowledge has allowed me to counter dubious claims made by administrators about how our institution compares to other institutions. As WPAs, faculty, and administrators, we need training on these national data sources—what the boss texts are and who the bosses are—and how to use them strategically. And then we must use them to talk back to systems of power and to fight misinterpretation and misuse of boss texts like the VALUE rubrics. So, too, we must become voices within organizations like the AAC&U, publishing work in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and well-read publications and forwarding what we know to the wide-spread audiences engaged in writing assessment decision making. Even so, for any one individual, it may not be enough to change the context, not without our national organizations also changing theirs, listening to diverse voices, and advocating for national policy changes in higher education.

## SHAPING LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

At times, institutional power may appear unidirectional—money flows from philanthropists to intermediaries to local institutions. Local institutions, such as Oak and St. Rita's, rely on national organizations, such as the AAC&U, to fund assessment initiatives, and these organizations rely on philanthropists, such as Gates and Lumina for their financial capital. However, social capital or “reputation, status, stature, or prestige” operates differently. In her definition of social

capital, Seawright (2017) drew on Bourdieu, who used the example of a father figure as someone with social capital—someone who is authorized to speak on behalf of the family as a whole (p. xxiv). So, too, are national organizations, whether it is the AAC&U or the CWPA, authorized to speak for all WPAs, teachers, and administrators through their common outcomes and rubrics. To extend the father metaphor, though, there are different approaches to this role.

The AAC&U has historically taken the position of stewards of higher education rather than technocrats. The primary difference in this approach is that steward's emphasis on nurturing individual choice rather than dictating practice from above (Adler-Kassner, 2008). Therefore, the AAC&U's social capital—their reputation as stewards—relies on local institutions and individuals using and adapting the VALUE rubrics for their own assessment practices. Just as administrators at Oak and St. Rita's draw upon the AAC&U to gain social capital for their institutions, the AAC&U solidifies their social capital through the position that their rubrics are adaptable. The fact that local assessment experts are sharing the rubric at their institutions is seen by the AAC&U as evidence of their validity. There is, then, a certain social power granted to local institutions and the groups that conduct assessment at them.

Local committees do have an impact on local practice. For example, the writing committee at Oak and the general education committee at St. Rita's decide on writing and assessment practice for their institutions. At Oak, the committee approves which courses count as writing designated; at St. Rita's, the committee determines which courses are a part of the core curriculum. These decisions have real institutional power. At St. Rita's, for example, there is concern that certain courses—even certain disciplines—will not survive if they are not required classes. Thus, the way that St. Rita's uses the VALUE rubrics to determine the outcomes of the core curriculum has real effects on the working lives of faculty. Oak's committee may have a less immediate effect since they only determine whether the course counts for the writing credit; however, to the extent that faculty follow approved syllabi, they determine what counts as enough writing to qualify. Furthermore, they specify pedagogical practices, such as peer review, as key to writing pedagogy and look for reference to these in course proposals.

Ultimately, these groups determine how they will use the VALUE rubrics. Devitt (2004) explained that with any genre, groups accept or reject variations. This may become more difficult as specific genres become more entrenched in institutions, but the groups do have power over genre variation. We see this power used at Oak when Associate Provost Philip provided the AAC&U funding to the writing program to create a rubric, but the writing committee created one that is vastly different from the VALUE Written Communication rubric. We see it used at St. Rita's when the general education committee rejects the suggestion

to make the writing outcomes more like the VALUE rubric but instead sticks to the outcome about sentence variety to reflect actual practice and appease Dr. Z. These committees may not challenge the idea of outcomes or rubrics, but they set the context for those outcomes and rubrics to be applied in core courses and writing designated courses.

Participation and interaction with these committees is often seen as tedious by faculty. Dr. Z states that he does committee work “under duress,” and Brad says he only cares about his own classroom. Both see this type of work as extra and annoying rather than as a key part of their own institutional role. Yet, these committees are key to connecting national institutional practice to local institutional power. For example, as WPA at an institution with upper-level writing designated courses but no WAC program, I have long hoped for a way to impact those courses. I offered workshops through our office of Strategic Learning and have presented about writing assessment at our local university assessment forums. Using data from the National Census on Writing and documents produced by the CCCCs and NCTE, I wrote a document specifying what counts nationally as a writing course for my department chair. Yet, I found my participation on the university core curriculum committee to be the best way to subtly influence these courses. Here I drew on boss texts, such as the form for core approval, and modified them to clearly state that writing courses needed to involve a process of feedback and revision. Whether or not this impacts actual classroom practice is another matter, but this change will impact how the committee evaluates and approves courses as writing designated.

## LOCAL INSTITUTIONAL STANDPOINTS

Just as individual faculty members occupy a particular standpoint in relation to the power of their institutions, so do local institutions occupy a particular standpoint within the institution of higher education. It is a myth that national practice—whether the VALUE rubrics or CWPA outcomes—can be applied evenly or will be seen the same across these local institutional standpoints. As seen throughout this study, Oak and St. Rita's occupy significantly different standpoints. As an open-access school in a depressed region of the country, St. Rita's serves an economically and racially diverse student population, many of whom would be denied access at other institutions. Yet, rather than recognize this as one particular standpoint within the institution of higher education, St. Rita's draws on national practice to compare itself with institutions that occupy different standpoints. In so doing, the faculty view their students as “underprepared” or “insufficient” rather than seeing the value added by their particular student population. Thus, their strategy is to try and be more like a “normal”

college. Gerald mentioned that St. Rita's is acquiring land for a dorm and building an athletic center in an attempt to be more of a traditional college. St. Rita's attempts to enact the institution of higher education through these practices as well as through attempting to get their students up to the standards they perceive as the norm across higher education.

While we should hold those at St. Rita's accountable for their practice, we should also remember that they lack many of the privileges enjoyed by faculty members at Oak. At Oak, facilitators are regularly brought in to run workshops on writing pedagogy and assessment, faculty are funded for participating in assessment initiatives, and the majority are protected by tenure. No matter how involved writing and assessment professionals are at the national level, when local institutions don't have funding to send faculty to conferences or to bring workshop leaders to campus, then we rely on local professionals to interpret and apply documents, such as the VALUE rubrics, when they find them freely available online.<sup>11</sup> So, too, national organizations such as the CWPA have offered evaluator services that, while valuable, are out of reach financially for the typical writing program. When we look at somewhere like St. Rita's that has only a handful of English faculty operating within a humanities department without a program or program director, we must acknowledge that they simply do not have the access to resources larger departments and programs benefit from. Thus, our own financial and social structures privilege the education of some students over others.

Elizabeth Kleinfeld (2020) called for a recalibration of expectations within writing programs to be in line with both material and emotional resources. Such a recalibration is necessary, but it also begs the question of how our national organizations get resources to those who might most benefit from them. Could, perhaps, evaluator services be tied to accreditation efforts, or provide a sliding scale of services at different price points? While I do not begrudge any speakers or workshop facilitators for being paid by their labor, like systems of publication, this can curtail the distribution of ideas. Furthermore, as seen in Chapter 7, White faculty still dominate our local institutions and are more likely to be protected by tenure and to make their voices heard. In reality, it is these individuals (often White and male) who benefit from academic freedom, which they in turn may use to maintain outmoded, racist pedagogies (Branson & Sanchez, 2021). We must work to diversify our faculty lines and to fight against the labor inequities that allow some individuals to hide behind academic freedom and tenure while keeping teaching faculty from enacting anti-racist pedagogies.

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11 As the pandemic has moved us into more virtual spaces, we can hope that these workshop and conference opportunities may become more accessible and more affordable for those at institutions such as St. Rita's.

## COMPOSITIONISTS ON CAMPUS

Part of the impetus for this study was to see how national rubrics created by specialists in writing were applied and adapted by non-writing specialists. There has historically been a narrative that the compositionist on campus must get involved in writing assessment and guide local application, and that when they do, all is well. But aside from the writing center director at Oak who was not involved with the writing committee or curriculum, there were no faculty who were affiliated with the discipline of rhetoric and composition at the two institutions I studied. It would be simple to say that writing at both St. Rita's and Oak is operating outside of our discipline. In many ways, this does seem to be true. Kristen is a history professor. Her predecessor, Ben, is a computer science professor. At St. Rita's, Dr. Z actively separates himself from the field of composition and seems to run off compositionists: Jessica worked as a compositionist at St. Rita's but left after a few years when she could not make the change she wanted. Dwayne took up the charge of composition, but he is a creative writer by training. These factors made the two schools ideal for my desire to study institutions where non-disciplinary experts implemented the VALUE rubrics for writing assessment. Yet, who is "in" our discipline and who is "out" is more complex. As seen throughout this study, what is on paper is not always representative of actual practice. A degree in rhetoric and composition may not mean any expertise in assessment, while those from other degrees may come to acquire both training and experience in writing pedagogy and evaluation.

At Oak, several of the faculty members who I interviewed talked about their experience with writing and assessment as graduate students. In each case, I recognized the program and/or the director as someone well-known in our field. Shawna, a professor of religious studies, participated in the first assessment of writing at Oak in Summer 2018. As a graduate assistant in her Ph.D. program, she taught writing, and she now teaches an upper-level writing intensive course on race and religion. In this class, she has implemented a portfolio, a practice she took from her graduate training. She was curious to participate in the writing assessment at Oak because she found it fascinating when she attended a campus-wide forum on writing conducted by Linda Adler-Kassner during her graduate studies. This was her first experience in seeing how writing conventions varied significantly across the disciplines, and she brings this understanding to her work as a rater in the assessment at Oak. Similarly, Wendy, the coordinator of multilingual learning at Oak, drew on her experience in graduate school when she participated in the 2018 assessment. Although her focus as a scholar is on German linguistics, Wendy has a graduate certificate in teaching ESL and has taught composition courses at multiple institutions. When I interviewed her,



she was teaching a first-year writing section at Oak that focused on bilingualism. Before coming to Oak, Wendy worked in a prestigious writing center where she applied her knowledge of language acquisition to writing. She brings this background into her teaching at Oak and works to make her classroom a place that “builds bridges between the international community and the domestic community.” Finally, at St. Rita’s, Dwayne continued to draw on his training as a graduate student in a composition program run by Andrea Lunsford. His view of error was influenced by this background, and while he is unable to fully resist Dr. Z’s focus on error, he does at least change practice at St. Rita’s so that faculty do not repeatedly count the same “error” against students.

These faculty members had training in writing instruction and assessment beyond what was offered at their current institution. Those of us who work as WPAs in first-year writing or WAC programs should consider, then, how our institutional role is often influential beyond our local institutional context. If practicum courses and TA training only focuses on the immediate need to train TAs in our programs, if we only focus on teaching writing at research institutions, then we neglect the chance to influence practice more broadly. Handing a TA a syllabus to teach or a rubric to assess writing may solve the immediate need for an instructor, but it does not prepare that instructor to think in new educational settings. So, too, must writing across the curriculum efforts focus on training graduate students as well as faculty. These opportunities as graduate students may be the only direct interaction future faculty have with writing pedagogy and assessment, and it is highly influential to their future practice.

The training we provide in WAC workshops and TA practicums can also help these future faculty think about the institution of higher education itself. If we see the goal of these opportunities as actually changing the institution, then we must teach the ability to read and resist institutional power. As Seawright (2017) stated: “Teaching our students to read institutions empowers them to decide what role they will play in supporting or deconstructing those institutions” (p. 101). While her book discussed the implications for professional writing pedagogy, such instruction is paramount for graduate studies. This questioning of institutional power and our place within it is also inherently tied to race relations in the United States. Inoue (2021b) perfectly posed the question: “Good assessment is local assessment, but what happens when we cannot count on our local teachers to be trained in race theories?” Local assessment stories, such as the ones I’ve shared in this book, show that we cannot expect this training, and worse, some local teachers may actively promote White supremacist ideology. Gerald Z directly called the students at St. Rita’s background, “culturally thin,” but he was not alone in promoting White ideology, stressing White languaging or even making racialized assumptions about students’ preparation and back-

grounds. When faculty and administrators have the tools they need to examine assessment from the lens of race, then they can make important adaptations to national texts. For example, one respondent to my 2016 survey about the Written Communication rubric, noted that they planned to modify the “Control of Syntax and Mechanics” dimension of the VALUE rubric because it maintained “the White privilege of standard English speakers.”

Yet, this knowledge—of writing, of assessment, of race theory—is often the responsibility of the individual rather than the institution. Martinez (2020) pointed out that minoritized perspectives are often found in elective course offerings rather than core classes. The same is often true within graduate programs. Adding these perspectives and introducing critical race theories in all graduate training, particularly TA training, is key to providing the foundation that future faculty need to interact with and question the authority of boss texts. This training is often not a part of practicum courses, or when it is, it is addressed in problematic ways (de Müller & Ruiz, 2017). Addressing racial injustice is the work of every discipline, but compositionists are particularly well-suited because of our involvement in TA training and WAC efforts on campuses. We may not be present at every institution, but as seen with many faculty members interviewed for this study, those who hear our words and attend our trainings often take that with them to their own careers.

Here we also need to take individual responsibility for what was institutionally lacking in our own educational histories. Although Black feminists have always made pro-Black work central to their careers (Jones et al. 2021), compositionists as a whole have not been trained in race or assessment. To make this change, then, we must ourselves seek out the perspectives our own education has lacked. As Natasha Jones, Laura Gonzales, and Angela Haas (2021) recently reminded us, we must ask, “What expertise do we need in order to address anti-Blackness that has been present in our program or organization from the start?” (p. 31). Too often we assume that if we teach and work from our own values that we will not be contributing to the ecology of assessment that is steeped in Whiteness. But as Patti Pobleto (2021) noted in her own response to the 2021 CWWA outcomes debate: we should not be surprised when “we get called out for saying things that reflect White supremacy. **Because we do.** It’s what we’re trained to do. It’s what we’ve been doing. It’s the air we breathe and the water we wade through” (p. 182-183). We, too, have been trained in systems of White supremacist language ideology and until we re-train ourselves by listening to diverse voices in our field, reading critical race theory, and interrogating our own institutional power, the real work cannot begin. The responsibility for this work lies with both us as individuals and with the institution at large. Politically, it may seem more acceptable to fund training in assessment than training in

critical race theory. But we must make the argument that to ethically do assessment—if that is even a possibility—we must be trained to look at race and its interaction with our systems of assessment and power.

## SHAPING THE INSTITUTION IN THE CLASSROOM

Even though groups such as core curriculum and writing committees are involved in deciding how the VALUE rubrics are used on their campuses, there is no guarantee this affects individual classroom practice. As with all boss texts, “Individuals must *actively* take up the discourses a text presents” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 44). Those in writing program administration sometimes talk about curriculum or assessment in programmatic terms without acknowledging individual, lived, material realities. Institutional ethnography helps us see the ways that pedagogy is “a highly individualized and material process” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 49). Even Gerald acknowledged, “Curriculum isn’t on a piece of paper. It’s in the classroom where people are acting it out and doing it.” Within assessment, we often note a tension between what we call the institution—the external forces and administrators who require accountability, assessment, reporting—and the individual—the lone pedagogue at work in their classroom. But it is together that they make up the institution. Thus, we must take institutional critique to “the actualities of an individual’s everyday work” (LaFrance, 2019, p. 15).

Chapter 7 focused on this connection with the individual by telling the stories of Gerald Z at St. Rita’s and Brad at Oak. While Gerald and Brad are not meant to represent all White male professors, or even particular archetypes, the overlap we see in their stories is that they operate from a viewpoint in which the classroom instructor is at odds with institutional structures. Gerald rails against disciplinary norms in composition as well as norms in academia as a whole. Although Brad’s definition of the problems with academia are opposite of Gerald’s, he too finds fault with academia as a system. It’s not that these challenges are unwarranted—they often are—it’s that both Gerald and Brad see themselves as *external* to the institutional power of higher education while occupying a standpoint of ruling within that institution. For better or worse, they do not recognize their own institutional power. Even though Gerald exerts his influence frequently, the extent to which he recognizes his own bullying behavior is unclear. He knows he’s “an opinionated guy,” but Dwayne commented that “Dr. Z has no idea how much he has interfered” with the assessment procedures at St. Rita’s. Similarly, Brad expresses a deep commitment to critical pedagogy and linguistic justice in his classroom while enacting the role of White male professor on the writing committee, unaware of the valuable perspective on writing that his colleague from Singapore brings to the table. By separating the role of

the instructor from the power of the institution, we deny the way that individual and idiosyncratic preferences become institutionalized, particularly when those individuals have status within the institution due to position and racial privilege.

For students, who usually do not see the inner workings of the institution of higher education, who may never know that their writing is taken from the classroom and passed to national assessors in order to hold the university accountable for their learning, the instructor is the face of the institution. Often administrators dictate policies that go on syllabi, but students may not be aware of what material their instructors create and what is handed down to them. When they see a strict attendance policy or cell phone policy, they see an individual teacher enacting the role of cop in the classroom. As Gannon (2020) reminded us, when we tell students to trust us but then state in bold in the syllabus that they must provide documentation for every absence, we reinforce that the institution of education is about legalese not trust. Whether guided by common administrative language or not, when instructors act as police in the classroom—attendance police, cell phone police, or grammar police—they reinforce that policing is an everyday practice within the university.

So, too, when students are given rubrics—perhaps ones made by writing committees, perhaps by individual teachers—that include a dimension labeled “unacceptable” and then produce work that the teacher marks in that area of the rubric, no amount of teacher feedback or revision opportunities can entirely counter the power of that language. Rubrics, by their very structure, imply that students should reach a particular end point that is not of their own determining. We can remove the letters A, B, C, D from a rubric and replace them with 4, 3, 2, and 1, but these changes make little difference in communicating to students that they should be progressing linearly through their studies. The form of the rubric indicates that students should aim for the top dimension of the rubric, even if it asks them to enact an identity that is counter to their own. In much the same way as our policy may communicate a lack of trust in students, so, too, an instructor can ask students to set their own goals for writing and can tell them they do not need to change everything to please the teacher, but it is difficult for the genre of the rubric to convey that same message. Rubrics place student work, and students themselves, in categories, in boxes, and thus constrain them to a particular role within the system of their education.

Creating rubrics with students is a solution for some. A limitation of my particular study is the lack of data from students adapting a rubric. However, if the same trends exist that we've seen here with faculty adapting a rubric, then this solution is suspect. When faculty adapt rubrics as a committee, they bring their own biases to this process. Their social dynamics and privileges inherently interact with these adaptations. So, too, would it be difficult to remove the racial, gender,

and class dynamics from the classroom setting itself when creating or adapting a rubric with students. Students, too, have ideas of how writing should be evaluated that come from years in our educational system. In addition, creating a rubric collaboratively with students continues to reinforce the value of consensus, that we all need to agree on common outcomes and standards for our writing. Inoue (2015) challenged us to think about how students might understand the evaluation of their own texts “as more than an individual’s failure to meet expectations or goals, but also as a confluence of many other structures in language, school, and society” (p. 19). For students to understand this requires an understanding of institutions and institutional racism that must be explicitly taught. It requires far more than a class period of collaborative rubric-making, and it is a big ask for teachers who may not be well versed in these issues themselves.

### INDIVIDUAL STANDPOINTS & LABOR

The individual position of any given instructor and how they interact with local and national boss texts is paramount to understanding how institutional power functions (LaFrance, 2019). Individual standpoint affects the choices available to individual pedagogues. Instructors themselves do not set the context in which they make their choices, and our valorization of the individual professor masks this fact. As Martinez (2020) reminded us, the idea that an individual can choose happiness—or success—for themselves ignores the historical realities of oppression. This statement is true whether we are talking about upper mobility within society, student successes within educational systems, or instructors so-called “academic freedom.”

In a technical sense, standpoint refers to the particular role that an individual occupies within a system. Institutional ethnographers thus pay attention to references to position titles as signals of how institutions function (Rankin, 2017b). It is telling in this study that neither Kristen nor Dwayne have the titles that are common to writing program administrators. Both Kristen and former writing committee chair Ben refer to their role as “director,” but Barbara, who occupies the position of a writing center *director*, clearly calls Kristen “chair” of the writing committee. While this missing title doesn’t affect her day-to-day work, Kristen expressed concern that it signals a lack of long-term institutional support for writing. However, faculty often defer and refer to her as the person responsible for writing pedagogy and assessment on campus. Although Dwayne later became department chair, at the time I visited St. Rita’s he had been trying to promote the VALUE rubrics for years only as a member of the general education committee. He tried to advocate for the WPA Outcomes, and what he believed to be best practice in writing pedagogy without any official role related to writing on cam-

pus. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that his own individual success is limited. He lamented that even after everything he did with the VALUE rubrics, a new dean found the AAC&U and LEAP movement independently and presented it like something new on campus. So, too, the newest co-chairs of the general education are repeating work that Dwayne attempted years before. This leaves Dwayne with a sense that the institution does not follow through on its promises and leads to frustration that his efforts go unnoticed. This frustration is magnified when faculty with even less institutional power attempt to make change. Dwayne and Kristen are both White, tenured faculty members.

To resist the frame of the institution takes its toll. Dwayne is exhausted and burnt out after years of challenging the system and his colleagues. His experiences fit with what Kate Navickas (2020) recognized as identity-based emotional labor, which occurs when “previous values and narratives com[e] into conflict with new institutional context, narratives, and roles” (p. 57). Dwayne struggles with attempting to balance what he believes the institution wants with what he believes will benefit students. He struggles with his role on the general education committee, and later as department chair, in conjunction with his role as someone who has a background in rhetorical pedagogy. In the beginning, he hopes for outcomes that match assessment, but by 2018, he admits that using rubrics to create those outcomes might not have been best. What Dwayne really wants is to talk about content of courses, but he rarely attempts that conversation because he does not see it fitting the institutional frame. The discussion of general education at St. Rita's fixates on what Dwayne calls “developmental order.” As I outlined in Chapter 2, this conversation is a part of the “great skills” approach to liberal education now dominant in higher education and reinforced by rubrics and skill-based outcomes. No one wants to talk about content at the general education committee meetings because it doesn't fit with this frame.

So, too, are faculty, in Dwayne's words “not wanting to step on each other's toes in terms of academic freedom.” Content is the purview of the individual pedagogue, and thus, a more rhetorical first-year writing pedagogy is seen as something for Dwayne to do in his *own* classroom and not something to be changed at the institutional level. Dr. Z, Jeremy, and others across the curriculum at St. Rita's continue their focus on development and skills, viewing sentence-level error as something that must be corrected before focusing on rhetoric. While Dwayne ascribes these views to the individuals at his institution, they too exist within a larger institutional frame. For example, we see this view that error correction must precede rhetoric reflected in VALUE Written Communication rubric. The “Control of Syntax and Mechanics” performance descriptors progress from a benchmark level where language might impede meaning to a capstone level where such language is “graceful.” Rhetorical acumen is viewed

as an accomplishment that comes from conquering error rather than something can co-exist with error. The rubric alongside other boss texts sets that developmental frame for discussion, and thus Dwayne's colleagues cannot see how he can teach rhetoric when the students "can't even write a sentence." It is only by working within this developmental frame that Dwayne is able to change the curriculum: he is able to move one first-year writing course to the second year. This move is, he stated, "an example of getting my way and still not being happy about it." It is not enough for Dwayne when he continues to see how many students, particularly students of color, don't make it past the first-year course. The vast amounts of labor that Dwayne puts into this change is not ultimately satisfying emotionally because Dwayne's administrator identity is still in conflict with his values as a pedagogue.

It is also important to recognize that while any individual *can* act counter to a group they are in, there are consequences for some more than for others. For example, Dr. Z's outburst at the general education committee results in a decrease in his own labor and responsibilities. He is no longer on the committee and is removed from his role as department head. Since my interview with him was before this incident, I did not get a sense how this affected him emotionally, but we should note that his actual labor load certainly decreased. The ability to resist the institution, and the consequences to doing so are linked heavily with institutional standpoint and privilege.

In contrast, even when the content of a particular class is seen as an issue of academic freedom, the means of assessment are often not. Instructors in first-year classes may be asked to adopt a common rubric, or their own students work may be assessed through an external portfolio completely outside the purview of that classroom or instructor. Even when classroom grading is left to the individual teacher, they may face institutional challenges to implementing alternative assessment. For example, if we look at a classroom practice of using contract grading over rubrics, we run into multiple institutional issues from explaining the practice to our students to defending our grades to administrators. These are not reasons to abandon alternative forms of assessment, but we should realize that they come with a labor cost that some cannot as readily pay as others.

If we stay with using rubrics, then local creation or adaptation is a key practice. Still, adapting or creating a rubric takes a great deal of labor. As Anderson et al. (2013) said about adapting the WPA Outcomes to WAC: "Nothing about adapting outcomes to local contexts is easy; no statement should promise anything but the rewards of that labor-intensive adaptation" (p. 102). Broch Colombi and McBride (2012) described an intense process of team development where faculty take multiple days to disagree about writing assessment before even beginning to move toward a collaborative assessment process. At Oak, time



and resources were dedicated to this process and the faculty had energy to invest on the writing committee, particularly Kristen. Over the course of three years of checking in with Kristen and visiting Oak, I saw her move the committee through multiple rubric drafts, to a summer "test run," to another revision, and then to a first roll-out of the rubric and assessment process. Every faculty member I interviewed at Oak was also on the tenure track. Kristen had a course release. And the summer assessors were compensated with a stipend for their labor. The sheer amount of labor involved in creating local assessment processes is daunting. It's no wonder, then, that so many faculty at St. Rita's, and elsewhere, are tepid in the face of these discussions.

What are the rewards for this labor-intensive process? For Broch Colombi and McBride (2012) it is an assessment that both meets the needs of faculty across the disciplines and the needs of higher administrators. For others, the benefit lies in faculty development. Zawacki et al. (2009) believe that faculty gain the most from collaborating on rubric creation. So, too, Kristen values the role that rubric development can play in faculty development, although Barbara laments the lack of the kind of full-scale faculty development she had at a former institution where she worked in a WAC program. In this study, I did see some positive effects of the rubric-adaptation process on faculty's own pedagogy. For example, Kristen herself began thinking about the context of her assignments, and about how to present students with a "purpose and audience" for their writing. Anson et al. (2012) also believed that better assessment processes would lead to better assignments, and the AAC&U, too, is exploring the relationship between assignment prompts and assessment. This potential benefit of collaborative rubric making or adaptation should not be dismissed. And yet, such benefits should also not be assumed. In my pilot study at my own institution, where the adapted VALUE rubric included "context and purpose" but eliminated "genre and disciplinary conventions," faculty I interviewed expressed a newfound need to have students make their writing readable by all audiences rather than help them learn disciplinary-specific conventions. Nor is this study free from examples where a quick dabbling with assessment led to its misapplication in the classroom. Jeremy at St. Rita's sees the grammar categories on the rubric and then primarily focuses on this area in his instruction. And even though Kristen is clear that the rubric created by the writing committee is not for direct classroom use, the feedback she received from the summer assessment process included comments from faculty members who wanted to take it directly to their classrooms. When collaborative rubric-development and assessment workshops are paired with other professional development, they can be a powerful means of connecting classroom practice to assessment across the institution. However, they should not stand alone or in place of other faculty development.

So, too, if the only outcome of assessment practices is faculty development, then participants and writing administrators may find that it is better to focus that time and labor elsewhere.

A part of the administrator's dilemma is how to value assessment labor knowing full well that the systems of accountability often mean that the intellectual contributions of a local assessment team may remain unrecognized by the institution as a whole. For Jacob Babb and Courtney Adams Wooten (2017), a part of recognizing contingent faculty members' contributions to a program is to include them in rubric development and assessment. Yet, even for tenure-line faculty, such labor is not often rewarded in the promotion or annual review process. When faculty participate in such efforts but never see meaningful results or feedback come from them, this can add to their feelings of isolation and frustration. In her dissertation on writing center assessment reports, Kelsie Walker (2018) found that the primary impact of the reports was financial. Institutions used the reports to verify the success of writing centers and renew their funding. The same may be true for writing programs. In Kristen's case, she received financial support for her assessment, but she lacked meaningful dialog with higher administrators about the process. After three years of perfecting her assessment process, she submitted her first report to the university assessment coordinator and the associate provost.<sup>12</sup> I asked her what the response had been to the report, and she replied with a bit of disappointment in her voice: "They both just email responded and told me they got it and appreciated it because we're coming up on accreditation." Dwayne does not get even that. He mentioned a university senate meeting where he wasn't even asked for his report. "It just doesn't make a difference what I say," he told me; "So, I'm just not even saying anything." Here we see the impact on real individuals from the way boss texts operate to uphold institutional power rather than to make meaningful change or even lead to meaningful dialog. To name this frustration is to be able to act upon it, whether that action means pushing for more meaningful responses between levels of the institution or deciding to re-focus our labor on areas we find more productive in the long-term.

## SETTING THE CONTEXT: FINDING VALUES

Many in composition have questioned the primacy of the rubric (e.g., Anson et al., 2012; Broad, 2003; Wilson, 2006). This debate is important, but to fully question the power of the rubric, we must locate it within the larger ecology of assessment and uncover the hold it has on systems of higher education. Do-

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12 By this time, Philip was no longer in the Associate Provost role.

ing so does not so much question whether or not rubrics *should* be used, but rather asks: who determines whether or not rubrics are used? How do rubrics, as a genre, perpetuate ways of thinking and conventions that fall in line with dominant power systems? The work of this book has been descriptive: to show how these power systems interact within the actual assessment processes at two different institutions. In so doing, I have made suggestions about how power and boss texts may operate at large, but the results here are not meant to be fully generalizable.

I have explored the notion of the rubric as a boss text that interacts with other genres within a larger ecology. Such ecological work is not new but is often discussed in theoretical terms. For example, Inoue (2015) reminded us that each text involved in assessment can only be understood in meaningful ways when seen as a part of the larger assessment ecology. For example, “a rubric, some feedback, a paper, inter-is with the other ecological elements” (p. 126). Genre theory helps us see how the texts within this assessment ecology interact. Devitt (2004) explained that “each genre encourages some actions and not others” (p. 77). By selecting the genre of the rubric for assessment, a committee thus limits themselves to certain actions while encouraging others.

Institutional ethnography adds qualitative research to our theories of genre to show how these limitations play out in actual assessment processes. Within literature that critiques the VALUE movement, there is a concern that the initiative may “be used to justify the continuation of ineffective practices” (Eubanks, 2018, p. 30). The qualitative data added through institutional ethnography can elucidate how and why this happens. Specifically, this study has shown how rubrics have become a stand in for teacher judgement across classroom and university contexts. And following that, student texts—while “authentically” produced within the classroom context—are removed from that context for the purposes of assessment. Assignment prompts are removed from assessment processes as is other contextual information about student writing. Rubrics are no longer genres that work in conjunction with classroom genres, like the assignment prompt or teacher feedback, but are rather stand-ins for all student work in all classrooms across institutional context. This awareness of how genres operate within systems is something we often don't always consider in large-scale or national assessment efforts. So, too, we must include racial privilege as one of the many forces influencing these systems of power. My study has added to what Behm and Miller (2012) called a fourth wave in writing assessment, one that elucidates “the intersection of race and writing assessment” (p. 136). Qualitative studies that explore the impact of assessment practice on the everyday lives of students and faculty working in variety of institutional contexts add to this important discussion of labor and equity in relationship to assessment.

Higher education has historically put too much hope in the genre of the rubric. We have been sold on the idea that it will save us time while still being a meaningful part of an assessment loop meant to improve curriculum and instruction. While a rubric-based assessment can be a piece of this puzzle, we must recognize that the data we gather from large-scale rubric use is extremely limited. Without returning to the context of writing, without returning to what teachers are assigning and what is happening when students write those papers, we know very little about why we are getting the results we see. We need to adjust our own expectations for what we can learn through large-scale, rubric-based assessment, what decisions we can and should make based on it, and how it might lead to follow up research. Over the years I interviewed her, Kristen began to realize the extreme limits of her assessment process. She began in 2016 by stressing that the rubric needed to reflect the writing program outcomes. But in 2018, she realized “it’s not actually an assessment of the writing program, it’s not an assessment of the writing courses at Oak... it is just a place to start.” Kristen completes the assessment, turns in her report, and thus satisfies the requirements of the institution. It does not answer the questions she began with about how the outcomes of the program are being taught or learned. While the continued use of this particular assessment at Oak is beyond the scope of this one three-year study, we know how this story often plays out. The assessment is conducted again next year. The director changes. Some tweaks are made to the rubric. And we do it all again. The assessment loop doesn’t close, we just become swept up in it, running on hamster wheel, gathering artifacts, scoring with rubrics, writing reports, unable to escape the assessment cycle that has embedded itself in the logic of the neoliberal university.

Returning to the epigraph of this chapter: how do we break free of that cycle and change the context of our choices about assessment? Bob Broad’s (2003) method of dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) is appealing for its attempt to disrupt the assessment cycle and focus on the values brought to the assessment over the qualities of student texts. Broad encourages writing programs to host “articulation” sessions over norming sessions. Such sessions are designed to uncover faculty values and provoke discussion rather than to make sure that all faculty align in their scoring practice. Yet, as demonstrated here, we should not assume that local practice is equitable practice. The product of these articulation sessions is still often a rubric or rubric-like scoring criteria that fails to challenge the thinking behind rubrics. A more thorough analysis of such texts is warranted, but a short look at the contributions in Broad et al.’s (2009) edited collection on DCM in practice illustrates this point. In this book, Barry Alford (2009) admitted that the faculty who participated in DCM at his institution wanted a rubric. So, Mid Michigan Community College created one, and with phrasing

such as “cannot grasp the key ideas,” it maintains deficit-based language (p. 47). Susanmarie Harrington and Scott Weeden (2009) created what they dub an “unrubric.” They even ask themselves: “Is the UnRubric a rubric?” (p. 96). They argue it is not because it is meant to be framework for the program, not dictate grading practice. Yet, it looks very much like a holistic rubric, and it appears to dictate a particular relationship between the student author and the faculty reader with language such as this description of a “below passing” final product: “A reader may come away from the essay thinking, ‘I expected more’” (p. 117). Thus, they seem to assume that there is nothing problematic about valuing the reader’s expectations in the assessment process. But that reader may be Brad or it may be Dr. Z, and their expectations vary drastically.

At one point, I too, helped create what I insisted were “assessment guidelines” and not a rubric for my local writing program. I made the same argument that Harrington and Weeden (2009) do: such a document would give faculty guidance but was not meant to be used directly in the classroom. Yet, year after year I see it linked on syllabi and assignment sheets as the only criteria on which students are graded. Using DCM may shift the context in which the assessment is conducted, but faculty and administrators often still apply the logic of rubrics to the resulting assessment documents. This logic suggests a hierarchy of written products that can be separated from the social conditions of their writing, products that can be read objectively by a reader, whose expectations are also assumed to operate outside this conglomeration of social, political, and racial biases. Our local values are no less suspect than the values of our culture at large. To change the context of our assessment means questioning the values under which higher education operates.

Contract grading has, perhaps, had more success in breaking the frame of assessment. In particular, Inoue’s (2019) version of labor-based contract grading operates from the notion that setting a single standard for student writing perpetuates White supremacy. Rather than grading writing on a scale that meets a (often White) reader’s expectations, we should grade on labor. This idea resists the very frame of our current assessment ecology. Yet, we still need more studies of how faculty at different institutions use these contracts. Shane Wood (2020) explained that if commenting practices do not change along with the implementation of labor-based contract grading teachers may still perpetuate the larger assessment ecology based on a White habitus. Sherri Craig (2021) argued that contract grading only does more injustice as it “attempts to convince them [Black students and faculty] that the university cares” while in reality, “we cannot correct the violence and the potential for violence in our universities” (p. 146). Further, Ellen Carillo (2021) reminded us that labor as a standard of measurement is not neutral, particularly when we approach it from the angle of

disability studies. In my own experience, I have seen new instructors attempt a contract-based system without fully adopting a different ideology than the one they have previously held. We are again stuck in the administrator's dilemma, making changes that ultimately do not change the violence done in our society and thus in our institutions.

When we think of rubrics as a rhetorical genre, we must ask what is the situation to which they respond? As covered in Chapter 2, early writing scales were designed as a labor-saving aid. It takes far less labor to use an already existing rubric for university-wide, programmatic, or even classroom assessment than to make a new one. At my university, the VALUE Written Communication rubric was adapted and implemented in just two brief meetings. Kristen and the writing committee took two-years or more on the process. And yet, they still saw rubrics as less labor-intensive than portfolios. I asked multiple faculty at Oak about a portfolio-based assessment, but I repeatedly was told that such a system would require too much labor, an argument I have encountered on my own campus as well. The portfolio-grading at St. Rita's is labor-intensive, as instructors score all first-year writing portfolios in a day-long marathon. Perhaps this is why the timed essays remain the central focus of the portfolio there, and why the portfolios are scored on a rubric. To offer meaningful feedback to each student would be an impossible task, even at an institution with fewer than 1,000 students. Moreover, the logic of outcomes focuses on the end point of an education, not on the experiences along the way or the embodied labor of learning (Brannon, 2016). These practices exist within a neoliberal capitalist system that values saving labor rather than rewarding it. This mindset is too often a part of WPA work, which has historically been about seeking administrative solutions that "involved shaping the behavior of teachers rather than in any sort of systemic change" (Strickland, 2011, p. 68). Arguments against rubrics must go beyond creating un-rubrics or using contract grading. We must resist the very logic that makes rubrics attractive: the logic of efficiency and accountability, the logic of neoliberalism and austerity, the logic of Whiteness.

Perhaps to hope that we can resist the logic of this system is naive or unrealistic. But at the very least, every time someone proposes a labor-saving measure, I ask: "What if we valued that labor instead?" Too often I hear that teachers should cut down their time responding to student work or that if they take too long grading it is their own fault. The problem of the labor needed for meaningful practice is not only found in education. For example, in a time of high need our university counseling center used a rubric to assess which students received immediate one-on-one services and which could be funneled into group counseling sessions. We've seen the way that the COVID-19 pandemic has stretched our labor thin and has led to difficult decisions. In a time of crisis,

relying on time-saving measures can be key. I won't argue that we aren't currently experiencing a crisis in higher education. However, we must also recognize that neoliberalism relies on a rhetoric of crisis to justify austere measures (Scott & Welch, 2016).

Institutional ethnography allows us a means to tie institutional critique to everyday labor practices. LaFrance (2019) noted that our critiques rarely examine "the actualities of an individual's everyday work" (p. 15). Even when they do, the actualities that are written about are the actualities of those who already have position and privilege in the field. The pages of our journals are filled with stories of WPAs and WAC directors who successfully implement new assessment measures in their programs or their classrooms. They are often disciplinary experts with tenure and research releases, not the Kristens and Dwaynes of the WPA world. To fully describe actual assessment practices, our research must go beyond our own experiences and theories to qualitative research at multiple and varied institutions. Whether intended or not, this distancing from the lived experiences of students and faculty—operating in very different local, embodied contexts—works to solidify the place of rubrics within ruling relations. Institutional ethnography asks how these boss texts are put into practice and interpreted by individuals. This institutional perspective can inform our perspective on other genres as well. LaFrance (2019) noted that annual reviews tied to writing center director's official job descriptions can "erase, minimize, and diminish work" (p. 83). Much of our frustration with such processes comes from the lack of meaningful response, but this expectation may be a misconception of the role of the boss text, which functions generically to maintain systems not to change them. Whether it is a rubric or another boss text, we must always ask where texts come from and how their context in larger ecologies affects their meaning.

Brad called rubrics a "pastiche." They are always a patchwork of local and institutional power, a combination of compromises, and thus they are never neutral tools. Rather, like Seawright's (2017) example of the police report genre, the genre of the rubric creates cultural capital, capital that benefits both individuals and institutions. To understand that power—and perhaps resist it—we must return to the "text-reader conversations" to see how real material conditions activate these power relations (Smith, 2005, p. 184). When I have critiqued the AAC&U or my participants in this book, it is to invite us all to consider how we all exist and act within systems of power that permeate our work and our everyday interactions. We must continue to interrogate those systems and our role within them.