Preface

This project began in 2000 with a call for papers for a collection on "alternative discourses in the academy." For many years, each of us had been studying academic writing environments, primarily through administration and faculty development in our university's writing-across-the-curriculum program, which had begun in 1978. We had read and analyzed hundreds of portfolios from students across many majors, and we had worked with hundreds of faculty in workshops, frequently hearing colleagues' opinions about standards in their disciplines and how students either met them or didn't.

At the same time, each of us had been reading the literature on "alternative discourse," and had pondered the ramifications of contrastive rhetoric and of feminist and other "identity" scholarship on our teaching and program direction. In our own ways, each of us had confronted the tension between the "standard" and the "alternative" not only in our day-to-day responsibilities but also in our writing. Terry had directly addressed this tension for feminist scholars in a 1992 essay "Recomposing as a Woman." In a 1997 collaboration, an essay on WAC assessment, we had noted the diversity of styles and voices in student portfolios from different disciplines: while the received wisdom seemed to be that the "academy" hindered individual diversity and expression, we were seeing personality, engagement, and passion in assigned student work in many fields.

Nowhere had we seen systematic empirical study of this tension in academic writing in disciplines. When the call for papers came along, we took it as an opportunity to look closely at a range of data sources from our institution in order to achieve a research-based idea of the relationship between the "academic standard" and individual variation. Could we reach a sound definition of "academic writing"? How did disciplinary differences and commonalities contribute to this definition? What roles did the individual scholar/writer—faculty or student—play in shaping and changing the standard? How did our students grow to fluency in academic and disciplinary discourses, while realizing their own ambitions for learning and expression? How could teachers help students—and themselves—more

fully achieve these intertwined, but sometimes conflicting, aims? The first stage of our research, interviews with faculty, produced the article for the 2002 collection *ALT DIS: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*. This new book, *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*, grew out of three subsequent years of research with faculty and students; that research is described, analyzed, and applied in the chapters that follow.

We direct this book to teachers, to writers, to scholars and researchers, and to writing program administrators. We have tried to strike a balance between meeting scholarly expectations and meeting the practical needs of teachers and program administrators across disciplines. As we show in the chapter descriptions that follow, we begin with a review of theory and research and describe our methodology, proceed through analysis of findings, and conclude with recommendations for teaching and program development.

We also wanted this academic book to resound with voices, to display the rich, diverse personalities of the students and faculty we came to know or came to know better through this research. This is a book of hypothesis and analysis, but it is also a book of stories: thumbnail portraits of lives and ambitions expressed in each person's words and our brief narratives. Conversely, as a collaboration between two writers, the book also blends our voices into a single "we." Readers of scientific research will find the "we" an aspect of the academic standard; for humanities people like us, the "we" of collaborative writing is still an alternative discourse, one that involves a good deal of risk for the untenured in those disciplines, as we discuss in Chapter Two.

The Chapters

Chapter One: What's Academic? What's "Alternative"?

What compels us in this chapter, certainly, is our sense, shared by some scholars in rhetoric and composition, that "academic writing" is not as stable, unified, and resistant to alternatives as others often assume it to be. Some of those who perceive academic writing as unnecessarily narrow propose alternatives as ways to acknowledge and honor diverse voices and cultures. Our goal in this chapter is to examine these differing perspectives: we explore definitions of the key terms, "academic writing," "alternative discourse," "discipline," and "genre." We trace summarily the recent history of theory on these key concepts. In so doing we reflect on the scholarship on gender, race, and ethnicity, and the field of contrastive rhetoric. We then introduce our five-year investigation, describing our research methods and materials.

Chapter Two: Faculty Talk About Their Writing, Disciplines, and Alternatives

In this chapter, we report the results of our research with faculty colleagues across disciplines. We present their voices and views in regard to the writing conventions and expectations in their chosen fields. We devote considerable space to their thoughts on the range of alternatives possible for scholar-writers, with special focus on several faculty who have been wrestling with their own places amid the changing expectations in their fields. Next we turn to those informants who—for different reasons and with varying emotions—have embarked on writing that they know falls outside academic conventions. We report their motives, experiences, speculations, and assessments. Our presentation of findings is conditioned by the extended definitions of key terms from Chapter One. Also instrumental is our discussion of the tension between reason and emotion/sensation in academic prose.

Chapter Three: How Our Informants Teach Students to Write

Here our faculty describe and illustrate their goals for student writers in their disciplines. These goals to a remarkable extent follow from their own values as writers; while all acknowledge the need for writers to learn standards and conventions in the discipline, all also appreciate to varying degrees the need for the individual student to engage personally with their studies, to find their passion in the discipline. We describe the diversity of approaches and assignments that result.

As we will show in this chapter, our data confirm that there is an academic way of conceptualizing writer, reader, and task, and that these follow the academic principles we've laid out in Chapter One. But, as we will also show, the common terminology about writing that faculty use hides basic disciplinary differences in argumentation, epistemology, style, form, and tradition—differences that are revealed when faculty elaborate on their assignments and values.

Chapter Four: Students Talk About Expectations, Confidence, and How They Learn

Student voices predominate in this chapter. We focus on the stories students across majors tell about their goals as writers and how these coincide with perceived conventions for writing in their disciplines. Relying on survey results, focus groups, and reflective essays in advanced writers' proficiency portfolios, we build a sequence of student academic writing growth through

three stages of increasing sophistication. We show the diverse ways in which students feel bound by perceived conventions and how they come to understand—if they do—what it means to participate in shaping the discipline, whether writing conventionally or in alternative ways. Our data also lead us to an explanation, based in part on activity theory, of why students misunderstand faculty expectations.

Chapter Five: Implications for Teaching and Program Building

In this final chapter, we summarize principal conclusions we have drawn from our research. These conclusions provide the basis for seven applications to teaching both by faculty across the curriculum and teachers of English composition. These are followed by five recommendations for faculty development programs in the uses of writing in teaching. Suggestions for future research conclude the chapter.