In the Here and Now: Public Policy and Basic Writing

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ABSTRACT: Recent public policy discussions and documents reflect frames that will have profound effects on questions central to teachers of and students in basic writing courses. We argue that if basic writing instructors/administrators want to have a voice in these discussions, we must develop strategies and gather data to support our positions; we then propose some potential strategies and possible questions for research.

KEYWORDS: assessment, public policy, framing, advocacy, change

In 2002, we finished *Basic Writing as a Political Act: Public Conversations About Writing and Literacies,* based on a two-year investigation of the perception of "basic writing" by those involved in the enterprise *of* basic writing—students, teachers, and institutions—as well as coverage of basic writing in mainstream newspapers. We concluded our study with some recommendations for curricular change that we thought important and that we both implemented after the book was published. This research was motivated by our commitment to students. We recognized a blind spot in our professional discourse, and we took steps to make sure that student voices were included and honored in discussing definitions of basic writing. In juxtaposing students' understandings of BW with faculty understandings of BW, we wanted to reveal disagreements among educators about BW and show how students' often rich understandings of out-of-school literacy could feed a richer notion of classroom experiences for academic writing.

Since that time, things have changed for both of us, as they have for the field. At four-year colleges and universities, and even at some two-year colleges, basic writing courses and programs are being mainstreamed into

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Together and separately, ***Susanmarie Harrington*** *and* ***Linda Adler-Kassner*** *have written extensively about issues related to basic writing. They are co-editors of* Questioning Authority: Stories Told in School *and co-authors of* Basic Writing as a Political Act: Public Conversations About Writing and Literacies*, as well as several articles. Separately, their recent research has focused on advocating for writers and writing programs through assessment and public policy work. Adler-Kassner is Associate Professor of English and Director of First-Year Writing at Eastern Michigan University; Harrington is Professor of English and Department Chair at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.*

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Stretch programs, for example, as at Susanmarie's campus; Guided or Directed Self-Placement is increasingly used as a process by which students choose where they want to start their writing coursework, as at both of our institutions. (For excellent examples of curricular innovation in basic writing, see, for example, Glau, Grego and Thompson, McNenny, Rodby and Fox, Soliday, Soliday and Gleason.) Both of our roles have shifted, too; we've taken on administrative work that has led to a reduction in the amount of time we spend in the classroom and increased the amount of time we spend meeting with higher-level administrators. From these different vantage points, we see another spot—perhaps not blind, but certainly obscured—that this article attempts to address: the framing of "basic writing" and "basic writers" in public policy documents. In this article, we examine that framing in two recently issued reports and propose strategies for basic writing instructors and administrators to affect those frames and the policies that stem from them.

We say we are addressing an "obscured" spot because others have issued the call that we repeat here. In 2002, for instance, Stanford Goto argued that in a time when "reform has come crashing back into basic writing . . . if we remain aloof from policy-oriented discussions, we leave basic writing open to future ideological attacks from outside critics" (2). Lynn Troyka's moving open letter to readers of *JBW*, published in 2000, also charged that "Our first failure was [that] we didn't tend to public relations" (114), and Troyka took herself and all of us in the field to task for failing to realize that those outside the field "would be frankly repelled by what aspiring college students clearly did not know" (114). She argued, "Clear information with specific supporting evidence, along with compelling stories, are vital for any new, semi-revolutionary movement to take root and grow" (115). Deborah Mutnick similarly called for basic writing teachers committed to democratizing education to engage with the forces cutting away at support for our enterprise ("Strategic"). Basic writing teacher-scholars have long articulated the need to make the case for what we do.

The need to return to this argument and go beyond it to reframe the concept of "remediation" seems particularly salient to us right now. Recently, Linda had an up close and personal experience with the American Diploma Project (ADP) and Project Achieve, an organization working to affect high school curriculum and testing across the country. According to ADP, 22 U.S. states educating 48 percent of the nation's high school students (among them Indiana, which is held up as a "model" ADP state, and Michigan, which is not) have partnered with ADP to "reform" their secondary English and math-

ematics curriculum (ADP). The goals for ADP's work are outlined in a report, *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Works*. Additionally, as we have drafted this article, the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education has released three drafts of its report. This group, formed by U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in 2005, has been charged with "developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America's diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country's future" ("Secretary"). Both of these documents signal an even more urgent need for educators concerned with access to develop a strategy for public action–right here, and right now.

They also reprise three themes that run through contemporary discussion of education generally, and writing specifically: that students aren't prepared for college or work during their high school years; that this lack of preparation is costing institutions and, directly or indirectly, taxpayers; and that these first two problems are rooted in a system that requires outside agents to come in and repair it. Like strands of DNA, these themes wind around and through one another in story after story about students, education, and learning. And unfortunately, like DNA, they are dictating the growth and development of education. Unless compositionists of all stripes—those teaching basic writing, those who work with first-year composition and graduate students—are able to shift the direction of this discussion, it will have significant and deleterious effects on our work, affecting everything from the students who sit in our classes to the lessons that we design.

LITERACY CRISES, "THE SYSTEM," AND BASIC WRITING

A fundamental premise shared by *Ready or Not* and the drafts of the Commission reports is that students are not being adequately prepared for life after education—in the case of *Ready or Not* for life after high school; in the case of the Spellings Commission, life after high school *and* college. The idea that students are coming or going from school under/unprepared is certainly not new, but the way that this "crisis" is framed in these documents presents the first challenge of representation to writing instructors.

In *Representing Remediation,* Mary Soliday argues that, until and including the period when her book was written, "literacy crises" were situated in what she terms the "discourse of student need." Borrowing from Sharon Crowley, Soliday contends that this discourse is often invoked in response

to remediation because in it, standards for writing are always stable. It's the students—and more importantly, students' abilities—that change (passim). Thus, something like a "literacy crisis" does not stem from the institution (whose standards remain stable); instead, it comes from the students (who cannot achieve those standards). And while focusing on individual students' needs is an essential part of teaching, the discourse of student need shifts attention away from the institution and onto the student. The problem, in this discourse, is that students don't come to college equipped with the right skills, and require the development of basic writing (or basic math, or basic reasoning) courses and programs. These crises, she says, "help[ed] to justify the institutional decision to stratify by admissions, curriculum, and mission" (107). And while compositionists have not always been wildly successful at refuting allegations of "literacy crises," defined in this way, we have at least thoroughly theorized the notion that "students can't write."

Beginning with the shift toward cultural research in basic writing in the early 1980s (see Adler-Kassner and Harrington 1998, 2002), composition and basic writing researchers began to conceive of academe as a culture and to examine connections (or lack thereof) between academic culture and students' own (Bartholomae's "Inventing the University" is a classic example of this analysis). The idea that there were differences between students' literacy practices and those expected/required in school, and that these differences might be construed as "illiteracy," became one of the field's best-rehearsed arguments (see, for example, Heath, Bartholomae, Bizzell, Mutnick, Gray-Rosendale, and our own work). This approach, which by now is a commonplace in the field, deflects the discourse of student need and situates issues around student performance in students' own cultures as well as the culture of the academy. As Soliday notes, this frame is distinctly different from the one reflected in the "literacy crisis" documents (*Politics* 107-108).

It was a different frame . . . until now. In fact, the ADP's *Ready or Not* and the Spellings Commission Report, which echo many of the recommendations set out in the ADP document, adopt a frame that works *away* from the discourse of student need, and toward what we will refer to here as a "discourse of institutional need." Rather than make the case that individual students are transgressing norms, these documents argue that education, as an institution, has somehow veered from its historically determined path. "Three hundred and seventy years after the first college in our fledgling nation was established to train Puritan ministers," the first and third drafts of the Commission Reports open, ". . . it is no exaggeration to declare that higher education in the United States has become one of our greatest success

stories" (1, 1). Colleges and universities, the first draft says, "are the most American of institutions. Their history is our history, from the founding of the first settlements . . . through the westward expansion of the 19th century to the emergence of today's network linking public systems of higher education, private colleges and universities, and specialized post-secondary training institutions" (3). But, switching from the metaphor of American expansionism to a business model, drafts one and three of the Report explain that "American higher education has become what, in the business world, would be called a mature enterprise: increasingly risk-averse, frequently self-satisfied, and unduly expensive" (3, 4).

The Commission's reports and *Ready or Not* lay out a clear problem that lies in the system. Individual learners have problems, in the frame laid out here, insofar as they are products *of* that system. The problem, then, is not with the student (as it would be cast in the discourse of student need), but with the institution. *Ready or Not* explains that

> our education system sends a confusing set of signals to students about how they can reach the goal [of going into post-secondary education]. High school students earn grades that cannot be compared from school to school and often are based as much on effort as on the actual mastery of academic content. They take state and locally mandated tests that may count toward graduation, but very often do not. College-bound students take national admissions exams that may not align with the high school curriculum the students have been taught. . . . The troubling result is that far too many young Americans are graduating from high school without the skills and knowledge they need to succeed. (2-3)

Similarly, the first draft of the Spellings Report describes a system that has moved away from its "core public purposes" (3).

A key facet of the problem, the reports say, is the lack of alignment within and between schools, especially from high school to college. According to the Spellings drafts, "Shortcomings in high-school preparation mean that an unacceptable number of college students must take costly remedial classes: Some 40 percent of four-year college students and 63 percent of two-year college students end up taking at least one remedial course" (draft 1, 5). Similarly, *Ready or Not* observes that "More than 70 percent of graduates enter two- and four-year colleges, but at least 28 percent of those students immediately take remedial English or math courses. Transcripts show that

during their college careers, 53 percent of students take at least one remedial English or math class. The percentages are much higher for poor and minority students" (3).

In the discourse of institutional need, the *Ready or Not* and the Spellings reports are careful to point out—in an argument that sounds much like those advanced by compositionists—that the institution, not students, bears responsibility for these problems. However, it is a foregone conclusion in both reports that institutions have failed to successfully remedy the problem; thus, the responsibility, in their estimation, should fall to states (and pressure applied to those states through the accreditation process, thus including public *and* private institutions in the prescriptions). "In the culture of postsecondary education," *Ready or Not* asserts, "students bear the lion's share of the responsibility for their success or failure, while the institutions themselves bear little" (15). Similarly, the third draft of the Spellings Commission report states that access to higher education is limited, in part, by "inadequate preparation. . . . compounded by poor alignment between high school and colleges, which often creates an 'expectation gap' between what colleges require and high schools produce. The result is a high level of remediation by college . . . a process that is both costly and inefficient" (10).

The answer in both reports is to reform the system, not the student: *Ready or Not* calls for policies that effectively mandate the states to "Hold postsecondary institutions accountable for the academic success of the students they admit, including student learning, persistence, and degree completion" (*Ready or Not* 15), while the Spellings report recommends that "colleges should be held accountable for the success of the students they admit" (draft 1, 18).

The first step in this proposed solution is to align the standards that are used for college admission and placement. Such work is already underway in many places. In Indiana (one of the American Diploma Project's model states), Project SEAM, funded by the Lilly Foundation to create a seamless transition from central Indiana high schools to area colleges and universities, aimed to "close the gaps between high school and college curricula in the content areas of math, science, and language arts" (Project SEAM). The California State University system, lauded in the Spellings Commission Report for its exemplary approach to issues of access, issued a report called the "CSU Plan to Reduce Remedial Activity, 1985-1990" that proposed reducing the number of remedial courses needed in colleges by raising the number of high school courses required for admission (Crouch and McNenny 48).

A second solution proposed in both documents has to do with aligning college admissions and placement standards (which are presumed to

stand for the expectations of college-level coursework) with high school completion standards. "The state can and should encourage . . . diverse approaches [within classes]," *Ready or Not* contends. But it should also ensure "that schools and students participating in them are held to the same state English and mathematics standards and are assessed using the same [NCLB mandated] state standards-based tests" (10). Additionally, those tests should be consistent from state to state. "Although high school graduation requirements are established state by state, a high school diploma should represent a common currency nationwide. . . . States owe it to their students to set expectations for high school graduates that are portable to other states" (4). And they should be used for college admission and placement. "Little justification exists for maintaining completely separate standards and testing systems for high school graduation on the one hand and college admissions and placement on the other," according to *Ready or Not*. "Postsecondary institutions need to reinforce efforts to raise standards in K-12 by making use of standards-based assessment data for admissions, for course placement, and/or for the awarding of merit based scholarships" (15). In other words, *Ready or Not* recommends that the same tests required under NCLB—tests that have been widely criticized by educators and educational researchers alike (see, for instance, Sacks; Traub; or Meier et al.)—become the standard by which college students are admitted, placed, and rewarded with scholarships. The Spellings Commission Reports, particularly the third draft, also call for increased assessment and accountability. Norm-referenced evidence of student learning that demonstrates "value added" to a baseline, the third draft says, will demonstrate the effectiveness of higher education (5, 15, 20-23).

Ironically, the very perspectives that locate the need for remediation in a failure on the part of high schools to prepare students for college, simultaneously support the movement of college into high schools. The CSU report supports high schools' using college tests in order to tell students about their "deficiencies" early (Crouch and McNenny 48), and the first and third drafts of the Spellings Commission report call for "the expansion of college experiences in high school through Advanced Placement, early college enrollment, dual enrollment, Early College on-line programs, etc." (20). The juxtaposition of the allegations that high schools are graduating under-prepared students and the call to move college experiences into high schools is striking, particularly when the reports offer few concrete suggestions for supporting that movement. Even those who accept the proposition that first-year college experiences should be off-loaded to high

schools would be rightfully concerned that the factors creating the "under-prepared" graduates must be addressed before college experiences can be successfully offered by high schools.

While we certainly react to the ways that "remediation" (and, by implication, "basic writing") is framed in these reports—particularly *Ready or Not*—we are hardly arguing against the idea of aligning K-16 education or assessing student learning. Rather, the issues that we raise—and must address as a field—concern who will define the terms of that alignment and assessment. This is particularly crucial for language arts/writing instructors, since our curriculum is characterized more by increasing levels of sophistication in student performance than by stratified content (students may read *Hamlet* in tenth grade and in the senior year of college; students discuss organization or use of sources in elementary school and in college. Math and science curricula are considerably more stratified and unified.) As Larry Brasskamp and Steven Schomberg argued in an *Inside Higher Education* editorial, these terms must be defined in ways that are appropriate for the contexts where they are used. A "culture of evidence," they argue, not one of "outcomes," will best attest to what kind of "value" is being "added" to students' educations. "Assessment should be informing . . . various publics about how the educational experiences of students or of the institutional engagement in the larger society is bringing value to the students and society," they write. "All parties need to get used to the idea that education can be conceptualized and interpreted in terms of a return on investment. But this can only be accomplished if we know what they are aiming for. . . . For some, the primary goal of college will focus on guiding students in their self discovery and contributing to society; for others it will be more on making a living; for yet others on understanding the world in which we live" (3).

But "alignment" and "accountability," as they are defined in these documents, do not reflect the notion of "evidence-based learning" outlined by Brasskamp and Schomberg. Although the alignment process prescribed by American Diploma Project/Project Achieve involves holding sessions where college faculty and business leaders review the standards developed by states for secondary education, these sessions are held separately—college faculty at one time, business leaders at another. Linda participated in the Michigan content review meetings that followed the development of new English Language Arts standards that were guided by this ADP/Achieve process; despite questions from the college faculty in the room, that group never learned who the business leaders were who participated in the parallel session, how it worked, or what they said (or would say). And although *Ready or Not* calls for secondary content standards to be determined by these "end

users" of high school education, it also makes clear that college *teachers* aren't providing useful input: "The academic standards that states have developed over the past decade generally reflect a consensus in each discipline about what is *desirable* for students to learn," the report explains, "but not necessarily what is *essential* for them to be prepared for further learning, work, or citizenship after completing high school" (8).

But if, as *Ready or Not* recommends, nationally standardized high school exit exams are used for college admissions, placement, and merit awards, not only will high school teachers teach to these exams, but college teachers will need to teach from and to them. Just as these exams will represent the "ceiling" of the high school experience, they will also be used as the "floor" of the college one. When colleges and universities are held accountable for student success (through measures built into the Higher Education Act), as the ADP report recommends that they should be, students' progress on the measures assessed by these exams also could signal their "progress" in college, as well (*Ready or Not* 16). While the Spellings Commission reports (particularly the third draft) do not go as far as *Ready or Not* in recommending state-mandated exams as *the* baseline, they do call for *a* baseline from which nationally normed assessments should proceed (draft 3, 21-23).

There are alternatives, of course. In fact, compositionists and high school teachers have described successful high school-college collaborations that have had important effects on teaching and learning for students and teachers in both settings. There is an important difference, though, between these projects outlined by *real* teachers and those envisioned by policy makers who are *thinking about* teachers. People on the front line—those in the classroom—know that the kind of sweeping change that these reports call for not only doesn't happen overnight, but also doesn't really happen at all. Indiana's Project SEAM fosters school-based collaborations involving university partners and high school teacher leadership targeting specific issues for groups of teachers. In Michigan, Heidi Estrem (a college professor) and Kristine Gideon (a high school teacher), who have collaborated with one another for the last three years, describe the first kind of change as "revolution" and the second as "evolution," and argue that it's *evolution* that really affects their teaching practice:

> What's been more long-lasting, more significant, and more unsettling [for our teaching] has been the ongoing evolution in our understandings of what it means to teach English/Language Arts in the 21st century. Evolution means adaptation to change. It means trying to ensure that the ways we teach at this moment, in response

> to our particular environment and purposes, are appropriate and robust; it also means living with the knowledge that there are unknown places ahead that we need to be willing to grow into. (1)

While evolution isn't as sexy or dramatic as revolution, it's considerably more enduring. It works against what a teacher, writing under the pseudonym "Wendy Darling" (of Peter Pan fame), called "the magic of never-never land" invoked when she and her fellow teachers were told at a workshop that the achievement gap was their fault, but that all they had to do to ensure that all students passed the twelfth grade exit exam was believe in students and work with the seven "strategic strategies" and "core values" distributed by the district (313-314). Contrast this with the California project directed by Crouch and McNenny, which opened with dialogue in which high school teachers "identified key impediments to student progress and preparation for college level writing. They determined what kinds of collaboration and intervention would work best for them . . . and they let us know exactly what they needed from us as university colleagues to help them improve student writing" (62). Such an equitable relationship sets up the potential for real change, the kind of evolution Estrem and Gideon name as fundamental.

Under the terms laid out in *Ready or Not*, however, there is no room for this kind of evolutionary collaboration. The good news is that the drafts of the Spellings Commission Report *might* create a space for this kind of work. They call for states to "provide incentives for higher education institutions to make long-term commitments to working actively and collaboratively with K-12 schools and systems to help underserved students improve college preparation and persistence" (draft 1, 18) and the revitalization and re-funding of FIPSE (draft 3, 24). (It should be noted, too, that the first draft of the Spellings reports and *Ready or Not* also call for "states" to provide support for this work. In states like ours, where the economies are in decline, the idea that states can provide support for the myriad initiatives outlined in these reports also seems to be a form of wishful thinking.)

And despite the call for improved college preparation in high school, these reports rather paradoxically lay the foundation for a massive shifting of college *into* high school, through an emphasis on advanced placement and dual enrollment courses. Such moves are assumed to solve many alignment issues, often in conjunction with standardized tests. However, the Association of American Colleges and Universities' *Greater Expectations* report notes:

> "College" courses in high school (as well as remedial courses in college) have proliferated, despite the absence of guiding principles about what characterizes college-level learning. Many colleges and universities have begun to encourage more in-depth, investigative, or research-based learning even in the first year, but high school and many advanced placement courses continue to feature broad surveys and superficial "coverage." (executive overview)

Clearly there is work to be done as we define what college work means (for one model, see the Missouri State Department of Education dual credit guidelines, guidelines developed in close consultation with high school and university teachers). As Susan Miller has noted, "What is in dispute is the nature and governance of sites of any writing instruction" (57). Miller's call to expand the site of writing instruction runs directly contrary to the policy critiques of higher education, which would limit and control the sites of writing instruction. To combat this pressure, we need to act differently. We need to develop rhetoric and action that will change the nature of the debate.

CONTROLLING FRAMES, DETERMINING DEFINITIONS

The issues are on the table: what should college students know? Why? And who should decide? *Ready or Not* lays out one response: college students should know what is outlined in nationally mandated, standardized exams because these exams will reflect what "experts" (though not necessarily college professors) and employers want them to know (see other reports, like ACT's *Ready to Succeed*, for more on what these exams might look like). The content should be determined by these experts and employers, and colleges and universities should also be held accountable for "preparing" students using the standards that they set. The third draft of the Spellings Commission report concedes that "faculty must be at the forefront of defining educational objectives for students and developing meaningful, evidence-based measures of their progress toward these goals" (23).

The clarity and seeming simplicity of the recommendations outlined in these reports—particularly *Ready or Not*—highlights the challenge facing instructors of basic and first year writing (or the evolving hybrids of these courses). For too long, we have engaged primarily in *critique* of documents and recommendations like these (in fact, the first part of this article does just

that), but we are less proficient at creating strategies that present alternatives to them. Yet, creating alternatives—alternative metaphors, alternative frames—is exactly what is needed if we are to have any hope of changing the national discussion reflected in these documents. Stanford Goto, drawing on the work of Basil Bernstein, notes that the "ideological rift" between supporters and critics of remediation is manifest in metaphor: critics use vertical metaphors (an emphasis on the seamless pipeline, for example) while supporters use horizontal ones (an emphasis on context and connection, for example). These metaphorical frames talk past each other, Goto argues, and attention to our own discourse is essential if we are to shift frames.

CHANGING FRAMES

Cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall explain the cultural process whereby definitions associated with "events" (such as "remediation") are "constructed into a seamless narrative." Because they reflect and perpetuate the worldview of those participating in the narrative, these definitions become naturalized so that it is impossible to raise new questions or consider alternatives (4). This narrative is encompassed by what cognitive theorists, most notably George Lakoff, call "frames"—"unconscious cognitive models" that shape humans' understandings of the metaphors through which we construct our worlds (*Politics* 159). Naturalized frames powerfully shape current understandings and future actions. The frames invoked in these reports shape the narrative about education that comprises the DNA strands we describe earlier; the actions that are taken (by educators and policy makers, especially) have significant consequences for students and for the broader culture that defines "education" (and particularly "college education") as a virtual requirement for participation in the nation's civic dialogue (a point made repeatedly, for instance, in the third draft of the Spellings Commission report).

Changing frames, then, creates alternative narratives. It is essential, though, to *change* and not *negate* frames (Lakoff)—and negating is what occurs when we engage solely in critique. Take as a case in point *Ready or Not*'s recommendation that the results of a nationally standardized (and mandated) exam be used for placement in college writing (and mathematics) courses. One of the tenets of the case for this practice is that it is *fairer* to students than currently employed practices because it places responsibility for student success (or lack thereof) on *institutions*, not on *students*. Institutions, therefore, should be responsible for developing and maintaining consistent

and aligned standards; this alignment will save students, parents, and taxpayers money because it will eliminate the need for "remedial education."

If the argument that students' lack of experience with academic expectations—or, say, even "academic discourse"—sounds familiar, it should. We've made a very similar case in composition research for years—say, for instance, in analyses of placement testing (see, for instance, Adams; Harrington; Yancey. Our 2002 book, too, makes this argument.) To be sure, there are differences between "our" analyses and "theirs"—huge differences, for instance, between how we conceptualize learning. And when there are solutions in "our" research, they also differ, though "solutions" aren't the baskets where we've placed most of our eggs. But these nuances are important only to us; we suspect they will be erased in the broader discussion.

GETTING OUT FROM BETWEEN ROCKS AND HARD PLACES

What we must do—and not soon, but now—is work to change the frames around these discussions. For that, we find it most useful to draw on outside resources for strategies to define and advance arguments. Some of these strategies require us to define terms for discussion that aren't always comfortable. They require us to peel away the layers of complexity that we find familiar when constructing academic arguments, for instance. After all, as Joseph Harris asserted almost 15 years ago, we love the "walls of our professional consensus," but the problem with those walls is that they deflect the very legitimate queries about our work that are raised in questions about writing (86). Responses to these discussions must be, first and foremost, strategic and pragmatic. We need to set goals, work toward them systematically, and assess them regularly.

Issues Not Problems

Like Eli Goldblatt, we find the work of community organizer Saul Alinsky a particularly useful starting point for this work, particularly as Alinsky's ideas have been developed by Edward Chambers, Ernesto Cortes, and the organizers of the Industrial Areas Foundation. In *Roots for Radicals*, Chambers, Executive Director of the IAF, outlines an important distinction between *problems* and *issues*, and stresses the importance of addressing the latter rather than the former. Problems are things that are huge and that you can do nothing about. Issues are things that you *can* try to affect (Chambers

84). Poor or misguided perception of writers and writing is a problem. An unfair placement test is an issue. Misperception of what writing teachers do is a problem. Imposition of curriculum or grading standards is an issue. Large class size is an issue; unfair grading practice is an issue. *Ready or Not*, especially, does a masterful job at defining a set of *issues* to be addressed, such as misalignment of curricular outcomes and flawed information streams that inform curricular development.

Developing and Deploying Messages

Rather than respond to the issues raised in these reports by framing problems, we need to frame other issues, or re-frame the issues raised by others. We need to do this as clearly and succinctly as these documents have, which is a challenge for people who are typically rewarded for complexity and depth. The use of a message box can be helpful for defining and maintaining a focused message, though. A typical message box looks like this:

What we are saying about ourselves	What they are saying about themselves
What we are saying about them	What they are saying about us

The message box reflected in *Ready or Not* might look like this:

(Fig. 1) Sample ADP Message Box

ADP position Students are failing in the system. The solution is to fix the system with uniform curriculum and assessment.	**What ADP says about themselves** We understand why the system is failing and how to fix it.
ADP says about teachers The job of teachers is to implement our recommendations, not to try to fix the system.	**Teachers say about ADP** ADP's ideas about how to fix the system will only exacerbate problems in the system.

Here might be a message box that compositionists/basic writing instructors would construct (at this point) about the same message:

(Fig. 2) Sample Basic Writing Message Box

Teachers' position ADP's ideas about how to fix the system will only exacerbate the many problems in it.	**Teachers say about ADP** ADP represents a group of people that don't understand the challenges that students face, or the situations that have created those challenges.
What teachers say about ourselves We have a deep understanding of the complexities of this system.	**ADP says about teachers** Teachers are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

The upper left hand boxes here are key. At this point, the hypothetical response outlined to ADP in "our" box (and the "we" here is entirely nebulous—another challenge that we face is that who is included in the professional consensus is unclear) negates ADP's message, rather than reframing it.

Alternatively, we might take on one of the issues raised in the ADP report: placement testing. Recall that ADP recommends that the results of a uniform national exam be used by colleges and universities for placement into writing (and mathematics) classes. Rather than argue against this method, we might work with a message that argues for an alternative. This requires two things: 1) having an alternative, and 2) having data that speak to the effectiveness of that alternative. To illustrate, for example, we'll use the example of Guided Self-Placement from Linda's campus:

(Fig. 3) Locally Developed, Issue-Focused Message Box

Our position Students are more satisfied with their placement and perform at higher levels when they choose their own introductory college writing courses than when they are placed in those courses based on other measures.	**We say about them** ADP's arguments are based in speculation and wishful thinking, rather than in data-driven assessments and decision-making.
We say about ourselves We have gathered data that attest to students' successful performances after they place themselves in introductory writing classes.	**They say about us** Teachers don't have a clear sense of the expectations of "experts" or employers.

The difference between this message box and the one in Figure 2 is that it articulates a position *for* something (Guided Self-Placement), rather than *against* something else (an externally mandated placement test). Additionally the position is supported by data.

While it might seem like defining and taking action on something like placement testing has no relation to the larger problem that's outlined in these boxes, think again. Some of the data supporting the analysis in *Ready or Not* come from the National Center for Educational Statistics, such as a report called "Remedial Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in Fall 2000." For that report, the NCES used "selection approaches for remedial courses" as one of *their* data points, looking at the number of students that were given placement tests to determine need. Of course, then, the *number* of students placed into remedial courses was included in NCES data. But so, in a sense, were the *kind* of placement tests given: SAT/ACT scores, placement exams, or—the smallest category—"Other selection approaches," which include "students refer themselves for enrollment in remedial/developmental courses" (NCES study). So while tackling an issue (not a problem) like "what placement test we use" might not seem to touch a problem like "Schools are failing," it actually *does* address the problem, and it does so in a way that may also shape the ways "failure" is defined in important data sources. Developing and deploying messages and advancing them consistently—in conversations with administrators, in program materials—is essential. It's also essential that basic writing instructors and program administrators be mindful about and attempt to work from position statements when we formulate everything from curriculum to program policy. If, for instance, a program works from the position in the upper-left hand box of the GSP strategy discussed earlier, that position carries through into the formulation of curriculum, professional development, even the attitudes that instructors take to their students.

Data-Driven Decision Making

Another phrase that comes up repeatedly in reports like *Ready or Not* and the Spellings Commission document is "data-driven decision making." This raises some very legitimate questions like "How do we know if students are learning? How do we know what they are learning?" Sometimes in the past, compositionists have contended that these complicated questions require answers too complex to distill into concise statements. Joseph Harris, in fact, decries the "ongoing inability of compositionists . . . to explain ourselves . . . admonishing not only our students and university colleagues

but the more general public as well when they fail to [accept] our views on language learning—answering their concerns . . . by telling them, in effect, that they should not want what they are asking us for" (85-86). This is what we think of as the "complexity argument": "It's so complex, I can't possibly put it into a sound byte." But as Travis Reindl, state policy director and assistant to the director of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, puts it: "The gas mileage we're getting out of the complexity argument is about to run out" ("Testing" 3).

An alternative to the complexity argument is to develop the kinds of communication strategies that we describe earlier. But those strategies are hollow—we might even say "empty rhetoric"—unless they are supported by data. In a recent address, Chris Anson drew on a point raised by Rich Haswell that composition no longer produces "RAD research: Replicable, Aggregable, and Data-Supported. We no longer seem," Anson said, "to be attracted to asking the kinds of questions whose answers might be found in research on teaching and learning" (15). But, he argued, these questions produce just the kind of research that is essential. We need more "good, solid research ... on every facet of writing acquisition and instruction" (17). Don't think for a minute, too, that players like ETS are not aware of the push for assessment at the college level. In fact, their Senior Vice President for Learning called *their* recent report, *A Culture of Evidence: Postsecondary Assessment and Learning Outcomes*, an attempt to "help frame the conversation" ("Testing" 1). Let us be clear here: we are not positivists arguing that empirical evidence, whether in the form of the qualitative data with which we are so comfortable or the quantitative data that, we have found, holds considerably more sway with administrators and higher-ups, is "real" where other data are not. We are arguing for pragmatic use of these data and clear presentations of the data to audiences inside *and* outside of the writing program. Collection and presentation of such data are necessarily local matters, but some additional issues that likely cut across campuses, issues that could be deployed strategically to shift the frames of discussion, include:

- *Data about the nature of instruction in the use and blending of source material, accompanied by data about the extent to which students complete and revise researched work in their courses.* Collecting such data would shift conversations inside a program or department as well as outside: the collection of such data would be predicated on common discussions about student performance and classroom instruction. There are any number of ways to set up

an assessment scenario that would get at these concerns—the use of random samples, the use of common portfolios, the use of common assignments, for example.

- *Data about teacher preparation and professional development activities.* Having such information available and public allows the credentials of a faculty to be more visible, and collecting information about professional development activities is likely to spur discussion about applications of professional development activities.
- *Data about student performance and assessment guidelines.* Here, too, the more faculty are involved in the creation of assessment plans, the more likely they are to have force. It is crucial that we define the terms of student performance (as in the first item on this list, work with sources).
- *Data about the validation of local assessments.* We can form useful partnerships with institutional research offices, for example, to use institutional data in relation to program-generated data. This might allow, for example, the comparison of student performance in courses with student performance more generally.

Each of us is in the best position to judge what local issues are pressing and what local information is available for circulation—but the point is that we need to *make* the decisions, *do* the research, and *use* the data we collect in strategic ways. It's time to move beyond academic discussion. We need to take our perspectives and our programs public: it's time to take data in hand, with rhetorical fierceness. We need to assess, and frame, this information for audiences outside of our programs, as well. Our students depend on us, and we must not fail them.

Notes

1. Some readers may wonder why we are including the draft Spellings Commission Report (released in June 2006)—after all, it is just a draft. We realize that the final version of the report may well differ from this draft in tone and substance—as we write, in fact, news reports are emerging about internal critiques. Inside Higher Education, for example, reports that Commissioner David Ward, president of the American Council on Education responded to the draft report in terms that are, given his usual approach, surprisingly

strong. He criticized the report as being based on a "highly selective reading of testimony" and prepared "without the slightest input of commission members." "I believe it is seriously flawed and needs significant revision," Ward wrote. "I am particularly unhappy with the tone and the hostile, almost confrontational, way it approaches higher education. Some of the recommendations are also deeply troubling" (Lederman).

But whether or not Ward's objections influence the final form of this report, the draft is a significant document. As we argue here, its assumptions are in line with those in several other significant reports on literacy, and it signals that the thinking we analyze here is influential among federal policy-makers. We need to take it seriously, even as we wait for the final document.

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