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“THE WORST WRITER THAT YOU COULD MEET”

by

MICHAEL BLIMLING

A THESIS

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in
The Department of English
to
The School of Graduate Studies
of
The University of Alabama in Huntsville**

HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

2012

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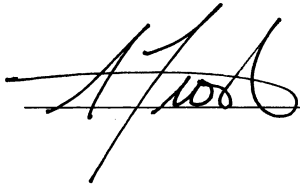

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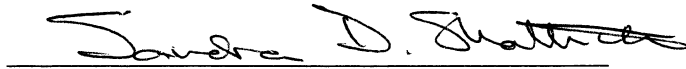
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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Submitted by Michael Blimling in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English and accepted on behalf of the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis committee.

We, the undersigned members of the Graduate Faculty of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, certify that we have advised and/or supervised the candidate on the work described in this thesis. We further certify that we have reviewed the thesis manuscript and approve it in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

 Committee Chair




Department Chair

 College Dean

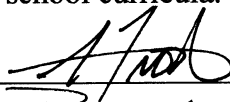
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ABSTRACT
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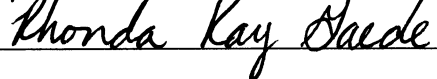
Degree: Master of Arts College/Dept.: Liberal Arts/English
Name of Candidate: Michael Blimling
Title: "The Worst Writer That You Could Meet"

This thesis is a case study of the Intensive Writing program at UAHuntsville that takes into account the policy factors that affect incoming students' preparation for writing at the postsecondary level and examines the students' own impressions of themselves as writers through an analysis of their personal literacy narratives. My analysis of these literacy narratives has affirmed concerns that there is an observable gap between what is expected of entering college students and what those students have acquired or retained from high school composition instruction. Many of these students are aware of the deficiencies in their writing, which they perceive as defining them (as writers, students, and individuals). It is a perception that can have a detrimental effect on their capacity to grow as students. The concerns expressed in these narratives indicate that current policy and assessment practices nationwide are not structured to prepare students for the writing they will be undertaking beyond high school. As a result, the first-year composition program at UAHuntsville—at all postsecondary institutions—needs to be prepared to integrate students into the world of academic writing while simultaneously empowering them to overcome the gaps in their preparation created by assessment-focused high school curricula.

Abstract Approval: Committee Chair
 Department Chair
 Graduate Dean







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This work is dedicated to my wife, Danielle.

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CHAPTER ONE

If We've Raised Standards, Why Do We Still Have Basic Writers?

In the fall of 2008 the department of English at UAHuntsville changed its course offering for students whose test scores indicate an under-preparation for college-level writing and recommend placement into a developmental writing course. The new offering replaced EH 003 Basic Writing, a skills course that carried no college credit, with EH 100 Intensive Writing, a credit-bearing course that combines classroom and studio work and allows students to proceed directly to EH 102 Freshman Composition upon successful completion. This approach allows underprepared writers to more quickly integrate into the mainstream composition program and overcome the gap between the preparation they received in high school and the expectations of their college instructors. It is an approach instituted at UAHuntsville six years after the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), a law that specifically seeks to address this expectations gap at the primary and secondary levels. NCLB relies heavily on high stakes tests to monitor and raise the standard of education in public school systems nationwide and holds districts and schools accountable for failures to do so. Yet after eight years of heightened standards and increased accountability, students are placing into the developmental writing program at roughly the same rate as ever.

This case study of the Intensive Writing program at UAHuntsville takes into account the policy factors that affect incoming students' preparation for writing at the

postsecondary level and examines the students' own impressions of themselves as writers through a consideration of their personal literacy narratives. By listening to the voices of students enrolled in a developmental writing program with an awareness of the policy-driven educational environment of which they are products, we can better understand the challenges faced by the students as they enter the postsecondary world. My analysis of these literacy narratives has affirmed concerns that there is an observable gap between what is expected of entering college students and what those students have acquired or retained from high school composition instruction. Many of these students are aware of the deficiencies in their writing, which they perceive as defining them (as writers, students, and individuals). It is a perception that can have a detrimental effect on their capacity to grow as students. The concerns expressed in these narratives indicate that current policy and assessment practices nationwide are not structured to prepare students for the writing they will be undertaking beyond high school. As a result, the first-year composition program at UAHuntsville needs to be prepared to integrate students into the world of academic writing while simultaneously completing the instructional objectives of the high school curriculum.

My Literacy Narrative

My interest in this topic goes back more than ten years. The high school I attended is an alternative school in a large mid-west school district. Though it is a public school, Walden III is based on progressive educational theories: class sizes are kept intentionally small, students are all on a first name basis with their teachers, the instructors request input from the students about what courses to offer, and everybody writes. Not only is a heavier than normal amount of writing taking place in all of the

courses (except math and gym), but a substantial portfolio of written work, part of the school's Rite of Passage Experience (R.O.P.E.), is required for graduation.ⁱ The R.O.P.E. portfolio consists of about a dozen papers on subjects ranging from civic involvement to the biology of the human immune system, personal finance to major authors studied, in addition to a large research paper and an autobiography. My portfolio was around sixty-five pages long (the high side of average). Some students wrote well over one hundred pages. All of this writing was all accomplished in a single semester. Not surprisingly, I found myself to be rather well prepared for the many writing assignments I received as an undergraduate. First-year composition was, for me, an introduction to the conventions of academic writing, library research, and citation methods, not the unsettling first attempt at writing papers longer than five paragraphs it is for many of the students enrolled in EH 100.

The preparation I received in high school was one I never fully appreciated until my final year as an undergraduate when I was offered the opportunity to act as a T.A. for one of the freshman composition courses at the university.ⁱⁱ The majority of students with whom I interacted in that capacity had only ever written a handful of papers—usually two or three—while in high school and approached writing for college with trepidation. A large portion of the students struggled to reconcile the assignments they were given with the five-paragraph essay format they already knew, searching out a formulaic method for completing an assignment, as though writing a research paper could be equated to completing some sort of academic mad-lib. Though I hadn't anticipated the lack of preparation, what really startled me was the lack of regard many of the students had for writing. The students in the classes in which I assisted were not, for the

most part, destined to become English majors; they were, instead, business, nursing, biology, and computer science majors. And they didn't view writing as an important skill. Many of the students questioned the requirement of a first-year composition course and much of my time was spent convincing them that what they learned in this course would serve them long after the semester had ended. Over the course of the two semesters that I spent assisting with English 101, I learned a lot about classroom instruction, assessing writing, providing feedback, and interacting with students on a non-peer basis. But I left with many questions: Why weren't these students better prepared for college-level writing? Why didn't they view writing as an important skill? Why were they so convinced that a simple formulaic approach existed for writing a paper? Those questions remained with me when I began my graduate work and received my first (re)introduction to standardized tests, No Child Left Behind, and developmental college writing.

During my first semester as a graduate student at UAHuntsville, I took EH 500 Composition for Teachers. This class gave me the opportunity to interact with many classroom instructors currently practicing at the elementary level. I was appalled to hear about the rigid structuring and scripting that dictated the instruction of reading, writing, and math in the public schools. Packaged instructional programs determined what was taught and when, the schedule structured to prepare the students to satisfy the battery of tests they would face throughout the school year. My casual conversations with these teachers revealed that so much of what was happening at the elementary level was test preparation and I was left curious as to how much influence these tests had on the

curriculum at higher levels. I was particularly interested to find out what impact, if any, these tests may have on writing instruction.

In the fall of 2009 I once again had the opportunity to work with college freshmen in a first-year composition class. Unlike my experience as an undergrad, however, this time I would be assisting students who had not placed into the mainstream composition course. As a studio leader for EH 100 I have had the opportunity to engage with students identified as unprepared for college-level writing on a one-on-one basis. The reasons why students have been placed into EH 100 are not always the same, and neither are their individual needs. But what many of them do shareⁱⁱⁱ is a view of composition that has been shaped the environment of assessment predominant in American high schools. Many seem to define writing in terms of errors that need to be avoided, yet display these same errors in their own writing. As I later discovered, this easily testable (though not easily transferable) component of composition is a major curricular objective for secondary education, and mandated by legislation supposedly designed to prepare students for the postsecondary world.

The Politics of Pedagogy

Preparation for life after high school has been on the minds of policy makers in this country for at least the past 45 years. The oversight of the federal government, via various pieces of legislation, has gradually increased over the past four decades, and with the rise to prominence of standards-based testing, the ability to influence decisions made at the micro-level has increased greatly. This trend can be traced back to 1965 when congress first passed in to law the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as a part of President Johnson's "War on Poverty" (Robelen). The ESEA was designed to

provide funding to elementary and secondary schools with disadvantaged students nationwide for professional development, instructional materials, and resources to support educational programs, and parental involvement promotion (Robelen). The current thrust of the standards movement was kicked off in 1983 with the publication of “A Nation at Risk” by the Department of Education and other reports warning of an eventual slide into mediocrity (Wenglinsky 16). These reports called for increased expectations of what should be learned by students in American schools and by 1994 legislators responded with “Goals 2000”. This bill, passed alongside of the reauthorization of the ESEA, established funds to be used for the creation of national standards by awarding grants to professional organizations to draft standards in their content areas (Wenglinsky 17). By 2000, 49 states (all but Iowa) had adopted content standards (Wenglinsky 18).

The 2002 reauthorization of the ESEA of 1994 created the most far-reaching piece of federal education legislation to date. More commonly known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), it is what Harold Wenglinsky refers to as “the culmination of the standards movement” (18). NCLB is different from previous versions of the ESEA in that it stipulates that “federal education dollars for disadvantaged students (known as Title I of the ESEA) would be contingent upon states’ having standards and assessment plans to measure student performance in the third through eighth grades” (Wenglinsky 18). Although the goals of the bill are not new to the landscape of education policy, the potential of the bill to affect instruction at the classroom level has been greatly increased over previous legislation thanks to the combined use of standards-based assessments,

graduation rate requirements, and severe penalties for schools and districts that fail to meet expectations.

The language of NCLB identifies elementary schools as the primary focus, mandating performance assessments in the areas of reading/language arts, math, and science each year from grade three through eight. The oversight at the high school level is less pronounced, with only one assessment mandated during the eleventh grade. Additionally, NCLB requires that states and districts identify schools with low graduation rates and develop plans to reduce the level of dropouts in those districts. The standards and assessments mandated under NCLB are not national; it is up to each state to develop a set of standards and assessments (standardized tests) as well as goals for graduation rates and adequate yearly progress (AYP) to satisfy the guidelines of NCLB.

Alabama's plan for meeting the requirements of NCLB can be found in the *Alabama Consolidated State Application Accountability Workbook*. This document outlines the state's assessment methodologies for calculating AYP at the elementary and secondary levels as well the procedures for determining graduation rates. Included in the assessment plan are provisions for using the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) as the state's tool for measuring AYP in grade eleven (*Alabama Consolidated* 25). Use of the AHSGE as a measure of AYP further increases the importance of the exam for students and administrators, as exam performance affects AYP for the eleventh grade year and for the high school graduation rate. The problem, however, is that the test's treatment of language arts, and writing in particular, is cursory at best. If it is true that, as (former secretary of education) Margaret Spellings is fond of saying, "what gets measured, gets done," very little writing instruction is getting done in Alabama.

The Composition Classroom Connection

Seemingly removed from this discussion of federal influence in classroom education is the postsecondary system, those colleges and universities that educate and train some 68% of young adults continuing their education after high school (Bureau of Labor Statistics). And while NCLB does not include any specific language addressing educational practices at the postsecondary level, the bill's ubiquity at the primary and secondary levels has the potential for a pronounced, if indirect, impact at the postsecondary level. Students entering the university system are the products of schools and curricula designed to satisfy the mandates of NCLB. Though the curriculum and standards may vary on a state-by-state basis, what does not vary is the incentive to meet AYP at any cost. Misaligned standards, such as the ones seen in the AHSGE, and teaching methods focused on test preparation may combine to prepare students to perform well on high stakes assessments, but they do not prepare them to write in the university.

The under-preparation of graduating high school students to write for the university has become increasingly evident as college enrollments continue to rise. Not surprisingly, it is a problem that has garnered national attention as of late and is focused on by reports from both the American College Testing Program (ACT) and the American Diploma Project (ADP). Both organizations identify an "expectations gap" between the skills possessed by exiting high school seniors and those identified as important by colleges, universities, and potential employers. As the report issued by the ADP argues, the move towards a "knowledge-based economy" has contributed to a change in what skills are valued in the workforce (*Ready or Not* 17). No longer is the ability to simply

follow directions highly valued; rather, critical thinking skills, the ability to work in collaborative environments, and proficiency with written communication are highly valued skills in today's workforce (*Ready or Not* 24). Yet evidence exists that students aren't receiving (or aren't retaining) these important skills. Recent estimates claim that around 30% of all entering college students will require at least one developmental^{iv} course during their college career (Cohen 21, *High School Report* 34, *Ready or Not* 3). And while this is problematic in regards to math, it can be devastating in regards to writing.

The first-year composition course is one of the only courses required of all college students at nearly all post-secondary institutions, regardless of their major. The ability to competently engage in academic writing is often viewed as a foundational skill at the postsecondary level, and is therefore the subject of many first year composition courses. Though this is a requirement that is often debated, it is generally accepted that the ability to effectively engage in written communication is intrinsic to academic and professional success. In fact, much of the subject matter covered in the first-year composition course—critical thinking, analysis, reasoned argumentation—has been identified by the American Diploma Project as highly valued by prospective employers. Yet many students each year enter the university without the requisite skills to engage in the first-year composition classroom. For these students a different program, one that addresses the gaps in their preparation for postsecondary writing while integrating them into a curriculum focused on academic writing, is necessary.

There are many different types of developmental composition programs at the colleges and universities across the country that employ varying approaches to

underprepared writers. Some developmental programs, such as the ones often found at community colleges or the recently abandoned EH 003 at UAHuntsville, follow the current-traditional pedagogical model and focus on basic skills development, essentially completing or supplementing (or, in some cases, supplanting) the work of high school language arts courses. These programs often carry no credit towards graduation and are aimed at preparing students to enter into the standard first-year composition course at their institution. The recent trend in the university has been to move away from skills-based “basic” writing courses in favor of more pedagogically progressive models. In some institutions, such as the City University of New York, this has been accomplished by “mainstreaming” developmental writers, that is, enrolling all students in the same FYC course regardless of past performance and preparation (Lallicker). Alternatives to mainstreaming, such as Arizona State University’s stretch program, offer students additional time for their integration into the world of academic writing by extending a traditionally one-semester FYC course to a full academic year. Others, like the Intensive Writing course recently developed at UAHuntsville, attempt to integrate students in a single semester by presenting them with a traditional FYC curriculum in the classroom, combined with a supplemental editing workshop aimed at providing students with additional attention and resources outside the classroom. Despite the varying approaches between these and other programs, the end goal is the same: to empower students to overcome the gaps in preparation between their secondary and postsecondary education.

The Process of Discovery

My exploration into the relationship between education policy and first-year composition has led me to read an extensive amount of information about NCLB, about

Alabama's plans for compliance, and about the performance of individual schools. I have read the reports and recommendations on the achievement gap, considered various placement methods and composition programs employed at different institutions, and extensively examined the population of first-year composition courses at UAHuntsville. It is in the students enrolled in UAHuntsville's EH 100 course that the results of NCLB can be best observed. Though identified as remedial and often treated as marginal, these students offer a fair representation of learner outcomes for public secondary schools in the state and the nation. By following the example of Bronwyn Williams and reading their literacy narratives to uncover what these texts communicate about the students' writing histories, the impact of the assessment-based curriculum cultivated under NCLB becomes more than theoretical, more than statistical; it becomes tangible.

This project offers such a textual examination in the context of NCLB in order to demonstrate the impact of this policy beyond the artificial markers of AYP by considering actual learner outcomes embodied in the literacy narratives—the first postsecondary writing produced by most of the students. Before discussing the narratives, however, a thorough contextualization of their authors and an understanding of the conversations taking place around these topics is necessary. Chapter Two covers the literature relevant to the study of recent education policy and the impact of high-stakes testing on writing instruction. After considering those factors shaping high school students prior to graduation, a presentation of literature surrounding the expectations gap follows. This discussion of learner outcomes naturally leads to a brief survey of the scholarship focused on placement methods for and approaches to first year composition at American universities.

Chapter Three is an introduction to the sample population of this project—the students enrolled in EH 100. By examining the policy documents for the state of Alabama that fulfill the requirements of NCLB, a better understanding of the educational environment at the secondary level can be ascertained. Once it is clear where most of the students entering UAHuntsville have been, I provide a composite view of the university's population and placement methods. This data does more than just provide interesting background information on the students considered in chapter four; it argues for the validity of considering these students as a population representative of high school graduates, whose educational experiences and insights are highly relevant when considering the impact of education policy in America.

The fourth chapter is an analysis and discussion of literacy narratives produced by the students enrolled in the intensive writing course at UAHuntsville. This analysis follows the scholarship of Eldred and Mortensen, whose work has argued that reading literacy narratives can grant insight into social constructs. It also draws from the work of Bronwyn Williams, who encourages us to read the literacy narratives of our students to uncover the valuable information these texts contain. This project considers the social constructs of language acquisition by reading literacy narratives to gain insight into the effects of specific policy; analysis was conducted to determine the impact of Alabama's focused curriculum and high-stakes assessments on composition instruction. By reading the literacy narratives of recent high school graduates, it is possible to understand the effects a curriculum that focuses on high-stakes test preparation actually has on students' writing practices and perceptions.

The fifth and final chapter is a discussion and interpretation of the data presented here, with suggestions for responses at the secondary and postsecondary level and recommendations for future research. In the end, this project does not attempt to present any clear-cut or one size fits all solutions. In fact, I believe that sort of rhetoric has contributed to many of the problems this study considers. What it does attempt to present, however, is a small picture that illustrates the larger problem facing millions of high school students, college freshmen, and composition instructors nationwide. Despite the best intentions of policy makers, the high-stakes assessments mandated by NCLB are not preparing students for postsecondary written communication and postsecondary success.

NOTES

ⁱ For more information on Walden III and the Rite of Passage Experience, visit <http://www.waldeniii.org>.

ⁱⁱ The University of Wisconsin – Parkside is similar in size and composition to UAHuntsville. One of the satellite for the University of Wisconsin system, the school has a heavy commuter population as well as a large number of first-generation students as it is highly accessible to the urban centers of Racine and Kenosha, two cities struggling to overcome their manufacturing backgrounds.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is excepting ESL students, who are typically placed into EH 100 after demonstrating that they are ready by either attaining a high enough score on the TOEFL or by passing non-credit bearing ESL writing courses. The experience with ESL students in the basic writing classroom is in many ways antithetical to the experience with native speakers as the ESL students are typically high academic achievers whose inexperience with English is mutually exclusive of their experience with writing.

^{iv} The terms “basic writing,” “intensive writing,” and “developmental writing” have all been used in various literature to describe what was referred to in the past as “remedial writing,” a term which has been largely abandoned because of the negative connotation it carries and its inaccuracy as a descriptor for what these classes actually are. Because of the changes in course names at UAHuntsville, however, I use the term developmental in this paper; “Basic Writing” refers to EH 003 and “Intensive Writing” to EH 100.

CHAPTER TWO

What We Talk About When We Talk About School

The Rhetoric of Assessment

In September of 2008 *College Composition and Communication* (CCC) offered a symposium on the subject of assessment, specifically examining the relationship between high-stakes writing tests and composition instruction. The articles that came out of that issue, though divergent in approach, were unified in their verdict condemning the culture of assessment currently pervading the American educational landscape. Chris Anson, in the opening article of the series, argues that the assessment environment in high school writing instruction has led to the creation of an artificial and closed discursive system. This artificiality of writing assessments is further observed by Schuster, whose study of state writing assessments supports charges by Anson and argues that most standardized writing exams do not test a student's ability to work with the writing process. Schuster argues that they are, instead, mere "drafting tests" which evaluate only that most experimental phase of the composition process (375-78). And while Beck and Jeffery acknowledge views of high-stakes exams as being responsible for raising standards and "making criteria for successful performance explicit and consistent" (61), their study of genre in high-stakes writing exams exposes the dangers of testing without explicit

theoretical foundations informing the skills to be tested. Their work, which focuses specifically on the written exams of California, Texas, and New York concludes that a lack of clarity and consistency in genre expectations can result in a failure to prepare students for “discipline-based writing at the college level” because of the impact such tests have on instruction and the signals they send to students regarding expectations (76).

Anson, Schuster, and Beck and Jeffery all charge that real world assessment of writing is not comparable to the assessment that takes place in the closed discursive systems of testing environments and thus does not lend itself to such scientific methodical assessment and instructional practices called for by NCLB (Anson 119). This is a charge echoed by Mya Poe in her deconstructivist examination of NCLB as a genre unto itself (147). In such an environment, familiarity with the subject matter becomes of second importance, a phenomenon that Les Perelman argues leads to a decreased capacity for students to evaluate sources (what he terms “information illiteracy) and that Nancy Somers argues is counter to the process that takes place in actual academic writing (Perelman 129). Her longitudinal study of Harvard students’ writing practices suggests that writing development with regard to audience becomes more apparent as the student becomes more comfortable with or develops expertise in the subject of their writing (158-59). These findings question efforts, such as those called for under NCLB, to define a set of outcomes or performance standards for student writing, a process that Sommers argues reduces education to an endpoint (162).

Despite protests from scholars such as Somers, educational endpoints are exactly what high stakes tests, those most valuable tools for assessment under NCLB, set out to measure. The College Board recently added its own writing assessment to what is

arguably the best known high stakes test in the country in an effort to represent students' writing abilities to prospective universities. And though it is not currently linked to NCLB^v in any official way, the SAT is representative of high-stakes tests in the U.S. The SAT, like so many others in the artificial world of high-stakes writing assessments, relies on the closed discursive system necessitated by the exam's stifling time constraints and need for scoring reliability (Anson 119). Among his other critiques of the exam, Anson notes that the assessment is "rhetorically a-contextual" and charges "it has no purpose other than to test" (119). The sort of writing produced to meet the requirements of these high-stakes assessments is about as far from the writing produced in the real world as one can get and thus calls into question the ability of these writing assessments to accurately predict the quality of writing students are capable of producing in other less constrained (and more authentic) environments.

To emphasize the artificiality of writing assessments like the SAT, Les Perelman reports the ease with which he was able to train high school students to "game" the exam by following a formulaic approach to the test. By adhering to the formula, which essentially called for students to aim for quantity of information and detail over quality and relevance while using an impressive sounding vocabulary and a famous quote or two (again, regardless of relevance), students were able to raise their assessment scores by a minimum of 15% (128-29). Such results underscore one of the foundational problems with writing assessments: they often separate the subject from the sample, valuing not the information contained in the writing sample (as takes place in real word writing assessment) but the format of the sample itself. And while the methods of writing assessment employed by the SAT are not currently mandated under NCLB, they do

appear in other influential tests, such as the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing (ADAW), and are accommodated by the policy documents discussed in Chapter Three.

If NCLB and high-stakes testing in general can be conceptualized as a separate genre, as claimed by Beck and Jeffery, Anson, and Poe, then it is a genre marked by artificiality and which requires specialized instructional methods (like those developed by Perelman). In this environment of high stakes assessments, teaching to the test has become commonplace, a practice that Anson argues limits the ability of instructors to engage their students in real world writing contexts and almost inevitably lends itself to formulaic writing methods (121). Unlike Sommers, Anson does not fault attempts to define desired educational goals; rather, it is the misalignment of those goals with the method of assessment that he sees as the problem (122). The result, Anson claims, is that

students will simply memorize the facts (what Biggs calls ‘dealing with’ the test), and the original goals and objectives are lost. On a national scale, such misalignment caused by reductivist testing programs weakens the entire educational system and produces students ill-prepared to do higher-level college work and enter an increasingly complex and demanding workforce. (123)

Despite the potential for this sort of damage, test preparation and assessment itself are almost inextricably linked to current perceptions of high school education, as evidenced by the perpetuation of such high-stakes writing assessments as the SAT, the ACT, and the AP exam. The pressure to perform on these and other assessments can negatively impact students’ overall education and preparation for postsecondary writing.

There are abundant concerns regarding the assessment-focused curricula that have developed under NCLB. Scot, Padina, Callahan, and Urquhart suggest that teachers “[are] being forced to teach to the test and to raise test scores at all costs” and that gifted students are paying a heavy price for these methods (47). By focusing instruction on skills specifically required to pass the tests, students are not challenged and are more

likely to disengage from their education (48). Further, the use of pacing guides, which, in some cases, prescribe which lesson is to be taught on which day, impede the ability of instructors to adjust lessons according to the needs and desires of their students (47). Fang, Fu, and Lamme also deride the use of pacing guides and scripted instruction programs. The authors claim that “[o]n one hand [they undermine] teacher morale and [inhibit] their development of professional expertise and wisdom. On the other hand, [they increase] children’s disengagement with school-based tasks and [result] in less overall learning for them” (58). Their report proposes ongoing professional development for educators in an effort to empower them to make informed decisions about curriculum and move away from prepackaged and scripted programs and questions the validity of such didactic programs, which they consider to be “counter-productive” to students’ educational development. Although the research of Scot et al. focuses on the effects of high-stakes testing on the gifted student population, while Fang et al. examine the rural poor in Florida, the implications of their research are in agreement and applicable to the experiences of mainstream students.

The stated goal of narrowing the achievement gap for minority students and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is one of the more commendable goals of NCLB. In practice, however, this goal has not been realized. Furthermore, the mandates of NCLB may be working to inadvertently exacerbate the achievement gap. The findings of McCarthy’s study illustrate the disparity in the effects of NCLB between high and low-income schools. As she notes, “teachers in low- and high-income schools share many of the same critiques of NCLB; however, teachers and students in low-income schools have less power to resist the law and are monitored to a greater

degree than teachers in high-income schools” (464). As a result, teachers in low-income schools are often pressured to adopt pre-packaged instructional programs that focus on raising test scores at the expense of other areas of the curriculum, while instructors in high-income schools are left to determine which methods best suit the needs of their students. The work of Linda Darling-Hammond seems to concur with McCarthey’s findings; she labels the act as “underfunded” and claims that it “disproportionately penalize[s] schools serving the neediest students” (246). Darling-Hammond goes on to highlight the inequality of funding in American public schools. She points out that “the wealthiest US public schools spend at least 10 times more than the poorest schools -- ranging from over \$30,000 per pupil to only \$3000; and these disparities contribute to a wider achievement gap than in virtually any other industrialized country” (247). NCLB does nothing to address these inequalities in funding.

David Hursh also addresses the charge that NCLB is implicit in further exacerbating the inequality referenced by the achievement gap. He challenges the tenets of AYP, claiming that the “indicators provide little information on whether schools are making progress but, instead, serve to unfairly punish urban schools, the schools most likely to serve students of color and students living in poverty” (298). Hursh argues that this occurs because “test scores strongly correlate with a student’s family income,” and are more likely to reflect socioeconomic realities than instructional factors (299). Worse, these lower test scores in lower income schools result in an imbalance in classroom instruction across socioeconomic groups. Schools not making AYP—poorer schools, in Hursh’s estimation—are more likely to adopt a narrowed curriculum that focuses primarily on raising test scores, often at the expense of subjects not focused on by NCLB,

such as writing. These inequalities not only fail to close the achievement gap, they serve to maintain the status quo by limiting access to educational practices that promote critical thinking skills and quality instruction in written communication valued in both higher education and the professional world.

There is empirical evidence that NCLB's reliance on high-stakes standardized assessments has led to a narrowing of the curriculum in certain schools. The findings of McCarthy's study reinforce many of the complaints and concerns regarding NCLB's potential to adversely impact the composition instruction students receive. Her findings indicate that 62% of the schools in her study had adjusted their curriculum to favor reading and math, while 44% reported cutting subjects not tested under NCLB mandates.

This impact of high-stakes assessments, which "offer nothing more than snapshots, often fuzzy ones, of student achievement at a single moment in time" is being felt at the elementary and secondary levels (Guisbond and Neill 13). It is also being felt at the postsecondary level. Despite what Diana Pullin acknowledges as the "long-standing traditions of autonomy and academic freedom" in institutions of higher education, she warns that threats to that tradition may be on the horizon (300-01). The legal precedents and guidelines concerning academic freedom are far from clearly defined, and the interests of the federal government may go a long way in deciding the outcome of any future dispute over accountability measures similar to those found in NCLB (Pullin 311). Recent statements by President Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, have indicated that NCLB is slated to undergo a major overhaul. These comments may seem ominous in light of warnings by legal experts like Pullin, but it is not necessary to look to policy written with postsecondary education in

mind to witness the impact of didactic policy and high-stakes assessment on higher education. Because of its ability to affect students' preparation for college-level work, NCLB, in its current form, does have a significant impact on the (first-year) composition curriculum at the postsecondary level.

The Expectations Gap

A substantial amount of effort has been undertaken to characterize the preparation of graduating high school students for work and college. This research indicates that there is a misalignment between what students are learning in high school and what is expected of them in the professional world and in higher education. This expectations gap, as it is commonly called, has been focused on by champions of standardized curricula and high stakes assessments because of its usefulness in demonstrating the existence of a problem. These groups, such as the American Diploma Project, view increased accountability as the solution to the expectations gap, claiming that such accountability measures will promote higher academic achievement and better postsecondary preparation ("Policy Implications" 9). This is an argument that ignores criticism that existing assessments have been instrumental in creating or, at least, perpetuating the gap by limiting the preparation of graduating seniors to that which is easily tested. Though much of the information presented in these studies has been used to advance an agenda inconsistent with the stance I am taking in this paper, the data included in the Spellings Report and by groups such as the American Diploma Project and even the ACT is valuable in identifying the educational needs of incoming college freshmen.

The American Diploma Project, a joint venture between Achieve, Inc., The Educational Trust, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, was undertaken in 2002 in an effort to determine possible solutions to the expectations gap. The findings and recommendations of that study are presented in the report *Ready or Not* published in 2004. The report opens with the rather serious charge that the American high school diploma has “lost its value because what it takes to earn one is disconnected from what it takes for graduates to compete successfully beyond high school” (1). This disconnect is the result of differing expectations and lower standards for high school graduation, charges the report, as evidenced by the exit exams employed by nearly half the states which are benchmarked at 8th or 9th grade performance levels (a category which the AL graduation exam falls into). As a solution to this problem, *Ready or Not* offers a set of benchmarks based on empirical evidence of what the postsecondary world requires of graduates (21). This evidence is the result of collaboration with educators and employers in five partner states to analyze what students are currently learning and what skills are most important for future success and the resulting benchmarks, though ambitious, are presented as the cornerstone to an implementable solution. The benchmarks that specifically address the curriculum in English and in writing are not far removed from what is currently included in the Alabama Course of Study (explored in-depth in Chapter Three); however, they are worlds apart from the objectives and standards of the Alabama Graduation Exam (32-34). Because of its high stakes nature as a reporting measure of AYP, the AHSGE has the potential to supersede the Course of Study, especially in schools struggling to make “progress.” As a further evidence of the disconnect between the AHSGE and the *Course of Study*, the ADP lists Alabama as being

“in process or planning” the alignment of graduation requirements with the benchmarks offered by the ADP (“Closing the Expectations Gap” 5).

Another study that has focused on the alignment between what is taught in high school what is necessary for success in college is performed by ACT, Inc., every three to five years as a survey of more than 10,000 secondary and 12,000 postsecondary educators nationwide. The survey gathers the impressions of educators regarding college preparation and is used to inform the test employed by many universities for admissions and placement decisions. The results, analyzed in the creatively named “Policy Implications of the ACT National Curriculum Survey Results” largely reinforce the findings and recommendations of the American Diploma Project. Regarding state standards for graduation, only 33% of postsecondary instructors surveyed believe that their state’s standards prepared students for college level English and writing; this contrasts with 76% of high school teachers who believe their state standards sufficient (3). This discrepancy is likely the result of the tendency for administrators to focus on state standards, and thus meet NCLB requirements, as the goal.

The impression among postsecondary instructors is that NCLB has not been successful in better preparing students for college; the majority of those surveyed indicated a belief that students’ preparation for college was the same or even worse than it was prior to the bill’s passage^{vi} (*Policy Implications* 4). One of the more surprising findings of the ACT survey was a call for high schools to give more attention to the basic skills of grammar and, mechanics, and sentence structure, the impression being that many states are sacrificing depth for breadth (*Policy Implications* 2). With specific regards to English and writing, postsecondary instructors ranked basic skills as more important than

global skills for incoming students (*National Curriculum Survey 11, Policy Implications* 5). The seeming logic behind this decision is that global skills such as rhetorical strategies and supporting an argument can and should be developed in the college composition classroom but that this development is not possible if basic skills regarding mechanics and usage are not first in place. And though this is antithetical to the benchmarks of “Ready or Not” that call for a mastery of global skills in rhetoric, research, and other composition areas, it should not be inferred that these two reports cancel each other out.

Grade inflation, which is linked to NCLB by the pressure to satisfy requirements concerning grade level performance and graduation rates, further exacerbates the expectations gap and complicates college placement procedures. Hoyt and Sorensen suggest that teachers may be awarding passing grades to students who have not adequately learned the material, a practice which can result under-preparing students and misrepresenting their abilities to prospective colleges and universities (32). Hoyt and Sorensen call for a better understanding of what constitutes competence. Their study detected grade inflation in A.P. mathematics courses and supports reports of high college remediation rates in mathematics and by students who had taken and even excelled in all required high school course work.

What is to be made of reports that claim current standards do not prepare students for postsecondary success? Michael Cohen, president of Achieve, Inc., points to the severity of the expectations gap and notes that “[n]ationally, 30 percent of first year students in 2- and 4-year institutions lack the basic skills needed to enter credit-bearing courses and are instead required to take developmental courses in math, writing or

reading” (21).^{vii} He further implies that only half of first-year college students are able to read at a level appropriate for the coursework they will be undertaking. The blame, as he sees it, lies in the fact that requirements for high school graduation are not rigorous enough and points to both coursework requirements and exit examination standards that do not encourage adequate preparation for college work. Like the American Diploma Project, Cohen proposes cooperative efforts between school districts and employers and postsecondary institutions to align graduation requirements. He also calls for increased tracking of longitudinal student data that would allow states and districts to evaluate the preparedness of students based on their actual outcomes (22). Though the solutions Cohen proposes do include the standardization of expectations for college readiness (at the state level), most of his recommendations seek increased collaboration between secondary and postsecondary institutions. If implemented, such collaboration could be highly effective in better preparing students for postsecondary work (academic or vocational). Resistance to these recommendations, however, may be related to other attempts at improvement: NCLB’s requirements for improved high school graduation rates would possibly be undermined by increasing the requirements for high school graduation.

Linda Adler-Kassner and Susanmarie Harrington’s “In the Here and Now” is a good example of the reaction to calls for increased standards and heightened expectations common in the composition field. Their article specifically addresses *Ready or Not* and the Spellings report and adopts a generally oppositional stance to the suggestions of the two reports while assuming a shared outlook from their audience. The authors lament that strategies for “deflecting the discourse of student need” away from one of a literary

crises to one of “personal literacies” seem to be no longer effective in controlling the conversation (30). Adler-Kassner and Harrington acknowledge a need to engage such reports but suggest doing so by “changing the frames around the discussion” rather than giving any serious credence to the findings of the reports. They advocate continued avoidance based on the assumption that the recommendations of the ADP and the Department of Education will exacerbate rather than alleviate any problems. It is a reaction based on fear of increased government involvement in postsecondary education and limited academic freedom. And while the potential for increased involvement does exist, as illustrated by Pullin, this reaction proverbially throws out the baby with the bathwater, ignoring or denying that there is an expectations gap and that the benchmarks proposed by the ADP represent the prerequisites for postsecondary success.

First-Year Composition and Developmental Writing

Placing students into the appropriate first-year courses can present a rather unique challenge and carries with it a fair degree of controversy. At stake in the placement process are both academic and financial considerations for students as well as the institution. Students inappropriately placed in a course beyond their level of ability face an increased chance of failure in their first semester and may need to repeat the course at the same level or at a lower level. They carry the financial burden of paying for two courses to satisfy one requirement. Additionally, students who struggle and fail in their first year of college may be unlikely to complete their studies and graduate on time, if at all. Lower student retention numbers, of course, affect the tuition a university is able to justify. Conversely, students placed too low may experience academic success but also may end up paying for a course that bears no credit towards graduation.

Furthermore, the lack of an adequate challenge may lead them to disengage from their coursework and their presence in a lower-level classroom can distract the attention of the instructor away from the students who need it. It is, therefore, in the best interests of all involved that the best efforts be made to appropriately place incoming students. To this end, many institutions employ the same data that informs admissions decisions, such as ACT and SAT scores and high school transcripts (Hoyt and Sorensen 28-29, Lallicker). There are problems with relying on this data, however. The potential for grade inflation in high school transcripts can lead to a misrepresentation of a student's actual preparation (and then there's the problem that ACT scores only indicate how prepared for a college a student was on a particular Saturday morning a year and a half earlier). In an effort to offset these complications, some institutions employ supplemental placement methods, such as in-house placement tests or portfolios of past work, in addition to, or in place of, transcripts and test scores.

Andrea Luna reports success in alternative placement means at Lyndon State College in Vermont, where a placement procedure instituted in 1999 asks entering students place themselves and write an essay defending their choice (378-81). The students' choices are factored into the placement considerations; however, final decisions are made by the English faculty based on the information regarding the students' writing histories provided in the essays as well as the presentation and persuasiveness of the essays themselves. Though Luna admits that such a method is labor intensive (380), she defends the university's decision by pointing to the results: fewer students are re-placed and more students report being happy with the placement decisions (381, 384). In addition to increased effectiveness in student placement, Luna also reports that students

are better prepared for their coming coursework because they are engaged in the process from the beginning by being compelled to think and write about their histories and their futures.

The placement of first-year college students with respect to their level of preparation is only one step in the integration process for under-prepared students; developmental courses must be in place to facilitate their needs. However, these courses have been the cause of some controversy in the academy as their very existence is an acknowledgement that not all students graduate from high school prepared for the academic rigors of a postsecondary education, and that not all universities accept only those students whose preparation has been sufficient. In the wake of the open-admissions movements of the 1960s, many universities began to notice the need for remedial or preparatory courses and programs within the institution to serve those students who were not prepared for college work in certain areas, such as writing and math. In many schools, these skilled-based courses carry limited or no credit towards graduation along with a label affixed to the student as basic or remedial. Furthermore, the “[o]utcomes of this approach to basic writing may not be theoretically or epistemologically compatible with outcomes being assessed for the composition program as a whole, especially if the composition program is driven by progressive rhetorical theory” (Lallicker). For this reason, (and in response to pressure from state accreditation boards brought on by charges that the college education was being dumbed down) within the past fifteen years, universities began to eliminate or restructure their basic writing programs.

William B. Lallicker posits that there are five alternative structures to the basic writing course employed by developmental writing programs: the stretch model, the

studio model, the directed self-placement model, the intensive model, and the mainstreaming model. His survey of writing program administrators describes each approach and lists their inherent advantages and disadvantages, along with information regarding placement, grading, and credit earned. This overview is helpful in situating the reports of educators writing about the approaches in place at their own institutions.

Rather than turning their backs on the needs of underprepared students, some institutions began to adopt modified first-year composition programs that allow students to more quickly integrate with the mainstream population while earning credit towards graduation. Two basic variations of this model exist: the stretch program, which gives students an extra semester to complete the standard first-level course (Rigolino 50), and the studio model, which gives students extra instruction outside of class and enables them to complete the standard first-level course in one semester. As Rigolino and Freel note, this model has the added benefit in that it doesn't stretch out "a one-semester, credit-bearing course into two or more semesters, [but instead] provides students with additional time each week to strengthen their writing" (50). It is a model first detailed by Grego and Thompson of the University of South Carolina and detailed in their "Repositioning Remediation: Renegotiating Composition's Work in the Academy," an essay which explores the service function of composition in the academy (62-3). Grego and Thompson pioneered the studio program as a means for efficiently streamlining those students who had been labeled basic writers; it was almost immediately successful, enjoying passing rates of over 90% from its first year (83). Rigolino and Freel report of a similar program that has been instituted at SUNY New Paltz and has likewise enjoyed resounding success. Within a few years of the program's implementation, the pass rate of

the basic writers was within 16% of those enrolled in the standard, non-supported, first-year composition course (75% and 91%, respectively). Further, retention and graduation rates for both groups were nearly identical (56-7).

Tassoni and Lewiecki-Wilson also discuss the introduction of the studio model to their university in Middletown, Ohio, presenting the difficulties involved with the model along with the merits. Their auto ethnographic study highlights the invisibility of basic writing departments in college campuses and questions the departmental power structures that influence and control these programs as well as the polarities between pedagogies and faculty inherent to such discussion (68-61). Success of the studio program in this essay is not qualified in the same manner as in Grego and Thompson or Rigolino and Freel; instead, it is the stories of students and the continuance of the program that stand as a testament, not to its success, but to its importance.

These varying developmental writing programs are often viewed as fundamental in empowering students to overcome the shortcomings of the preparation they received in high school. Yet despite the successes witnessed by many of these programs, one has to wonder why they are even necessary. With the amount of oversight at federal and state levels focused on education, it should be reasonable to expect that students who graduate from high school are adequately prepared for standard FYC coursework. To understand why this has not been the case, it is necessary to examine the specific policy and assessments instrumental in dictating the writing instruction high school students in Alabama receive. The following chapter covers the policy documents for the state of Alabama that fulfill the requirements of NCLB; specifically examined are the materials

that have the most potential to impact composition instruction and thus contribute to the expectations gap.

NOTES

^v There is evidence to suggest that tests such as the SAT and the ACT may become the favored tools for reporting eleventh-grade AYP to the Department of Education. Alabama is currently in the process of eliminating its current reporting measure, the AHSGE, and mandating the ACT for all students. Whether or not this will, in fact, tie the ACT to NCLB as a tool for reporting AYP is yet to be seen (Alabama Education Association).

^{vi} This survey does not here specifically mention NCLB but, rather, refers to a time period prior to the 2002 law. This omission of the controversial bill's name from the survey decreases the potential for a respondent's political associations to influence their reply.

^{vii} This is in line with the current rate of remediation in Alabama (*High School Report*).

CHAPTER THREE

Policy, Pathways, and Population

Overview

This case study presents an assessment of literacy narratives produced by students enrolled in UAHuntsville's intensive writing course. Although this course is classified as developmental, it is not the intention of this study to imply that the students of EH 100 are below average. To the contrary, I contend that they are representative of high school graduates in this country. The students enrolled in the Intensive Writing course that are the focus of Chapter Four have, by virtue of graduating from high school and enrolling in college, exhibited academic achievement of a higher degree than the majority of their ninth-grade cohort. Though not all from Alabama, the vast majority are graduates of American high schools and the products of NCLB. And though the policy documents examined in this chapter are specific to Alabama, it should be kept in mind that all states have undertaken similar steps to satisfy the mandates of NCLB and receive federal funds.

In order to determine the potential impact of education policy on the students entering UAHuntsville an assessment of Alabama's plan to satisfy the requirements of No Child Left Behind was undertaken. The specific focus in this respect is on the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHGSE) and the "Alabama Course of Study"

curriculum recommendations, as well as the supporting materials for both: “Great Expectations,” a booklet designed to help students prepare for the graduation exam and “Pathways for Learning,” a series of checklists and recommended activities intended to assist teachers in aligning their classrooms with the Course of Study. These documents are here examined in the context of their approach to composition instruction and assessment.

Following an assessment of the impact of policy on secondary education in the state is an introduction to the sample population of this study. This introduction is accomplished by presenting a statistical analysis of learner outcomes for Alabama high school students, a review UAHuntsville’s pertinent institutional data, the university’s admissions and placement practices, and first-year composition program data. Through careful consideration of this information, I make the case that the students enrolled in EH 100 constitute a representative sample of Alabama high school graduates, and that the information derived from their literacy narratives can be used with validity for generalizing about the larger population.

So it is(n’t) Written

NCLB has a significant influence at the primary level, especially in grades four through eight where students are tested annually on math, reading, and science. The impact at the secondary level is, at first glance, not as significant. AYP is measured just once for high schools: during grade 11 with a focus on (again) math, science, and reading. The only other accountability measure in place at the secondary level regarding student performance and progress is an annual report of graduation rates. In fact, state accountability plans are nearly silent on the subject of secondary education, with only one

“critical element” focusing directly on the reporting of high schools (U.S. Department of Education). Considering this, it may seem unlikely that the mandates of NCLB would have the potential to influence the curriculum of individual writing programs at the high school level in the manner observed by McCarthy in her study of fourth grade classrooms. Unfortunately, this is not the case. My examination of state and federal documents demonstrates that the potential for curricular influence is present, and that the emphasis on demonstrating AYP does have a negative impact on composition instruction and preparation for postsecondary writing.

Since 1983, the Alabama State Department of Education has required all exiting high school seniors to take and pass the Alabama High School Graduation Examination (AHSGE) (*Great Expectations* 4). As it exists in its current form, the exam tests students’ knowledge, via multiple-choice questions, in five academic subjects: math, science, social studies, reading, and language^{viii} (*Great Expectations* 4). The exam is “generally written” to test students at an eleventh grade level and is sufficiently difficult enough that in 2002, some schools saw upwards of 25% of twelfth graders who attempted the test fail it.^{ix} It is this test which is named in Alabama’s NCLB accountability plan as providing the measurement for 11th grade AYP, and thus does double duty by influencing graduation rates which are also reported as a part of NCLB (*Alabama Consolidated* 25). In this way, the exam qualifies as high stakes for both the students who take it and the schools that administer it.

Because of the high stakes for both student and school, it should not be surprising that the AHSGE has the potential to affect the curriculum. A cursory examination of the Alabama course of study for English reveals parallels between what is tested and the

approved curriculum. Additionally, the Alabama department of Education's *Pathways for Learning* provides micro-level recommendations such as lesson plans and assignments that more directly address the material covered on the exam. Though these materials are optional (as opposed to the more general guidelines of the *Alabama Course of Study*), it is strongly recommended that they be utilized so that instructors can "teach the required skills" (*Great Expectations* 3).

The Language Arts section of the AHSGE consists of 100 multiple choice questions concerning grammar, punctuation, word choice, and sentence structure (*Great Expectations* 3). There is no direct assessment of writing in the AHSGE. There is, however, another statewide exam, the Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing (ADAW), administered in the fifth, seventh, and tenth grades, that is designed to measure students' proficiency with written communication by employing an essay rather than multiple-choice exam (*Alabama Direct Assessment of Writing*). I do not categorize the ADAW as a high-stakes test with the potential to impact curriculum in the same way as the AHSGE because the ADAW is not linked to NCLB as a measure for reporting AYP. And though this may be partly due to the lack of attention NCLB gives writing instruction that is not necessarily the only reason. NCLB allows for the inclusion and or substitution of scores from writing assessments as a measure for reporting AYP (Alabama Consolidated State Accountability Application Workbook 20). However, including such scores could be damaging to a states efforts to demonstrate AYP, as affecting improvements on writing assessments is likely more difficult than on multiple-choice tests. As comparative scores from the two exams indicate, it is far easier to move students towards a goal of 100% competency on the AHSGE than on the ADAW (Accountability Reporting System).

The Language Arts section of the ADAW is designed to test the knowledge students should have acquired in the language section of their high school curriculum and, as such, purports to focus on topics covered in English language arts classes (*Great Expectations* 10). The document provided by the State Department of Education includes an overview of materials covered on all sections of the exam and is shown in Figure 3.1.

- Standard: The student will recognize correct grammar and usage.

Objective:

 - Identify correct noun forms.
 - Identify correct verb forms.
 - Recognize subject-verb agreement.
 - Recognize pronoun-antecedent agreement in number and gender.
 - Identify incorrect shifts in verb tense.
 - Identify correct pronoun case.
 - Identify effective use of voice.
 - Determine correct placement of modifiers.
 - Identify correct usage of commonly confused words.

Standard: The student will demonstrate appropriate word choice.

Objective:

 - Use words that create clarity, precision, and vivid description.
 - Use formal and informal language appropriately.

Standard: The student will recognize correct sentence structure.

Objective:

 - Correct run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and comma splices.
 - Correct sentences that lack internal parallelism.

Standard: The student will use correct capitalization and punctuation.

Objective:

 - Demonstrate correct use of capitalization.
 - Demonstrate correct use of commas.
 - Demonstrate correct use of a semicolon and a colon.
 - Demonstrate correct use of quotation marks and underlining.
 - Demonstrate correct use of the apostrophe.

Standard: The student will use appropriate organization skills for writing/revising.

Objective:

 - Determine logical progression and completeness of paragraphs.

Figure 3.1 Standards and Objectives for the Language Arts Section of the AHSGE (“Great Expectations”)

The “objectives” listed are translated, in the exam, into multiple choice questions which call on the student to read either a paragraph or group of sentences and identify the selection which demonstrates a grammatical error, a grammatically correct sentence, or an off-topic sentence (one which does not “belong” in a given paragraph). If it follows that schools in poorer districts (that often have a higher percentage of minority students)

tend to exhibit lower performance on the AHSGE,^x then those are the schools that would be most likely to feel the pressure to raise scores and adopt a narrowed curriculum and focused instructional methods to do so. In those schools that do resort to teaching to the test in order to satisfy the federal mandates of NCLB, this is the test that they will be teaching to. This is the “composition instruction” students at those schools will be receiving.

The general curricular guidelines for writing instruction in the state of Alabama are outlined in the *Alabama Course of Study* for English language arts. This document is key in directing the scope of instruction in Alabama public school classrooms and is designed to prepare “students to transition successfully from high school to post-secondary education or to the working world” (*Alabama Course of Study* 42). As noted earlier, many components of the Course of Study are similar to the benchmarks identified by the ADP as indicators of preparation for postsecondary success. However, the Course of Study is also designed to ensure that instruction encompasses the materials covered on the language section of the AHSGE.

The *Alabama Course of Study* is organized by grade level and includes suggested assignments, which are intended to reinforce the topics covered. Figure 3.2 displays the requirements related to composition instruction by grade level. Beginning with the requirements for ninth grade, the items numbered 8, 10, 11, and 12 relate specifically to topics covered on the graduation exam. Item number 7 is the only one that specifically mentions a writing component; the other items could conceivably be covered by worksheets or flash cards. Of the requirements for tenth grade, items 11 through 14

Minimum Requirements - 9th grade:

7. Write in narrative, expository, and persuasive modes using figurative language and imagery, including simile and metaphor, when effective and appropriate.
8. Critique paragraphs for logical progression of sentences.
9. Identify factors that influence the development of language.
10. Determine correct use of commas with appositives and direct quotations, colons to introduce lists, semicolons with a series of elements separated by commas, and punctuation for a divided quotation.
11. Identify correct use of parallel words; incorrect verb tense shifts within sentences; correct number and tense in verb forms, including regular and irregular verbs; and correct forms of compound nouns, including singular, plural, and possessive forms.
12. Apply the correct use of subject-verb agreement with collective nouns when verb forms depend on the rest of the sentence; with compound subjects, including those joined by or with the second element as singular or plural; and with the subjunctive mood.

Minimum Requirements—10th Grade:

7. Write in persuasive, expository, and narrative modes using an abbreviated writing process in timed and untimed situations.
8. Write in a variety of genres for various audiences and occasions, both formal and informal, using an attention-getting opening and an effective conclusion.
9. Apply principles of Standard English by adjusting vocabulary and style for the occasion.
10. Justify a thesis statement with supporting details from American literature prior to the twentieth century.
11. Demonstrate correct use of commas with parenthetical expressions and after introductory adverbial clauses and correct use of semicolons before conjunctive adverbs and in compound sentences with no conjunction.
12. Demonstrate correct use of singular and plural collective nouns and words with alternate accepted forms; pronoun-antecedent agreement in number and gender; and nominative, objective, and possessive pronoun cases.
13. Apply the correct use of subject-verb agreement with singular and plural subjects, including subjects compound in form and singular in meaning and subjects plural in form and singular in meaning; intervening prepositional and appositive phrases; and correlative conjunctions.
14. Edit for incorrect shifts in verb tense in paragraphs, use of verbals, use of dangling participles and misplaced modifiers, and parallelism in phrases.

Minimum Requirements - 11th Grade:

8. Write the text for an oral presentation with attention to word choice, organizational patterns, transitional devices, and tone.
9. Analyze writing for parallelism in literary selections and student writing.
10. Edit writings, including student papers, for correct parallel form in clauses in a series and with correlative conjunctions and for correct use of subject-verb agreement with subjects with intervening phrases, collective nouns as subjects, indefinite pronouns as subjects when the verb form depends on the rest of the sentence, and subjects in sentences with correlative conjunctions or in inverted order.
11. Differentiate between the use of active and passive voice.

Minimum Requirements - 12th grade:

7. Write for a variety of purposes, including critical essays on literary topics, college application essays, résumé cover letters, and résumés.
8. Demonstrate appropriate use of ellipses, parentheses, hyphens and suspended hyphens, hyphenation of number-and-noun modifiers, slashes, and use of commas with subordinate clauses and nominative absolutes.
9. Revise drafts to increase sentence complexity.

Figure 3.2 Writing and Language Requirements by Grade Level (“Alabama Course of Study”)

address subject material mentioned in the “Great Expectations” handbook and covered on the AHSGE. The items in both ninth and tenth grade that do specifically indicate the presence of a written component to the curriculum are perfectly in line with the objectives of the ADAW and the written components of the ACT and the SAT.

In grade eleven—the year for which AYP is reported based on the AHSGE—three of the four items focus on specifically identified exam components (items 9, 10, and 11). Though these requirements imply the presence of a written component of the curriculum, the language of the items places more weight on the identification of textual components than the actual creation of student texts. Finally, the focus of the curriculum for grade twelve seems evenly divided with item 7 focusing on the creation of practical texts for the acquisition of postsecondary education or employment, and item 9 encouraging the revision of drafts (though the goal here is to increase complexity at the sentence level rather than increase clarity at the document level). Item number 8, however, stands out as concerning topics related solely to mechanics and punctuation - those items covered on the AHSGE. All in all, slightly more than half (eleven of twenty-one) of the items listed as minimum required content for the writing and language section of the *Alabama Course of Study* can be identified as primarily functioning to prepare students for the language section of the graduation exam, with another two being devoted to preparing students for the ADAW. For better or worse, the majority of the Language Arts instruction required under the Course of Study is, in fact, test preparation.

In addition to the guidelines provided by the course of study, the Alabama Department of Education has published a series of documents for “classroom improvement” titled *Pathways for Learning*. These publications expand upon the general

guidelines of the *Alabama Course of Study* by providing specific checklists for classroom instructors to follow. The checklist for Language and Reading provides specific topics instructors should cover, such as “verb shifts within sentences,” “verb shifts within paragraphs” and “misplaced modifiers” (*Pathways for Learning: Specific* B-6, B-8). Additionally, the *Pathways* publication provides a specific breakdown of the types of questions included in the graduation exam and the number of questions regarding each standard. For instance, 45 questions on the language subject test concern grammar and usage (*Pathways for Learning: Specifications* B-1). *Pathways for Learning* focuses only on those topics tested on the graduation exam, and is primarily concerned with detection and avoidance of errors. Though *Pathways* is not employed in every classroom in every high school in Alabama, it is the default instructional supplement for schools that exhibit difficulty with the AHSGE, the high school equivalent of the pre-packaged instruction programs that McCarthy, Fang et al., and Scot et al. mentioned. Schools that do employ *Pathways for Learning* in writing instruction supplant process pedagogy with the current-traditional pedagogy long since out of favor in composition departments at universities throughout the country. In such cases, it would be difficult to argue students are receiving a preparatory experience that is valuable to postsecondary writing, even if they are being prepared to graduate.

Where Pathways Lead

What are the results of Alabama’s public education system? How effective are the Pathways documents and Course of Study for preparing Alabama’s students for postsecondary success? Statistical data reported to the U.S. Department of Education and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education can be useful in answering these

questions. As of the 2005-2006 academic years, the most recent year reported by the U.S. Department of Education at the time of this research, the high school completion rate for the state of Alabama was 66.2%. For the same time period, the national average for high school completion was 73.2% (*High School Dropout and Completion Rates* 40).^{xi} Of the students who graduate high school in Alabama, 57% go on to enroll in a college or university, including both two-year and four-year institutions, in the state for the following academic year (*High School Report* 34). Nationwide, 66.8% of high school graduates continue their education at the postsecondary level within a year of graduation. What this means is that in Alabama approximately 38% of students who begin high school can be expected to attend college in the state following graduation.^{xii} Of the students who do attend a postsecondary institution, 30% are enrolled in “remedial courses”^{xiii} during their first year of postsecondary instruction; of those, 16% enroll in what the state classifies as “remedial” English (*High School Report* 34).

UAHuntsville is an ideal environment to study learner outcomes for the state of Alabama. As of the fall of 2008, nearly 82% percent of the school’s 7,431 students were Alabama residents, a figure that exactly reflects the makeup of the freshman population (*Student Origins*). Placement into the developmental composition program is lower than the statewide average at just around 10% (though for the fall of 2008 14% of students enrolled in Freshman Composition had been placed in the developmental EH 100); however, the university’s higher admissions requirements (versus two-year community and vocational colleges) most likely account for this disparity. As such, it can be understood that the students enrolled in EH 100 represent a higher than average outcome for 9th graders in Alabama. I point this out to make it clear the students presented in this

study *in no way* represent the failures of the state's educational system. These are the students who have been, by most measures, among the successes of Alabama's public schools.

The first-year composition program at UAHuntsville, into which all incoming freshmen enroll, was restructured in the fall of 2008. The move to eliminate the current-traditional basic writing program, which had been in place at the university, resulted in the creation of a new course. EH 100 Intensive Writing incorporates elements from the studio and intensive models described by Lallicker, and consists of a three-credit classroom component of about twenty-four students and a one-credit (pass/fail) writing studio of around eight. EH 100 combines instruction for both students for whom English is a second language (ESL) and students formerly labeled as "basic" writers. The placement procedures for the first-year composition program are remarkably standard. Students are placed into the university's developmental course (EH 100) if their ACT score is 19 or lower or if their SAT score is at or below 500. Placement essays are only used in cases where students don't have test scores (as occasionally occurs with older non-traditional students). ESL students are placed into EH 100 upon completion of coursework specific to non-native speakers. The combination of ESL and Basic writing populations was done with the intention of increasing contact between the two groups in an environment where both constituencies would benefit from the experience, as well as allowing both groups a quicker entry into the credit-bearing freshman composition sequence (Bollinger 3). By design, ESL students comprise less than twenty-five percent of the EH 100 population (Bollinger 1).

The revised structure of the program has thus far been successful in integrating developmental students into the standard composition progression. Under the former system, students placing into the developmental program first took EH 003 Basic Writing, a no credit course, before continuing on to EH 101 Freshman Composition and then EH 102. The failure rate for EH 003 ranged between 25 to 40%. In the current system, students take either EH 100 or EH 101 during their first semester, and in the second semester all students who have successfully completed either EH 100 or EH 101 enroll in EH 102. Although data only exists for the first year, early reports suggest that this failure rate has been reduced substantially—to around 22% for the 2008-2009 academic year. Not only are students in EH 100 passing that course, they are going on to pass EH 102 as well, at a rate of 79%, a further indicator of the program's success.

The importance of courses like EH 100 is emphasized not just by reports of its success reflected in declining failure rates, but also by listening to the voices of the students enrolled in the course and understanding the factors that have contributed to their (under)preparation. The accountability measures required under NCLB are intended to raise the quality of education received by all students in the United States. In theory, by requiring schools to demonstrate academic improvement each year results in preparing more students for success in the postsecondary world. In practice, however, the burden of demonstrating AYP has resulted in some (often low-income) schools narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the test. What this means in Alabama high schools is a focus on the AHSGE, the measure for reporting eleventh grade AYP in the state. The treatment writing instruction receives by the AHSGE and its supporting materials is based on the current-traditional pedagogical approach to composition long since abandoned by the

academy. It is an approach that drills students in the identification and avoidance of errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage at the expense of instruction that focuses on audience, purpose, process, and revision. Students who receive such an instruction are not adequately prepared for postsecondary writing. Instead, they are primed to identify with the production of errors and to avoid—even fear—writing. The analysis that follows reflects precisely this outcome and provides evidence that suggests that the skills focused on by the AHSGE and *Pathways for Learning* are not necessarily transferring beyond the context of that multiple-choice test.

NOTES

^{viii} The language section covers the knowledge purportedly related to writing abilities.

^{ix} This figure does not imply that 25% of high school seniors at these schools failed to graduate as a result of not passing the exam; the test is first offered in tenth grade, and then again in eleventh, and again in twelfth. In several schools, however, records indicate that more than 50 students would have been barred from graduation due to their inability to pass the graduation exam. Not surprisingly, those schools had remarkably high percentages of students receiving free lunch—the standard indicator measuring poverty in public schools.

^x This is, in fact, the case. In Alabama, poorer schools generally have significant minority populations and tend to exhibit lower test performance than their counterparts in wealthier schools (*Accountability Reporting System*).

^{xi} These graduation rates indicate the percentage of 9th graders from the 2002-2003 academic year who received a high school diploma in the 2005-2006 academic year and are calculated by the Department of Education under the accountability provisions of NCLB.

^{xii} This is not to say that only 37% of Alabama 9th graders can be expected to engage in any postsecondary education. The data available from the state only reports the mobility of students from public high schools to public colleges and universities in the state. Students attending private institutions in the state or public or private institutions out of state are not reported by the Commission. Also, students who enroll in postsecondary education after more than a year following graduation are not reflected in these numbers. A contrasting figure from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that, on average, fully 50% of 9th graders can be expected to continue their education immediately following high school. Though this figure takes into account enrollment data from public and private postsecondary institutions nationwide it also incorporates the higher national graduation rate. The combination of these two figures do indicate, however, that somewhere between 37 and 50 percent of 9th graders in Alabama can be expected to continue their education directly following high school.

^{xiii} Available data suggests that this percentage is significantly higher among students from poorer schools. Among the nine poorest high schools in Alabama (those schools with more than sixty percent of the student body receiving free lunch) that graduated one hundred students or more in the 2007-2008 school year, 51% were enrolled in remedial courses, with 35% enrolled in remedial English. The percentage of graduates from these schools enrolling in college was only 41.6%, 16% below the state average.

CHAPTER FOUR

“The Worst Writer that You Could Meet”

Methods

At the beginning of the fall 2009 semester, students enrolled in EH100 were asked to compose a “literacy narrative” describing their histories with writing in either personal or academic settings. Although these narratives were collected, they were not assessed or graded, a fact students were made aware of prior to composing the narratives. The prompt for the assignment was also rather informal; students were asked to discuss their histories and feelings with and about writing, their hopes for the course, and any background information they wished to share. They were given approximately thirty-five minutes to compose the narrative and allowed to leave once they had finished. Despite the temptation that may exist to complete the assignment as quickly as possible without much giving much thought to the prompt, the majority of the students did take the opportunity to reflect on the role writing had played in their lives. The narratives collected range in length from 35 to 398 words and average around 145 words.

The decision to discuss students’ literacy narratives as the primary data for this project follows the scholarship of Eldred and Mortensen, whose work “Reading Literacy Narratives,” argues that these documents can provide insight into social constructs. Their

reading of Shaw's *Pygmalion* as a literacy narrative presents the play as an exploration of how language functions as social capital. The authors argue that Shaw is grappling with the "literacy myth" and demonstrating the limits of language to act as the currency that allows for access to and navigation between social classes (513-15). The examination of students' literacy narratives in the context of language as political rather than social capital offers insight into the effects of current academic policy. In demonstrating that the accountability measures of NCLB have underprepared students to write for the university, this examination argues that literacy does function as a political capital of sorts—not as that which grants access to power, but that to which power limits access.

In addition to facilitating a discussion of literacy as political capital, these narratives are the perfect vehicles for examining the personal aspects of language acquisition. Bronwyn Williams proposes reading students' literacy narratives as a means for uncovering the identities students adopt when considering their histories with reading and writing. Williams posits that the identities students adopt in their literacy narratives are the "result of external judgments handed down by literacy 'authorities'" (345). These "authorities" may be individual instructors or the policies (and policy makers) dictating instruction. When the literacy narratives produced in EH 100 are discussed as a measure of political capital and an indicator of identity, the impact of NCLB on the preparation of students to write in the university is evident.

The literacy narratives produced by the students of EH 100 are illuminating when read in conjunction with the institutionally reported data summarized in the previous section. They convey the students' impressions of their own writing abilities and often refer to their experiences writing in high school. The information contained in these

narratives is useful in determining the needs of students enrolled in the course, as it exemplifies the gaps in preparation reported explicitly through the students' own acknowledgement of problem areas and implicitly through the construction of the narratives themselves.

The available demographic information for the students discussed in this study is relatively limited. The gender of the students was evenly distributed between 33 males and 34 females and included ten ESL students (14.9%). It should be noted that three of the ESL students were graduates of American high schools (2 from Alabama, one from Tennessee) and had not been enrolled in any ESL courses at UAHuntsville. No data regarding socioeconomic status was available for this study.

Sixty-seven student narratives from the fall semester of 2009 were analyzed for this project and categorized according to the information they provided about the students' writing preparation. Figure 4.1 lists and describes the categories used in assessing the narratives. The categories labeled A-E were derived from the "Standards" of the AHSGE (as shown in Figure 3.1) and are repeated in both the Stated and Observed sections. These categories were classified based on whether they were raised by the student ("Stated") or apparent in the narrative ("Observed"). Information classified as "Stated" can be read as an indication of identity, while information classified as "Observed" indicates the extent of language acquisition—the political capital present in the narratives.

Stated

- A. Issues with grammar
- B. Issues with sentence structure
- C. Issues with appropriate word choice
- D. Issues with capitalization and punctuation
- E. Issues with organization skills for writing and revising
- F. ESL

Observed

- A. Issues with grammar
- B. Issues with sentence structure
- C. Issues with appropriate word choice
- D. Issues with capitalization and punctuation
- E. Issues with organization skills for writing and revising
- F. Misinterpretation of prompt

Common Statements

- A. "I want to learn to write better."
- B. "The ability to write well is important to my future success."
- C. "I have struggled in English classes in the past."
- D. "I'm scared of writing."
- E. "I'm no good at writing"
- F. "I don't enjoy academic writing."
- G. "I enjoy writing."
- H. "I enjoy creative writing."
- I. "I am a decent writer."

Figure 4.1 Categories and Classifications Assigned to Literacy Narratives

The purpose of using the categories derived from the Language Arts standards of the AHSGE was to interrogate the connection between the objectives tested by the exam and the incorporation of those objectives into actual student writing. In other words, are the students learning how to observe rules regarding mechanics, usage, and process in their own writing or are those skills remaining contextualized in the multiple-choice environment for which they were learned? By understanding the extent of this transfer we can better conceptualize the impact of NCLB on students' writing.

In addition to the five categories derived from the AHSGE, nine generic statements representing attitudes or ideas that appear in several of the narratives are listed

in the “Common Statements” section of Figure 4.1. Statements that communicate a dislike of writing in general were categorized under “F” (I don’t enjoy academic writing) as many of these narratives go on to mention an enjoyment of creative writing or contain contextual evidence indicating that the student’s problem is with academic applications of writing or writing for school. Category “I” (I am a decent writer) also includes statements that reflect a more positive self-evaluation, such as “good.” However the majority of positive self-evaluations contain a fair degree of modesty (or even self-deprecation), making “decent” the more representative adjective.

Narratives were each read three times (once for each category) and in an effort to minimize subjectivity, the names of the student authors were removed from the narratives prior to assessing them. Care was taken to give a fair representation of the “Observed Issues” by objectively noting errors in grammar, capitalization, structure, usage, and organization without critiquing style, a task any instructor familiar with assessing student writing knows to be a challenge. The narratives were all composed on computers running Windows XP and with Microsoft Word installed; the students had access to and were encouraged to use a word processor with a built-in spell check and grammar check. The full results of the analysis appear in the Appendix.

Findings

The results of the narrative analysis, summarized in Table 4.1, provide a wealth of information regarding student preparation for college level writing. In more than 40% of

Table 4.1 Statistical Results of Narrative Analysis

Student Reported	
Issues with Grammar	17.91%
Issues with Sentence Structure	2.99%
Issues with Appropriate Word Choice	10.45%
Issues with Capitalization and Punctuation	2.99%
Issues with Process	25.37%
ESL	11.94%
Rater Observed	
Issues with Grammar	37.31%
Issues with Sentence Structure	35.82%
Issues with Appropriate Word Choice	26.87%
Issues with Capitalization and Punctuation	37.31%
Issues with Process	0.00%
Misinterpretation of Prompt	5.97%
Common Statements	
"I want to learn to write better."	31.34%
"The ability to write well is important to my future success."	13.43%
"I have struggled in English classes in the past."	8.96%
"I'm scared of writing."	7.46%
"I'm no good at writing"	32.84%
"I don't enjoy academic writing."	25.37%
"I enjoy writing."	13.43%
"I enjoy creative writing."	25.37%
"I am a decent writer."	8.96%

the narratives, students reported having difficulty with at least one of the areas expressly covered by the Alabama graduation exam and identified as a standard in the "Higher Expectations" handbook. Further, nearly 75% of the narratives demonstrated some level of difficulty in one or more those same areas. As Table 4.1 demonstrates, issues with process and with grammar were the issues most frequently identified by the students in their narratives. Because issues with process are difficult, if not impossible, to observe in the brief narratives, none were noted in the rater observed portion of the analysis; however, issues with grammar were frequently noted—at more than twice the reported

rate. Additionally, issues with capitalization and punctuation and sentence structure were frequently noted (in more than 1/3 of the narratives).

The common statements, summarized in the third section of Table 4.1, go a step further in revealing student impressions regarding their preparation for college writing. More than 30% expressed a lack of confidence regarding their writing abilities, indicated by statements such as “I’m no good at writing” and nearly as many expressed a desire become better writers. The students expressed satisfaction with their writing abilities in only six of the narratives. Surprisingly (at least to me), no students expressed a belief that the compulsory writing course or the skills it taught was unnecessary; however, more than 13% indicated the opposite through statements which related proficiency in writing to future academic and professional success.

Narrative of a Test-Taker

One of the attitudes expressed often enough to be of note was a fear of writing; five narratives included statements that, with no prompting, clearly indicated that the author was uneasy about writing (these statements were all by native speakers). Several students indicated that their anxiety may stem from a difficulty understanding the assigned material and that they felt uncomfortable working with texts to produce academic-style papers. This discomfort with the very type of work assigned in EH 100, and in many other college courses, can be understood to indicate a lack of sufficient preparation to write for the university. These students’ academic and professional success will be predicated—at least in part—on their ability to wield effective communication skills. Their anxiety over the inability to do so is natural, but one

wonders if it could have been avoided by exposure to a curriculum that placed more emphasis on the production of written work than test preparation.

The standardized assessments given to students throughout their primary and secondary careers are intended to provide the students and educators with an idea of the students' abilities. There is evidence in the narratives, however, that these tests fail to adequately appraise student performance. A couple of students related that they had scored well during middle and high school on state board writing exams but that a later unexpected low score on the ACT resulted in a sense of self-doubt. These students had been told throughout their academic careers that their efforts and abilities had been not just sufficient but exceptional and had received the high marks from state assessments to prove it. Their placement into EH100, however, indicated otherwise. Despite test scores that suggested they were prepared for college and beyond, they were, in fact, not.

The students' accounts of their experiences in high school, though varied, do acknowledge the under-preparation taking place in those institutions. Accounts of students who felt they were never adequately challenged in high school, despite having done a fair amount of writing at that level, were not uncommon. During high school language arts classes these students would often complete their assignments quickly and with little effort, typically yielding good grades and high praise. That they were never pushed to do their best was not lost on them as they reflected from the perspective of an intensive writing course. And though some students excelled in high school, only to be placed in a lower level course upon entry into college, others recounted experiences of struggle throughout their academic careers and were less surprised to find themselves in need of additional help at the post-secondary level.

Several students wrote of struggles with structure, spelling, and grammar – common problem areas covered by the *Course of Study* and the AHSGE. Some had even been in the advanced placement programs during high school, yet acknowledged problems with grammatical conventions. With these students, knowledge of grammatical rules was equated with the ability to write, and the belief was expressed that if they could improve their grammatical skills they may even come to enjoy writing. This attitude, that writing is grammar, is a reflection of the assessment model that tests students only on their ability to recognize rules of convention and valued mechanics over content, process, and rhetorical style. The irony here is that these students failed to attain the mastery of these “basic” skills their curriculum favored at the expense of more valuable composition components.

A further reflection of misplaced valued was evident in the narrative of one student who stated that he didn’t understand how an essay can be less than five paragraphs, an indication of curricular focus on an easily recognizable form. The five-paragraph essay is valued in post-secondary curricula because it is easily taught and easily tested. Les Perelman has focused on this particular form as one of the problems with the ACT's written examination, namely because if the form is adhered to, the exam is scored high regardless of the content. For most situations beyond writing assessments, however, the five-paragraph essay format is not valued and, in many composition classrooms, frowned upon. Furthermore, it has little if any application to the types of writing done in the workplace. It is a clear example of a curricular item intended for test preparation and little more.

Although much of the instruction undertaken at the secondary level seems to have been to prepare students for either multiple choice assessments, which test their knowledge of mechanical conventions, or timed essays, which value adherence to a prescriptive form over content, the students' literacy narratives express a desire for more. As was noted earlier, over 30% of the students expressly stated that they wanted to become better writers. The authors of some of these literacy narratives have, in the past, sought feedback from their instructors, and that feedback made an impact on them. Students recounted being told that they did not use the proper vocabulary in their high school essays, or that their essays lacked the desired professional tone. And while such feedback left the affected students unsure of themselves as writers, it is preferential to the experience of other students who, knowing that they were struggling with mechanics and form, sought feedback time and again only to encounter instructors who promoted them without ensuring that they possessed the fundamental skills for success and without providing them the constructive criticism they desired. As a result, some students admitted that they disengaged from their writing classes and instead developed coping methods sufficient to get them through high school and, ultimately, placed into an intensive writing course EH100.

As a general rule, the students of EH100 were aware of their under-preparation for college level writing, while at the same time committed to their education and determined to improve their writing abilities; statements to this effect appeared in nearly one third of the narrative. Yet in too many of those narratives there was also fear –fear that their perceived inadequacies may be insurmountable or that their instructors might give up on them. These students utilized the narrative as an opportunity to express that

fear and to ask not to be dismissed, but to be given the chance for the success they had been denied in the past.

When we read literacy narratives, such as the ones discussed in this chapter in the context of the policies and practices designed to prepare their authors for postsecondary writing, the impact of those factors becomes apparent. Despite the best intentions of policy makers, NCLB and the assessments upon which it relies—such as the AHSGE—are not ensuring that all students receive an adequate preparation for life after high school. To the contrary, this analysis of student literacy narrative indicates that the impact of such high-stakes assessments has been a misalignment of expectations in composition between what is tested at the secondary level and what is valued at the postsecondary level. As a result, students prepared to take a test based on the current-traditional pedagogical model of composition are underprepared for a first-year composition course grounded in process pedagogy. Many of the students in EH 100 describe writing in terms of errors to be avoided; they identify themselves as test-takers, not writers. Nevertheless, those errors focused on by multiple-choice exams such as the Language Arts section of the AHSGE are prevalent in their narratives. Analysis of these narratives may not present overwhelming evidence that NCLB is complicit in under-preparing all students to write for the university but it does demonstrate that assessments like AHSGE ensure nothing more than that students know how to pass a test.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Path Behind and the Road Ahead

The Path Behind

For the most part, these literacy narratives speak for themselves. Many of the students have not been prepared for the writing assignments they will face in college. They are nervous, frustrated, and scared. Their concerns range from issues of mechanics and convention to difficulty finding the adequate means for expressing their thoughts. One student stated that he struggled in “high school with structure, spelling and grammar” and has a hard time “putting [his] thoughts on paper.” He is not alone in these frustrations; they are echoed throughout the narratives. The presumption that by progressing through a curriculum based on the *Course of Study* and passing the AHSGE a student will have been adequately prepared for life after high school is undermined by the very fact that many of the concerns expressed in the narratives are specifically addressed by those documents. The students included in this study are all high school graduates, many who are from Alabama and have passed the graduation exam and were instructed under the dictates of the *Course of Study*.^{xiv} They took the ACT, the SAT, applied for admission and were accepted to a major American university. By all indications, they should be fully equipped to undertake the sort of writing assigned in college. And yet,

they are not. They have been under-prepared by their high schools—that much is clear. And while it might be tempting to argue that the students of EH 100 represent a small minority of the high school population, it would be difficult to claim that they are not a representative population. The students enrolled in EH 100 are the students who, upon graduation from high school, have continued on to pursue a college education. By my estimates, they represent the 56th percentile, a better-than-average outcome for students entering the ninth-grade in the Alabama public school system. By considering the preparation that these students received we are able to make a very good generalization about the effect of writing instruction taking place in Alabama's high schools.

One of the most relevant findings of this project is that the culture of assessment prevalent in primary and secondary education seems to have led to an understanding among students that writing is just grammar, mechanics, usage, and structure. When asked to reflect on their histories with literacy, with writing, 40% of students indicated that they considered themselves to be poor writers because their writing contains the sorts of errors identified by the AHSGE. The high school curriculum, as enforced by policies such as NCLB and assessments like the AHSGE, teaches student writers to fear errors because it is the errors—in grammar, mechanics, and syntax—that are identified in the tests. The students entering UAHuntsville's Intensive Writing program have had instilled in them what essentially amounts to a local to global model of composition, focusing first on the production of sentence level correctness and treating the effectiveness of an argument as being of secondary importance. This approach is dialectically opposed to the process pedagogy favored by most compositionists and utilized by the university's writing center and the EH 100 program. The idea that the local issues such as

grammatical correctness, word choice, and sentence structure take precedence over the global issues of audience, purpose, argument, and organization is reinforced by assessments like the AHSGE, which offers only a multiple choice assessment to determine a student's level of competence in the language arts.

Essay-based writing assessments like those used by the ACT, the SAT, or the ADAW only offer further reinforcement to this bottom up approach. As the research discussed in Chapter Two has indicated, these types of assessment do no better job of measuring a student's ability to write in an academic or real world setting than their multiple-choice counterparts. Instead, they encourage instruction that is focused on the production of a generic document that has no discernable purpose or audience and need not adequately support an argument. The problem with multiple-choice and essay assessments is that both, in the interest of fitting the criteria of scientifically based assessment, focus on unrealistic markers as measures of success. Yet even the efforts to focus on the local, testable components of writing seem to be failing, as I have indicated in my assessment of the literacy narratives.

Despite testing proficient on the language arts portion of the Alabama Graduation Exam, students in EH 100 report and demonstrate problems with mechanics, usage, structure, and organization. Analysis of the literacy narratives revealed that nearly 75% of the samples displayed errors in grammar, mechanics, usage, or structure. Setting aside, for the moment, the bigger question of how much attention these areas should even be receiving in the secondary curriculum, we can see evidence that a focus on them in assessment (and, therefore, instruction) is not transferring beyond the context of the multiple choice tests for which they are learned. In other words, a student's ability to

identify the proper use of a comma from amongst four examples does not indicate that the same student will be able to correctly use a comma in a sentence of her own construction. And while actual composition consists of so much more than the proper use of commas and colons, tests that focus on such details contribute to a reductive outlook on behalf of educators and students. It is an outlook that can be quite limiting.

When students begin to equate the ability to write with mastery of grammar conventions, they adopt identities based on their knowledge of those conventions. In these cases, students who don't understand "everything that has to do with grammar" come to believe that they are "the worst writer that you could meet." Identities such as this can hinder or prevent development in the students that adopt them. The young man who made this comment was, in fact, not the worst writer that I have ever met; in fact, much of what he ended up producing for the class did a good job of making and defending an argument with appropriate respect to his intended audience. And yet his lack of confidence based on that identity did severely limit his growth early in the semester. This student, like many of his peers, had trouble seeing beyond sentence-level errors to focus on the organization of his papers and requisite support for his arguments.

The adoption of instructional methods that teach to the test and encourage a bottom up view of writing more concerned with errors than arguments is not a universal phenomenon. Although I have focused on the negative outcomes in this study, many students are graduating from high school prepared to engage in postsecondary writing. And though some of these well-prepared students may be coming from schools formerly identified as failing under the rules of NCLB, the majority, as McCarthy has shown, are likely to be graduates of high schools in higher income districts. The tendency to teach

the test, a practice that misplaces value in the writing process, is more likely to be commonplace in those schools that have been identified as failing by NCLB and are under pressure to raise test scores and graduation rates. In other words, students from middle- and upper-class schools are being prepared to write in postsecondary academic and professional environments while students from lower income schools are simply being prepared to pass the AHSGE. This is, of course, counter to the goals of NCLB, which seeks to ensure a good education for all students and thus grant them access to economic mobility. The system, as I have here described it, is structured in such a way that it actually perpetuates class distinctions rather than eliminating them (or, at least, allowing for movement between them) by means of educational access.

The Road Ahead

President Obama recently called for sweeping changes to the way policy impacts education in America. The signaled overhaul to NCLB would presumably lessen reliance on standardized tests and replace targeted grade level proficiency with goals of college readiness (Dillon). If such an upheaval of current policy does take place, the potential exists for a shift in curricular focus and instructional practice at the local level. If this shift is to be a positive one, one that will favor a more constructive approach to teaching writing at the secondary level, policy makers must take into account the lessons that have been learned under the current system. The extent to which we at the university can hope to affect change at the secondary level is limited, but it does go beyond observation and analysis of the sort included in Chapter Two's literature review. Efforts like those undertaken by the American Diploma Project encourage cooperation between secondary and postsecondary institutions to enhance curricular alignment and better prepare

students for success after high school. Federally funded efforts, such as the department of education's GEAR UP program, are likewise working to bridge the expectations gap by partnering postsecondary institutions with school districts to prepare students for undergraduate programs (ed.gov). These types of initiatives do have a limited reach, but they represent a necessary step in encouraging school districts to focus their curriculum not on what it takes to pass the test but on what it takes to succeed after the test has been passed.

For the majority of the classes in the university offered above the first-year, or 100, level, the course catalogue lists prerequisites for students wishing to register for the course. The logic behind these prerequisites is to ensure that the students in the course possess a similar knowledge base and thus allow the course instructors to teach to a certain level. At the first-year level, however, this is an assurance not as easily granted. While the university (and I am speaking here specifically of UAHuntsville and other institutions that do not have open enrollment policies) does maintain enrollment requirements, these requirements do not necessarily indicate the same level of preparation for students that have graduated different high schools. This becomes especially true in areas such as composition, which is required of all entering students and yet potentially given minimal attention at the secondary level. It is important that instructors in the university's first-year composition program, whether in the developmental EH 100 or the standard EH 101, be aware of the educational environment from which their students arrive.

In the same vein, it is important that students in need of additional assistance in composition be identified and placed in the proper course prior to their first semester. A

recent change in the rules at UAHuntsville now allows students who have failed EH 101 to replace that failing grade with a passing grade from EH 100 and thus negating the failure on their transcript. But it would be better for all parties if the students had been properly placed from the beginning. Tests such as the ACT, for which students cram and prepare, and which can be easily deceived, do not offer an accurate representation of an individual's preparation for composition at the postsecondary level. The university's reliance on these assessments for placement purposes, especially in composition, almost certainly results in the improper placement of dozens of students each semester. The directed self-placement model that Luna reports having been successful at Lyndon State might one option for more effective placement at UAHuntsville. Although this processes can be highly labor intensive, and thus cost prohibitive, to an institution the size of UAHuntsville, schools such as Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (which has a student body more than twice the size of UAHuntsville) have incorporated it with success (Blakesley 17). Failure in the first year of a college career can be difficult to overcome; by taking steps to ensure proper placement, the university may be able to raise its short-term retention and even long-term graduation rates.

The analysis the policy documents and discussion of literacy narratives that this study has presented reinforces the need for courses like EH 100 at the postsecondary level that can empower students to overcome the gaps between secondary education and postsecondary expectations. The largest potential benefit of such courses comes from the combination of classroom and studio instruction, which can allow for a focus on process pedagogy and revision in the studio while simultaneously providing under-prepared students classroom instruction similar to (if more focused than) that of EH 101. This

approach allows for quicker integration into the standard composition curriculum (without the unsettling effects of the “mainstreaming” approach in place at CUNY) and also provides students with composition skills valued in the courses they are taking in other departments. By focusing on strategies for successful editing and revision in the studio, students can learn to view mistakes in grammar, usage, and structure as a part of the writing process rather than as defining limiters to their success. This focus on editing needs to take place within the context of writing produced by the students themselves, as opposed to the a-contextual environments of worksheets and multiple choice tests not connected to actual communication. Allowing for a separate space to focus on planning, drafting, revision, and editing will encourage students to shift their perception of writing from a task defined by the number of errors in the outcome to a process in which the production of errors is an almost necessary step.

The policy that has been in place since 2002 has not, as I have argued, contributed to any real improvement in educational preparation. Test scores and graduation rates are easily quantifiable markers of success that policy makers and administrators turn to as a measure of quality when considering public education in America. Yet an increased graduation rate is a meaningless measure if, as the ADP has argued, the value of a high school diploma has decreased. Improved test scores are likewise meaningless if, as we have seen with the students in EH 100, the knowledge they portend to measure does not transfer beyond the genre of the assessment for which it was learned.

Despite the inability of these measures to communicate actual preparation for postsecondary life, they are likely to remain valuable to policy makers and to the public for the foreseeable future. But as long as the focus in public education is on raising test

scores and graduation rates without regard to the cost of doing so some students will continue to be subjected to a curriculum that does little more than prepare them to take a test. This is not to suggest that NCLB and the AHSGE will necessarily conspire to undermine the educational quality for all students in the state. Rather, as McCarthey has suggested, only those students in the poorest schools are likely to be subjected to a curriculum molded in the service of such misplaced values, thereby perpetuating a cycle of under-preparation and exacerbating the problem of the achievement gap explicitly identified in NCLB.

Suggestions for Future Research and Conclusion

Although there are many changes on the horizon set to reshape the culture of assessment in elementary and postsecondary education, the need for research in this area has not been diminished. Rather, with new goals of providing all students with a college-ready education, it will be increasingly important to monitor the effects changes in policy have on students' preparation for postsecondary writing. While this project has focused on the impact the current system has had on students entering UAHuntsville's Intensive Writing program, future studies would benefit from an expanded scope. A similar study focused on students placed into EH 101 would allow for a better understanding of how pervasive the under-preparation of exiting high school students is as well as provide empirical evidence on the current placement methods. Such a study would require that all (or at least a significant sampling of) students entering the FYC program at UAHuntsville complete literacy narratives at the beginning of the semester and not just those enrolled in EH 100. This could be easily accomplished if the university were to adopt some variance of the directed self-placement model that incorporates writing

samples in the placement process, such as those in place at Lyndon and SIUC (Blakesley, Luna).

It would also be of interest to consider the literacy narratives of students written after their first semester of composition, be that EH 100 or EH 101. This would provide a good measure of student growth and could possibly provide an indication of the effectiveness of the course beyond the current binary of pass/fail or the only slightly more communicative indicators of letter grades. Williams has proposed having students compose multiple literacy narratives throughout a semester for this purpose, as well as for encouraging students to contemplate their own growth as writers (344-45). By taking into account the changes in perspective that take place over the course of a semester, we could gain a more realistic evaluation of our efforts than are currently available to us by looking at final grades or the results of hastily answered student surveys. This, coupled with a full accounting of longitudinal academic progress similar to what Cohen has called for would be highly valuable in determining the long-term success of the FYC program (22).

In any future studies of the FYC population at UAHuntsville, increased demographic data would be valuable in providing a fuller account of the preparation received at the secondary level. This study was only capable of providing an accounting for the gender of the students enrolled in the course; age, race, family income, placement information (ACT/SAT score), parents' level of education, and high school of origin should all be factored in as well. If, as McCarthy concludes, low-income schools are resorting to scripted methods and narrowed curriculums this should be reflected in the comparative FYC populations as well the literacy narratives of the students. This

information would also be useful in reinforcing reports that suggest an achievement gap based on race and in tracking the success of efforts to close such a gap. As suggested in Chapter Two, current methods for assessing progress made towards closing the achievement gap are ineffective, as they reflect only increased test score and graduation rates and communicate very little about the students' preparation for life after high school. Such information would also be invaluable in identifying schools that would most benefit from cooperative programs with the university focused on aligning the curriculum for college preparation.

It would be a very simplistic response to look at all of the data presented in this study and proclaim that NCLB has undermined efforts to prepare students for postsecondary writing. There are many factors, some related to federal education policy and others not, that have influenced the curriculum and instruction at the elementary and secondary levels. A primary focus of my thesis was the AHSGE; and while it is certainly a result of the standards movement in education, it predates the current incarnation of the ESEA by nearly two decades. This particular assessment tool is not in and of itself a part of any national education law. However, the high stakes placed on the exam by NCLB has increased its prominence in Alabama secondary schools and strengthened its potential to impact curriculum and instruction. The extent of that impact varies across school districts and states and across socioeconomic boundaries and just as there has been no one single impact at the secondary level, there can be no one single response at the postsecondary level. The freedom to adapt course curriculum and instructional approaches to students based on where they are in their educational progress (as opposed to where they “should” be) is still available to faculty at the colleges and universities in

this country. For the hundreds of thousands of students currently enrolled in developmental writing courses, this may prove to be the last chance for them to learn the skills that were left behind by their high school curriculums.

NOTES

^{xiv} As has been noted earlier, there were no controls in this study to account for high school of attendance. Rather, the general demographics of the school—as well as my own conversations with many of the students—lead me to imply a connection to Alabama high schools. Wherever possible or appropriate, I have avoided referencing statements that would erroneously imply a connection between ESL students and Alabama high schools.

APPENDIX

Analysis of Literacy Narratives

Stated

- A. Issues with grammar
- B. Issues with sentence structure
- C. Issues with appropriate word choice
- D. Issues with capitalization and punctuation
- E. Issues with organization skills for writing and revising
- F. ESL

Observed

- A. Issues with grammar
- B. Issues with sentence structure
- C. Issues with appropriate word choice
- D. Issues with capitalization and punctuation
- E. Issues with organization skills for writing and revising
- F. Misinterpretation of prompt

Common Statements

- A. "I want to learn to write better."
- B. "The ability to write well is important to my future success."
- C. "I have struggled in English classes in the past."
- D. "I'm scared of writing."
- E. "I'm no good at writing"
- F. "I don't enjoy academic writing."
- G. "I enjoy writing."
- H. "I enjoy creative writing."
- I. "I am a decent writer."

Figure B.1 Categories and Classifications Assigned to Analysis of Literacy Narratives

Table B.1 Detailed Results of Narrative Analysis (1 of 2)

	Gender		Stated									Observed									Common Statements											
	Male	Female	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	F	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	F	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I					
1		1																			1											
2	1									1		1														1						
3		1																	1													
4	1			1	1						1	1	1						1							1						
5	1										1			1				1														
6		1																1														
7	1							1			1	1	1									1	1									
8		1							1				1	1					1													
9		1												1											1							
10		1							1		1	1	1				1		1													
11		1					1				1									1							1					
12	1																										1					
13		1												1					1								1					
14	1		1				1				1	1					1		1				1				1					
15		1												1										1	1							
16	1				1		1																1			1						
17		1	1		1							1		1									1			1						
18	1									1	1	1				1			1	1												
19	1																1						1	1								
20		1			1		1		1				1					1			1											
21		1								1	1	1												1	1	1						
22	1				1							1	1										1									
23	1						1							1										1								
24		1	1				1			1				1																		
25		1												1									1	1								
26	1													1		1				1												
27		1					1															1	1									
28		1	1				1			1									1													
29		1										1													1							
30	1						1	1			1												1	1								
31	1						1					1							1				1				1					
32		1								1										1												
33	1												1											1								
34	1		1	1															1	1												
35		1					1												1				1									

Table B.2 Detailed Results of Narrative Analysis (2 of 2)

	Gender		Stated									Observed								Common Statements								
	Male	Female	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	F	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	F	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	
36		1	1		1																			1				
37	1																	1						1				
38		1					1					1						1	1	1			1					
39		1	1					1						1				1	1									
40	1													1														
41	1													1					1									
42	1											1	1	1							1		1					
43	1									1	1		1	1					1	1			1					
44		1												1											1		1	
45	1											1	1										1	1				
46		1												1					1	1								
47	1										1	1										1	1	1				
48		1																							1	1	1	
49		1									1	1	1													1		
50	1		1																					1		1		
51		1	1								1	1	1										1	1				
52		1	1								1	1																
53		1					1														1					1	1	
54	1																									1		
55	1										1	1		1												1		
56	1										1	1	1	1						1				1	1		1	
57	1						1		1		1			1									1					
58		1									1	1															1	
59	1										1	1	1	1								1	1	1				
60	1		1				1				1		1								1							
61		1					1							1					1		1		1					
62	1										1			1					1								1	
63		1											1	1					1									
64		1					1				1												1			1		
65		1									1	1		1									1			1		
66	1		1		1						1	1		1							1		1					
67	1						1					1							1									
	33	34	12	2	7	2	17	2	3	8	25	24	18	25	0	2	7	4	21	9	6	5	22	17	9	17	7	

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