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### Author

Moos, Andrew

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# The Injustice of Opportunity: Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, Articulation, and the Inter-Institutional Ecology of Writing Assessment

Andrew Moos, *University of Michigan*

Because writing assessment's present is bound to its past (Elliot, 2005; Poe et al., 2018), scholarship has pointed to the need for more critical inquiries of local "assessment ecologies" (Inoue, 2015) to better understand the effects of past injustices (Hammond, 2018; Harms, 2018). In understanding how opportunities are allocated unjustly within processes like articulation, compositionists must be willing to understand how postsecondary ecologies have systematically attempted to deny opportunities for certain student groups. This article does so by examining the 1935 Michigan Committee on the Articulation of High School and College English, a committee in charge of redefining readiness for first-year writing across the state of Michigan, led by Professor Clarence DeWitt Thorpe of the University of Michigan. The work of Thorpe's committee has been an under examined component of historical assessment ecologies in the Midwest and beyond. Under Thorpe's guidance, this committee shaped assessment to function across numerous institutional spaces. Utilizing this historical example, this article illustrates that narrow emphases on the ways local ecologies shape opportunities are insufficient for identifying how opportunities are structured. Instead, scholarship should be more attentive in understanding how any given local ecology is situated within a broader system of interinstitutional ecologies that define the boundaries and formations of opportunity within the space.

Keywords: opportunity, assessment ecology, writing assessment, history, social justice

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## Introduction

*The overdetermined nature of racism explains why we can change or eliminate one unfair thing in a system, or school, or classroom...yet still find that our students of color struggle and fail—even when we are there to help them, showing them that others like them have made it. We hold up the flag of opportunity and say, "Please, don't give up. Follow me!"*  
Asao Inoue (2019a)

The use of "opportunity" within the literature of assessment always invites ecological questions about what compositionists mean by opportunity: Who allocates it? Who receives it? Where does it happen? How does it occur? Within postsecondary contexts, these questions have bearing on issues of articulation—or the process of how institutions situate learning goals and outcomes with one another (Gallagher, 2012)—insofar as aiding students over the "gap" between secondary and postsecondary classrooms has been a continued concern for writing programs (Bartholomae, 1986/2011; Fanetti et al., 2010). Articulation agreements between institutions have attempted to understand who a ready or "basic writer" (Bizzell, 1986) is within specific institutions (Haswell & Elliot, 2017; Stancliffe et al., 2017), but the opportunities compositionists act upon to close gaps do not always lead to more just or fair outcomes for students; and, although perhaps "[t]he key to articulation is to start with the goals of the

assembled teachers and students, not externally formulated goals” (Gallagher, 2019, p. 496), when articulation between secondary and postsecondary institutions is understood without considering how *interinstitutional* ecological constructs are always working to displace student populations, opportunities will only be for select individuals. When we fail to consider how interconnected inequity is across our local ecologies, we enact the injustice of opportunity. In this article, I offer an example of why Inoue’s (2015) assessment ecologies must be expanded beyond the local to understand opportunity by examining the efforts of the 1935 Michigan Committee on the Articulation of High School and College English—a group that wielded significant influence over the writing standards of both universities and high schools across the state of Michigan and beyond. This group, led by University of Michigan Professor Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, consisted of representatives from Michigan and secondary schools, but it would soon grow in the years following to include “nearly all the other colleges of the state”<sup>1</sup> (Thorpe, 1945, p. 7). In examining the assessment standards used by Thorpe and the Michigan Committee in their 1935 guide, I will frame a clearer understanding of how and for whom this committee structured opportunities in first-year writing (FYW) courses. The central questions under consideration are as follows: What inequitable assumptions influenced the ways in which opportunities were shaped by Thorpe and the committee’s articulation practices, and how can an understanding of the interinstitutional and ecological nature of these unjust practices be used to further our theorization of opportunities within writing assessment? To begin, I will outline scholarship that has intertwined writing assessment with social justice and history. In doing so, I will expand Inoue’s (2015) theories of assessment ecologies to examine multidimensional aspects of injustice and interinstitutional ecologies of assessment. Inoue (2019b) himself has called for this intersectional work to be done with assessment ecologies in acknowledging how we cannot just acknowledge race in assessment conversations:

Our privileges and oppressions intersect along many separate but converging lines and can be quite different in various geographic and temporal locations. Thus, I assume that there are intersections in any given historically specific, geographic classroom and that we cannot talk about race without implicating class, economic status, even sexual and gendered identities. (p. 374)

To demonstrate how this expansion might work, I will then analyze the work of the committee and its founder Clarence DeWitt Thorpe. In my portrayal of both Thorpe and the committee, I will engage in a type of “little narrative” (Lyotard, 1984), as described by Beth Daniell (1999) and used by Tricia Serviss (2012), that seeks to reveal and complicate assessment histories through emphasizing individuals’ work. I will then frame this narrative within an interinstitutional assessment ecology of the time period by connecting the major ecological constructs in the guide itself: the student, the pedagogical space, societal needs, and professionalization that worked to shape how, where, and for whom opportunity would function. Finally, I will call attention to the need for local institutions to conduct this kind of historical and ecological

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for a list of participating colleges as of 1945.

research at their own sites for us to examine the ways interinstitutional ecologies shape opportunities in our iterating on assessment practices.

### Historicizing Opportunity

As “writing assessment best serves students when justice is taken as the ultimate aim of assessment” (Poe et al., 2018, p. 5), justice-centered approaches have become an integral way of engaging with assessment. While Norbert Elliot (2016), inspired by the work of Jonathan Rawls (1971/1999, 2001), describes fairness as being the first, unifying goal of writing assessment, in which “constraint of the writing construct is to be tolerated only to the extent to which benefits are realized for the least advantaged,” the pursuit of both justice and fairness in writing assessment are not “competing traditions” (Poe & Inoue, 2016, p. 123). Justice in writing assessment is understood as not being a lack of injustice, but rather “the relationship of individuals and the dispositions of social structures” (Poe & Inoue, 2016, p. 121). Unlike attempting to balance the need versus harm of an assessment in a “good enough” approach to assessment (Elbow, 2012), in doing the work of justice, compositionists can work to uncover the ways in which “college administrators and faculty members codify racial microaggressions in institutional policy and procedure” (Naynaha, 2016, p. 200). However, these injustices aren’t just the result of individual actors; in explaining how assessment function as ecologies, Inoue (2015) describes assessments as being political systems in which shifting dynamics of power work across, with, and against various parts, purposes, people, processes, products, and places to produce certain outcomes. These assessment ecologies are interconnected and living political systems within classrooms and institutional programs, and to therefore analyze the ways in which assessments function ecologically, we must take a macro approach that goes beyond the actions of individual actors and, instead, to what particular results the ecology produces (Inoue, 2015, p. 16). This structural understanding of justice in assessment owes a great deal to the work of Young’s (2011) *Responsibility of Justice*—which has encouraged scholars to think about structures of (in)justice and our collective and individual responsibilities.

History is one area scholars are able to take a structural perspective to engage with justice work. As explained by Banks et al. (2018), “Historical analysis of purportedly meritocratic systems associated with student advancement can be used to reveal structures of power that result in both group and individual disenfranchisement” (p. 380). In particular, the recent work of Hammond (2018, 2019), Harms (2018), and Molloy (2018) illustrates how writing assessment scholars can better engage with unjust histories of assessment. Critical insight into the past of composition matters, as “exposure and examination allows for analysis and critique of the ways that present conditions are manifold” (Poe et al., 2018, p. 28) while also allowing us to better orient the past, present, and future of writing assessment with justice work (Hammond, 2019, pp. 48-49). In “understanding the importance of assessment historically, we can center our evaluative practices more effectively in the present” and in doing so in an applicative way, studying history “becomes a way to chart specific paths for action associated with justice and fairness” (Haswell & Elliot, 2019, p. 4). In doing such work with history though, “if we are more interested in proposing rather than understanding, something or another is going to get badly nuanced” (Elliot, 2005, p. 315). However, by carefully using history to identify the actions and

agents in assessment ecologies, we may be able to engage in a kind of “imaginative” construction of the past that can allow us to better inform our current theories of assessment (Poe & Elliot, 2019).

This work provides moments for reflection, reformation, and inclusion, but what opportunity means and allows needs further theorization. Lamos’s (2011) history of opportunities in “basic writing” classrooms shows how “equal opportunity” is racialized, and Pullin and Haertel (2008) emphasize how opportunities must be further investigated in connection with both assessment and educational history. As Moss et al. (2008) found,

Questions of [opportunities to learn] cannot be equitably addressed by looking simply at content, resources, or processes of instruction, or even by looking at all three. Although these are surely important, one must look further at the relationships among particular learners and these elements of their learning environments. (p. 6)

Therefore, although opportunity can and has been studied from different theoretical and methodological perspectives, what it means to have the opportunity to learn or for it even to exist in educational spaces is historically contingent, yet it is inherently ecological.

As Poe et al. (2018) note, “Emphasis on opportunity to learn...holds the potential to play an important role in the achievement of social justice in writing assessment” (p. 5). Compositionists should seek to theorize opportunity in light of our emerging ecological understandings of interinstitutional historical spaces that have allocated opportunities unjustly, as a hyper-focus on the local neglect to demonstrate how local ecologies are shaped by unjust forces that dictate the boundaries of opportunity; consequently, interventions made from prioritizing the local run the risk of oversimplifying the scale at which these structural issues operate. As Gere et al. (in press) state, “Structural problems demand structural interventions; local action is necessary but not sufficient.” Solely investigating opportunity in local and contemporary settings limits how the scale, at which opportunity is parsed or denied, can be viewed. In setting such a narrow focus, the complexity of opportunity is lost. Therefore, I propose that, to theorize opportunity in assessment, opportunity must be understood as a structure defined by ecological constructs shared between institutional spaces in a given historical moment.

In the sections that follow, I aim to show how one Michigan professor’s historical work requires us to broaden our theorizing of how assessment ecologies shape opportunities beyond just a single classroom or writing program and through a multidimensionality of injustice. My aim is not to create a singular master narrative about this committee, time period, or even Thorpe. As Gold (2012) writes, it is not enough to identify “heroes and villains” in historical work (p. 24). Rather, I center the agents of assessments to help avoid creating a false sense of objectivity about decisions (Poe & Inoue, 2016, p. 122) and presenting an ecology that seems natural. Therefore, even though I focus mainly on the harm one individual and committee enacted in constraining opportunities for many, I do so to model how compositionists can and should connect influential actors to broader interinstitutional ecologies that individuals choose to intervene in and that intervene upon them.

## Clarence DeWitt Thorpe and the University of Michigan

Michigan has long served as an important site of historical study to the field of composition due to its influence on the practices of writing instruction (Berlin, 1987). The ecology of Michigan around the early to mid-1900s serves as a helpful site of investigating how interinstitutional ecologies shape opportunity not because Michigan was an aberration, rather, because it stood for what it meant to be a typical site for elite education at that time. Michigan was not the first college to diversify its student body beyond wealthy White males, even though it was the one of the largest and most prestigious public institutions when the first Black male students enrolled in 1868 and White female students in 1870 (McGuigan, 1970, pp. 2, 30). However, even at a place that may have been *relatively* progressive in its attitudes toward White women and male students of color, we see injustice enacted.

Professor of English and Education, Clarence DeWitt Thorpe spent the majority of his career (1924-1959) at Michigan. The published enrollment data for Michigan in 1935 show that the majority (63.38%) of the students were male, and the vast majority (97.97%) of students were from the United States (University of Michigan [UM] General Register, 1936, p. 163). These ratios of male-to-female students and national-to-international students remained relatively stable between 1926-1935, between around the time Thorpe arrived at Michigan and the publication of the guide (Report, 1928; UM General Register, 1936). However, the overall student population did almost double between these years. It was during these same years that the university did also see increases in the number of out-of-state students enrolled in Michigan (Wechsler, 1977, p. 242). Furthermore, shifts in the culture of the campus occurred, with feminist efforts leading to the founding of the Women's League in 1929 (Diversity & Minorities, n.d., p. 131) and the establishing of the International Center in 1938 for international students (p. 268). It is important to note the president of Michigan during Thorpe's initial years (1925-1929) was outspoken eugenicist Clarence Cook "C.C." Little (Belmont, 2019).

Although Little's eugenicist beliefs were common within the broader cultural economy of American higher education of this time (Cohen, 2016), it is worth recognizing how, in his few years as president, he worked to reverse Michigan's more liberal policies toward women and coeducation that the former President James Burrill Angell had enacted. During his tenure, Little pushed for women to pursue only fields of study "that would prepare them primarily for the role of homemakers and mothers," shaping Michigan's attitudes toward the abilities of women in higher education for decades to come (McGuigan, 1970, p. 105). Misogynistic attitudes in faculty members were rampant, as evidenced by graduate student Ruth Wood's response to a 1924 survey concerning the climate of the campus: She emphasized in her response, "Michigan's sentimental and antiquated attitude toward women.... [as o]fficers as well as students are unable to recognize professional intellectuality in women" (Attaway & Barritt, 2000, p. 21). Up until 1956, women were not allowed to enter the student union unless accompanied by a man, and they were not allowed to use the front entrance of the union at all (University Unions, 2020). Housing, furthermore, was also racially segregated, with records of one Black female student who questioned this policy reportedly being met at the town's train station and

forcibly turned away by one of the deans (University of Michigan Bars Girl, 1931). In light of these structural conditions, Michigan upon Thorpe's arrival and the publishing of the guide was a site of multiple overlapping exclusions, both of students of color, women, and—at their intersection—women of color. These conditions reflect a set of assumptions on the part of those in power regarding for what ends both Michigan and the academy should operate, and which groups had a place in it.

Thorpe's published scholarly work focused mostly on literary criticism and the work of John Keats (Thorpe, 1939); however, his appointment to "Chairman of the English Department in the University High School" in 1929 "brought him into active leadership in the field of the teaching of secondary English, both in the state of Michigan and in the nation at large" (Stevens et al., 1959). While serving in this position, one of Thorpe's goals was to aid articulation efforts by informing university students and high school teachers of the writing standards at Michigan. It was with this mission that Thorpe worked to bridge the transition between high-school and university writing and "to avoid [what he saw as] serious and often, for the students concerned, disastrous gaps between high-school attainment and college requirements" (Thorpe, 1946, p. 95).

The fruit of Thorpe and his committee's efforts would be the guide published in 1935 titled *Preparation for College English: An Interpretation of College Entrance Requirements in English*. While Harker (2015) may have illustrated how the guide was an attempt to solve the problem of efficiency for the overworked composition teacher, this guide most explicitly positioned itself as an articulation aid for students, teachers, and institutions to know the standards to which student writing would be held at Michigan and thereby allow schools to "carry on their work with greater continuity and effectiveness" (p. 7). The committee declared within this guide that one of the most fundamental rights an incoming student to Michigan should have is "the right to know all that can be known of the standard of attainment to which he will be asked to measure up when he enters his freshman classes" (Thorpe et al., 1935, p. 7). Inspired by a report Thorpe helped develop on high-school English assessment standards by the North Central Association (NCA)—an accreditation institution, founded in 1895, which evaluated schools in an effort to further "the development and maintenance of high standards of excellence in all of its member schools" (NCA, 1951, p. 7)—the committee attempted to provide an explanation of the standards of Michigan's composition classes, contextualized with examples of corrected and analyzed student-produced work at Michigan.

To understand how one individual and committee intervened within local assessment ecologies across the Midwest, we must be sensitive to the broader national trends in education that were working to influence perceived goals and problems in education. In the sections below, I aim to establish how both national and local elements affected the assessment ecology of Michigan during Thorpe's time, particularly surrounding his arrival and the publishing of the guide. The first section will analyze the 1935 guidebook to identify four ecological constructs operating within it. In the following four subsections, I will investigate how those four ecological constructs—the student, pedagogical spaces, societal needs, and professionalization—are a

part of an interinstitutional ecology shaped by racism, sexism, and classism within the scholarship of Thorpe and others.

### **Beyond the Local: How Interinstitutional Ecologies Shape Assessment**

It was because of the NCA's standards that Thorpe "rallied the Michigan Council of Teachers of English and from its ranks drew the Michigan Committee" (Stevens et al., 1959). While the NCA standards were reproduced within the guide (Thorpe et al., 1935, pp. 8-10), the Michigan Committee believed they could be of service in demonstrating how these standards should be carried out in "actual practice in University freshman classes" (p. 7). Clear and unforgiving standards of assessment that enforced "good" English were deemed essential to enabling more consistent programs in writing that would prevent degradation of students' skills between years (Thorpe, 1935, p. 70). Therefore, the purpose of Thorpe et al.'s (1935) Michigan guide was twofold: to establish a clear lock-step standard across FYW classes at Michigan, standards which could be worked toward by elementary and secondary schools to help eliminate the "unfortunate waste in teaching English" that results from curricula that lack continuity between schools (p. 7), and to allow students to examine the given standards and assessed student samples and, "by comparing his own writing with these themes, tell fairly well whether he measured up to the standards held by the English department for entering freshmen" (p. 15). The reason for these purposes was to install a specific understanding of "good English" in all students.

Thorpe and the committee sold their guide as a tool for student empowerment in more transparently allowing a student to know the "standard of attainment to which he will be asked to measure up..." (Thorpe et al., 1935, p. 7). However, this guide also was intended to service society: for instance, the affluent, White male groups that Thorpe et al. belonged to. For example, the committee's depiction of what "decency" means to writing carries strong undertones related to both race and class:

Decency means such a mastery of acceptable forms as not to offend the taste of cultivated people.... [It] bears the same relation to speaking and writing that good table manners have to eating. The school-boy who declares, 'We ain't goin' to have no baseball team this year' ... is not using language with decency. (Thorpe et al., 1935, p. 12)

The NCA standards that inspired this guide contained similar depictions of certain Englishes: "Slovenly English... [is] in the same category with dirty hands" (Miller, 1931a, p. 725), and in his own, individual work Thorpe expressed that people who would use "vulgarity" such as *ain't*, *haint*, or *ast* (for asked), "indicate lack of education, good breeding, and refinement" (Thorpe et al., 1934, p. 666).



Further evidence of classist considerations can be seen in what genres and subjects of writing Thorpe et al.'s (1935) guide view as important. While the guide does touch on many aspects of what they consider necessary for good writing, they only choose to pull out one extracurricular genre for special mention that students should already be familiar with upon arrival at the university, the genre of the business letter. The committee even goes so far as to mandate the preferred salutations and valedictions for business letters that students would be expected to be familiar with upon their arrival (Thorpe et al., 1935, p. 14), which would assume students have a particular socioeconomic family background. Furthermore, with the essay prompt options suggested for their imagined students in the later 1945 version, there is a heavy emphasis on American life and culture: "One reason I believe in American democracy .... Flag waving is not enough .... Why I regularly read Time (or the Saturday Evening Post, Harper's Life, etc.) .... A square deal for the alien in America means..." (Thorpe, 1945, pp. 18-19). These prompts are emblematic of—as discussed by Hammond (2018)—a wave of Americanization efforts published in journals such as *English Journal* (a journal Thorpe regularly published in) that sought to address the "problem" of the "foreigner in our schools" (p. 17). This focus on American/Anglo standards and Americanization is further emphasized by the assumption of English being all students' "mother tongue" (Thorpe et al., 1935, p. 11).

In continued efforts to erase the existence of some individuals, these standards were to be enforced on not just the written texts of the students but their spoken language as well in creating a "framework for continuity" (Thorpe, 1945, p. 7). Students in the committee's ideal ecology would be in a constant state of surveillance. Everything students produced or did was to be assessed: their speaking ability, their reading ability, and their writing ability in academic English were all to be measured and corrected:

If this training could be made more complete, could be made to embrace the pupil's entire school life, so that every child would be assured a thorough discipline in his mother tongue, many of the more technical language difficulties which now seem insurmountable ... would already have been overcome. (Thorpe et al., 1935, pp. 11-12)

The NCA reports that Thorpe worked on (Miller, 1931a, 1931b) suggested a practical means for conducting this surveillance across pedagogical spaces—the use of cards filled out by teachers to anonymously report students to the English department:

As an aid to good work it is clearly necessary for teachers of all subjects to co-operate in maintaining reasonable standards in speaking and writing. The card forms which accompany this letter furnish convenient means for you to report students for particular help. Will you be good enough to fill them out...as occasion arises? (Miller, 1931b, p. 633)

Teachers in other subjects, when they believed they had observed a violation of language decency, would fill out and sign a card and indicate who the pupil was and what error was committed.

Thorpe (1931a) additionally argued that a type of language screening and surveillance should also be done to professionalize staff as well:

When [the principal] hires his teachers he [should insist] that all, from the first grade up, shall have the ability to speak and write good English, and when he visits them in their classrooms he checks on their capacities to express themselves in acceptable language. (p. 282)

These all-encompassing assessments would serve to instill fear in students and staff, resulting in the persecution and elimination of any and all perceived differences in continuing efforts to impose cultural homogenization. These standards from Thorpe et al. (1935) illustrate how little issues of equity were considered in developing these standardized assessment criteria that they viewed as being “needed by our country as a whole” (p. 12).

The end result from this 1935 guidebook would be to produce a homogenous student body, culled by years of biased, standardized assessment practices. Thorpe’s (1946) hope was to use these assessment criteria to foster students with drive and motivation, “the only kind of motivation that is in the end productive of right attitudes and of willing, self-sustaining effort” (p. 97), but in reality, these standards served to further a status quo of institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, and bigotry while masquerading as an attempt to reward hard work and good character with further access to education. By building this continuous framework for assessment that evaluated and shaped every student and school throughout kindergarten and leading into FYW in college, the committee’s standards embedded constructs that served to target individuals and block off opportunities for them, both at Michigan and other institutions.

### **The Student: Education for the Bright-Normal Individual**

*Who are opportunities for?* Throughout his career, Thorpe expressed concern with what he perceived to be declining language ability. Much of his pedagogical work focused on “advancing the cause of *good English* [emphasis added]” (Thorpe, 1936, p. 70), and in his pedagogical writings he seemed to fixate on a certain type of student that he deemed worthy of teaching: “the bright-normal pupil” (Thorpe, 1946, p. 95). This designation was likely taken from David Wechsler’s (1939) IQ classification, which labeled individuals with an IQ between 111-119 as “bright-normal” (p. 166).

**Table 1**  
*Intelligence Classifications*

I.Q.	Classification	Percent Included
128 and over	Very Superior	2.2
120-127	Superior	6.7
111-119	Bright Normal	16.1
91-110	Average	50.0
80-90	Dull Normal	16.1
66-79	Borderline	6.7
65 and below	Mental Defective	2.2

*Note.* Adapted from *The Measure of Adult Intelligence*, by D. Wechsler, 1939, p. 41.

As seen in Table 1, the bright-normal designation and higher only accounted for 25% of the population, and Thorpe seemed to believe that the remaining 75% of students classified below the bright-normal category needn't be worried about, as equality of outcomes for students shouldn't be prioritized in education: "The democratic plan of education to which we are committed, we have in our schools and are obliged to provide for the dull, the unfit, and the lazy, as well as the bright and the efficient ...It is quite right that, conditions being as they are, we should give up the idea of equal attainment for all" (Thorpe, 1936, p. 70). It should be noted, as Pullin and Haertel (2008) detail, these IQ categories and differences in scores found between students of various races, ethnicities, and nationalities "also offered a convenient, 'scientific' explanation for the poorer school performance of children of immigrants and children of color" (pp. 25-26).

The category of "bright-normal" obviously was not used by Thorpe until after Wechsler's (1939) publication on the topic, but his fascination with standards and categorization of students is seen from the beginning of his teaching career at the Northern Arizona Normal School. It was here that Thorpe first worked to identify "dull" and "bright" students by demanding precise language use from his students, going so far as to make a game of it called "the better-speech movement." Played during the entirety of the summer semester, students were instructed to use "the best English possible, with an absolute taboo on slang and other vulgarities;" each student held others accountable for their English by keeping "an ear open for slips in the speech of those about him" and recording their classmates' mistakes and correcting their language in their notebooks (Thorpe, 1917, p. 485). As Hammond (2018) notes, games of this type were typically used by teachers of the time to stamp out any trace of "foreign" languages and accents in students, in a broad attempt at "cultural homogenization" (pp. 61-62). Additional writings from Thorpe around this same time seem to indicate that his belief in discriminating between

students through IQ categories may also be due to determinist beliefs that some students naturally failed while others succeeded.

It is not enough to have something to say and to be able to put it into English; one must know how to say it in the most telling way...The American Beauty rose is natural enough, but the main reason it is different from its scraggly little roadside cousin is that it has been well brought up. Its native leanings toward beauty have been developed to their utmost. (Lockwood & Thorpe, 1922, p. 62)

Thorpe continued to express concerns about “good” English in later chairing the Committee for the Promotion of Better English during his time at his following position at the University of Oregon, during which he campaigned for Oregon schools to include greater correction of students’ spoken English (Thorpe, 1922, p. 40).

However, it was during his time at Michigan—in the years during and following World War I and the Great Depression, in which “women entered in greater numbers and the diversity of undergraduates noticeably increased” at Michigan (Bailey, n.d., p. 149)—that Thorpe believed a crisis in literacy was occurring amongst many students all over the state and country. The source of many of these problems was, in Thorpe’s opinion, due to the apparent lack of clear standards guiding young writers (Thorpe, n.d., 1935, 1938, 1939). Yet Thorpe also believed that this moment presented to educators an opportunity to revitalize the writing systems both in the high schools and the universities of Michigan and the nation at large for students. This opportunity could be seized through a two-pronged focus of attack: A more consistent university presence of language standards throughout all secondary school systems needed to be established to help enforce good English (Thorpe et al., 1935), and changes had to be made to both align teachers and students with these standards by altering who was teaching in the English classroom.

### **Pedagogical Spaces: The Over-Feminization of the Classroom**

*What spaces provide opportunities?* Thorpe (1931b) believed that administrators should be concerned with maintaining a strong male presence in schools: “It hardly needs saying that in fairness to the boys there should be a goodly proportion of men in the department” (p. 83). In an unpublished article written around the early 1930s titled “An Opportunity,” Thorpe (n.d.) speculated that “the evil of the over-feminization” of teachers in schools was the cause of the ongoing literacy crisis, and that these teachers, whom he describes as “the tramp teacher, the butterfly [who flits from job to job], and the trowseau-hunting [the husband-hunting] type” had caused “incalculable” damage to the school system (pp. 2-3). Thorpe was concerned with what he viewed as a disproportionate number of female teachers serving male students in secondary education, and this essay was responding here to several decades worth of increases in the proportion of female teachers, which would see female teachers making up more than 86% of all K-12 teachers in the early 1920s (National Center, 1993). Although Thorpe (n.d.) claimed that “there can be nothing finer in the world than a fine woman teacher” (p. 3), he believed most female teachers to be incapable of educating high-school boys, as male students would be

forced to “adjust their male vision as to see life that is in books through feminine eyes” (p. 4). According to Thorpe (n.d.), being instructed in the English classroom by a female teacher would be a challenge for male students, and therefore the most equitable solution would be to reduce the number of female teachers in schools to “leaven the loaf to make it palatable and fully nourishing to our adolescent boys” (p. 4).

Thorpe was not alone in framing the presence of female teachers in schools as a problem. Debates about the effects of feminization of curricula and pedagogy have continued within the field of composition (see Flynn, 1995; Lauer, 1995; Schell, 1992). However, the topic of the “feminization” of school—and it carrying an inherently negative meaning—was rather common in Thorpe’s time, with concerns being expressed in scholarship well before his tenure: “From various sources the cry resounds that our schools, or our boys—or both—are being ‘feminized’” (Tufts, 1909, p. 55). The Male Teachers Association in particular had historically argued for the need for more male teachers, noting that “formerly women were employed as teachers because such a practice was deemed expedient. Men were then considered the ideal teachers” (Butler, 1904, p. 99). The reasons for these concerns about female teachers fell broadly into two categories, which Tufts (1909) outlines: “These complaints [about feminization] fall under two main heads—the subject matter and the personnel of our schools” (p. 56). Male educators, including Thorpe (n.d.) as evidenced by his essay, were concerned about the lack of male role models for male students in the classroom—and the ensuing turnover that they believed would occur from unmarried female teachers marrying and leaving the profession. Additionally, they believed that women would feminize—and therefore harm—the reading and writing curriculum of the classroom through also “feminiz[ing] the methods of teaching” (Butler, 1904, p. 102). Thorpe (n.d.) closed his argument in “An Opportunity” by claiming that this opportunity to reshape the spaces of education by altering who was allowed to teach would aid articulation efforts by giving “a new firmness and breadth to our whole secondary school structure” (p. 4). The space of the classroom in being more male dominated would allow Thorpe and like-minded individuals the opportunity to further establish patriarchal elements in classrooms under the guise of more “firm” standards and curricula, specifically regarding language.

### **Societal Needs: Identifying “the Poorest Passing Student”**

*How do benchmarks dictate opportunity?* The 1935 guidebook attempted to streamline articulation efforts by suggesting that its standards “should extend below the high school, either junior or senior, into the lower grades” (Thorpe et al., 1935, p. 7). While in his career, Thorpe did not claim to be entirely against the aims of progressive education that sought to see students more as individual learners, he critiqued what he saw as progressive education’s lack of attention to the “needs of society” in favor of a sense of “exaggerated individualism” (Thorpe, 1943, p. 5). Thorpe’s views here were also not atypical for the time. Other scholars wrote similarly of the “problem of articulation” in suggesting the need for schools to move away from “the establishment of a philosophy of education which centers attention upon growth of the pupil and not upon the attainment of standards from without” (Smith, 1940, p. 147).

Thorpe's thinking here and his "framework for continuity" seems to have been inspired by the "minimal essentials" movement of the 1920s. This movement sought to encourage educators to establish minimum standards as being an essential part of coursework, in expressing "the measure of attainment of the poorest passing student" (Klingman, 1920, p. 3). In doing this, students were seen as homogenous clusters that moved from grade to grade, capable of developing knowledge at the same pace. This influence on Thorpe is evidenced by his actions as the chair for the "Promotion of Better English" committee, during which Thorpe distributed handouts to teachers explicitly asking them to confirm that they had "tried the plan of minimal essentials in written and oral English," so as to hold these educators "responsible for having taught certain fundamentals" (Questionnaire, n.d.). Thorpe continued to believe in minimal essentials as seen in both his work on the NCA reports (Miller, 1931a, 1931b) and a later essay of his, where he referred to the achievement of "economy in composition," being only when students as a unit are "always conserving, building on the past, and consistently advancing" (Thorpe, 1931a, p. 283).

It, however, is impossible to talk about the minimal essentials movement without returning to and further connecting Thorpe's beliefs about intelligence classifications and "good" English. It was perhaps due to Thorpe's aforementioned determinist beliefs about natural intelligence that the minimal essentials movement seemed to make sense to Thorpe and seem like a natural pedagogical pairing. Pullin and Haertel (2008) note how IQ tests in education were often used "to sort children into homogeneous ability groups, [so that] bright children would no longer be bored or held back, and less capable children would no longer be frustrated by exposure to content or pacing beyond their capacity" (p. 25). Shifting toward more male teachers and stricter frameworks might provide a way of upholding standards and increasing literacy, but homogenizing the population of students allowed in the classroom through using descriptors of IQ like "bright-normal" would surely make the maintenance of standards even simpler. Thorpe states his frustration with the heterogeneity of the classroom and "dull" students in saying, "It were better that dull, lifeless speakers had never been born. They hurt good causes and waste people's time" (Lockwood & Thorpe, 1922, p. 65). His later scholarship partially walks back some of the extremity of these initial comments to offer the possibility of using remedial classes to separate out some students although he still describes teaching remedial students as being beneath him (Thorpe, 1938, p. 25). However, regardless if these students were not for him to educate, he believed the system needed to separate them from their better testing colleagues before their problems spread: "The dull child must be cared for— perhaps, some day, in a different kind of school entirely" (p. 71). To set the benchmark for the poorest passing student then, Thorpe suggested using language ability to separate students into academic or vocational tracks (Thorpe, 1938, p. 23) wherein vocational was deemed by Thorpe to be a lesser form of education. A contentious debate concerning the purpose of secondary education being vocational or college-preparatory had dominated many conversations of the previous two decades (Krug, 1964, p. 291). While some sought to compromise in finding the merit of both tracks, Thorpe's (1943) classist distaste for vocational education can be seen in his critique of a colleague's support for increasing vocational programs: "[vocational education] doesn't do much to help people to learn to read well, to think straight, or to vote more intelligently, does it? (p. 3). Thorpe often used classist metaphors in comparing "formal speech...to full dress in clothes and

manners at a ball or reception.... [while i]lliterate speech is language in shirtsleeves ...” (Thorpe et al., 1934, p. 674). Thorpe seemed fond of quoting other classist opinions from colleagues in his work as well, such as the following he attributes to his fellow professor, G. K. Stanley: “The voice of the lazy sounds vulgar, that of the overworked weak” (Lockwood & Thorpe, 1922, p. 71).

Thorpe’s distinction between whose language was formal (and therefore compatible with his framework for continuity) and whose was illiterate seemed to him to be a natural divide, likely influenced by determinist beliefs about intelligence. To Thorpe, good English represented more than just a way of clear communication; it was also an indicator of a person’s character and upbringing:

The voice is an index of one’s personality; it reflects the moods and emotions of the inner life; it betrays what is hard and unkind and untrue, or it reveals that which is lovely and sweet and strong. A concern then for him who would have a good voice is to live a sincere, decent life, trying always to express his true thought and feeling in simple, plain speech. He will be sure then to avoid such “mere vocal quackery” as working up a set tone and manner, “such as that mawkish, insipid voice which some women cultivate as revealing their sweetness of soul.” (Lockwood & Thorpe, 1922, p. 63)

In justifying this connection between language, voice, and morality, Thorpe is quoting the scholarship of public speaking Professor Alma Bullowa. In the particular piece that Thorpe cites, Bullowa (1920) is making the argument that some students’ language is predisposed to be that of the “savages,” and Bullowa laments how cultures and classes she viewed as inferior had tainted the language of the college student in America:

It was the false pride of all students—not alone college Freshmen—to limit the vocabulary and to use sufficient of the current slang to make their English savor of the lowest social classes. On the other hand, among the cultured of Greece and Rome we know that speech arts were assiduously cultivated, and among the cultured classes in England speech never lost its place as an art worthy of attention.... Here in America our language has not come as an inheritance to a large number of people. (pp. 24-25)

The classist remark in referring to the “lowest social classes” and the racism in the othering of individuals through the labeling of “our language” in elevating Greece, Rome, and (some of) England to the status of a higher culture shows how Bullowa—and those who favorably cited this work—would be arguing about more than just language in establishing where society’s benchmark should be for who gets into writing classrooms. Barring some students from the classroom to help others was viewed by Thorpe (1946) as justifiable, as “boys or girls who come to college inadequately trained...are pretty certain to be weak in thought and inept and inarticulate in conveying what little they may have in their heads” (p. 98).

## Professionalization: NCA Standards and Top-Down Assessment Models

*From where are opportunities dictated?* While Thorpe's scholarship throughout his career persuaded educators to consider racist, misogynistic, and classist systems of assessment in writing classrooms and beyond, it was with the guidebook that he and his colleagues first began to attempt to widely enforce this vision through the implementation of language standards for colleges and high schools across the United States. To assist in advancing Thorpe's fight for good English, the Michigan Committee developed a consultants program that directly advised more than 60 schools (Booth & Bader, 1936; Thorpe, 1945) with some accounts believing the number to be closer to 150 (Rice, 1940, p. 143). The goal of the consultants program was to help "bewildered high school teachers" rework their language standards to more closely match Thorpe and the committee's suggestions (Booth & Bader, 1936, p. 2). This program would be led by Thorpe's colleague Bert E. Boothe, an instructor in the Rhetoric department (Michigan Daily, 1935), and Boothe's work as a consultant would help Thorpe's "influence [reach] into the classrooms and curricula of the high schools of America" during the next few years and beyond (Stevens et al., 1959).

At the outset two, and then later three, consultants were appointed. A list of Michigan high schools selected so as to represent different districts and different classes (small schools, large schools, urban schools, country schools) was made up, and six schools from outside the state were added as "control." (Rice, 1940, p. 140)

The program sent out representatives into high schools, held workshops for teachers, collected and critiqued teachers' assignment prompts, and attempted to properly demonstrate how to assess student work (Booth & Bader, 1936, p. 3). These workshops were each well attended, averaging more than 100 teachers at every session, and Michigan funded the consultant program with \$3,500 annually (Rice, 1940)—approximately \$66,000 in 2020.

Due to lack of personnel available initially, the majority of these consultants' practices consisted of simply having high schools send in a self-selected sample of student papers (Booth & Bader, 1936). These papers would be solely examined by the consultants and evaluated to the standards of Michigan. Despite efforts in the program to examine "different districts and different classes" (Rice, 1940, p. 140), the numerous remarks correlating good English with certain identities, behaviors, or possessions shows that divergence from Michigan standards would be viewed in solely a deficit way (i.e., in need of remediation). Because the consultant program was solely interested in professionalizing other institutions to the benchmarks of Michigan, the individualized context of school districts was seemingly not seriously considered. This is exemplified by one letter from an administrator at Detroit Northern who after reiterating the main advice the consultants suggested—have students write longer and more frequent themes— informs them of why they don't already do that at Detroit Northern:

The problem of longer themes... [o]ur teachers meet about two hundred pupils daily, forty or more to the class. This program does not admit of much activity outside the classroom, except for preparations and the completion of records and reports. Therefore, virtually all the reading of themes must be accomplished during spare time at



home; and I think if a teacher is to report the next day with enthusiasms properly renewed she should not be too greatly burdened in this respect. (Boothe & Bader, 1936, p. 6)

Over the many years that would follow, school boards, principals, and teachers alike acquiesced to Thorpe's expertise in their eagerness for university mandated assessment. Letters poured in from high schools praising Thorpe and his committee for their generous help, and many high school English departments purchased dozens of copies of the committee's guidebook for their writing teachers (Boothe & Bader, 1936). The guide from the Michigan Committee gained much attention from the local students, quickly becoming a bestseller of the University Press (Michigan Daily, 1935), and Thorpe was awarded a lifetime achievement award by the Michigan Council of Teachers of English for "his inspirational leadership and devoted service" (Stevens et al., 1959). His guide would continue to be revised and used at Michigan and beyond, first by himself—in 1945—and then by his colleague Arno Bader in 1958.

### **Implications for Practices and Further Study**

The standards and scholarship developed by Thorpe and the committee made it clear that Thorpe and his colleagues viewed good English as being "a matter of character" (Thorpe, 1946, p. 106). As the many conversations identified in preceding sections show, these ideas seemed an innocuous way of aiding articulation efforts for students. The assessment ecologies presented in the scholarship seemingly influenced Thorpe et al.'s (1935) views on their local pedagogical spaces, and—in turn—they created an assessment tool that sought to prevent students having "slipshod or slovenly attitudes and thinking and ways of living" (p. 106) from being considered successful in Michigan and numerous other institutions as well.

One benefit in using social justice theory alongside writing assessment theory is that it encourages us "to shift the focus from the potential harm done by writing assessment to a more expansive view of the possibilities of writing assessment" (Poe et al., 2018, p. 4). In examining issues of social justice in the classroom, compositionists are forced to confront the reality that our current methods and practices may be just as harmful, offensive, and disturbing as Thorpe's now seem to us if we don't *consistently* work to understand how our assessment practices are a part of the larger university system and how that university system is a part of an even larger interinstitutional ecology that provides, creates, restricts, and destroys opportunities. This kind of critical reflection can only be understood in expanding focus beyond local ecologies and into interinstitutional spaces. While examining how opportunity is structured at the local level is helpful, in solely focusing on the local it becomes tempting to view the strides made in our individual assessment practices as being more affording of opportunity than they actually are. However, through engaging in examinations of the ways in which our local ecologies map into broader interinstitutional ecologies, we can try to maintain a multidimensional perspective of justice, fairness, and opportunity that is cognizant of how our local ecologies are defined by much more complex constructs in our classroom spaces.

Telling the history of one person and focusing on their role and beliefs in developing influential assessment practices in an ecological context can be one of the ways we can seek to understand how assessments can be inattentive to how opportunities are connected to race, gender, and class. However, opportunities for assessment such as articulation that span spaces and shape people across multiple institutional sites require us to go beyond individual people, classrooms, and writing programs. As evidenced by my interinstitutional examination of Thorpe, isolating these individuals only within their local ecologies doesn't allow us to be attentive to the broader disciplinary ecology in examining how opportunities have been provided or limited. In expanding our notions of assessment ecologies by acknowledging the necessity of contextualizing our local ecologies within interinstitutional assessment ecologies, we can more clearly see the scale at which these systems of oppression are operating and influencing our programs and classrooms.

As Poe et al. (2018) suggest, examining history through a social justice lens “reveals normative fixations and yields reflexive engagement” (p. 22). When we reconsider ecologies alongside a multitude of injustices related to race, gender, and/or class we can better understand how depictions of good English in assessments can and have normalized injustice within our practices. Through debunking illusions of writing assessments as being completely fair, opportunities always just, and complicating our local histories of assessment by situating them more broadly, we can be more conscientious about how we are engaging with issues of race, gender, and class in developing assessment practices. In a brief moment of uncharacteristic vulnerability in his scholarship, Thorpe (1938) himself demonstrated this never-ending work of reflexivity:

Where shall we find the standards we need? To whom shall we go for our authority as to what to expect of our pupils in language and composition and reading by the end of the sixth, of the ninth, of the twelfth grade? In simple honesty we are at present somewhat inadequately equipped with such authority, and that such authority as we have needs, no doubt, to be constantly revised. (p. 24)

In investigating how our writing assessment practices shape opportunities, we must first work to build a better understanding of both institutions' and composition's present as well as their past. Only by first understanding both the local and the interinstitutional ecological contexts can we begin to understand how the injustice of opportunity has pervaded our assessments in FYW and beyond.

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## Appendix A

### Colleges Participating in the Michigan Project on the Articulation of High-School and College English

Adrian College	Michigan State College of Agriculture and
Allison College	Applied Science
Alma College	Michigan State Normal College
Aquinas College	Muskegon Junior College
Bay City Junior College	Nazareth College
Central Michigan College of Education	Northern Michigan College of Education
Emmanuel Missionary College	Port Huron Junior College
Flint Junior College	Siena Heights College
Grand Rapids Junior College	Spring Arbor Seminary and Junior
Highland Park Junior College	College
Hillsdale College	St. Mary's College
Hope College	University of Detroit
Jackson Junior College	University of Michigan
Kalamazoo College	Wayne University
Marygrove College	Western Michigan College of Education
Michigan College of Mining and Technology	

- Colleges as reported in *Preparation for College English: An Interpretation of College Entrance Requirements* (Thorpe, 1945, p. 2).