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Liberal Learning, Professional Training, and Disciplinarity in the Age of Educational “Reform”: Remodeling General Education

Linda Adler-Kassner

Policy leaders seem to think that they need to eviscerate the liberal arts in order to grow the economy. But what do employers themselves actually say about their own priorities for the kinds of learning that college students need to succeed in today’s innovation-fueled economy? Do employers share policy makers’ disdain for the liberal arts? Are they calling on higher education to focus more narrowly on workforce development and eliminate the liberal arts dimensions of college learning? [. . .] [T]he worrisome disconnect is not between study in the liberal arts and preparation for success in today’s economy, but rather between leading policy makers’ views of the kind of preparation students need and the overlapping views of educators and employers.

—Carol Geary Schneider

This excerpt, from a recent column by Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) president Carol Geary Schneider, captures an issue underscoring some of the most powerful education reform efforts currently underway: the differing perceptions inside and outside of the academy of liberal learning and education for what has come to be called “college and career readiness.” Current reforms extending from the college- and career-ready agenda have thus far largely been focused on K–12 schooling. However, as Schneider’s column suggests, postsecondary education is also becoming a target for change as connections between college learning and professional training come under scrutiny.¹

General education (GE) courses intended to impart strategies associated with

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liberal education are highlighted in discussions of college and career readiness; because writing courses are associated with “skills” or “competencies” directly linked with career success, they are often more explicitly addressed. Writing (sometimes included under the heading of “communication”) is rightly seen as a strategy that is critical for this success. For this reason, policy efforts undertaken in the name of the college- and career-readiness agenda hold the potential to significantly affect the shape of college writing instruction (see, for example, “Lumina Foundation Strategic Plan”; King). A central goal of the agenda, for instance, is to eliminate the need for “remedial” writing courses, which (in policy discourse) are seen as expensive and time-consuming, slowing students’ progress to degree (see Complete College America). Occasionally some of these reform efforts also extend beyond remedial writing, suggesting that if students demonstrate proficiency with standards (via performance at a particular level on their assessments), there will be little or no need for first-year writing courses, either. For instance, a recent report from Achieve, a primary driver of the college- and career-readiness agenda, posited that as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were implemented, “English composition” might “be a developmental course for those students who still need to learn how to write research papers” (*Connecting* 5).

There is no doubting the power of the college- and career-readiness agenda. Backed by millions of dollars from foundations such as Lumina and Gates,² wound through initiatives at the local, regional, state, and national level, the notion that education is intended to do anything *but* prepare students for college and career readiness is virtually anathema. In this sense, college and career readiness is an excellent example of a strong frame, dominating discussions about students and learning through language that is coming to be seen as “commonsense” (see Adler-Kassner and O’Neill). Because of this increased attention to strategies (or “skills”) developed in general education—especially and explicitly, writing courses—reform efforts undertaken in the name of college and career readiness should be of immediate concern to college writing instructors and, more broadly, instructors involved with general education. Indeed, many postsecondary educators, especially those in the humanities, have attempted to contribute to discussions of the relevance of general education broadly (for example, AAC&U), and of writing courses more specifically (for example, Council of Writing Program Administrators) in the midst of these discussions. But to forge grounded responses to attempts to remake general education, it is critical to examine how educational reformers perceive postsecondary education and consider these perceptions in any effort.

In this article, I examine the complicated challenges that reform efforts undertaken under the auspices of the college- and career-readiness agenda present to general education. To center what could be a sprawling analysis, I focus on the ways in which efforts linked to two prominent college- and career-ready initiatives—the

Common Core State Standards and competency-based education (CBE)—are intended to address a tension between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity identified by educational historian David Labaree (“Mutual”). This tension is perceived differently by postsecondary educators and educational reformers. Inside the academy, it is understood to contribute to a state of equilibrium, a balance that is reflected in the structure of general education. But educational reformers see it differently; they find that this tension contributes to a dysfunctional state of stress that causes harm to students and negatively affects the academy’s ability to work in the interest of a particular conceptualization of “public good” (Labaree, “Public”). To illustrate these differing understandings, I begin by briefly describing the ways in which the very structure of GE programs sought to balance the liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Next, I examine the ways in which this tension has been portrayed as dysfunctional in contemporary educational reform, describing how the CCSS and initiatives linked to CBE attempt to resolve the tension between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity by reframing the public good and education’s role in serving that good. Finally, I conclude by outlining a grounded strategy for remodeling general education that attempts to address concerns of those inside and outside of the academy.

LIBERAL LEARNING, PROFESSIONAL TRAINING, AND DISCIPLINARITY: PRODUCTIVE TENSION OR STRAIN?

Efforts within the academy to create the dynamic tension between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity that I describe here are ubiquitous in general education as it was conceived of during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historian Gary Miller notes, the “general education paradigm” was developed to encompass intellectual development (liberal learning); “curricular unity” via specialized, discipline-based inquiry (disciplinarity); and training for participation in the broader culture (professional training) (5). Across Miller’s work and that of others who have examined the history of general education (for example, Menand; Newton), it is possible to identify three models for general education that typify attempts to achieve this equilibrium.

The first model, visible at institutions such as Columbia University and the University of Chicago, emerged from what Miller terms “humanistic approaches to general education” (33). At the core of this model was the belief that education should cultivate “individual values as a means to achieve social ends” (34). These ends included professional preparation; at the time, this preparation was defined as the ability to identify critical social issues and develop methodologies that could be applied to address those issues and, thus, propel the nation’s progress. From this pragmatic-progressive perspective, the *ability to develop generalizable methodology* was

as important as—perhaps even more important than—the specific application of method to problem (for more on this approach, see Susman; West; Adler-Kassner, *Activist*) because it was seen as critical for professional (and life) training. Humanistic general education took the form of a curriculum that fostered the ability to analyze current social problems from various perspectives to cultivate what would today be called *competencies* (liberal learning) that could be applied to questions critical for future success (professional training, though of a particular kind) (Miller 36). Through GE, students would develop abilities to identify critical ideas and problems as they existed in historical and contemporary culture and receive training in “intellectual techniques which have been developed for the purpose of stating and comprehending fundamental principles” (Hutchins, qtd. in Miller 52–53). At both institutions, this would be followed by immersion in discipline-based education in the major.

A second model of general education that sought to balance the tension between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity reflected an “instrumental” perspective based on the work of pragmatist philosophers, especially John Dewey. Here, the emphasis was on lifelong learning (liberal learning) with an eye toward educated reflective practice. These were also evident in humanistic approaches like those at Columbia and Chicago; in instrumentalist-driven general education, though, disciplinarity was folded into the emphases on lifelong learning and educated practice. As Miller explains, “[S]ubject matter [was] seen as a resource available to help [. . .] solve problems of immediate concern” (67), rather than something to be explored following the *completion* of general education, as in the humanistic model. This approach to GE was (and in some instances still is) evident in programs at some liberal arts colleges. In these sites, cultivating an attitude of reflective practice through learning and doing suffused the entire curriculum and was not separated into a distinct course of study.

A third model of general education attempting to balance tensions between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity can be termed the “social reconstructionist” model, which emerged following World War II (Miller 134). Here, the emphasis on the role of general education in cultivating the citizenry shifted from a sense of collective action, “the creation of citizens able to shape a democracy,” to individual effort, “citizens who recognize [and are educated to act upon individual] *responsibilities*.” This individuation of general education reflected and was reflected in the university itself, which was moving toward a new era of disciplinary specialization. “The real value of general education [for faculty and administrators]” in this model “was less in its intrinsic philosophical and methodological unity than in its potential as a response to the problems of fragmentation and overspecialization” (134). This approach, Miller writes, was most evident at Harvard, where there was an attempt to develop a GE program that emphasized “the common standards that an individual must learn” to be an *individually responsible* participant in the culture (135) through a simultaneous immersion in disciplinary learning and liberal learning

(136). In Harvard's program, students would simultaneously be immersed in interdisciplinary study, be introduced to "general education as the context for specialized study," and distinguish differences between "liberal education" and "professional education" (138).

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these manifestations of general education had been distilled into three models that have been widely used by American colleges and universities: a core model, in which students are immersed in consideration of "perennial human questions" through a shared curriculum determined by faculty; a "scholarly disciplines" model that focuses on introduction to questions, methods of inquiry, and evidentiary practices within disciplines (Newton 170); and an "effective citizenship" model that focuses on "communicat[ing] relevant information [in order to] spell out [. . .] implications for life in modern society, and to develop the skills and values required for effective citizenship" (174). But regardless of their specifics, each model represents an attempt by academic institutions to find equilibrium within the tensions that exist within postsecondary education: the desire to emphasize liberal learning, the desire to provide professional skills and training, and the need for academic practitioners—members of the professoriate—to situate their work within the boundaries of academic disciplines.

Outside of the academy, meanwhile, questions about the efficacy, wisdom, and value of these approaches to general education became part of the expansive critique of education winding through the college- and career-readiness agenda. This was nowhere more evident than in the public discussion swirling around *A Test of Leadership*, issued in 2006 by the US Department of Education (Miller). At the core of this report was a charge that has since been echoed and magnified many times over: that although academics saw tension between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity as productive, it wasn't working for the public because it was not preparing career-ready students.

This charge was embedded in an often-analyzed, continuing story (Adler-Kassner, *Activist*; Adler-Kassner and O'Neill; Green; Huot; Fleckenstein). It says that like K–12 education, higher education in the United States is broken. Once the greatest system of education in the world, it is now as outdated as the model of industry that propelled the Industrial Revolution (Miller). To point to one illustration, Lumina Foundation president Jamie Merisotis has established a parallel between Kodak's recent bankruptcy and the current state of higher education (see Merisotis, "More Than Mere Data" and "Higher Education's Kodak Moment"). As in the Kodak narrative, this story says that higher education is too expensive, its faculty are not accountable for what students learn, and students who are emerging from the system are spending too much time learning the wrong things. As a result, students aren't getting jobs that will enable them to be at least middle class, if not more than middle class, or jobs that are important to propel the twenty-first-century economy.

With this story, the college- and career-readiness framework taps into a second tension that is critical for the analysis here, between education as a public good and education as a private good. Historically, notes educational historian David Labaree, education has been seen as a *public good*. This is reflected in two roles that school has typically fulfilled: preparing students for “political roles” with an education focused on citizenship and participation, or preparing them for “structurally necessary market roles” with an education focused on contributing to the economy (“Public” 42). Both of these ideas of education as a public good are rooted in the belief that schooling should enable citizens to participate in a vision toward which Americans collaboratively work. This conception of public good is also reflected in historical humanistic and instrumental models of general education as they were developed at Columbia, Chicago, and some liberal arts colleges. On the other hand, Labaree argues, there has also been the view that school is a *private good* circulating through ideas about education. Here, school is about facilitating the mobility of individual students, training them to be individually competitive entrepreneurial actors. Through this lens, Labaree writes, “The aim [of school] is to get more of this valuable commodity [education] than one’s competitors” (“Public” 42).

Elements of this shift in conceptualizations of schooling are found in the social reconstructionist model of general education that emerged after World War II. This model, which privileged the development of individual responsibility within the structure of institutions increasingly focused on disciplinarity, reflected what higher education researcher Christopher Loss has called a move toward “rights-based citizenship,” shifting higher education from a “state-academic partnership” to “the privatization of educated citizenship.” In this paradigm, “the educated citizen is a free agent, working within a free market, whose primary allegiance was to herself and to the cultivating of a well rounded [. . .] identity” (226).

In the college- and career-readiness agenda, the cultivation of the “free agent” citizen has become part of the public good, the goal that schooling should help students achieve. As the entrance point to higher education, issues associated with GE—specifically, what constitutes “readiness” for college writing and math courses, and how learning within and beyond GE courses takes place and is connected to “career”—have become targeted as areas for reform in order to perpetuate this revised public good. These reforms are necessary, the agenda says, to alleviate the tension resulting from the same pulls that have been seen as central to equilibrium within the academy—professional training, liberal learning, and disciplinarity. The strain caused by these tensions, these reform efforts say, undermines the academy’s ability to train students to become these agents. To right this course, the CCSS and CBE seek to address each element of those tensions. First, they collapse distinctions between liberal learning and professional training. Second, they position professional training as a public good, privileging the development of individually competitive

economic actors. Third, to varying degrees, they seek to erase or at least minimize the presence and role of disciplinarity.

THE COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

The first effort attempting to reorient higher education toward a focus on this revised public good is the Common Core State Standards and their assessments. The CCSS have been adopted by forty-five states. I'll confine my analysis to the writing standards, which seek to alleviate these tensions by dissolving ideas about writing as a discipline and distilling writing to a function in the service of college and career readiness. Because achievement of the Standards (as indicated by performance on their assessments at a particular level) is intended to stand in for what is ubiquitously referred to as “remedial writing” in college, the CCSS represent one important initiative that has significant potential to reshape general education—and especially GE writing courses. For this reason, it is important to consider how these standards and the assessment consortia designing tests for them conceptualize education (as a public or private good), and how they represent the relationship between professional training, liberal learning, and disciplinarity.

The Standards are framed by the idea that as a public good, school should cultivate a citizenry that can fill necessary market roles *and* a citizenry that can compete against one another to create and fill what are referred to as “jobs of tomorrow that don't exist today.” The documentation accompanying the Standards assures readers that the Standards will “promote equity by ensuring all students, no matter where they live, are well prepared with the skills and knowledge necessary to collaborate and compete with their peers in the United States and abroad” (Common Core, “Frequently Asked Questions”). A report from ASCD (formerly known as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, but which now goes only by its initials), typical of numerous reports making the same case, discusses the process by which “career” (and college) readiness was defined in the Standards.

CCSS leaders established clear criteria [. . .] one of the most important was that the standards reflect research on college and career readiness. [. . .] In addition, the CCSS leaders asked representatives from Achieve, ACT, and the College Board to craft the anchor standards. These organizations had considerable expertise in the area of college and career readiness, and they could enlist business and higher education professionals to verify their judgments about what might be necessary for employment or postsecondary education. (Rothman)

To prepare college- and career-ready students, the writing standards engage students in a “spiraling” curriculum focused on three modes—argumentative writing, informative or explanatory writing, and narrative writing (Johnson). But with this focus on modes, the CCSS effectively separate writing from disciplinary content.

Though rhetorical, audience, and genre awareness are mentioned in the Anchor Standards and in the explanation of college readiness (Common Core, “English Language Arts”), the grade-level standards focus on producing these modes with increasing levels of complexity from kindergarten through twelfth grade. As Kristine Johnson explains, the “curriculum constrains the types of writing and purposes [that] writing students experience” (520; also see Applebee).

With its explicit linkage between achievement and standards for career success, the focus of the CCSS (and their assessments) is clearly linked to economic achievement. As Achieve explains,

Currently, too few of the students who enroll in our public institutions complete a certificate or a degree—a situation that is even worse for students who have to take remedial courses. Moving to the Common Core may be a game changer for higher education—the shifts in the standards will result in better prepared students and enable us to be more successful in helping them graduate ready for success in the global economy. (*Connecting 5*)

Promoters of the Standards and the assessment consortia have both made it clear that career readiness and college readiness are *the same*. Hence, what students need to be ready for careers will also serve as achievement that will exempt students from remedial courses. Allison Jones, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers’ (PARCC) vice president for postsecondary collaboration, is one of many making this point, writing that

[t]he Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) college ready assessment will be used to determine whether a student will be “placed” into remedial courses or enrolled directly into entry-level, credit-bearing courses. [. . .] Thus, the PARCC college ready assessment, and that of SMARTER Balanced, too, will be used by colleges and universities as a “placement test” that determines into which course a student will be placed—remedial or credit-bearing.

PARCC has been more aggressive than Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) in making the case that its assessments and, indeed, the Standards, will be used by colleges in a number of ways.³ PARCC/Achieve materials say that 755 colleges and universities have pledged to “participate in the development of [PARCC assessments] [. . .] and have signed on to ultimately use these tests as college placement tools” (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness, “Postsecondary and PARCC”). PARCC/Achieve’s materials also lay out what they refer to as the “benefits of PARCC for postsecondary education,” arguing that the CCSS will remedy the need for “remedial education” because they will address a “disconnect between the knowledge and skills students have when they graduate from high school and what they need for success in credit-bearing college courses” (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness, “Postsecondary and PARCC”).

The question, then, is what will these college-ready assessments look like? At the time of this writing, that is less than clear. Both PARCC and SBAC are working with a number of contractors (for example, Pearson) to develop their assessments; documents published by PARCC and SBAC have made it consistently clear that these assessments will be in whole or in part machine scored (see Partnership for Assessment of Readiness, “PARCC Assessment Design,” and Smarter Balanced, “Summative Assessment,” for instance; also see Educational Testing Service). But automated assessments run up against some of the most fundamental principles of our discipline-based practices—that good writers must be flexible and learn to move among genres, that writing classes should foster this movement, and that feedback from a human who knows and takes into consideration the student writer is critical for writerly development (Hesse, “Grading”).

Both the Standards and the assessment consortia’s goals also frame education as a public good that is served through the preparation of competitive, entrepreneurial agents. In the pursuit of this version of the public good, the writing Standards—and, very likely, their assessments—blur the lines between professional preparation, liberal learning, and disciplinarity. Nowhere present is the idea that writing is a discipline involving the study of composed knowledge; instead, writing is an activity performed in the service of preparation for career—and college, its equivalent. As these standards are fully implemented in K–12 education and used to indicate readiness for college, it’s worth asking: How will these assessments be used by individual postsecondary institutions or systems? Along with what other factors? For what purposes? At many institutions there is a history of linking placement and exit assessments; if and when that is the case, will these assessments shape what happens *in between* placement and assessment—in other words, in GE programs generally, and in GE writing classes specifically? What about the argument that the CCSS will *replace* what is taught in college composition courses? To be sure, some institutions have not yet had to confront these questions. But they are coming, propelled by a tsunami-force wave of public sentiment about a dysfunctional system of higher education that is no longer serving the public good.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: REDEFINING “LEARNING”

Like the CCSS, competency-based education seeks to address what is framed by its proponents as a dysfunctional relationship between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity. But where the CCSS represent a tightly organized effort, the postsecondary CBE movement—if it can even be called a movement—is less focused. This is in part because postsecondary institutions are themselves more diffuse. They are mission differentiated; currently, it is not possible for any central body to drive postsecondary policy.

The fundamental premise underscoring CBE is that education should be assessed differently. Currently, it's the measure of hours as embodied in the Carnegie Unit that serves as the official means by which educational achievement is indicated. Instead, CBE advocates argue, achievement, whether in a course or a degree program, should be indicated by masteries of the competencies established for that particular site. Within this framework, it doesn't matter how long it takes students to achieve the competency.

While efforts are still taking shape, several signs point to CBE's potential implications for the structure of postsecondary education. First, CBE has backers with deep pockets. Though not the only one of these, the Lumina Foundation, the largest funder of postsecondary initiatives in the country, is the most prominent; Lumina's current strategic plan prioritizes the development of CBE. The document calls for a structure for postsecondary education that enables students to more quickly earn what they call "high quality" credentials "defined by learning and competencies rather than time" that "have well-defined and transparent learning outcomes that provide clear pathways to further education and employment" ("Lumina Foundation Strategic Plan" 19, 5). Second, federal policy and accreditation structures are making room for CBE-based programs. In a March 2013 letter, the US Department of Education decreed that "direct assessment" as an indication of learning was permissible under federal regulation. The department's letter notes that "competency-based approaches to education have the potential for assuring the quality and extent of learning, shortening the time to degree [. . .], developing stackable credentials that ease student transitions between school and work, and reducing the overall cost of education" (Bergeron). The Higher Learning Commission, the nation's largest regional accreditor, has recently approved two CBE programs (at Capella University and Southern New Hampshire University) with several more in the pipeline (see Fain).

Even among existing CBE efforts, there are significant (and important) questions about how competencies are defined and by whom, and how they are assessed. An examination of two efforts to outline competencies illustrates the ways in which these efforts also attempt to address (and/or remove) the balance between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity. The first of these is the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), one of the most widely cited (and, to date, widely adopted) illustrations of competency-based education. The DQP represents an attempt explicitly rooted in the existing academy to readjust, but not reject, the balance between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity. The DQP was funded by Lumina and authored by a committee that included, among others, AAC&U's Schneider, author of the epigraph used to open this article. According to Lumina data, the DQP is being tested by "more than 100 institutions in 30 states [. . .] under the auspices of several partner organizations: The American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the [AAC&U], the Council of Independent Colleges, and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges" (Merisotis, "President's Message").

In its current instantiation, the DQP represents a compromise between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity. This position is made clear in the document's preface, which states that "most students enrolled at the [AA, BA, and MA] levels [. . .] are pursuing degrees in occupationally related fields. [. . .] The [DQP] embraces both applied fields [. . .] and the traditional arts and sciences by establishing learning outcomes that are critical to all fields." It continues, situating the approach reflected in the document in professional training and civic participation: "Looking to the future, because current and prospective students will face changing workplace demands, new technologies, civic challenges, and expanded parameters of knowledge, the [DQP] emphasizes analysis, adaptation and application within both occupational fields and the arts and sciences" (Lumina Foundation, *Degree* 3).

In practice, the DQP seeks to achieve this balance by degree-level competencies (at the AA, BA, and MA levels) that are situated within five broad domains: Applied Learning; Intellectual Skills; Broad, Integrative Knowledge; Specialized Knowledge; and Civic Learning (DQP). These competencies, which are described in detail over eight pages, are in some ways expansive. But when they focus explicitly on writing, they resemble the same narrow ideas about writing as are reflected in the CCSS's writing standards. Competencies for Communication Fluency, included in Intellectual Skills, largely frame writing as the performance of particular tasks. They include "present[ing] error-free prose in both argumentative and narrative form to general and specialized audiences" at the AA level; and "construct[ing] sustained, coherent arguments and/or narratives and/or explications of technical issues or processes, in two media, to general and specific audiences" and "advance[ing] an argument or design[ing] an approach to resolving a social, personal, or ethical dilemma" at the BA level (Lumina Foundation, *Degree* 14). At the same time, writing is referenced or implied in competencies in the other four domains of the DQP as a means for learning or representing learning about other things. But although this focus on writing to learn is welcome as a strategy for including writing throughout the curriculum, it nonetheless reflects what might be considered, through the frame here, a "discipline-vacant" approach to writing. This competency, in other words, can be achieved absent the disciplinarity of writing.

There are also questions about the future of the current DQP. Lumina, the primary sponsor of the document, has indicated that it will sponsor a revision as part of its strategic planning efforts, and that the "second generation DQP [. . .] will incorporate a new framework to define the learning outcomes of postsecondary certificates and be aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Lumina will also support the development of transparent, learning-based pathways for students based on this framework" ("Lumina Foundation Strategic Plan" 19). The fact that Lumina has said that DQP 2.0 will align with the CCSS provides considerable insight into the possibilities—it is likely that the new DQP competencies will reflect the even

narrower conception of writing found in the CCSS, building on the effort to alleviate the tension between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity by continuing to merge college and career and to erase disciplinarity in the name of an economically motivated public good.

Other (newer) efforts, such as Southern New Hampshire University's spin-off, College for America (CFA), reflect a very different perspective on the balance between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity. CFA, an entirely online, competency-based degree program, extends entirely from the idea of professional training. "The Workforce Crisis," the second link on the CFA site, makes this clear:

In a city, a business opens a new plant. The expansion brings 500 additional job openings to the area. 22,000 individuals apply. Only 150 applicants are qualified. Even in this difficult economy employers struggle to find workers with the skills they need. Too many employers have employees who lack the skills necessary to advance and keep their firms viable.

A college degree no longer signals sound basic skills in oral and written communication, quantitative literacy, and collaboration. Graduates often lack the fundamentals. Key employees seek advancement. Yet without a degree, which often is too difficult to complete in traditional settings, many are held back.

The program (which, at this point, awards only the AA degree) is open to students who enroll through employers that partner with CFA. Students participate in online learning that is assessed through a variety of projects, including written work, exams, and "third party, nationally normed assessments" (LeBlanc 12). CFA asserts that its "competency framework builds on the Lumina Degree Qualifications Profile" (13)—and it may. At the same time, when those competencies are visually represented in an overview of the program, the emphasis seems to be placed on liberal learning for the purposes of professional training. Included under the category Foundational Skills are Communication Skills, Critical and Creative Thinking, Quantitative Skills, and Digital Fluency and Information Literacy. Under Personal and Social Skills are Personal Effectiveness, Ethics and Social Responsibility, and Teamwork and Collaboration. Content Knowledge—the smallest of the three categories—includes Business Essentials as one subcategory; Science, Culture, and Society is a second, presumably including most other content and all other disciplines (LeBlanc 7).

As the many news stories linked from the CFA site make clear, CFA may well make a two-year degree newly accessible to working students (see collegeforamerica.org/latest). But the shape of this degree, which is outlined through the competencies defined for it and the means by which those competencies are achieved, seems to represent a dramatic shift in the relationship between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity that has traditionally run through GE programs. Even more than the DQP, the competencies here seem to be disassociated from disciplines and anchored more to professional training.

Like the CCSS, competency-based education seems to represent another set of efforts attempting to address the tension between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity. These efforts return to the tension between public and private good and reflect a story that runs through the college- and career-ready agenda: postsecondary education will fulfill its mission in service of the public good when academic study is understood as something that is intended to equip students with the competencies necessary to be individually competitive economic actors; this entrepreneurial competition is key to the nation's success and to the perpetuation of the democracy. The role of disciplinarity in this new era of competencies, though, is uncertain. Some documents, like the Lumina Foundation Strategic Plan, do not mention it. Others, like what is apparently now the DQP version 1.0, include it along with competencies. And the emphasis of these efforts on education for credentialing for professional training is abundantly clear.

It might be that some instructors find no issues with this potentially content-vacating structure of postsecondary education, especially at the level of general education and especially in writing courses. Goodness knows that many first-year writing courses do not focus on writing as a subject—that is, the creation, circulation, distribution, and consequences of composed knowledge in specific contexts (see, for example, Hesse, “Who Speaks”; Yancey; Wardle; Downs and Wardle; Adler-Kassner, “Companies”)—but instead foster production of templated modes (narrative, description, argument, and so on) or focus on process connected to “any” content (see Smit). Further, it would be almost impossible to find a writing instructor who would argue against the position that education is a public good, or that the strategies students learn in courses—especially first-year writing courses—should help them to be more successful in college and career.

At the same time, some (if not all) writing faculty agree that there is value in exposure to, if not immersion in, disciplinary concepts associated with the discipline where writing is taught *as an explicit subject* (see Downs and Wardle; Adler-Kassner, “Companies,” for more on this argument). In fact, some of the field's strongest recent research attests to the important benefits for college *and* career success that accrue when students learn to study how knowledge is composed, used, and circulated within contexts (that is, Beaufort; Wardle; Rounsaville). And this is what is missing from the college- and career-ready frame and from CBE in its most stripped-down version. When writing is seen as *only* a form to be filled in or a set of strategies to be developed, there is no particular need for disciplinary knowledge associated with writing—a point made eloquently by Doug Hesse (“Who Speaks”)—nor, as Achieve's *Connecting the Dots* might have it, no need for any *real* writing education at all. But for those who understand what is really required for success—in college, in career, or elsewhere—this is a significant problem. The erasure of writing as a discipline, as the field's research suggests, will come at a considerable cost to students (and instructors).

**STRIKING A (NEW) BALANCE: GENERAL EDUCATION AS
INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE**

But there's a question: what might happen if we reclaim the term *college ready* and create or highlight approaches that demonstrate how a remodeled balance between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinary identity can help students become career ready? These approaches can, as much as possible, address elements of the definition of *college and career readiness* associated with that agenda as they have been defined, for instance, by David Conley: developing abilities to problem solve, conduct research, and interpret results; understanding the "structure of knowledge in core concepts"; learning to develop "ownership of learning"; and cultivating "key transition knowledge and skills" (VanderArk). They also can address other elements that we know to be critical for students to participate in what has been referred to as a "super complex world; a world that, at the very least, requires them to be able to continue learning [. . .], cope with uncertainty, and relate constructively to others in increasingly complex and diverse sociocultural and political contexts" (Kreber, "Supporting" 11).

To begin forging an answer, we can draw on extensive research in transfer of learning and activity theory (for example, Bransford; Bazerman; Russell), especially as it has been applied to writing (for example, Wardle; Downs and Wardle; Nowacek; Rounsaville; also see Moore for a summary of this literature). Specifically, we can use this literature as a jumping-off point to make a critical point: *Competencies are always situated within contexts*. Just as there is no such thing as "general skills writing," competencies are not generic; they are developed and closely linked to specific sites. Successful learners know that the competencies they develop through learning are situated *in* context, understand how to analyze expectations for learning and competencies within contexts, and consider carefully how to move what they know *among and between* contexts. Recent research (Reiff and Bawarshi; Nowacek; Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey) also suggests that when writers are able to situate their activities and choices within specific contexts, they are more likely to be successful; other studies focusing on learning more broadly suggest that when learners do not participate fully in these learning contexts, their prior knowledge and experiences tend to interfere with the goals of those learning situations (Russell and Yañez).

From this point, it becomes possible to reimagine—or, even better, to *remodel* general education as a site where students lay the groundwork for studying how to develop competencies within specific contexts by identifying boundaries of and contexts for competencies. The use of remodel, rather than redesign or reformulate, is intentional here. As the Frameworks Institute has described, "remodeling" invokes a restructuring that maintains core elements of a structure (say, a house), but reworks those elements so that new meanings (or new spaces) are constructed from them

(Bales et al. 16). Remodeling GE using this approach may speak more effectively to stakeholders (inside the academy) who are invested in the balance between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity because it extends *from* these elements. My colleague John Majewski, professor of history, and I have been involved in research that has helped us develop this remodeled framework, which we think of as GE as Introduction to Communities of Practice, over the last three years. This approach represents one possible strategy that might forge a navigable path through the differing perceptions of tensions between liberal education and professional training, between competencies and disciplinarity.

As the name suggests, GE as Introduction to Communities of Practice borrows liberally from the work of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. They define communities of practice as physical or imagined locations (communities) that are bound together (and delineated from other communities) by shared rituals, practices, and commitments. To participate in any such community, novices must learn the practices in a community and learn *how to learn* about these things in appropriate ways (Wenger, “Theory”). To put the concept in concrete terms, we might point to the experience of participating in a new activity—say, the roller hockey league that I have only recently joined—as a community of practice. There are myriad rituals (fist bumps among my team during games; fist bumps with the opposing teams at the end of games), practices (guarding opposing skaters in particular ways) and commitments (understanding the relationships among particular positions on one team to those on another) that, as a novice, are new to me. In my role as a novice, I also recognize these practices more distinctly than can experienced players—experts on the community—for whom they are considerably more natural (and less visible). To move from novice to expert, I must learn these practices; I must also learn to *think* like a hockey player. For instance, I must learn to participate in the game not as an individual player chasing a puck, but as part of a unit operating synchronously in particular formations in pursuit of a common goal. If I do not participate in this way of seeing the game—this way of understanding an essential practice of this community—I will not be a successful participant. Presumably I am sharpening my hockey-playing abilities by learning the practices shared among this community. At the same time, because I am acutely aware of the metacognitive strategies that I am employing to identify and attempt to participate in these strategies, I am also honing my abilities to distinguish between this community of practice and others.

Communities of practice are, as Wenger points out, ubiquitous (“Theory”). Colleges and universities (indeed, all schools) are full of such communities, whether formally designated or informally constituted (see Wenger, *Communities*; Johns). Academic disciplines are excellent examples of communities of practice. Students’ academic success in school, in fact, is predicated on their ability to participate, to some extent, in the practices *of* an academic discipline, in what Michael Carter has

described as the “active ways of knowing” that constitute the fundamental activities of disciplines (387). Drawing from a large body of work focusing on the study of disciplines, it is possible to identify a number of elements that come into combination and form practices that contribute to the boundaries of academic disciplines. Primary among these is faculty members’ commitments to what Jan Meyer and Ray Land refer to as “threshold concepts,” concepts that are critical for epistemological participation within disciplines. Threshold concepts are “new and previously inaccessible way[s] of thinking about something [. . .] [which] represent [. . .] transformed way[s] of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress [in the discipline]” (3). Should a learner, a novice within a community of practice, not successfully use threshold concepts of a discipline as a lens through which to understand the world, she could not successfully enter the community of practice.

Framing general education as Introduction to Communities of Practice places the explicit development of learners’ abilities to identify, describe, and participate in boundaries around communities of practice at the center of a GE curriculum. This approach echoes Rebecca Nowacek’s suggestion to create courses that “pull back the curtain[s] on the formation of disciplinary expertise” (129). Broadly, such an approach would involve adapting GE courses so that they explicitly address *how* students learn to identify and participate in the threshold concepts of the discipline in which the course is situated as an explicit part of the course. Specifically *which* communities of practice would serve as these sites in such an approach to GE would depend on the institution; just as GE programs tend (at least in name) to be responsive to the mission of the institutions where they are located, so would a focus on communities of practice.

On my campus, where disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity are highly valued, examining academic disciplines as communities of practice is a logical focus. To that end, John Majewski and I began to incorporate this approach into two GE courses, Writing 2 and History 17b, the latter a large (400 students) survey course focusing on the period around the Civil War. To develop our approach, we needed to first identify the threshold concepts of *our* disciplines. Historians and researchers focusing on learning in history (see Wineburg; Middendorf and Pace; Hounsell and Anderson), sometimes working explicitly with the idea of threshold concepts, have explored these ideas extensively in history; however, their research has been focused largely on secondary learning (Wineburg) or on sites other than large, GE lecture courses (Middendorf and Pace). In composition/writing studies, a project is currently underway to identify threshold concepts of the discipline (Adler-Kassner and Wardle). To identify threshold concepts in these courses for our own efforts, we reviewed the existing (published) literature and drew on a multiyear research effort that involved extensive interviews with faculty and students in history and composition.

From this research, John and I have developed a number of activities and assignments that explicitly emphasize introduction to and practice with threshold concepts in our disciplinary communities of practice and asked students to contrast these with threshold concepts in *other* communities of practice. In History 17b, for instance, John introduced this idea immediately in the course syllabus, explaining that the course “tries to convey how historians think. Historians analyze the past in the form of meaningful and contested narratives [a key threshold concept of history]. [. . .] Because historians like to think and write in the form of narratives, they are big believers in context—facts about the past take on meaning when they are related to other facts” (Majewski). John then incorporated regular “Historical Thinking” lectures into the structure of the course that explicitly focused on threshold concepts: reading like a historian, historical writing, how historians argue, causation and counterfactuals, Lincoln and memory, debating the Transcontinental Railroad, and history versus other disciplines (which explicitly contrasted thinking in history and economics).

Meanwhile, in the composition class, I drew on an overarching threshold concept of writing—writing is a subject of study and an activity—to create a course that immersed students in the study of writing in a specific context. In this instance, because students in my course were also enrolled in History 17b, we used historical thinking as *our* subject of study, as well. To do so, students worked on a series of scaffolded assignments that asked them to identify the outlines of historical thinking as they were represented in course texts. Students built on this work for the second assignment, which asked them to explicitly focus on identifying threshold concepts in 17b. Then, significantly, the assignment asked students to put this understanding into practice, identifying where they did (or did not) draw on these concepts for their writing in 17b. The assignment included two key questions, excerpted here from the longer assignment:

1. What are the threshold concepts outlined in History 17b? How are those elements communicated (in writing? Orally? Visually?), where, and by whom? When you develop this analysis, you should draw on an interview with some member of the instructional team [. . .] and analysis of the documents from the course like your syllabus and writing assignment. [. . .]

Once you’ve worked on that question, the next step is to take your analysis and apply it to your own work to respond to a second one:

2. How have you acted (or not acted) upon your understanding(s) of threshold concepts in the first paper that you wrote for History 17b? You should use evidence from the paper you’ve written for 17b as evidence for your analysis.

This assignment, then, asked students to explicitly work from a threshold concept of composition/writing studies (writing is a subject of study and an activity) by studying writing in another specific class.

Assignments like this, as with John’s historical thinking lectures, focus on the identification of threshold concepts within specific communities of practice as a case

study, making concepts, community boundaries, and differences among communities an explicit part of the course. Because explicit identification of and movement among practices and boundaries is critical for “career readiness,” assignments like the one in my course, as well as John’s historical thinking lectures, foster learning for career readiness by striking a remodeled balance between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity. Academic disciplines (history, composition, and disciplines students choose as foci) become sites for inquiry and research (key elements associated with liberal learning) in order to develop the ability to analyze expectations for success (key elements associated with professional training) within specific sites. At the same time, students are developing “competencies” in writing (competencies that, in this instance, are situated within a writing course).

As the assignments that I have described from my course and from John’s demonstrate, remodeling GE can occur within existing structures of general education at the course level. GE, after all, is hard to approach and revise as a program; in some institutions, it also is shaped by external mandates (that is, requirements from state boards of education, transfer equivalencies, and so on). For this reason, these possibilities for remodeling *inside* existing structures are important because they can take place in sites where faculty still maintain ownership. At the same time, because this approach has the capacity to explicitly address the development of competencies that can be directly linked to professional training at that same level of the class, it may (potentially) speak to the interests of those outside of the academy who find the existing structure of the relationship between liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity dysfunctional. In this way, this approach might represent one attempt to address the concerns raised in the college- and career-ready agenda about whether and how students are developing competencies, what those competencies are, and how they are cultivated.

This response is situated within the tension between liberal education and professional training, to be sure. But an approach that locates disciplines as one example of the communities of practice for students to analyze also carves a new and potentially distinctive role *for* disciplinarity and the relationships between threshold concepts and knowledge capabilities within, across, and among academic disciplines and sites outside of the academy. This strategy, asserts learning researcher Carolin Kreber, may help academics understand our own work differently: “I am not so sure that as we teach our individual courses,” she notes, “it is always on our ‘radar’ that the overall purpose of our collective teaching efforts is to prepare students for successful future learning in increasingly diverse, complex, and uncertain contexts. [. . .] It is precisely by introducing students to the ways of thinking, the concepts, procedures, and practices characteristic of our various disciplinary communities that we can help prepare them for the complex challenges they are likely to encounter in their post-college world and personal lives” (“Supporting” 9). Doubtless there will be many other responses by postsecondary educators to reconsider this work in the

contemporary policy climate. Whatever those responses, they also must take into account the tensions addressed here. The academy's efforts to balance liberal learning, professional training, and disciplinarity in the name of equilibrium is no longer providing a persuasive case; instead, in the name of the newly revised "public good," efforts like the CCSS and CBE make the case that this tension is dysfunctional and must be resolved. As we move forward in this new climate, we must consider what new story we want to tell.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Cathy Fleischer, Heidi Estrem, Lorna Gonzalez, and two anonymous *CE* reviewers for feedback on this article. Portions of this research were developed as part of the Elon Seminar on Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer.

2. Lumina's grant database does not include an explicit category of grants for "college and career readiness"; the Gates Foundation's does. In an analysis of both of these databases, researchers Cassie Hall and Scott Thomas found that in 2010, the Lumina Foundation gave \$31,623,916 to "access and preparation" and "student success," both of which are aligned with "college and career readiness" in the current analysis; the Gates Foundation 2010 database listed \$75,467,778 in grants directed toward "college ready education," a term that is included in their database (Hall and Thomas 13–14).

3. PARCC has 22 states that educate 24 million students; Smarter Balanced includes 23 member states that educate 18 million students.

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