Moving Beyond the Common Core to Develop Rhetorically Based and Contextually Sensitive Assessment Practices

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Much political and disciplinary debate has occurred regarding The Common Core State Standards and the development and implementation of concomitant standardized tests generated by the two national assessment consortia: The Partnerships for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). In entering the debate about K-12 standardized assessment, the authors critique the top-down model of assessment that has dominated K-12 education and is currently being promoted by the national assessment consortia, and how the assessments associated with the national assessment consortia promote an interpretation of college readiness from a skill-based framework. Moreover, we examine PARCC by using content analysis to illustrate how it is an inflexible assessment measure that fails to capture the complexity of learning, specifically in literacy based on more than thirty years of disciplinary research. In contrast, using the construct of college readiness as defined by National Council of Teachers of English, National Writing Project, and Writing Program Administrators in The Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing (Framework), we champion the Framework as not only a viable alternative for conceptualizing effective methods for teaching and learning for college readiness, but also as a heuristic for developing rhetorically based and contextually sensitive assessment practices through the implementation of portfolio assessment.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were built from the idea that states needed to reform education to better prepare students to be globally competitive in math and science, to ensure readiness in students for postsecondary education, and to guarantee that businesses would have a much more skillful workforce from which to choose (NGA, 2006; NGA, CCSSO, & Achieve, Inc., 2008). Although this idea has pervaded much public discourse on education since at least the Cold War era, when posited in a report by the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council for Chief State Officers (CCSSO) in 2008--supported by data from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), addressed through five explicit calls to action--governors, educators, administrators, and policy makers were once again persuaded by this discourse of failure. These stakeholders, then, agreed to fix the K-12 system by "upgrad[ing] state standards by adopting a common core of internationally benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades K-12" (NGA, CCSSO, & Achieve, Inc., 2008, p. 24). Unlike other standards movements, though, the CCSS garnered unprecedented support across the political spectrum during the designing, drafting, and adopting phases because stakeholders used "political and policy learning" from other failed national standards movement (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013, p. 489). Furthermore, using interview data from groups active in promoting the CCSS, McDonnell and Weatherford (2013) showed how stakeholders "strategically" used evidence to appeal to "the diversity of organized interests" (p. 491). By using a rhetorical approach to promote the standards, develop the standards, and engage local stakeholders in implementing the standards, the NGA and CCSSO experienced little public opposition and critique until recently, as the implementation of the standards ramped up and states began making critical decisions about assessment (p. 494).

Although this recent criticism of and resistance to standards movements and assessments have focused on myriad problem/solution scenarios, in this article, we engaged with the criticism focused on the assessments designed to measure students' achievement of the English Language Assessment (ELA)/Literacy Common Core State Standards and determine students' college and career readiness. To do this, we focused on PARCC, Inc. (2015a), a nonprofit derivative of Achieve, yet another nonprofit organization consisting of corporations and charitable foundations that are dedicated to reforming education to focus on college and career readiness (Achieve, Inc., 2015). As the "Leadership" page of the PARCC website indicates, the consortium consists of education leaders, like superintendents and education commissioners, from twelve participating states who have formed a governing board and various leadership teams that liaison with and solicit input from stakeholders (PARCC, 2015e).

Though the governing board of educational leaders apparently makes all "major policy and operational decisions" (PARCC, 2015d), how decisions are made and who influences those decisions is quite cryptic because, according to a 2014 PARCC press release, the recently established PARCC, Inc. now manages the PARCC consortium and the generation and implementation of assessments. PARCC, Inc. ostensibly functions as PARCC's "'agent,'" managing "the test development process, oversee[ing] quality of the assessments, and support[ing] the governance and policy vision of the PARCC states" (PARCC, 2014b, para 8). We wonder which organization in the triumvirate promoting accountability and reform--PARCC, PARCC, Inc., or Pearson—actually possesses the lion's share of power (and revenue) and makes the policy decisions that affect students and teachers.

Based on first-hand experiences of the impact of PARCC (2015a) on teaching and learning in local contexts and expertise from over thirty years of scholarship in the field of rhetoric and composition, the authors of this article believe that anti-PARCC fervor generates an opportunity for K-12 and university educators and administrators to advocate for richer standards of career and college readiness that capture the complexity of learning. Therefore, we argue for building sustainable partnerships between K-12 schools and colleges and universities to combat an etic understanding of "college readiness," which left to corporations like PARCC, Inc., has the potential to negatively influence both curriculum and assessment in K-12 schools and universities. As public confidence in and enthusiasm for the CCSS quickly erodes, K-16 teachers and administrators can apply their pedagogical expertise, their scholarship of teaching and learning, and their localized (and differentiated) experiences mentoring students toward college and career readiness to champion alternative standards and assessment mechanisms, particularly for the ELA standards.

Although our critique, like other recent criticism of the CCSS, echoes sentiments similar to earlier anti-national standards movements in the U.S, we recognize there are also myths being perpetuated about CCSS that only support ideological and political arguments and do nothing to engage the public in a dynamic dialogue about teaching and learning in local contexts. For example, some critics claim that CCSS is the product of the federal government. A group calling itself Arizonans Against Common Core (2013) described CCSSI this way:

> Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) are not state standards in the first place, and are nothing more than

> further federalization of our state education systems. It has been the goal of federal education departments for decades to further control state education of our children through federal standards, federal testing mandates, data mining of our chidlren [sic], and to take education out of the hands of the parents and put it to "the state," or away from the parents.

Diane Douglas, the Arizona Secretary of Education, based much of her campaign for office on her opposition to CCSS. During the primary race, Douglas's homepage explained why she was running for the office: "Quite simply, to stop the Common Core Standards in Arizona and return control over your children's education to you through your locally elected boards" (Barr, 2014). This idea that CCSS was a federal initiative was easy to perpetuate after the Obama Administration unveiled their *Race to the Top* initiative. Through this initiative,

> Although Congress had circumscribed the U.S. Department of Education's (USDOE) involvement in curriculum development, it could provide financial incentives for the states to adopt common standards, as it did in Race to the Top, and it could support other aspects of the effort, as it did subsequently by funding assessment consortia. (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013, p. 491)

Consequently, critics viewed these incentives as a mandated federal education agenda that had the potential to silence state and local stakeholders.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2013), various states were incentivized to implement the CCSS and seek "four-year grants," which have amounted to date to "over $4 billion dollars for nineteen states," to participate in federally-funded assessment. Once the federal government publically endorsed the standards through its *Race to the Top* initiative and tied this endorsement to the criteria established through a national assessment consortia, it was difficult for the stakeholders of CCSS to distance themselves from the idea that these consortia were similar to other top-down assessment systems that had plagued past standards movements, what Darling-Hammond (1994) argued over twenty years ago as the inability of content standards and the tests that are aligned with them to foster "systemic school change aimed at improving teaching and learning for all students" (p. 480). Similarly, the assessment consortia, both PARCC and SBAC (2015), consist of state educational leaders who solicit CCSS-aligned assessments from testing corporations; determine performance levels and cut scores; and make policy decisions regarding the design and implementation of assessments, all of which are opaque processes that fueled further criticism of the *Race to the Top* initiative from both opponents and supporters of the CCSS. In an open letter to the Arne Duncan after the initiative was announced, the National Education Association (2008) articulated suspicion of the *Race to the Top* after much support of the Obama Administration's vision for education:

> The Administration's theory of success now seems to be tight on the goals and tight on the means, with prescriptions that are not well-grounded in knowledge from practice and are unlikely to meet the goals. We find this top-down approach disturbing; we have been down that road before with the failures of No Child Left Behind, and we cannot support yet another layer of federal mandates that have little or no research base of success and that usurp state and local government's responsibilities for public education. (para. 8)

The NEA's letter is only one example of how the tide of support, strategically constructed by the stakeholders to avoid the pitfalls of earlier reform movements, began to recede as criticisms of this so-called top-down assessment model--what appeared to some, like the NEA, as contradictory to the entire process of drafting the CCSS--intensified.

Despite this type of criticism, there is evidence that both the federal government's *Race to the Top* initiative and states' CCSS implementation processes were committed to building local partnerships and requesting local feedback from school administrators, teachers, and parents. For instance, as the first state to adopt and assess the CCSS, the Kentucky Department of Education made transparent the processes used to adopt and assess the standards. On their state website, a viewer can access news releases, fact sheets, and videos that show how and when the public was asked to provide feedback on the state adopted standards. In one document Kentucky's DOE (n.d.) explained,

> The drafting process for the standards included broad input from Kentucky teachers, administrators, higher education officials, education partners, the public, staffs of the three participating agencies (CPE, EPSB and KDE), a national validation committee and national education organizations. **The federal government did not direct or even suggest what should be included. In fact, federal law prohibits dictating a national curriculum.** Several versions of the standards were publicized for teacher and public feedback. Kentucky teachers were very positive about the standards and expressed that their collective voices had been heard. The result of the review process was the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) [emphasis in the original].

Furthermore, while explaining the PARCC Content Frameworks for English Language Arts/Literacy and Mathematics in a year two report on *Race to the Top*, the U.S. Department of Education (2013) asserted,

> The content frameworks are designed to support state and local implementation of the CCSS and to inform the development of PARCC's item specifications and blueprints. After extensive year one teacher and higher education input and public comment, the consortium requested further feedback from practitioners who had begun implementing the content standards and used the Model Content Frameworks as a resource. Accordingly, the consortium took further input on the frameworks during spring and summer 2012 and released a revised version of the English language arts framework in August 2012 and a revised version of the mathematics framework in November 2012, which included additional clarification on high school mathematics (p. 9).

The DOE even added a footnote to stress "[t]he Department notes that all resources developed by PARCC are intended as

exemplars only and do not prescribe scope and sequence or curriculum, which are and remain state and local decisions" (p. 9).

Evidence from state and federal agencies illustrates, at the very least, an acknowledgement of the importance of establishing local partnerships (DOE, 2013); at the most, it provides records of forums and news releases inviting the public to provide feedback (Kentucky DOE, n.d.). Despite this, implementation of the CCSS--particularly the development and proliferation of assessments, instructional tools, and teacher accountability measures devised under the auspices of PARCC and SBAC--continues to garner criticism for lack of transparency and for perpetuating a testing culture that had been demoralizing both teachers and students for over two decades. Even the most entrenched advocates of other standards movements, such as Diane Ravitch, have reconsidered their positions on standardized tests and accountability measures. Ravitch, as one of the most vocal opponents of CCSS on the national stage, paved the way for other activists to organize and promote ideas, like the opt-out movement (Strauss, 2014; Ujifusa, 2015), to delegitimize the CCSS. This momentum to rally against the CCSS can also be seen in the scholarship of many educators and educational researchers who oppose the CCSS for other reasons such as the alignment issues between state standards and assessments (Beach, 2011); its impact on diverse student populations (Compton-Lilly, 2014); its lack of attention to reading and producing multimodal texts (Drew, 2012); and its methods for defining teacher accountability (Dobbins & Bentsen, 2014).

Although we agree with the need to oppose CCSS for the reasons mentioned above, in this article we are actively resisting the culture of testing and its implications on the teaching and learning of writing. As Huot, O'Neill, and Moore (2010) detailed in their concise history of educational measurement, for decades, "reliable and valid writing assessment outside of a school context has been envisioned as a better source of evaluative information about students than teachers are" (p. 498). Now may be the time to wrench writing assessment away from PARCC and educational measurement corporations and back to the purview of educators, developing "site-based, locally controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically based, accessible, and theoretically consistent" assessments (Gallagher, 2010, p. 10; Huot, 2002; O'Neill, Moore, & Huot, 2009). A coalition consisting of educators, parents, politicians, and concerned citizens could work concertedly to fashion an "assessment scene" (Gallagher, 2011, p. 450) that challenges the dominance of positivistic assessment mechanisms, like PARCC, and replaces them with inquiry-based, contextually sensitive formative and summative assessments that are responsive to the learning needs of students and reflect instructor expertise within specific educational communities. Given the political, social, cultural, and economic implications of assessment, we are compelled to (re)examine the impact of the CCSS's federally funded standardized tests on the construct of college readiness, the teaching and learning of writing at the postsecondary level, and the design and implementation of K-16 writing assessment. To that end, we offer more than a mere critique of the CCSS and PARCC; we offer an alternative for disrupting what Behizadeh (2014) called the "mitigating dangers of assessment" telling a single story (p. 125).

College Readiness under CCSS

In "Standards, Assessment, and Accountability," an educational policy white paper by the National Academy of Education (2009), the authors explained the public fervor that has historically erupted around standards-based education reform:

> Ambitious rhetoric has called for systemic reform and profound changes in curriculum and assessments to enable higher levels of learning. In reality, however, implementation of standards has frequently resulted in a much more familiar policy of test-based accountability, whereby test items often become crude proxies for the standards. (p. 1)

Although this white paper was written over six years ago, the authors' description of the "disconnect between rhetoric and reality" is an appropriate lens for exploring the construct of college readiness described by CCSS and PARCC.

Initially, the authors of CCSS divided the standards into two categories: College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards and K-12 Standards. As mentioned in the introduction, the momentum for these standards was decades in the making, fostered by a public (and policy) narrative of failing schools and ill-prepared college freshmen. This narrative and its subsequent manifestations, historically, have had little influence over the postsecondary curriculum and assessment up until now, making this call to define college readiness from a K-12 vantage point and address K-16 alignment issues unique (Barnett & Fay, 2013; Lederman, 2009). Although 42 states and four territories originally adopted the CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015), initially very few postsecondary institutions responded to the college readiness standards or the federally-funded assessments designed to evaluate the college readiness of a student (Barnett & Fay, 2013). This is quickly changing as colleges are also being pushed to accept the 11th grade final assessment--PARCC and/or SBAC--as primary indicators of college readiness and use these scores instead of current placement measures. The PARCC assessment explored in this article is currently driving the placement of high school students into colleges and creating a bypass of developmental coursework due to the PARCC scoring and assessment methods. Recently, in an article in *Inside Higher Ed*, Smith (2015) explained that many colleges in Delaware, California, Hawaii, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and South Dakota have begun to accept the PARCC and SBAC scores in lieu of placement exams. This trend could prove to be problematic for higher education if more parents and students continue to opt out of these assessments. In addition, by accepting the PARCC and SBAC as an indicator of college readiness, institutions of higher learning are deferring to a de-contextualized notion of what it means to be college ready. Near the date of this article's printing, several states are beginning to shift away from CCSS.

Therefore, if top-down mandates continue to impact college placement processes, then faculty in higher education need to have a more prominent voice in the conversation. Instead of accepting the construct of college readiness from outside the postsecondary institution--developed from ideas promoted by ACT Inc., constructs in first-year college textbooks, and consultation of some English and math faculty at universities (Barnett & Fay, 2013, p. 5)--more institutions of higher education should be involved in implementing the standards at the state and local level. There is evidence that these initiatives are gaining action. In Arizona, for example, a consortium, comprised of a partnership among the Arizona Governor's Office of Education Innovation, the Arizona Board of Regents, the Arizona Department of Education, the three state universities, and all the Arizona community colleges, hosted two all-day workshops in different parts of the state for K-12 ELA teachers, teacher educators, writing program administrators, and other

stakeholders involved in developing literacy practices of K-16 students to begin discussing how the College and Career Readiness Standards would impact K-12 ELA curriculum and pedagogy. Several of the authors of this article led sessions at these meetings.

Additionally, faculty also need to consider putting their own research and scholarship on teaching and learning in dialogue with disciplinary frameworks to critique these assessments and offer suggestions for creating new assessments aligned with national K-12 standards, using knowledge from the field to build a critical lens for advocating for assessment practices that have high construct and consequential validity (Behizadeh, 2014; Huot, O'Neill & Moore, 2010; Moore, O'Neill, & Huot, 2009; White, Elliot, & Peckham, 2015). For example, Purdy and McClure's (2014) edited collection includes chapters that examined the CCSS from a range of scholarly perspectives, and some chapters demonstrate how the CCSS can be put in dialogue with other standards or learning outcomes--e.g., library (Hess & Greer, 2014), the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* (Clark-Oates, Boggess, & Roen, 2014), the WPA Outcomes Statement (Ratcliff, 2014), and media literacy (Cercone & Bruce, 2014). Constructing assessments from a sociocultural framework has more potential for mentoring students not only to hone their academic literacy practices in college, but also to develop practices they can use to participate in other arenas of life, including personal, civic, and professional.

College Readiness under the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*--An Informed Alternative

In contrast to the education-in-crisis narrative that underlies the work of organizations like Achieve, professional organizations that drafted the *Framework* and WPA Outcomes Statement conceptualize college readiness and assessment differently; frame college readiness in terms of outcomes, dispositions, experiences, and habits of mind; and apply assessment practices like portfolios, that garner a much richer, more comprehensive and nuanced picture of student achievement. For instance, after Edward White posed a question on the WPA-Listserv in 1996 about what students should learn in first-year composition courses (White, 2005, p. 3), a group of rhetoric and writing scholars became seriously engaged in conversations about learning outcomes, and held spirited discussions at the annual meetings of College Composition and Communication and the Council of Writing Program Administrators. As a result, the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition emerged in 2000. Since then, the WPA Outcomes Statement has been used widely to shape conversations and curricula. Many writing programs have adopted and/or adapted the WPA Outcomes Statement, and there have been numerous articles, chapters, and books written about it (Harrington, Rhodes, Fischer, & Malenczyk, 2005; Behm, Glau, Holdstein, Roen, & White, 2013). Since its adoption by the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 2000, the WPA Outcomes Statement has been revised twice, with the most recent adoption date of July 2014, as the document was intended to be a fluid text that adapted to the changing state of composition studies.

A decade after the WPA Outcomes Statement was adopted, the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, collaboratively drafted by members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project, served as a response to the lack of meaningful consultation among the developers of CCSS and major organizations in the field of writing studies. The document was developed to acknowledge the shared responsibility for teachers at every level so post-secondary teachers were not perceived as "blaming down" and elementary, middle, and secondary teachers did not aim to "teach up" (O'Neill, Adler-Kassner, Fleicher, & Hall, 2012, p. 520). The *Framework* was designed to provide pedagogical, curricular, and assessment guidance in writing, enhancing "teacher effectiveness while the supporting documents offer pedagogical strategies for enabling students to meet learning goals in writing before entering careers and college" (O'Neill et al., 2012, p. 523).

We argue that the *Framework* not only serves as an alternative frame for conceptualizing effective writing and college readiness, but also empowers students, teachers, and administrators to design and participate in assessment practices that are rhetorically based and contextually sensitive to the needs of learners. As noted by Clark-Oates, Boggess, and Roen (2014), secondary English language arts teachers and postsecondary writing faculty are increasingly using the *Framework* to shape curriculum and assess learning, and scholars such as Sullivan (2014) have offered detailed explanations for how to do so. Students will not be "college-ready" under guidelines of the CCSS with PARCC assessment because these materials lack what the *Framework* offers--the infrastructure for students to think critically and understand transference of knowledge and the research to redefine the purpose of learning as complex. If the purpose of the *Framework* is intended to better prepare students to be college ready (as stated in its introduction), opposed to the construct of college ready in CCSS, then curriculum and assessment guided by the *Framework* would better prepare students to engage in credit-bearing courses using the Outcomes 3.0.

At the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, composition and developmental literacy faculty along with the administrators who oversee first-year composition and the transitional courses in developmental reading and writing have designed learning outcomes by adapting the habits of mind from the *Framework* along with outcomes within reading. The intent is to prepare students in developmental courses to engage with the WPA Outcomes Statement in the upcoming required two-course sequence of composition. Students in the developmental reading and writing course are required to articulate in a course portfolio how they demonstrate understanding and applications of the eight habits of mind from the *Framework*: curiosity, openness, engagement, persistence, responsibility, flexibility, and metacognition. Assignments in the course were designed around reading concepts that integrate the habits of mind. The aim of asking students to demonstrate their understanding through reflective writing in the course portfolio is to prepare students for portfolio assessment in the composition course and to help students begin thinking about transference of knowledge as they move toward using the WPA Outcomes Statement to frame these reflections. The portfolio is a significant portion of the students' grade to illustrate to students the importance of the semester-long learning.

As White, Elliot, and Peckham (2015) argued, using portfolios to assess writing allows students to include a variety of writing samples over time, stressing the pedagogical axiom that "writing is a process, not merely a product" (p. 102). As such, the *Framework* can provide students and teachers with a view of writing that each student may carry through college composition classes and into their respective lives and careers. Unlike the CCSS, the *Framework* is better aligned with contextually sensitive assessment practices because it constructs learning as on-going and dynamic, as rhetorically situated. Moreover, The *Framework* does not encroach on teacher autonomy and does not define teaching and learning as merely developing cognitive processes

(Beach, 2011). In contrast to this contextually sensitive and rhetorically based assessment practice, PARCC seems to remove any decision-making capability from the teacher and the learner, imposing standards with rigid teaching materials and inflexible assessment measures. PARCC (2015b), when describing its test design on its website, claims that states are developing "groundbreaking instructional tool to spur student achievement. They have released test items from the PARCC assessment, an exceptional step, to give teacher a powerful tool to guide their classroom instruction," which could be read as promoting teaching-to-the-test methodologies to ensure student achievement on PARCC assessments.

Clark-Oates, Boggess, and Roen (2014) placed the *Framework* and CCSS's College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRA) in dialogue with one another, using the habits of mind as a frame for interpreting the "products of learning" put forth by the CCRA. In this way, the authors attempted "to construct a dialogical encounter, to support teachers and librarians as they use their intellect and expertise to design their curriculum in the space" (p. 114). Clark-Oates, Boggess, and Roen (2014) advocate for the use of the *Framework,* its theories and practices that are "endorsed by years of educational research," by teachers and librarians as a critical lens to interrupting how to design and implement curriculum that reflects the CCSS (p. 136). Furthermore, we agree with Sullivan (2014) when he notes that the *Framework* "represents our profession's best current thinking on the subject of college readiness and teaching composition" (p. 156) and the habits of mind "communicates to students some of the most significant things we have to say to them about writing, about success in school, and about the ways one may choose to understand and live in the world" (p. 157). The gap has continued to widen between the state mandated curricula (CCSS) and assessment that not only drives pedagogy, but also affects teacher perspectives on their ability to educate students.

A Critique of PARCC: Experiential Perspectives of Two Writing Teachers

Two of the authors, one a college administrator and the other a high school English teacher, offer a critique of PARCC through the lens of college readiness in this section; we target PARCC, rather than SBAC, because the state where both are employed has a signed Memorandum of Understanding for *Race to the Top* with PARCC. The two offer a secondary and a postsecondary perspective on the ELA of PARCC's implementation with specific examples from the materials offered. Based on their experiential perspectives, these authors explore the effectiveness of the assessment of CCSS through PARCC in preparation for students' college and career readiness.

As a high school English teacher, one author believes that the shift toward CCSS would only be beneficial if coupled with the WPA Outcome Statement and the *Framework* to help students realize their full potential as critical thinkers and writers in the 21st century. What CCSS fails to provide--and what makes the *Framework* effective in the secondary classroom--lies in the abstract concepts that are difficult to measure in standardized tests: curiosity, responsibility, flexibility, openness, engagement, persistence, creativity, and metacognition. As Cathy Davidson (2011), who is the Distinguished Professor and Director of The Futures Initiative at the Graduate Center, The City University of New York and who studies the history of technology and learning, observed,

> In a decade of researching digital education, I have never heard an educator, parent or student say that the [standardized] tests work well as teaching tools. Beyond the flaws of these rigid exams--which do not measure complex, connected, interactive skills--there is little room in the current curriculum or even in the current division of disciplines (reading, writing, math, natural sciences and social studies) for lessons about key questions that affect students' daily lives.

The CCSS offer "exemplar texts" that focus on predominantly western canonical works. PARCC, in partnership with Pearson, developed assessments with this in mind, using pre-20th century British and American literature interspersed with few minority writers. In doing so, this has left little room for the examination of long-silenced voices of minority writers within the assessment and the classroom. As with other forms of standardized testing, whether teachers are advised not to "teach to a test," instructional and learning activities built around the test will inevitably happen, especially given the recent trend of evaluating teachers based upon students' standardized test scores (Doherty & Jacobs, 2013), even to the point that it may be written into curriculum guides. Arthur N. Applebee, a member of the review panel for the English Language Arts CCSS and the Validation Committee for both ELA and mathematics, acknowledges that much of the criticism concerning CCSS is understandable--that in parceling out standards for each grade level instead of outcomes, the standards run the risk of resulting in the "recursive application of available skills to ever more specialized texts and tasks rather than the development of new content knowledge" (2013, p. 28).

PARCC's interpretation of CCSS, particularly within the realm of expository and argumentative writing, is similarly troubling in that the exams cannot fully assess the skill sets implicit in CCSS. For example, CCSS W.11-12.6 is a writing standard that asks for the student to "Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information" (CCSSO & NGA, 2010, p. 46). Given the adherence to timed writing and a "one-off," heavily weighted chance at each prose-constructed response each year, students are unable to design "shared writing products," revise those products, and provide/receive clear feedback to/from other students; as a result, prose constructed responses aligned with this standard only partially fulfill the standard, and because of the inclusion of multimodality and cooperative composition, PARCC is unable to fully synthesize all of the CCSS to get a true picture of individual students' college and career readiness. Conversely, the *Framework* and WPA Outcome Statement (WPA OS) require students to "write for real audiences," which directly contrasts PARCC's "general audience" tasks (WPA OS, 2014). In using real world audiences, the WPA OS gives students the chance to not only engage various voices but to also engage various genres in their writing. Using WPA OS 3.0 and the *Framework* encourages secondary education teachers to craft lessons around outcomes instead of standards, thus recognizing and respect students' stylistic choices, need for cooperative learning, and time to consider all the evidence.

Producing Assembly-Line Thinkers through PARCC

Although PARCC claims its goals in preparing students for postsecondary education are "improvement in writing; exposure to rigorous texts; improvement in reading skills; independence in college and career setting," the materials provided to aid teachers,

assess student learning, and demonstrate to stakeholders learning for college-and-career-readiness do not lend themselves to meeting these goals (PARCC, 2012). As the writing program administrator at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Sherry Rankins-Robertson attended a PARCC Summit on October 30, 2014 at a local two-year college where nearly every major university and college throughout the state was represented. The Arkansas Department of Higher Education coordinated the summit in an effort to bring together the state's Department of Education, which governs K-12 education in Arkansas with the institutions of higher education and PARCC representatives from Washington, D.C. Panel experts ranged from school district superintendents to high school, university, and college literacy and mathematics specialists to Arkansas Assessment Coordinator for K-12; topics covered spanned from "Creating a Culture of State Support for PARCC," "How We Can Work Smarter," and "PARCC 101: Preparing for Literacy Assessment."

Materials provided during the summit presentation illustrated sample tests alongside teacher preparation materials; for the ELA portion, the materials dictated what each sentence in the one-paragraph assignment would require to earn a passing score. The supplemental test preparation materials for writing educators provided formulaic instructions that align with pre-1960 composition theories. For example, the instructional *PowerPoint* presentation (PPT) provided by PARCC, available only online to participants of the summit, encouraged educators to explain to students what should be included in each sentence of a five-sentence paragraph. For example, "The third sentence should state the author's apparent purpose, followed by an in order to (to, for) phrase" (PARCC, 2014a). Each slide of the PPT moves sentence-by-sentence through this five-sentence paragraph that mandates specific content. Students are assessed on a single paragraph rather than an essay--and more importantly, the process of composing is completely overlooked. Critical thinking is not required for students to develop a passage that implements a formulaic approach; both the teaching and assessment materials, under this model, become a set of assembly instructions that fit together in a concise way to meet the criteria of the PARCC scoring guide. Teachers who engage learners could become easily frustrated at a color-by-number teaching imposed by PARCC, despite the many hours invested in teacher certifications, additional professional development hours, and master's degrees.

In the PowerPoint used in the PARCC Summit for Arkansas Colleges and Universities facilitated by Allison Jones, Senior Higher Education Consultant, PARCC, Inc., the assertion was made that PARCC prepares students to be "college ready" by using statistics and probability: "A student who earns a 4 on the PARCC assessments has a 0.75 probability of earning college credit by attaining at least a grade of C or its equivalent in entry level, college-credit bearing courses" (2014a, slide16). The scoring rubrics for ELA offered by PARCC (2015a, *Task Prototype*) are divided into two categories that evaluate students' writing: the first is written expression, which includes "purposeful coherence, clarity, and cohesion" (also considered as organization) and "effective styles, attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline" (or conventions of essay genre); the second area is writing knowledge and language conventions, defined as "full command of conventions of Standard English … with few minor errors in mechanics, grammar, and usage." The rubric for an 11th grade writing sample does not mirror the following CCSS goals for college and career readiness as stated in the CCSS ELA College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing:

- Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach,
- Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others, [and]
- Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

During PARCC assessments, students are not allowed to collaborate with their peers, conduct sustained research projects, or revise and rewrite over several days. Instead, more often than not, students are assessed on whether they've answered the prompt with appropriate evidence and employed organization, essay genre conventions, and standard English conventions correctly (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 41).

Writing is much more complicated and cannot be siloed--regardless of the task or length--to the assessment values of organization, genre conventions, and corrections as simple classifications. The test takes no consideration for the student's writing processes, awareness of rhetorical concepts, integration and determination of source use, or ability to critically think about the rhetorical situation presented in the task. As illustrated in one particular test example, students are asked to "write an essay" that analyzes the main characters of two separate fictional texts by comparing how the characters interact, the presentation of the characters, and feelings of the characters (PARCC, 2015c); however, students are left on their own to make any sense of the purpose of this task. The claim that a high performance on CCSS tests as they relate to college readiness, not to mention college performance, seems unsubstantiated based on the PARCC materials available. Additionally, teachers (and/or graders) of PARCC documents must correlate three separate documents and synthesize the scoring guides to determine a score. For example, the grader needs to examine the English Language Arts Task Model along with Writing Evidence Tables and the match with the CCSS. PARCC's current practice of pulling all standards into one table for grades 6-11 (PARCC, 2015f) has turned into a Rubik's Cube® of assessment that has educators as lost as students in trying to determine a clear delineation of specific elements that are grade and task appropriate for any given skill set. The scoring guide used to assess writing assignment further complicates teachers' understanding of student career and college readiness. Practices tests and scoring materials are available through the PARCC website (PARCC 2014a; PARCC, 2015b; PARCC, 2015c; PARCC 2015f).

As it is in Arkansas, numerous states may find themselves in academic quicksand, with signed MOUs, which force composition programs to accept student placement into college based on PARCC scores in addition to bypassing developmental coursework in both reading and writing in college based on the PARCC scores. We have simply traded out one invalid placement measure, the ACT or Compass, for another, CCSS and PARCC, at the price tag of nearly $4 billion dollars of taxpayer money (*Race to the Top*, n.d.). One important lesson that college writing administrators can take from the efforts of CCSS, PARCC, and SBAC is the amount of wide-spread, easily accessible materials. Additionally, the statewide efforts that are occurring across the nation and the teaching support workshops are impressive at the K-12 level; without similar financial support and the exigency of local and national policymakers, college writing programs stay at a disadvantage. Students might actually be on a path of college readiness if the Council of Writing Program Administration, along with other professional organizations in the field such as National Council of

Teachers of English and the National Writing Project, had the financial backing that has been provided to PARCC and SBAC, "to create new models to personalize learning for students, so that they can engage their interests and take responsibility for their success" (*Race to the Top*, n.d.). The funding that has been invested in assessment models that states are now moving away from could have been used to support education for teachers at every level about the *Framework* and reinstate the important work of the National Writing Project, which has lost federal funding (e.g. the week before this article was sent to press, Arkansas has committed a move from PARCC to ACT's Aspire with a $48 million price tag.) The dissemination of the Framework would build the bridges between high schools and colleges.

Postsecondary Teaching and Learning of Writing: Portfolio Assessment

In *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13*, published four decades ago, J. Moffett and B. J. Wagner preferred the word *evaluation* instead of *assessment.* In fact, in the index to the book, the entry for *assessment* says "see *Evaluation*" (Moffett & Wagner, 1976, p. 479). They argued that evaluation should serve five functions:

It should indicate to:

- the individual student how effectively he is communicating,
- the parent how much the student is learning in school,
- the teacher the needs of the student, for diagnosing and advising,
- the administrator how good a job the teacher is doing, and
- all parties how effectively the curriculum and materials reach their goals. (p. 415)

Moffett and Wagner (1976) noted that "too often educators expect a few standardized test scores to fulfill all five functions at once, and yet it is obvious that one type of evaluation cannot serve such different purposes" (p. 415). Although Moffett and Wagner's observation is accurate for the most part, the word *educators* is anachronistic in this context because educators have not driven the use of standardized tests to fulfill these five functions. Instead, policy makers have often mounted the charge to use standardized tests to assess student learning (Elliot, 2005).

Challenging the use of standardized testing, Moffett and Wagner observed that "tying teachers' jobs to their students' test scores fosters a me-or-them atmosphere hardly conducive to learning" (1976, p. 416). Yet forty years later, we still see policy makers attaching teacher effectiveness to student performance on standardized tests. As noted by Doherty and Jacobs (2013), many states have implemented or plan to implement teacher-evaluations tethered to student achievement; as Baker et al. (2010) explained, this practice is fraught with problems. Moffett and Wagner recommended students should evaluate their own work; of course, they also argued that teachers should evaluate students' work constantly: "Let all parties know that *all activities* are assessed *all the time*" [emphasis in the original] (1976, p. 419). Moffett and Wagner recommended a wide range of strategies for assessing learning, including portfolios. Huba and Freed (2000) also advocated for a learner-centered approach to assessment, where assessment is defined as:

> the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve student learning (p. 8).

Unfortunately, the use of PARCC and CCSS in the United States disregards the significant impact that a learner-centered approach to assessment can have on students' academic lives--regardless of the forty years of scholarship within the field of rhetoric and composition that avers the importance of process; details best practices in writing assessment; and discusses cognitive processes of student writers.

With continued disregard for the research on assessment in the field of education and the field of rhetoric and composition, contemporary state-mandated standardized tests--a boon for testing corporations such as Pearson and ETS--decide what skills students should possess by the end of each academic year, or in some cases, three to four months before the academic year ends. These national standardized tests are used to mine data and "grade" school districts, individual schools, students, and teachers around the country. They give onus to the media and Congress to portray public education in an ever-increasingly negative light based solely, as we have seen inaccurately represented in reports and white papers published in the last thirty years in the United States (see Rankins-Robertson, Bourelle, Roen, 2012), specifically after Ronald Reagan's sobering account of public primary and secondary education through his administration's report titled *A Nation at Risk*, and books like *Academically Adrift* (Arum and Roksa, 2011). The interpretation of these data by philanthropic foundations, such as The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and The Walton Foundation, state boards of education, and education reformers such as Michelle Rhee, former Chancellor of Washington D.C. Public Schools and proponent of standardized testing, pushes teachers to test harder and to rely almost solely on data received from standardized testing in the classroom to inform, and consequently, reform instruction to prepare students for state exams (Ravitch, 2013, p. 235). For example, contemporary standardized testing's reliance upon timed writing prompts indicates a need for what Les Perelman, former director of MIT's Writing Across the Curriculum program, has called, "the ability to bullshit on demand" (Malady, 2013). Perelman further lamented:

> There is no other writing situation in the world where people have to write on a topic that they've never thought about, on demand, in twenty five minutes. Lots of times we have to write on demand very quickly, but it's about things we've thought about … It seems like it is training students to become politicians. (Malady, 2013)

Perelman's argument shows how this production of "slap-dash" writing increasingly complicates meaningful critical thinking. Not only are students in K-12 education trained to become politicians, but also student experience and critical writing skills are relegated to

25 to 45 minute sessions that oftentimes determine their future educational opportunities (Malady, 2013). The reality of this "product-over-process" approach can alienate struggling writers from post-secondary education. Standardized testing causes a burden for many university and college composition instructors, as the rigidity of CCSS seems counterintuitive to the various writing styles students learn at the collegiate level.

Unlike the closed-door development of CCSS, Perelman has spoken out against problems with standardized tests, like the SAT, and he is cited in Maladay's "We are Teaching High School Students to Write Terribly: The Many Problems of the SAT's Essay Section," along with additional numerous public pieces, such as a recent articles in the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe*, to engage as a public intellectual (Behm & Roen, 2012; Behm, Rankins-Robertson, & Roen, 2014; Roen, 2015). These articles in mainstream media illustrate the attention to standardized test results is not exclusive to the boardrooms of the multi-million dollar testing facilities or limited to an agenda item for a local school board meeting. Perelman's comments have pulled back the curtain and invite all stakeholders, including those beyond the academy, to participate and question the implications of educational policy makers' decisions.

Huot (2002) offered the eminently logical observation that "people who write well have the ability to assess their own writing, and if we are to teach students to write successfully, then we have to teach them to assess their own writing" (p. 10). With Huot's observation in mind, students construct learning portfolios at several of our institutions in which they make the following case:

> In light of the learning outcomes for this course, this is what I have learned about writing. To support my claims about what I have learned, I offer the following evidence from my experience in the course, as well as some experiences outside the course. Further, I consider my evidence to be effective because . . .

Students use both the WPA Outcomes Statement and the habits of mind from the *Framework* to reflect on their learning.

As students construct these portfolios, they select the learning that is most important to them. Each student decides how much to emphasize each learning outcome or habit of mind. Each student selects what kind(s) of evidence to support claims about what has been learned. Each student elects how to evaluate the quality of the evidence. Each student chooses how to talk about the ways in which he or she can continue to learn and how to apply that learning not only in the academic arena of life but also the professional, civic, and personal arenas. That is, using portfolios in this way helps faculty to develop the kinds of insights that result from learner-centered assessment:

> Assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve student learning. (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 8)

Further, as students discuss their emerging portfolios with peers throughout the course, they are functioning within Lev Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development," defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). That is, as students discuss one another's portfolios over the course of the semester, students usually take turns functioning as the more capable peers. For example, if two students are asked for focus on rhetorical knowledge and flexibility as rhetorical concepts that require not only a claim with evidence, but also an artifact to support, the students might offer feedback throughout the semester. One student may have learned more about critical reading and persistence than rhetorical knowledge and flexibility; however, the two students can share insights about learned knowledge and skills in ongoing conversations, each student is modeling the act of learning. The emerging portfolios serve as occasions for further learning.

Under PARCC, it may not be easy to use learning portfolios. However, another advantage of portfolios, as Huot (2002) noted, is that they "furnish the pedagogical context in which teachers can evaluate student writing as part of the way they teach" (p. 75). Teaching, learning, and assessment exist in a synergistic relationship. Further, as Edward White (2007) noted, "Whereas most evaluation instruments provide a snapshot of student performance, the portfolio can give a motion picture" (p. 163). And if it is not a motion picture, it is a least a photo album of snapshots over time. A portfolio also makes it possible to see "the thinking reflected in [a student's] writing" (Odell, 1999, p. 7) because a portfolio encourages students to reflect on their writing--the kind of metacognitive activity described in the *Framework*. When students' knowledge is gathered only in a snapshot much is lost. In support of this position, White, Elliot, and Peckham (2015) and Behizadeh (2014) have argued that e-portfolios are the gold standard for an assessment approach that values writing as a process-based rhetorical act, relying on sociocultural practices that are local, situated, and related to genre and audience.

The PARCC English language arts (ELA) assessments measure students' knowledge and skills in a timed testing situation in which they answer multiple-choice questions about texts and write an essay on an assigned topic; these are typically argumentative, expository, and narrative "prose constructed responses" (PARCC, *Task Prototypes*, 2015g). In contrast, when students construct outcomes-based portfolios over the course of a semester, they draw on a range of their own work to demonstrate what they have learned. Further, they can draw on a wide range of experiences from multiple arenas of life, whether that be academic, civic, personal or professional. Larson (1996) noted two important distinctions between the two situations:

> Portfolios usually bring together writings that students have produced not at a special session but over time and usually in response to the specific tutelage of one or more teachers. Furthermore, as teachers increasingly collaborate with students in the process of composing, the writings in the students' portfolios may come into final form with the teachers' active help. The objects being assessed are therefore often the products of an interchange between teacher and student; they are,

one might say, the written displays of the student's learning process and the teacher's teaching process as well. (pp. 271-72)

Even though PARCC assessments are tied to the CCSS and are purported to be connected to college and career readiness, writing in many workplace contexts is collaborative, not produced in a testing situation with an individual writing alone in a timed situation. Further, as digital portfolios have become more common, there are many reasons to broaden the definition of *writing* as *composing*, as addressed in the WPA OS, to include a wide range of genre and modalities, including production of audio and visual and video, which PARCC does not provide for students to produce.

With digital portfolios, students can choose how public to make their work. At several of our institutions, some students choose to make their portfolios fully available to the general public. That sort of public attention helps students understand how writing can span time and space to reach other people. Their writing is published, and the public nature of their portfolios makes it possible to demonstrate what they have learned to thousands of people. Rather than having their work hidden behind the security walls that come with standardized testing, students can celebrate their accomplishments publicly, influencing others' perceptions of their growing body of knowledge and skills in the areas of rhetoric, critical thinking and reading, composing processes, and conventions. Their portfolios represent who they are as writers and learners, as well as show how they reflect on who they are and where they are on the larger spectrum of their learning and thinking.

As the former Director of the Little Rock Writing Project recently said to Sherry Rankins-Robertson after a presentation on the *Framework* to teacher consultants, "CCSS is here to stay," (Crisp, personal communication, 2014). College teachers and administrators know, particularly given their resources, that there is not a magic eraser that will eliminate CCSS or the assessment consortia. The best option for writing program administrators and college administrators, along with university assessment coordinators, is to get involved not only in educating the state departments of education with national documents, such as the *Framework* and the WPA Outcomes Statement, but also to build partnerships with K-12 schools in an attempt to share locally the task of designing curricula and assessment tools that reflect college readiness from the rich experiences and expertise of scholars and practitioners in the field.

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Angela Clark-Oates is an Assistant Professor of English at California State University, Sacramento, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in rhetoric and composition. Her research is influenced by the scholarship on teaching and learning, theories of writing and identity, and research on literacy, technology, and multimodality. Before starting her position at Cal State, Sacramento, she was the administrator for the Writers' Studio, an online first-year composition program at Arizona State University (ASU). In this position, she taught writing online, mentored faculty to teach writing online, developed online curriculum and assessment tools, and directed an online Writing Fellow program. She extends her work at the university to the community by working with English teachers in high schools supporting their teaching of writing through professional development, writing groups, and the development of high school writing centers. She was a summer institute co-director for Central Arizona Writing Project. She has published on a variety of topics including faculty writing groups, the practice of critical sustained reflection in teaching, and the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing.

Erica Ivy teaches AP English Literature and Composition, AP English Language and Composition, and Literacy Ready at Parkview Arts/Science Magnet High School. She is currently working toward a Master's in Professional and Technical Writing at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock.

Sherry Rankins-Robertson is associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She joined the University in July of 2012 as the Writing Program Administrator in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing. Her research and publications explore designing writing assignments to respond to national learning outcomes, developing curriculum and assessing learning in online environments, offering writing instruction to incarcerated writers, and using multimodal instruction to enhance student digital literacies. She is currently working on a collaborative edited collection, *Applications for the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing: Scholarship, Theories, and Practice.* Additionally, she and Joe Lockard are editing a collection titled *Prison Pedagogy.*

Nicholas Behm, an associate professor of English at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois, studies composition pedagogy and theory, writing assessment, and critical race theory. With Greg Glau, Deborah Holdstein, Duane Roen, and Ed White, he is co-editor of *The WPA Outcomes Statement—A Decade Later.* He is currently working on an edited collection titled *Applications for the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing: Scholarship, Theories, and Practice* (with Duane Roen and Sherry Rankins-Robertson).

Duane Roen, professor of English, serves as dean of the College of Letters and Sciences, dean of University College, and vice provost of the Polytechnic campus at Arizona State University. His current projects include an edited collection titled *Applications for the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing: Scholarship, Theories, and Practice*(with Nicholas Behm and Sherry Rankins-Robertson) and an edited collection on cognition and writing (with Michael Rifenburg and Patricia Portanova).