

***Minimum Competency Testing in Florida and
the K–12/College “Disconnect”***

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Sixteen miles south of the Tallahassee Community College (TCC) campus—as the crow flies, or the hawk, or the seagull—exists one of the most beautiful places in the world, the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, a massive, mystic stretch of land comprising much of the crook in the Florida Panhandle that locals call “The Big Bend.” When visiting the Refuge, one looks across seemingly endless marshes, ponds, sands, and shells, out to the surrounding bay and beyond to the vast Gulf of Mexico. Every manner of fish, bird, reptile, and mammal inhabits these shining waters and rolling grasses, including alligators, otters, ospreys, mullet, catfish, and more. Most significant to this discussion about open-admission college composition students, though, is the Refuge’s primary environmental function as an estuary—that is, as a birthing place and nursery for many species of fish. First the mothers come and spawn in the brackish shallow water, where the eggs and eventual small hatchlings develop in quiet safety before washing back out to the Gulf to swim with all the other fish already inhabiting deep, rolling waters extending as far south as the Florida Keys—and also, by way of the Gulf Stream, northward all the way to Europe.

I visit St. Marks Wildlife Refuge often and, during one walk along the beach in recent years, realized while looking across the shimmering bay that after over twenty years of open-admission college teaching in the state of Florida, I’ve come to experience these colleges much as estuaries as well—estuaries of the public school system. When I refer to the open-admission college, I mean a postsecondary institution that extends open-door admission to all students possessing high school diplomas or the equivalent certificate of completion. The institution typically offers associate degrees, including associate in arts (AA), associate in science (AS), and

associate in applied sciences (AAS), as well as workforce-related certificate programs. The Florida College System (FCS) consists of twenty-eight such institutions, eleven of which are exclusively open-admission two-year community colleges (including TCC), while the other seventeen offer the same open-admission two-year option, as well as a limited selection of baccalaureate programs developed in response to local and state employment priorities. While many students choose to pursue the in-house baccalaureate programs at their local FCS institutions, a significant number of other students choose to take advantage of the Florida “2+2” articulation agreement that “guarantees students who graduate with an AA degree from the Florida College System admission to one of the eleven state universities, though not necessarily admission to the student’s first choice” (“Florida Colleges” 4). Therefore, it is important to note that Florida offers to students earning high school diplomas and their equivalents open admission to any FCS institution in order to pursue, among other options, an AA degree and subsequent bachelor degree at a state college or university, and even at several private colleges throughout the state as well.

Returning to the estuary comparison, in a series of moves similar to those we witness regularly in the beautiful expanse of water, land, and sky we call “St. Marks,” our students wash in from the K–12 system, spend a few nurturing years with us, then wash back out into the workplace, or more significantly for this essay, often into the university system to sit alongside other students who have already been thriving in university “waters” for at least two years, comprising so far throughout this century the most elite first-year classes in the history of the State University System of Florida.

While the estuary image begins in great beauty and tender regard, reflective of the Refuge’s own tender beauty, the eventual meeting of these two student groups during their junior

years opens up many areas of significant concern—particularly with regard to each group’s respective readiness for postsecondary education, demonstrated initially by their first-year admission experiences, and continuing from there in varying degrees throughout the postsecondary system. Looking at admission specifically, while Florida university students must compete for admission by presenting high GPAs and SAT or ACT scores, open-admission college students must present only high school diplomas or an equivalent to gain admission to any of Florida’s twenty-eight state colleges. The differences are particularly profound when considered in light of recent admission data for a sampling of Florida universities. The University of Florida, for example, reports that the middle 50 percent of the students entering in 2009 arrived to campus with high school GPAs of 4.0 to 4.4, SAT scores of 1780 to 2060, and ACT scores of 27 to 31 (“2009 Freshman Profile”). At the University of South Florida, the 2009 entering class averaged a GPA of 3.90 and an SAT score of 1195, with a mid-range of 1090 to 1270 (“New Student Profile Fall 2009”). Florida State University also reports strong student profiles: “The middle 50 percent of our 2009 accepted freshman class is: 3.5–4.1 GPA; 25–29 ACT composite; 1700–1930 SAT total. The top quartile rivals any selective school in the nation, boasting a GPA of 4.4, an average ACT composite of 31, and an average SAT total of 2059” (“About Our Students”). As one more example, University of Central Florida 2009 first-year student data indicate an average high school GPA of 3.8, average SAT score of 1225, and average ACT score of 27 (“UCF Freshman Class Profile—Fall 2009”).

Anticipating their eventual arrival to university classes with students such as those described, open-admission college students working toward university admission must face in many cases a great deal of catching up as they prepare to pursue eventual majors in programs containing such advanced students. For example, according to TCC in-house data for the fall

semesters of 2005 through 2009, an average of 65.6 percent of TCC's first-time-in-college, (FTIC) first-year students performed poorly enough on the state mandated College Placement Test to place in at least one noncredit college preparatory—often called “developmental”—course in either language or math areas, or both (“FTIC Student Cohort 2003–2009 College Prep Areas”). As I understand it, such data are not unique to just TCC among the twenty-eight members of the Florida College System. As these comparative data clearly indicate, many of our students must come far in a relatively short time in order to ensure success in their later university efforts. We work hard to help our students prepare, and success stories abound, but the challenges are indeed immense, as will be discussed in more detail later in this essay.

Although I will discuss some factors that make the Florida situation unique, I believe that a characterization of open-admission college students' preparation as well below the level of their university counterparts is generally true across the nation. In its capacity to bring this question of preparedness into unique relief, the Florida case may provide a useful starting point to explore institutional perceptions of many students bound for open-admission colleges—the same students often considered average or below average in K–12 systems across the nation. While their diplomas do indeed qualify them for admission to college, these students' preparation is often far from college focused. As a result, the great democratic experiment to provide postsecondary education to all students finds itself up against several self-constructed obstacles—or perhaps blind spots—this essay seeks to address. These blind spots are not new in U.S. education, but the relatively recent arrival of the open-admission college is forcing us to recognize these blind spots, first of all, and then address them comprehensively. In so doing, we may arrive at more accurate perceptions of our students' intelligence and therefore aptitude for postsecondary education. Afterward, we should develop instructional strategies for K–12 classes

and beyond that reflect these more accurate, more respectful, and more useful perceptual/attitudinal changes.

Historically, the notion of a college education open to anyone with a high school diploma remains relatively new in the development of U.S. education. Indeed, Tallahassee Community College, where I teach, is a little over forty years old, still relatively young when compared to our republic's 233-year history. Over the years, I have encountered an interesting spectrum of perceptions regarding the open-admission college's role in the nation's educational aspirations. Not surprisingly, these perceptions vary widely and can best be characterized at this still early stage of these colleges' existence as "in formation." Some observers look backward to more traditional college and university roles and assert that postsecondary education is an activity best pursued by the most advanced K–12 students. Others see a democratic mission for open-admission colleges to bring to those formerly excluded the great depth and breadth of ideas developed around the world. Still others see open-admission college students as perhaps "lesser, but necessary" versions of their university counterparts—as eventual participants in the workforce, better trained than in the past, even educated in some ways, but also often limited by less-than-outstanding intellectual abilities and economic circumstances, and therefore also limited when compared to their more accomplished university counterparts. No doubt, the title of the preceding collection, *What Is "College-Level" Writing?*—a book edited by two community college professors, Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg, and emerging from ideas presented in Sullivan's earlier article of the same name—suggests the presence of still-forming perceptions and definitions of not just college writing generally, but also open-admission college writing in particular, as this great "democratic" time of postsecondary experimentation pushes forward into a new century.

Florida

The Political Background

We now go forward with a particular Florida tale that may provide broader application to other statewide testing programs, wherever they may exist or be contemplated, and, more important, to underlying perceptions about “average” and “below-average” students that often inform institutional actions taken in education systems across the nation, with or without standardized testing programs. Perhaps a good place to start is a sign I see each day when arriving at my own community college, TCC. Tallahassee is the capital of Florida, and so at various points around town, visitors and residents alike are greeted by a collection of signs that combine to form the “Capital Milestones” series. At a main public intersection adjoining the TCC campus, situated below one of the principal campus marquees, appears a Capital Milestones sign proclaiming the following:

Tallahassee Community College

Training Florida’s

Future Workforce

With its prominent location at one of the main campus entryways, this sign provides one of the first messages students, faculty, visitors, and all others in the community see when approaching the campus. When I first saw this sign a couple of years back, my reaction was, “How many universities offer signs like this beneath their most prominent campus marquees—or actually anywhere on campus?” On further reflection, other questions emerged, including, “What vision of themselves might this sign suggest, or perhaps even reinforce, for our students? Where does this vision emerge from, and is this vision truly helpful to students attempting to succeed in

postsecondary education?” While I have supported the workforce initiatives on campus, focusing on employment in computer, medical, and other fields, and I have taught in my ENC 1101 classes many students aspiring for certificates in those fields, I see “Training Florida’s Future Workforce” as only one part of our job when working with those certificate-seeking students, and when working with our college-bound students as well.

We sometimes hear discussed the importance of putting an institution’s “best foot forward” when presenting messages such as that found on the sign. In this case, though, while workforce development may indeed represent a “good foot,” it does not, in my view, represent the college’s foundational “best foot” for any of our students, professional certificate or college degree seeking alike. Indeed, I believe that posting such a strong, narrowly focused statement at a prominent campus location is indeed inappropriate as public representation of the college’s mission. Beneath this important workforce purpose reside several more foundational purposes, including, at bottom, “educating the nation’s future creative/critical thinkers.” Indeed, I believe that such a statement represents more completely a core value held by all postsecondary institutions, universities and open-admission colleges alike, reflecting foundational values honored within Western higher education since its inception at places such as Bologna, Paris, and Oxford during the High Middle Ages. I also believe that with primary focus on this more accurate, more comprehensive value, the workforce training piece would happen of its own accord—as it always has throughout the centuries—followed by strong, thoughtful participation in the nation’s democratic decision-making process, values originating more recently during the United States’ own eighteenth-century Enlightenment/Revolutionary period. As James Madison, one of our nation’s founders, observed, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a

people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives” (276).

The prominence of a workforce-focused sign at a key TCC campus entryway is no accident, unfortunately—at least in my observation. The growth of this emphasis at the open-admission college, versus university, level in this state—not value, but emphasis, as we have always understood that students seek employment credentials, among other goals, when attending college—reflects a larger reordering of K–college educational policy and therefore funding priorities that began during Florida Governor Jeb Bush’s recent administration. On the national level, Governor Bush’s brother was president, and the Florida and U.S. education climates were similar in direction, or “redirection,” of education policy—and also, in my view, similarly misguided. I will discuss at length the Florida example, but as one example at the national level, the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) declared in November 2008 that President Bush’s “scientifically based” Reading First (RF) initiative, “had no statistically significant impacts on students’ reading comprehension scaled scores or the percentages of students whose reading comprehension scores were at or above grade level in grades one, two or three” (xiii). Additionally, “Reading First had no statistically significant impacts on student engagement with print” (xii). And so, in the end, IES was forced to conclude that “no relationship was found between the number of years a student was exposed to RF and student reading achievement” (xiii). The cost of the program was \$1 billion per year and thousands of hours of effort across the country.

Writing now in late 2009/early 2010, it is painful to remember these last several years of misguided Florida and national education policies. While I see no sense in judging the motivations of those in control—instead taking them at their word that they were making their

best efforts—I can say that the results are indeed disappointing. With captains of industry and finance largely influencing education policies over the last several years, millions of students, from kindergarten to at least the open-admission college, began accustoming themselves to an accelerating emphasis on their becoming parts of an industrial/economic machine—of a “workforce”—and all at a time when creative and critical thinking were most needed nationwide. Of course, employment skills provide an important priority for public education, but the institutional overemphasis of profit-driven, often class-based workforce values for many of our students during these last several years has left other equally important values sadly underemphasized. Now we find ourselves a nation in great peril internationally as well as domestically. Most thoughtful observers believe that one principal reason for these problems is the decline in creative/critical thinking in our democracy that followed the rush to standards, state and national skills initiatives, and other so-called “basic” educational values that do not by themselves lead to an adequately educated populace, a nation of people realizing their full intellectual, professional, social, and even spiritual potentials—however each may define them. As Madison also observed: “A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both” (276).

I have heard it said that “a bad situation is a good situation” (Sahn), and so I choose to approach this present moment in that spirit. In spite of the damage wrought by misguided approaches to the education of our students, I believe in the end that these Florida and national policies have actually brought to light certain tensions that have been present all along in our educational decision-making processes—often without our even noticing them. We have for some time now offered a democratic promise to every student, but delivery of that promise has been hampered by often unrecognized perceptions of these students that we now must address.

As UCLA's Mike Rose mentions in *Lives on the Boundary*, "We are in the middle of an extraordinary social experiment: the attempt to provide education for all members of a vast pluralistic democracy" (238). Indeed, and the time is now here to take long, clear, very conscious strides forward in removing significant perceptual barriers in order to provide that democratic experiment the best chance to succeed.

Some Specifics

Having addressed elements of the political climate contributing to the present Florida situation, we now turn to specific features of that Florida K–college system. Again, the goal is to examine an extreme, single-state instance of what I believe to be trends operating nationwide. First, as a writing teacher, one of my functions is to teach students how to incorporate coherence into their written work; that is, how all pieces of an essay should fit together to create for readers a clear, easily navigable whole. As I spend much time addressing coherence, naturally enough, I notice the presence or absence of coherence in other areas as well, from novels, to music, to menus, to clothing, and even to nature—again, as demonstrated so beautifully in the seamless balance of the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge. Also I look at the Florida public school system I have worked in for thirty years, first at the middle and high school levels, and now community college, and find a great deal of incoherence—of a system seeking to find itself amidst a rapidly changing social and political landscape. One would reasonably expect that the K–12, open-admission college, and university systems would all function together more effectively, but such is not the case. State educational bureaucrats and administrators bravely soldier on amidst always-accelerating cultural change and political pressure, making their best efforts to bring the pieces of the system into a unified whole, but the results of these efforts are thus far dramatically unsuccessful, in my

experience of the system and its interactions at least. Many of the problems eventually come home to roost in the open-admission colleges, and at least in part because these colleges remain “the new kids on the block,” and, as such, also the point at which the disconnect between the K–12 and postsecondary systems finds its clearest and most problematic expression.

When I began teaching at TCC in 1988, although I experienced the situation of teaching 120 writing students per semester as far from perfect, I still was impressed by the diverse abilities of the students, embodying everything from high school valedictorians to dramatically underprepared “squeakers-by” and what I would call a balanced spectrum of abilities in between. Although we have two state universities in Tallahassee, including Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University and Florida State University, many who qualified for entry in either institution chose instead to attend TCC. We were then and remain now an affordable alternative, less costly than the state universities—a local school, serving a three-county area, as well as significant numbers of other students from all around the state who are attracted to the various athletic and other extracurricular activities available to community college students via the other two campuses, as well as our own. As a teaching rather than a research institution, we offered then and continue to offer now high-quality educational services, provided by an instructional staff of experienced, dedicated teachers. When meeting classes during those first years at TCC, I was impressed by how well the diverse student abilities worked—textbook examples, in many cases, of research I had read concerning the advantages of multi-ability classroom dynamics. In group activities particularly, the more capable students increased their knowledge of course material while collaborating with/explaining their understanding to less capable students, and the less capable students learned a great deal through interactions with stronger students. Altogether,

I found teaching at TCC to be a most satisfying, highly workable opportunity to address the needs of a diverse student population.

Toward the end of the '90s, though, and accelerating into this century, the balanced spectrum of abilities I saw when I arrived in 1988 began undergoing dramatic change, resulting, as I have since come to understand, from the Florida Department of Education's implementation of two programs that together profoundly affected the state school system, K-college. The community college experience of these changes, particularly, included a dramatic shift in the ability profiles of our classes. In my view and the view of many colleagues, the diversity of abilities I describe above gave way over time to a less diverse group of what one could call capable but often underprepared students, significantly hampered by an unfortunate statewide emphasis on a minimum competency exam called the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). While recent legislation has mandated changes concerning the prominence and content of this test—and these changes cannot come soon enough, in my view—for over a decade, school evaluations and funding depended extensively on how well students performed on this minimum-competency instrument, consisting, in the area of English, of multiple-choice language and reading questions, as well as an impromptu five-paragraph essay. For many of my students, success on this instrument provided a primary focus for their precollege educations, as they were required to pass the FCAT in order to receive their diplomas.

The schools were required to pass this test as well—in terms of student success rates—in order to receive publicly proclaimed “passing grades” and significant portions of their annual budgets. The idea that a school can actually be “graded” and significantly funded based in large part on students' minimum competency test scores represents dramatically misguided policy, in my view, resulting in profoundly negative consequences for students and teachers alike. The

whole notion of “excellence” becomes distorted in such an environment, where the only tangible rewards most often emerge from minimum-competency performance by students, teachers, and schools. The much touted A grades for schools demonstrating strong performance on the FCAT were no more than celebrations of the most minimum accomplishments any system should expect from its educational institutions. Most harmful has been the effect of a minimum-competency focus on students, communicating to them that they are not really capable of more, and consequently creating for them a prophecy of limited possibilities that many came to accept over time, or resent—knowing better—or simply just disengage from altogether. I’ve seen all these responses in my students’ eyes, as they sit in my classroom, the end-products of Florida’s minimum-competency educational emphasis.

When starting a semester with students whose educational backgrounds were defined by the FCAT program, I believe my first job is to acknowledge their discouragement, anger, and indifference and discuss possible origins in the FCAT testing system they have just endured. Afterward, I seek to deconstruct the premises of such limited views of their ability and invite them to consider a vision of possibilities more suitable for students sitting in a college classroom, about to embark throughout their courses on a survey of the most advanced ideas humanity has developed thus far. I seek to treat them with that respect, and I hope that soon enough they will push away the not-so-subtle messages about their intellectual potential that prior immersion in the FCAT system has delivered to them. And I look forward to the day the Florida K–12 system begins treating students with such respect as well. Perhaps a beginning has actually taken place in this regard. Standards of excellence have not played a major role in the statewide conversation up to this year, although finally, the state appears to have recognized some aspects of its error. The resulting changes now on the horizon will be discussed later in this essay.

Simultaneous to the arrival of the FCAT emerged another important change, the Florida Bright Futures Scholarship Program. As misguided, limiting, low-ability-engendering, and, one can argue, classist the FCAT program has been, the Bright Futures Scholarship Program has been as refreshingly positive, in my observation, rewarding students who combine strong high school GPAs and SAT or ACT scores by paying 75 to 100 percent of their tuition in Florida postsecondary schools and, in the case of 100 percent scholars, even a stipend for textbooks. How one state could implement at essentially the same time two such dramatically different programs—in terms of real value for Florida students—is a question I cannot begin to answer. “The world is forever out of control,” I once heard someone say. “Only the fool thinks he can turn the wheel upon which he himself is turned.” Indeed.

Existential ruminations aside, from an open-admission college perspective, these two programs combined over the last several years to create great change in the nature of our student population. Once attracted to these colleges’ lower tuition costs, the higher-achieving students, now “Bright Futures Scholars,” for several years have accepted their tuition stipends and attended the state universities for the usual four years. In the absence of Bright Futures Scholars, the remaining open-admission college students have increasingly arrived as products of the FCAT system, often profoundly underprepared by the FCAT’s emphasis on minimum competencies. When so much of the high schools’ budgets depended on their students’ FCAT performance, I am not surprised to hear from my students, especially those from the lower-to-failing FCAT schools, that they arrive to my class well practiced in answering multiple-choice questions but not very well practiced in reading books, articles, and other forms of written communication and, when actually writing at all, most often practiced in five-paragraph impromptu essays written in preparation for the FCAT. Ironically, a high school diploma

automatically qualifies these students to attend any of the state's twenty-eight open-admission colleges, but many arrive at our campuses often more practiced in FCAT-related "skills" than true college-ready reading, writing, and thinking processes.

In my observation and the observation of many colleagues, absent the Bright Future Scholars who may have attended open-admission colleges in the past, a large number of our students now cover a narrower spectrum of preparation, from middle of the road to profoundly underprepared. Open-admission colleges have always served the underprepared; that has never been and is not now the problem. The problem now—distinctly different than any I encountered twenty years ago—is twofold: First, the narrowing of the classroom ability spectrum is problematic because this new shift toward middle-of-the-road to challenged abilities, with the Bright Future-caliber students going elsewhere, creates a classroom environment that works against breaking through its own self-imposed ceiling. The second aspect of the problem emerges ironically from the FCAT exam itself, designed originally to raise educational quality in Florida, but, in my observation and the observation of many colleagues I know throughout the state, has actually succeeded more completely at limiting the educational possibilities of many students it supposedly is designed to help. When so much institutional energy goes into ensuring attainment of minimum competencies, how much time is left to prepare these high school graduates for the open-admission college experience their high school diplomas promise them? The situation is not just limiting for students, either. I have spoken to numerous Florida K–12 teachers over the past several years, and their reactions are almost uniformly the same: The school-budget-survival FCAT emphasis significantly compromised their ability to teach what they consider important topics related to real-world creative and critical reading/writing

processes, as opposed to the multiple-choice and five-paragraph essay-style accomplishments emphasized up to now (fall 2009/spring 2010) by the FCAT program.

The stakes—and accompanying pressure—for all in the system have indeed been high, and so too the distractions from meaningful, college-preparatory instruction for K–12 students. In the following comments from her essay on the topic of education, Ashley (last name withheld at her request), a fall 2008 TCC ENC 1101 (first-year composition) student, makes several points about her FCAT participation, emphasizing both teacher and student experiences of the mandate. In my view, her aim is true from the opening sentence: “All throughout high school, I felt I was cheated out of my education. Why? Because so much of our curriculum consisted of FCAT practice” (1). Concerning the teachers’ experience, her comments reflect many points I’ve encountered in conversations with K–12 teachers, students, and parents from across the state: “What’s in it for the teachers? They get to teach the FCAT curriculum year after year until they’re blue in the face and not get to teach us some stuff that’s worth teaching” (2). In her role as a student, rather than teaching professional, Ashley may not be as professionally knowledgeable as her teachers concerning the particulars of what constitutes “stuff that’s worth teaching,” but she clearly understands that these particulars were not as available to her as they should have been, and I agree. As one who this century has worked with over two thousand students after their experience of intensive FCAT preparation, I can say with absolute certainty that some of this missing “stuff” would include higher-order reading and writing processes that emphasize both creative and critical thinking—in other words, college preparatory reading/writing processes.

In other comments, Ashley identifies more problems related to the intensity that drove FCAT preparation at her school, particularly since so much of the school’s budget depended on

students' FCAT results. The particular FCAT-based "intensive" class she describes in the following quotation was often implemented in one form or another across the state, from the inception of the test until academic year 2008–09, when the practice was eliminated via statute. For our purposes here, though, I should emphasize that many of my students from across the state report having experienced such intensive courses or "sessions" during their prior education, and most all report similar reactions to those Ashley expresses concerning "intensive reading" (including the phonics exercises described in all caps) and "intensive math" courses she was required to take in her senior year:

Not only was it stupid, it was embarrassing to all of us to have students walking by the classroom and hearing the whole class saying, "A, EE, AH, O, OO." Like I said, it was a waste of time and energy for all of us in that class, including the teacher. I should not have been in that class. I should have been in a Spanish II class so that I could complete my foreign language requirement (which I didn't). I should have been taking another elective, such as Art, learning about Picasso and Rembrandt. But I wasn't. I was stuck in those darn intensive reading and math classes. (2)

Clearly these are the statements of an observant student whose high school years were often occupied with surviving—and, it would appear, also perceiving accurately—a standardized testing system that represented a "lowball" estimate of her intelligence.

I have visited high schools and seen FCAT banners lining the hallways, one symbol of the extent to which some schools emphasize the test, and I have later taught the graduates of

these same schools. I think it is important to say that these graduates are vital, interested, intelligent people, as Ashley clearly is, and it is indeed a shame that so many have been force-fed minimum competency “skills,” in the name of helping their schools attain “passing grades” and complete budgets—simultaneously at the expense of higher-order reading/writing and thinking processes that most, if not all, of these students are more than capable of practicing and eventually mastering. I cannot here effectively convey the extensive disservice done these students, in my experience working with them, by the mandated K–12 Florida FCAT focus. I will say, though, that I believe the test has driven the system away from helping students attain their true intellectual potentials, in favor of the safer, more institutionally lucrative direction of minimum competencies. When these students arrive at the open-admission colleges, for which, again, their diplomas qualify them, they find a whole world of college-level intellectual “moves” for which they are either inadequately prepared—or not prepared at all.

Examples of Student Writing Emerging from the FCAT Environment

As responses to an ENC 1101 out-of-class essay assignment asking students to describe their writing process, the following examples are typical of many I have received. I offer them as evidence of what I believe is wrong with any K–12 system that takes a “low-ball” view of students’ intellectual capability and teaches them safe, cramped “techniques” for writing, while simultaneously offering these students diplomas that qualify them to attend any of the twenty-eight open-admission state colleges. I ask any who read these examples to consider whether they would want to see their own children, relatives’ children, or friends’ children arrive to college with similarly dramatic underpreparation. The answer to such a question is painfully obvious, though the source of the question is not often seen by those other than the open-admission

college teachers who seek each day to offer these students a true college education. These essays are examples of writing by first-year college students who have each qualified for ENC 1101 according to standards set by the state of Florida. I asked the students to choose the structure that best helped them make their points, five-paragraph or otherwise. With the exception of minor formatting changes to fit the framework of this essay, all of these writing excerpts are presented just as they were submitted, including spelling, punctuation, grammar, and other elements. All students provided written permission to publish their work. Some also gave permission to use their names, but as others did not, I have chosen to keep them all anonymous. I would like to thank these students for the opportunity to publish their work.

Student “J. G.”

I first began to learn to write essays and papers in the 3rd grade. The same technique that was taught to me then is the same style that stressed to me throughout the rest of my years in school. All my English teachers taught the same writing technique as my 3rd grade teacher did. The only thing that changed with my writing over the years is the topic. The topics got more and more mature. In 11th and 12th grade my English teachers began to dip my mind into different aspects of writing and more challenging subject matters. I was taught that before I even began to put the pen to the paper I had to read the topic several times and let my thoughts gather. I guess that was so I could know what I was going to write about before I initiated writing. It worked for most students because it prevented them from diving into the essay from the deep end. The pre thought process gave me a head start. I was taught that an essay should compose of 5 paragraphs.

The 1st paragraph is dedicated to the introduction. The introduction is where u state your cause and re state the topic. The next 3 paragraphs were supposed to be dedicated to backing up your claim. Basically I was to go in depth on the subject matter and why I felt the way I did

about it. Each of the 3 middle paragraphs had to have a main view point or a reason behind my opinion of the topic. After that came the inconclusion. The last paragraph was dedicated to restating my stand on the point and to state my 3 reasons behind my opinion. The last paragraph was basically a summary on the entire paper. This is the way that I was taught to write an essay since my early days as a student. That writing technique has since grown on me. But now that I am a college student I am open to the idea of learning new writing methods. I am open to the rhetorical perspective aspect of reading a paper. I look forward to shedding my old ways of writing.

Student “Z.I.”

out-of-class essay

The only way i was taught to write an in-class essay or an out-of-class essay was the five paragraph essay. i would start with a scratch sheet of paper and draw a graph with a main idea and three supporting ideas branching off of that. After that i would come up with a introductory sentience stating what I’m going to talk about. Then write three paragraphs about the supporting details. After that I write a conclusion sentience restating the main idea.

Student “P.M.”

My Writing Process

I’ve never been asked to write an out-of-class essay. The only essays I have written up till now have all been In-class essays and have been timed. I believe up until last year, 12th grade, they taught nothing but structure. It was always a required five paragraph essay. The first paragraph was introduction, which included things such as thesis and foreshadowing. Then the second thru the fourth paragraph was called the body, and in each paragraph you’d give one reason and support of each one. Lastly, we would finish it up with a conclusion; this would include a

little more detail and a quick summary of the whole essay. Like I said though, in the 12th grade, they dropped requirement for structure and paid more attention to the writing; such as the purpose, audience, and the focus. I did learn how to write in high school, but I still don't have that confidence that I'm looking for. I want to know that my structure is right and that I'm clear in my words when I write.

Student "T.W."

The steps I use to complete an essay depend on the type of essay I am writing. If it is a research essay, I do the research needed. Then I pick three strong points that support what I am researching. If it is a Persuasive essay, I will choose the side I feel comfortable backing up. I will pick three points that would defend my argument best. If I am writing an Informative essay, I will select three main points that summarize my prompt most. Next I will begin my Introductory Paragraph, in the paragraph I will set the stage for what I will be talking about in the body of my paper. Second will be the body paragraphs. In the body I will present my three points in detail. Last will be the conclusion. I will conclude my paper by tying my three main points and my prompt together.

For example, I had to write a research paper on whether a parent should or should not be informed when their teenager is getting an abortion. It felt as if I went to over hundred websites to get the right information, but I did. Out of that information I chose three points that fit best with what I wanted to say and what I agreed with. After studying and planning what I wanted to say, I wrote the introductory paragraph with the three main points I wanted to talk about. Then, in the body paragraphs I explained the three points in details. Once I completed the body paragraphs, I concluded the essay by restating the main points and what I had researched.

Student “J.B.”

Writing Process

To be perfectly honest every time in high school and grades younger when I have written an essay, whether it is in or out of class, it has always had to follow the five paragraph “FCAT style”. As sad as that may sound that is how my teachers at my school have always instructed us to write our essays, even during my junior and senior years when we have already passed and completed our FCAT, so I feel very unprepared to write at the college level but I am welcome to the challenge. So since that is the only type of essay that I have ever written I will explain how I went about that process.

The first things I do are read and evaluate my topic. I begin to ponder the ways that I can go about expressing or explain my idea or situation, and begin to jot them down on scratch paper. I do not use the “we” or “outline” that we have always been taught to use, for me that takes up too much of my time and I just jot down the main points that have popped into my head. After I do this I think of a catchy phrase or statement to use as my opening line to grab my readers’ attention. I then begin to form my first paragraph that states my three main ideas, which is how we have been taught. Once my first paragraph is complete I then begin to focus on my body of my essay, my three explaining paragraphs. I try to fill each of these paragraphs with lots of details and use strong vocabulary words. I sum everything up and reinstate my main idea in my conclusion paragraph and try and think of another catchy way to end my essay so that my reader will remember it. After I have completed my essay I then go back and re-read it so I make sure that it makes sense and to check for any spelling and grammatical errors, which my spelling errors I tend to have a lot of because I am a horrible speller!

This is how I have gone about my writing process for all of my school years. yes it is very cut and dry, but that is just the way that I have been taught to write. I have never written a

research paper so i wouldn't have any idea as of where to begin if I were to write one. I am looking forward to learning how to write at the college level.

Student "S.A."

My Writing Process

Whenever I get a writing assignment I usually follow one basic writing process. I use the steps that they taught us to use on the FCAT Writes. This entitles a five-paragraph essay. The first paragraph consists of the introduction and your point of view on the topic. The next three are three reasons or examples with supporting details. Finally the last paragraph is wrapping your view up and conclusion. I guess the reason why I have adapted to this process so well is because that's what I've been taught since elementary.

Student "D.A."

Writing Process

In the start of my writing process, I first read and analysis the topic/prompt after which I research if it's necessary. Now the next step is the thesis, which I think is the most difficult part of the process. Then coming up with three main points contributing to the thesis. Next I sketch out a planning sheet with details and quotes under the main points. Like she/he states "to help you strengthen your reading, critical thinking, and writing skills so that your learning experiences at college are challenging, meaningful, satisfying, and rewarding." for example. I start to follow the 5-paragraph essay format (intro, point 1, point 2, point 3, and conclusion). Then my paper is written and I'm done.

(Note: The quote used in student D.A.'s essay is from Carol Smith's "Three Questions (and the Answers) about College Composition," discussed elsewhere in this essay.—JP]

These examples sadly reflect the experiences of many students I work with each term—students arriving not just from TCC’s three-county northwest Florida service district, but from all across the state. Smart and focused on their futures, these students clearly express detailed understanding of their reading/writing preparation, perhaps best characterized in the language of our field as a test-driven, minimum-competency approach to “mastery.” Now with diplomas in hand, they seek to join the college conversation, clearly unprepared for the higher-order thinking, reading, and writing tasks that lie before them. Again, one hears of changes finally beginning to occur, but those changes will not affect the students I am seeing now in academic year 2009–10, nor certainly those students I’ve already seen throughout the previous years of this century. In fact, the problems created by an overemphasis on the FCAT throughout the system will take years to resolve, including a sad, even ominous, gap in student preparation that each year Florida open-admission colleges must address as quickly and as effectively as possible for the sake of our students, many of whom will arrive eventually in the Florida university system, to attempt holding their own among the most elite, Bright Futures–populated classes that system has seen. Indeed, the disconnect between FCAT preparation and our students’ needs for true college preparation appears in even more profound relief when examined not just through the lens of these students’ open-admission college experience, but rather their entire journey through the Florida postsecondary system, college to university.

As a result, therefore, I have come to find that one way to serve as a community college professor in the first years of this century—in Florida at least—is to provide students the opportunity to break through their FCAT-driven underpreparation so that they have the best possible chance to succeed once they leave our classes and go on to the state’s universities,

should they so decide. Seeking ways to accomplish these goals has become my teaching mission in recent years—the primary focus of my research and classroom practice. This focus does not reflect accurately what I expected my college teaching experience would be when I first entered the field—reasonably expected it would be—but it has indeed become my focus. While I am grateful to have finally understood that role and embraced it through continual research and classroom trial and error, I am sad for the many students who, having done all that was asked of them and so obtained their diplomas, discover that this extra step in their college experience is even necessary. I believe they were capable of much more than what the FCAT-driven instruction asked of them, and I firmly believe they are fully capable of moving well beyond the shortcomings of that instruction now.

These FCAT-related issues in Florida may or may not take place in other locations—and I sincerely hope they do not. Immersed as I have been in the many conundrums produced by the Florida system, I cannot say with any clarity how much of what I report here reflects in some way the experiences of others who might read this essay. If I do speak to shared experiences, I hope what I say will offer support to those seeking to meet similar challenges. If what I discuss does not speak as directly to others in the audience, then I celebrate their good fortune and offer this brief narrative as a cautionary tale for any considering the recent Florida model for their own schools. To put a new spin on a famous 1980s expression, “Just say no.” Indeed, even the state of Florida has begun extracting itself from its own sticky creations. Recent Department of Education reports and Florida Senate legislation (Senate Bill 1908) point to a new direction, to include an eventual ramping of “Sunshine Standards” (the standards the FCAT is designed to assess) by the end of 2011 and a 50 percent reduction of the FCAT results’ weight in a school’s

evaluation that began in academic year 2009–10. The remaining 50 percent of school evaluation criteria include factors related to

- A school’s high school graduation rate;
- As valid data become available, the performance and participation of students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, dual enrollment courses, Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE) courses, and the achievement of industry certification in a career and professional academy;
- The postsecondary readiness of the students as measured by the SAT, ACT, or the common placement test;
- The high school graduation rate of at-risk students who scored at Level 2 or lower on the grade 8 FCAT Reading and Mathematics examinations;
- The performance of a school’s students on statewide standardized end-of-course assessments approved by the Department of Education, when available; and
- The annual growth or decline in these components.

Beginning in 2009–10, in order for a high school to receive a grade of “A” the school must demonstrate adequate progress for at-risk students who scored at Level 2 or lower on the grade 8 FCAT Reading and Mathematics examinations. (“Components of Senate Bill 1908” 1–2)

College preparation is another area the bill addresses. While I will suggest later a more comprehensive and, I believe, more effective approach for implementation throughout the K–12 system, the following actions constitute at least a start, although limited primarily to the final years of the students’ K–12 experience:

The State of Florida launched the College and Career Readiness Initiative to improve student readiness for postsecondary education and promote success after high school graduation. During the 2008 legislative session, s. 1008.30 (3), F.S., (also known as Senate Bill “1908”) was revised to provide an opportunity for postsecondary readiness testing of high school students and remediation prior to graduation.

This legislation, which requires cross-sector (secondary-postsecondary) collaboration, expands college/career readiness testing to 11th grade students who express a desire to attend a postsecondary institution, and provides opportunities for students with deficiencies to receive remediation during the 12th grade. Participation in remediation is voluntary for students. Students are considered “college ready” or prepared to enter college credit coursework when they meet the state defined cut scores on approved common placement tests. (“College and Career Readiness” 1)

While these changes appear promising, it will be some time before they develop a track record we all can understand. On the surface, the emphasis clearly moves toward more college-focused values. That said, as with the previous approach, the name of the game will emerge from how these new emphases and accompanying standards are assessed. The nature of those assessment instruments will ultimately influence the manner of instruction, particularly related to the so-called “average” and “below-average” non-Bright Futures Scholars, as such has certainly been the case until now. Whatever course these changes eventually take, however, those of us teaching in open-admission colleges must in the meantime continue to make the best of a bad situation, as our students arrive expecting us to provide them with a college education, however deficient their preparation might be as the result of faulty state policy.

Possible Applications of the Florida Experience

Administrative and Faculty Perceptions of Students

Now I would like to discuss what recent extremes in the Florida education system might tell us about larger trends, or even blind spots that participants in systems across the country—students, administrators, and faculty alike—might benefit from examining. As I proceed, let me say first that I am not here to point fingers and righteously proclaim the inadequacy of those working in the education field. As one who has worked in education for thirty years, I do not hold myself above the shortcomings I am about to discuss. Indeed, I can say with certainty that, in spite of my best efforts, I know I have not always provided the best services to my students. At levels of personal perception I have only recently begun to identify, I find I have at times failed to understand these students, feel patient toward them, and accept them on their own, often heartfelt terms. So, far from excoriation, the purpose of this discussion, rather, is to encourage a “deep questioning” of how we view, how we approach large numbers of K–12 students—in spite of our best efforts, how we approach them—and so also encourage more meaningful use of local education systems across the country.

I know that the backdrop for any such discussion must include acknowledgement of the unreasonable student/teacher ratios we see, particularly in middle and high schools today, such as the typical per-teacher load of 135, 150, or even more students—and I acknowledge these ratios as unrealistic, indeed fundamentally unfair to students and teachers alike. I know as well that another significant—and related—factor we must acknowledge resides in the traditionally low funding of schools, exacerbated now by a dramatic economic downturn. Indeed, as I write this in academic year 2009–10, school budgets across the country are facing cuts no one could have envisioned even two or three years ago, and the overall funding climate looks to remain

perilous for perhaps years to come. In acknowledging these difficulties, though, I do not seek to excuse any of us from still taking a long, hard look at how we approach our students—each day taking such a look—so that whatever our student/teacher ratio and funding circumstances might be, we always respond from the clearest possible understanding of our students, first of all, and from that understanding build out to design curriculum outcomes, assessment instruments, and accompanying teaching methods that support our students’ efforts to the greatest extent possible.

Perhaps the foundational point to examine nationally can be found in Florida’s decision to separate students into two separate classes, consisting of elite Bright Futures Scholars and the remaining FCAT-focused “average” and “below-average” students. As clearly misguided as this choice might have been, I believe that in making it, Florida only demonstrates in clear relief significant foundational attitudes toward students that have influenced United States public education for many years, and that often enough appear to result, at the human level, in experiences such as those TCC student Camille Fischer describes:

In a conference pertaining to Essay Two, my professor told me something I could never forget. “I believe you can get an ‘A’ in this course,” he said. Sadly, that was the first time a teacher had ever said that to me. As we ended our conference, my professor then said, “I expect to see great things from you, Camille.” As I walked out of the classroom and down the stairs, a million things were running through my mind. It was that moment that I realized someone did believe in me. (2)

In spite of our intentions as educators to accomplish more positive outcomes for our students, my more than twenty years of working with open-admission college students cause me to conclude that too many so-called “average” to “below-average” students, such as Camille, leave their K–12 experiences doubting themselves rather than believing in their ability and future possibilities.

We promise that their high school diplomas entitle them to at least state college admission, should they so decide, but often the systems that grant these diplomas and accompanying rights are weighed down with harmful and largely unrecognized or, if recognized, unquestioned premises about the students they supposedly are designed to serve. We all have blind spots—that is part of the human condition—but the reality of this human flaw does not excuse us from an ongoing process of identifying and rooting out every inaccurate, misplaced assumption about our students—every assumption that prevents us from providing the most optimal educational experience for every student, whatever his or her ability to demonstrate or not demonstrate accomplishment in traditionally academic terms. As Mike Rose asserts, “. . . virtually any kid who has been written off, virtually any kid who has that thick cumulative folder full of failure has an ability and a potential that we simply don’t see” (“Excerpt from ‘World of Ideas’”). Our system is turning out too many Camilles—too many students who leave their K–12 experience beaten down, rather than built up—approaching the doors of open-admission colleges with no enthusiasm for learning and no real belief in themselves. Something has to change—fundamentally, down at the very bottom of how we view these students—each of them.

The first point to understand in this portion of the discussion is that elite, AP, and honors-level students are not the only students attending college these days, yet they constitute, by and large, the only student group that can be assured of true college preparation nationwide. Any reasonable observer can conclude that “democratization” of postsecondary education became a growing trend in United States education when GI Bill–funded WW II veterans arrived at college campuses in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In the years since, our postsecondary systems have opened their doors and thus stretched their accessibility in ways not known in this country before, and the arrival of open-admission colleges in the ‘60s and ‘70s has accelerated this

process even further. To what extent, though, have K–12 systems adapted to this rapid change, and, for that matter, how have entire K–college systems adapted nationwide? Simply put: not enough. My own classroom experience and accompanying explorations of other educators’ views convince me that, grounded in long-held, more traditional perceptions of K–12 students as college-bound versus “all the rest,” we educators have not yet digested the contradiction between continued acting from this often unnoticed, yet very much “in-play” perceptual framework and our promise of open college admission to any student possessing a high school diploma. I remember even back in the 1980s, when I taught high school, I attended districtwide high school English teacher meetings that involved as many as one hundred teachers and listened to conversations in which teachers, searching for answers to the best of their abilities, wondered aloud what to do with “the rest of our students”—that is, those who did not as readily demonstrate intellectual ability in academic environments as the “outstanding,” clearly “college-bound” AP, honors, and other elite students. Even in instances today where state K–12 systems do not divide students as extremely as Florida does with its Bright Futures “Scholars” versus the “FCAT-takers” approach, my readings in this field and discussions with educators around the country all convince me that we still do not know how best to serve the “rest of our students.” Worse, even when we think we *do* know how best to serve those students—as in the Florida example—we do not prepare them adequately for future college work because we do not, at bottom, believe they are truly “college material.” In particular, if we are to provide the promise of college admission to any student completing high school, then we must begin approaching—even in our hearts approaching—these oft-called “average” and “below-average” students as if they are truly college bound, because, in fact, they are. We can no longer accept that 50 percent, 60 percent, or sometimes even more of our high school graduates will not place in college-level

classes once they leave high schools and attempt to participate in the open-admission college experience. These students must arrive “good to go”—no exceptions, no excuses.

The first task in addressing this perceptual obstacle is perhaps the most difficult, yet without accomplishing it, all other tasks will bear no fruit: In the midst of often overwhelming class sizes, teacher loads, and unrealistically low funding formulas, all educators—all of us, from the administrative to the classroom level—must begin finding ways to identify perceptual frameworks and values that allow us to see our students as they are, on their own terms. We must work to see these students, however great the generational and socioeconomic differences, according to their own areas of competence and intelligence rather than according to standardized “school” criteria that may or may not—at least at first—acknowledge or successfully bring to the fore the true intellectual abilities of these students. For the purposes of this discussion, I include not just those students preparing to seek AA degrees at open-admission colleges, but also those students consciously choosing so-called “vocational” career tracks. With virtually every such “vocational” career moving into increasingly higher-level, more technically focused directions, our understanding of these students and their future careers must undergo significant ramping up as well. We must approach all so-called “average” and “below-average” students determined to understand, and also help them understand, the full extent of their intellectual abilities, even when our own, more traditional college training might actually—and even ironically—provide significant barriers to our attaining such understanding.

I suggest a fundamental place to start this journey of perceptual reconditioning: our roles as teachers of “communication,” a word that comes from the Latin *communis*, meaning “common.” When exploring how we, as teachers of written communication, approach our vocation, we might ask, first of all, what does it mean to establish a common point of

understanding between our students and ourselves when teaching written communication? As a first step, what does it mean to see our students as they see themselves, including what they identify as their personal interests and areas of accomplishment? To what extent do our outcomes, assessment instruments, and teaching methods support efforts at establishing common ground between our students and ourselves? In the alternative, to what extent might these areas of educational activity stand apart from students—emphasizing differences, holding up bars to hurdle that have little to do with efforts to understand students as they understand themselves, or even affirm their processes of developing such understanding as part of their own intellectual growth and resultant communication efforts? “You must become like a child . . .” we hear advised in many religious and philosophical traditions. To what extent do we suspend what we *think* we know about our students in order to understand their actual experience for a time—as they see it—in order to establish workable common ground?

In my own thirty years of teaching—of plowing through many efforts to work well for these students in spite of my own shortcomings—I have become convinced that without open, ongoing acknowledgement of fundamental, “common” student/educator communication values—at both the classroom and administrative level—our efforts to provide students with meaningful communication instruction are doomed to only partial success at best, and to failure at worst. The FCAT experiment in Florida—its good intentions, combined with its distant, “noncommunicative” character—has been more than enough experience for me. I have worked with hundreds of FCAT graduates throughout this century, and I hold the greatest respect for their intelligence and also their determination to press on in spite of the inadequate and often insensitive preparation this misguided testing system has provided them. Even without the FCAT testing system in place, however, I believe these students would have received similar treatment

in one form or another throughout the K–12 system, and each would have had to press on, pulling those hindrances behind him or her, or simply give up and accept the prophecy the system had communicated daily. I believe, too, that without having to confront the extremes of this FCAT system, I might well have continued to accept at levels beyond my recognition this traditionally “lowball” estimation of many students’ intellectual abilities and so continued in one form or other the same ineffective treatment of their efforts at the college level. Each day represents another opportunity to overcome my own perceptual shortcomings so that I can provide—I hope—increasingly effective, empathic, and respectful communication instruction. As I teach students to communicate, they teach me to communicate as well—and so the common ground among us grows each day, as well as the effectiveness of what we do together in the classroom.

Some Approaches to Implementing a “Clarified Vision” of Students’ Intellectual Abilities

First Thoughts

As one way to promote more effective communication in the reading/writing instructional environment, we have discussed ongoing administrative and faculty “perceptual reconditioning” of long-held and often inaccurate views of the intellectual abilities of so-called “average” and “below-average” students. Such perceptual efforts constitute an indispensable foundational step, but, in order to succeed, these efforts must find concrete expression within a framework of supportive institutional structures and practices. What follows, therefore, provides at least some starting-point suggestions for designing such a framework for all students, from college-bound AP and honors students to those traditionally identified as average to below average, yet also at least potentially college bound due to the promise of open admission. These suggestions address

how we might transform K–12 systems into true college-preparatory programs—providing all high school graduates the necessary tools to take advantage of the opportunities their diplomas entitle them to, including an open-admission college education, should they decide. In so transforming the K–12 environment, we ensure more effective reading/writing coherence throughout K–college systems generally so that students not only leave their K–12 experience ready for the reading/writing demands of open-admission college but also leave their college experience ready for upper-level undergraduate work at the various post-AA transfer options available to them. Additionally, as participants in our expanding “Information Age,” high school graduates who choose not to take advantage of open-admission college or other educational opportunities their diplomas provide also stand to gain significantly from practicing in their K–12 years the reading/writing processes I describe later in this essay, as higher-order reading/writing competence constitutes an increasingly valued ability in almost every aspect of the economy.

At the very least, the following suggestions speak to important values related to institutional coherence, of conscious coordination among the various levels of public education that has eluded us up to now. Particular areas of focus include reduced class sizes and teacher workloads, which then support implementation of reading/writing-based course outcomes and related assessment methods. Not only will individual students and their families—present and future—benefit if we implement such top-to-bottom refocusing of reading/writing instruction in our K–college educational systems, the nation will benefit as well from such open, more meaningful affirmation of students’ intelligence, as well as from the accompanying system coherence to support this commitment. As decision makers within our nation’s public school systems, we must seek what most supports meaningful development of the reading/writing and

thinking abilities that provide all students the greatest possible personal and economic opportunities and that provide our participatory democracy with the most meaningful preparation of future voters and office holders—indeed, of future decision makers at every level of society.

Reduced Class Sizes and Teacher Workloads

Planning for writing instruction and then responding to the resulting student writing involves intensive work, often difficult to execute in even the most ideal situations. In many precollege classrooms, however, the situations are far from ideal. In his book *The Testing Trap*, George Hillocks summarizes the problems with great accuracy:

If states really want student writing to improve, they need to insure that teachers have adequate time to teach writing well. Effective teaching means planning for instruction and responding to student writing. Planning for the effective teaching of writing is very time consuming in itself. . . . Effective response to student writing requires careful reading, analysis of strengths and weaknesses, constructive suggestions, and words of praise where possible.

Normal student loads for middle and high school English [are] the same as for other teachers, somewhere between 125 and 150 students per day. In one large urban school system in Illinois, teachers reported that they would have 175 students per day because of funding cutbacks. However, assume that 130 is average. If the teacher assigns a personal narrative after appropriate preparation, students will likely write over 500 words. If the teacher spends only 5 minutes on each, responding to the entire set will consume 650 minutes, nearly 11 hours. Every additional minute per paper will add 2 hours and 10 minutes. In my

experience the average on such a set of papers is more likely to be 10 minutes per paper. This is an unconscionable load and could well be responsible, in part, for the growth of formulaic writing. The formula permits quicker and easier responses. If states want better teaching of writing, they need to reduce per pupil teacher loads. (205)

Hillocks is not alone in his concerns related to relentless teacher workloads and the resulting stresses on instructional effectiveness and the quality of student reading/writing. For example, the National Council of Teachers of English echoes these concerns in this excerpt from its “Statement on Class Size and Teacher Workloads: Secondary”:

Effective learning demands opportunities for students to become actively involved in their education, and demands many roles for their teachers: teacher as facilitator, as enabler, as empowerer—not only as lecturer and transmitter of knowledge. These opportunities and roles cannot be achieved when teachers are faced with large classes and heavy workloads.

- A teacher who faces 25 students in a class period of 50 minutes has no more than 2 minutes, at best, per pupil for one-to-one interaction during any period.
- The greater the number of students in a class, the fewer the opportunities for students to participate orally.
- The larger the number of students in a class, the greater the amount of time devoted to classroom management rather than instruction.
- The larger the class size, the less likely teachers are to develop lessons encouraging higher-level thinking.

- Teachers of larger classes are more likely to spend less time with each student paper, and to concentrate on mechanics rather than on style and content.

In response to the conditions described, the NCTE goes on to recommend a “. . . goal to reduce each English language arts class to not more than 20 students and to limit each language arts teacher’s workload to not more than 80 students.”

At the open-admission college, full-time composition instructors’ workloads are equally difficult, typically numbering from 120 to 150 composition students distributed over four or five sections, encouraging a continued “mass production” approach to teaching what are, in truth, essential and often very personal written communication practices. By contrast, college composition classes at Syracuse University are limited to no more than twenty students per section, and no more than three sections per composition instructor (Haswell). At Stanford University, the numbers are even more dramatic, with composition classes limited to no more than fifteen students, and no more than three sections per composition instructor (Haswell). In both cases, the faculty/student numbers are more in line with guidelines endorsed by professional organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the Association of Departments of English, amounting to no more than twenty students per section, and no more than three sections per instructor.

Returning to the precollege level, as a high school teacher in Tallahassee during the 1980s, I participated in a two-year statewide program involving increased per-student funding for writing students. As I recall, participating schools limited writing class sizes to twenty, and the increased per-student funding was calculated accordingly. The one administrative requirement for participation was that each student complete at least one full composition per

week—not a five-paragraph essay, but a true composition involving prewriting and multiple drafts. While my memory is foggy about some details of this short-lived program, I recall clearly that, districtwide, English teachers reported significantly improved student engagement and writing ability as a result of its implementation, and, as one example, such an outcome was the case in my classes. The increased, process-based practice supported students in becoming more effective and confident readers and writers. I look back on this time as one of the most rewarding of my teaching career, but eventually the extra funding was eliminated, and class sizes statewide returned to more usual numbers of twenty-five to thirty-five. In spite of its short duration, this program clearly modeled a creative approach to providing reasonable teaching loads and resulted in improved instruction: Fund reading/writing students at higher per-pupil levels that acknowledge the labor-intensive nature of reading/writing instruction.

Based on my experience and the experiences of other teachers across the state, if such an approach were to be adopted today, particularly middle school through college, students and teachers alike would experience significantly increased opportunities to succeed in their classroom efforts—beyond minimum competency and other surface-level reading/writing concerns, and on to higher-order processes. In such an environment, students could explore how best to make the most of their intellectual abilities through the academic practices necessary to succeed in college or in any other increasingly higher-order educational and professional activities they might pursue in this rapidly accelerating Information Age.

Reading/Writing Curriculum Outcomes

Once we address the class size and teacher workload question, the next gate we pass through—more comfortably, now that we have established the best possible environment in which to

teach—involves curriculum outcomes that reflect a commitment to active integration of reading and writing processes. While the study of reading and writing processes often takes place separately in the universities, I believe such preparation suggests a false division that ultimately often hinders our profession from providing the most meaningful instruction. As I mention in the previous volume of *What Is “College-Level” Writing?*:

. . . such a divided approach to written language study is similar to the study of respiratory therapy in which one therapist might seek credentials in the area of inhalation, while another receives certification in exhalation. True respiration, however, requires both inhalation and exhalation, but in this exaggerated example, these “specialists” are not expert in the entire process, just one aspect of it. In the study of written language, we have reading (“inhalation”) and writing (“exhalation”), and yet these processes are often studied separately, rather than as integrated aspects of a larger process we could call “written language.” (239)

Active integration of reading/writing processes opens onto many benefits, including, first, a message for students that reading and writing actually work together to perform larger “dialogic” purposes, as written language most often emerges from and participates in larger public conversations—even, I would contend, at the most elementary levels. As active reader/writers, students therefore become fully inquiring participants in these conversations. Carol Smith, dean of General and Exploratory Studies at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, provides a college-focused comment on these points, but I believe her views find application from the start of a child’s reading/writing career:

The metaphor of “joining the conversation” perfectly captures the rhetorical act of college reading and writing. We can never consider academic texts in isolation.

Academic writing is always writing that is interacting with other texts. We are always understanding one text in terms of another, developing our ideas in the context of what has already been thought, and writing our papers in response to others' papers. The concept *intertextuality* describes this cumulative and interactive process through which we attempt to create knowledge and reach understanding through reading and writing. (xiv)

In her comments, Smith suggests another key component of the written language process: that much of what occurs when participating in this process involves both discovery of existing meaning and creation of new meaning, a dynamic process Smith describes as “knowledge-making.” In discussing the particular college application of this term, Smith identifies the key creative and critical thinking elements I believe apply to all levels of our educational system, and which, in fact, may provide an important thread to pull through that system in order to create more complete, more effective reading/writing instructional coherence, K–college:

. . . the creation of new insights, not just the repetition of what is already known, is the central activity of college learning. In other words, the emphasis in college is on knowledge *making*, not knowledge *telling*. The classes that require you to search the library to establish the current state of knowledge on a particular issue, to read that material closely and critically, to creatively forge a new insight, and to develop that insight into writing, are the classes that will stay with you. (xi)

“Knowledge-telling,” that is, the educational activities surrounding memorization of essential terms, concepts, events, and other elements, certainly performs a valuable function for our students, but I would suggest only insofar as these activities provide a foundational understanding students may refer to when engaging in higher-order, “knowledge-making”

activities, such as application of creative and critical thinking processes through both written and spoken language. Such a “knowledge-making” emphasis throughout the K–college system would affirm students’ intellectual abilities by encouraging them to move beyond simple memorization toward creative and critical application of higher-order reading/writing processes. I would suggest, therefore, that the “eye” of any K–college system remain fixed on higher-level, knowledge-making goals that emphasize frequent practice of reading/writing processes.

As a related benefit, in addition to emphasizing the fundamentally dialogic, knowledge-making nature of written language processes, a reading/writing integration approach to written language instruction also provides students extensive practice with the “sound” and appearance of diverse writing styles, including, in particular, the more formal or standard styles found in academic and professional written language. In this way, we prepare students early and progressively throughout the K–12 system to approach with greater familiarity and effectiveness the language used in open-admission college or other postsecondary and/or advanced-certificate classrooms. Such an outcome provides yet another thread we could pull through public education systems, elementary through college, and thus accomplish a system coherence that provides *all* students the opportunity to succeed in any postsecondary program they might elect to undertake.

The Centrality of Questions in a “Knowledge-Making” Reading/Writing Environment

As we have discussed, if we emphasize knowledge-making as a foundational activity for any K–college reading/writing curriculum, we ensure that valuable creative and critical thinking occurs throughout the K–12 years, leaving high school graduates prepared for true college-level reading/writing and creative and critical thinking. The front end of the system functions to ensure student success at the back end—not just access, but actual readiness for the rigorous

reading/writing and thinking activities that constitute the heart of postsecondary learning, whether open-admission college or university.

Now we turn to a specific tool available for effectively promoting all of these outcomes: the question. Once again, I thank Fort Lewis College English faculty for helping me see an important point about knowledge-making, expressed clearly in the following excerpt from Richard Paul and Linda Elder's "The Role of Questions in Teaching, Thinking and Learning," the first essay offered in the Fort Lewis College Writing Program's custom text, *Joining the Conversation*:

Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions. Had no questions been asked by those who laid the foundation for a field—for example, Physics or Biology—the field would never have been developed in the first place. Furthermore, every field stays alive only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in a process of thinking. To think through or rethink anything, one must ask questions that stimulate our thought. (1)

In the spirit of Paul and Elder, we can say that questions provide the "pry bars," the "can openers," the catalysts for knowledge-making activity, and, in so doing, also provide valuable common ground for teachers and students seeking to explore together the written language experience. When all who participate launch questions as a central knowledge-making activity, many possibilities open, related to one's self—as either teacher or student—in the educational environment, related to the classroom environment and the people participating in it, and related to the benefits residing in each learning activity that all undertake together. Particularly for students often identified as "average" or "below average," a question-driven reading/writing instructional environment provides a valuable opportunity to "turn over a new leaf" in their

educational experience and launch a truly meaningful exploration of intellectual abilities, particularly as expressed in reading/writing and creative and critical thinking. Paul and Elder make important points in this regard when they contrast a question-driven instructional environment against the more rote approaches these students frequently encounter in response to their perceived intellectual shortcomings, and the often “mind-deadening” effects of such environments on students and teachers alike:

We must continually remind ourselves that thinking begins with respect to some content only when questions are generated by both teachers and students. No questions equals no understanding. Superficial questions equals superficial understanding. . . . If we want thinking we must stimulate it with questions that lead students to further questions. We must overcome what previous schooling has done to the thinking of students. We must resuscitate minds that are largely dead when we receive them. We must give our students what might be called “artificial cogitation” (the intellectual equivalent of artificial respiration). (2)

I hope that the succeeding sections will further demonstrate effective use of questions as vehicles for driving knowledge-making reading/writing and creative and critical thinking in K–college written communication classes.

Extending the Benefits of Questions: The “Core Moves” and Building Bridges from Personal to Academic Accomplishment

Many possibilities emerge when envisioning knowledge-making, reading/writing-focused instructional outcomes, including practice with what we could call the “core moves” of knowledge making: posing questions, consulting authorities, drawing conclusions, and

explaining those conclusions and their accompanying reasons, then evaluating actions taken in response. These are the typical moves of anyone conducting research in a postsecondary environment, informing everything from class term papers, to textbooks, to lecture notes, to theses and dissertations, to journal articles, and many other academic pursuits. As a result, these “core moves” provide as well important threads to pull through the K–college system to promote system coherence, true college preparation, and resulting success for all students. Not only do these “moves” identify important focus points for any K–college environment, they also combine to provide an important bridge between students’ passionate interests and areas of personal accomplishment and the world of academics.

“Knowledge-making” can appear to many students as a vague, off-putting term when used in an academic setting. Over the years, I’ve come to notice that the idea of “making knowledge” is often not so off-putting, however, when applied to areas of interest and accomplishment that students know well and sometimes even love, such as athletics (“How will I go to the boards against a zone defense as effective as our next opponent possesses?”), or computers (“How can I increase my computer’s memory capacity to enhance the new portable audio player I have purchased?”), or surfing (“How can I take advantage of steep, storm-produced waves, while also avoiding perils associated with the rip tide?”), or job searching (“Where can I find an employer willing to hire people my age, with both my skill level and also school schedule?”), or cars (“How can I find the best car for my budget—and how can I keep that car in good repair?”), or even dating (“How can I let her or him know that I find her or him attractive and would enjoy spending time together?”).

In each of these scenarios, students are already practicing the “core moves,” starting with the always-important opening question, and often with great skill. For instance, in the surfing

example, I recall from my own younger days hearing many such knowledge-making questions posed on gray, windy beaches while all concerned observed the tempting, towering, storm-generated waves. The more experienced surfers would hold forth on what they knew, and the less experienced surfers would listen carefully—having already researched these questions earlier in various surfing magazines, or now even on surfing websites, blogs, and YouTube videos. Once having posed the question(s) and consulted the authorities, the next step would be for each surfer to decide on a plan of action, and then paddle out to meet the waves and put that plan to the test. The remaining day of trial-and-error riding of waves might produce further questions, further consultations with authorities, and further decisions—each of which would be evaluated for quality of ride and promotion of safety. I have met many smart people on the beaches, regarding the waves with great concentration, surfboards held under their arms. Some of these focused, clearly intelligent people were at the same time unsuccessful as students in the local schools. Indeed, their confident beach manner often wilted to discouragement or even anger as they entered the classroom. No bridge existed from what they knew outside the classroom to what they needed to know inside the classroom, and the shame of it all is that they did not stand as distant from academic success as they—and often their teachers—may have perceived, nor was the bridge from one set of accomplishments to the other all that difficult to build.

In February 2005, driven by questions concerning how best to help students overcome their accelerating, FCAT-driven reading/writing difficulties, I attended an all-day workshop on student reading/writing integration led by Karen Spear, former chair and dean at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, and at the time of this workshop, executive director of the Consortium for Innovative Environments in Learning. Spear provided in that workshop what I could call a “duh” moment—that is, a moment when the simplest, most obvious solution finally

comes clear—in asserting the importance of helping students “scaffold” from underlying “moves” they make in areas of personal interest and accomplishment to similar moves they might make in academic environments. My work with the “core moves,” as I previously discussed, is simply an extension of her ideas, and I here thank her for laying out so clearly a very simple point that had eluded me for many years. Sure, prior to her presentation, I would try to incorporate student interests in my choices of reading/writing activities, but in my mind, students’ lives and interests remained “over there,” the academic world was “over here,” and a systematic identification and connection of common underlying moves in each area simply did not occur to me.

In the years following that workshop, I have explored additional questions concerning how best to adapt the insight Spear provided to the situation of Florida open-admission college students. I traveled to Fort Lewis College and, hosted by Writing Program member Bridget Irish, explored its very fine campus and writing curriculum. I visited other campuses as well, read about and discussed related questions whenever I could, and eventually began cobbling together a variety of trial approaches for the classroom. Evaluating each approach as I proceeded, I identified further questions, consulted more authorities as a result, and made adjustments as appropriate. Finally I arrived at the approach I suggest in this essay, which, I suspect will eventually go through similar stages of questioning, research, reevaluation, and revision.

The brief overview I provided reveals details of a personal “knowledge-making” process related to the subject of this essay, but the underlying “moves” of this process reflect experiences that, as professionals in the academic field, we are all familiar with—moves we all practice frequently. I believe that if we put our minds to identifying these underlying “moves” for our students, from the very start of their academic experiences, we can help them realize that they

already apply these “core,” question-driven moves in their own lives, in pursuit of their own personal interests. In my observation, once students recognize these personal-to-academic connections, the academic world becomes less mysterious, off-putting, or even intimidating. Instead, students learn to experience the academic world as a location of great possibility, much as they experience possibility in their own, already established worlds of accomplishment and confidence beyond the classroom walls. This building of bridges from personal accomplishment to academic accomplishment is one area where important communication between teachers and students should take place, where the academic enterprise can become students’ ally in an environment affirming their already existing expertise. Instead of wearing “baggies” and holding boards on windy beaches, they simply take the same fine intellects and underlying knowledge-making moves into the classroom and start riding the many wonderful “waves” curling up and down the academic hallways. As we know from our own experiences as successful participants in the academy, such intellectual adventure provides much excitement and satisfaction, experiences we can help our students encounter as well, just by communicating the possibilities available to them, by helping them build the bridges from personal to academic accomplishment—and even joy.

In my observation, many of these “average” to “below-average” students possess more than enough intellectual “game” to excel in academic environments. Perhaps, in fact, one expression of their intelligence can be found in their clear disillusionment with the out-of-place, unhelpful approaches to learning they often find in their classroom experiences—the lack of understanding or even desire to understand that they encounter in often inflexible, standardized instructional environments, and the resulting clarity with which they express their disappointment, as Ashley expresses earlier in this essay. We cannot give up on these students

because we do not understand them, or because they do not readily demonstrate their intelligence in academic terms we are more familiar with. We must work to build bridges between what they know and have already accomplished and what they now must accomplish in school in order to prepare themselves for college—a promise many accept, diplomas in hand, however poorly prepared they might be. In the following sections, I describe some practical approaches to implementing such an approach in the reading/writing instructional environment, K–college. Perhaps in ensuring that such purposeful, knowledge-making coherence spans the full breadth of the system, we might provide great opportunity for schools, students, those students’ families—present and future—and our democratic society as a whole.

The Portfolio as Knowledge-Making Vehicle for K–College Reading/Writing Instruction and Assessment

Approaching this portion of the discussion, I realize the portfolio has been controversial for years, but I choose not to engage the debate here. Instead, I prefer this essay keeps its “eye on the ball” by continuing to focus on the reading/writing instructional needs of so-called “average” and “below-average” K–12 students. Whatever readers’ views may be concerning portfolio use across K–college educational systems, my experience tells me that, for these students particularly, the portfolio provides a valuable vehicle to thread through the K–college system in order to ensure purposeful, coherent reading/writing instructional outcomes, accompanying student and program assessment, effective and affordable teacher training, and, finally, true college preparation for *all* students—including particularly those considering pursuit of the open-admission college opportunity that their high school diplomas can provide.

When I speak of the portfolio, I refer to a collection of student reading/writing efforts that reflect a variety of messages, purposes, and—ultimately—opportunities to explore creative and critical thinking “moves” practiced at least as far back as the High Middle Ages in universities throughout Europe—the time and locations many identify with the origins of Western education as we practice it today. Reading/writing values originating in these universities have served Western culture for over a thousand years, providing the intellectual foundation for many societies and still providing this foundation today in our United States K–college system. One has only to attend a college or university graduation to see how steeped we remain in our medieval roots. Students and professors wear black robes, much like those worn on campus in medieval times. The professors also wear hoods, the colors and sizes of which indicate discipline, alma mater, and degree, much as professors wore in medieval times. Latin, the dominant language of medieval church and state, appears on diplomas, sometimes known as “sheepskins,” reflecting further a less paper-infused time of great creative and critical inquiry—indeed, of great romance related to the many mysteries and pleasures associated with both written and spoken language.

Part of our present democratic educational experiment is to make this thousand-year lineage available to all students obtaining high school diplomas. While such an effort provides significant challenges for all involved, accomplishment of these challenges is indeed possible. K–12 schools can help students identify and practice long-honored scholarly “moves” in the academic environment and so prepare them for a possible choice to continue their educations at least via the open-admission college option. Such, at least, are the ideas of one open-admission college reading/writing “professor,” steeped in the democratic doctrines of Jefferson, Lincoln, and Whitman, as well as the scholastic values of Aristotle, Abelard, and Aquinas. We find in

these names and converging interests a rich mix of ingredients—and the open-admission colleges in particular appear to be the institutions most called now to stir that blend of education and democracy into a workable whole.

From the start of their school careers, students can find in the portfolio wonderful opportunities to read individual writers and ruminate on what these writers have to say, then broaden their reading of individual writers to include conversations among multiple writers and ruminate further on these conversations, then dip their feet in the conversational waters themselves, wade out, and provide their own knowledge-making points among the other voices in the chorus—recording and entering their own viewpoints on these subjects in true democratic fashion, from the unique, nonrecurring experiences of their respective lives. Thus, the portfolio provides meaningful practice in posing questions, recognizing already developed core moves in personal experience, and applying those moves to the academic world—to the active process of making knowledge in a conversation-filled, written language environment. Indeed, in its emphasis on extended, process-based reading/writing *experiences*, the portfolio provides students opportunities to create ongoing records of their growing awareness and significant accomplishments as participants in the academic written language environment.

Another instructional benefit of the portfolio resides in its use of ongoing reading/writing efforts as learning opportunities, rather than mistakes to be graded and averaged at term's end. The portfolio is an ongoing project the students prepare all semester, revising their work right up until the final due date. Thus, time exists in a portfolio-based course for a student to learn from unclear focus of main points, incoherent arrangement of supporting points, insufficient detail, grammar and punctuation errors, and whatever other concerns might affect successful communication with the reader. In this way, the student becomes a more practiced, more

effective academic reader/writer. I know that, for myself at least, I have never learned anything without making mistakes, often many times over. Thus, as a child learning to play golf on a public course in Jacksonville, Florida, I spent hours on the driving range searching for my “voice” as a player. I can say that many of those trial shots were far from “pure,” but I learned from them, as I learned from the many practice and competitive rounds I played as well. Now, at 60, I still enjoy the game and indeed continue to improve, using the same trial-and-error method I always have. Likewise, when “mistakes”—as in unsuccessful essays—do not become fixed grades in a teacher’s grade book, students have time to step back and learn from those “wobbly” drafts. Indeed, in a portfolio environment, the primary reading/writing textbook becomes the student’s own reading/writing efforts, there for her or him to study without fear of penalty—to test out early efforts in the spirit of learning, of growing in understanding rather than fearing penalty before completing the rewarding work of trial-and-error learning. Not just an instructional opportunity, the portfolio also provides outstanding assessment possibilities for teachers and students. The best portfolio assessment rubrics define essential reading/writing components in simple evaluative terms, thus clarifying and reinforcing for students the valuable reading/writing opportunities portfolios present. Rather than demonstrate reading/writing competence by choosing from among multiple-choice items written by others, students instead demonstrate these accomplishments in a collection of their own written work. Rather than complete timed five-paragraph essays on topics they’ve never seen before, students demonstrate reading/writing competence through a collection of activities designed to reflect a meaningful spectrum of academic reading/writing opportunities that, again, reflect the best values held in our educational system since medieval times, including the postsecondary learning environment.

Students learn how to assess their own efforts in a portfolio environment as well, a valuable skill for them to possess when they put their reading/writing abilities to use in the work world—and their own individual and family worlds as well. Patient and deliberate efforts, one week after the next, lead these students to discover how they can express effectively their intellectual capabilities not just in sports environments, hobbies, and other personal interests but also in both a K–12 academic environment designed to make college possible for any high school graduate choosing to attend and a postsecondary environment designed to take full advantage of those K–12 gains.

The portfolio's value as a coherence-building vehicle throughout K–college systems does not stop with optimal support for students' intellectual development through the grades, but extends to ongoing faculty professional development as well. In Kentucky, for example, a statewide portfolio assessment system has functioned with great success since 1991, and, following an in-depth analysis of that portfolio program, Callahan and Spalding conclude the following:

Educational leaders are urged to begin viewing portfolios as more than an unwieldy accountability instrument. The real potential of a portfolio system does not lie in its ability to generate accountability data, but in its ability to stimulate teachers to reflect individually and collaboratively on their practice to make changes that benefit students. (349)

Throughout ongoing portfolio program maintenance, teachers explore collaboratively their instructional and assessment practices and, in response to priorities emerging from these explorations, identify professional development opportunities to support their efforts going forward. Indeed, much like their students, teachers' understanding grows through the systematic

trial and error associated with a portfolio program, as well as the capability to reflect on those experiences and take steps to improve as a result. Quoting Callahan and Spalding again: “Better teachers produce more knowledgeable and skilled students; and isn’t improved student achievement the goal of educational reform?” (349). Indeed.

A final benefit emerging from the portfolio approach that could impact the education of so-called “average” and “below-average” students is the use of reading/writing portfolios for open-admission college-course placement purposes. At present, I believe most open-admission colleges employ more traditional, often multiple-choice, and sometimes short, impromptu-essay approaches to student placement, but a portfolio approach would clearly provide more comprehensive and valid placement data. Additionally, required portfolio placement in open-admission colleges would reinforce for K–12 students and teachers alike the importance of meaningful reading/writing practice and assessment via portfolio. Such diagnostic use of portfolios might be more labor intensive, once again, but the benefits would far outweigh the additional time and cost. Simply put, if the open-admission colleges insist on true college-ready reading/writing portfolios for placement, the K–12 systems will find a way to ensure that students arrive at these colleges with those placement portfolios in hand. The resulting true college readiness could only be a win–win for students, the K–college systems serving them, and the improved creative and critical thinking these students would bring ultimately to their families, their jobs, and our participatory democracy as well. The diagnostic uses of portfolios need not stop at open-admission colleges, either. Universities could also consult portfolios for placing students, thus intensifying further the message delivered throughout the K–college system that portfolios provide valuable experiences for all participating in the educational experience.

When examined from the perspective of system coherence, portfolio instruction and assessment provide valuable opportunities for students to optimize their developing intellectual growth through the grades, according to stages of intellectual development well documented in educational and psychological literature. As this progressive development takes place, students grow specifically in the use of traditionally honored, question-based knowledge-making reading/writing practices that will carry them forward to the eventual award of their high school diplomas, fully prepared to embrace the spectrum of postsecondary opportunities they have earned through obtaining those diplomas. Once students arrive at the postsecondary level, portfolios can continue to support their reading/writing development.

An Overview of a Community College Reading/Writing Portfolio, with Example Essay

I remember the fall 2006 NCTE Annual Convention premiere of the previous volume Patrick Sullivan and Howard Tinberg edited, *What Is "College Level Writing?"* The event was so well attended that those seeking entry spilled out into the vast hallway beyond the conference room doors. Arriving five minutes before the presentation was scheduled to begin, I watched sadly as those doors were soon closed and locked to hold back the rising tide of people attempting to enter the already crowded room. Many of us milled about in the hallway, and I recall my frustration because I believed in that book a great deal and had written one of the articles published in it, yet could not gain entry into the room. Eventually the doors were reopened, however, and soon Patrick, with typical generosity, was calling me forward from the crowded hallway to participate in the panel discussion, even though I was not among those scheduled to speak. I remember my expectations upon arriving that the room would be filled with college writing teachers, given the title of the book and the ongoing discussion of the subject then

ramping up in the college ranks. To my surprise, though, the college writing teachers attending were relatively few compared to the number of high school teachers, many of whom were asking, in one way or the other, what preparation did college teachers want from first-year students? I found myself admiring these teachers' clarity and sincerity about the importance of their questions, and I also found myself quietly reflecting on how little agreement there was for college teachers to offer in reply.

The memory of this conference session has stayed with me since, appearing regularly as I work with my students and ruminate about the subjects discussed in this essay. I think the events of that session clearly demonstrate that the entire K–college system has questions to address concerning the reading/writing instructional needs of our students. As I hope this essay conveys, I do not believe these questions necessarily focus on what K–12 or college teachers want, as what constitutes the most coherent way to focus K–college reading/writing instruction—with full dialogue and understanding among all teachers involved—so that our students receive the best opportunities to succeed. In that spirit of ongoing dialogue, therefore, and also in the spirit of Patrick and Howard's second project on these very practical concerns, I offer the following overview of my own humble and evolving efforts to implement the various knowledge-making principles discussed in this essay. I offer the overview not in the spirit of letting anyone know “what I want,” but more in the spirit of mutual inquiry by way of laying all of one's cards on the table. If the following discussion contributes to the larger conversation that I believe our field should be conducting, K–college, I celebrate that outcome. If the discussion supports another teacher's efforts, I celebrate that outcome as well. If the discussion prompts constructive comments concerning how I can improve my teaching practice, I welcome those comments, as I

welcome whatever other comments—pro or con—that might emerge in response to what I present.

Let me say at the start that I am far from the “Portfolio King.” Indeed, I believe that even after many years of practice I still have much to learn about how best to implement this approach to reading/writing instruction and assessment. The more I read, the more I speak to colleagues and students, and the more I attempt to refine my own portfolio practices, the more I come to believe that one never masters the portfolio so much as one perhaps gets better at implementing it in order to understand how much more is left to learn. Please, then, approach this part of the discussion in the “ongoing journey” spirit I believe best represents its intentions and ultimate value.

Concerning my own portfolio-based reading/writing classroom practice, I can say, first of all, that I seek to honor all the student goals discussed thus far in this essay, particularly since I continue to work often with those students identified as “average” to “below-average” throughout their K–12 experience. Next, as the result of professional reading, visits to other campuses, and my own classroom practice, I am convinced it is important to identify a unifying theme to tie together the various portfolio reading/writing activities. I have heard of some particular themes attempted in portfolio programs, such as themes related to pop culture or gender studies, but from conversations with professionals employing these themes and students working with them, I have concluded that such “special interest” themes do indeed work well for students who possess the personal motivation to explore them, but often not so well for students who have no such affinity. I still, though, believe some sort of underlying theme is important to a portfolio’s overall effectiveness, so when considering possible themes for my own portfolio approach, I have taken as my guide the Fort Lewis College Writing Program’s “joining the

conversation” (Smith xiv) focus, and, in particular, joining the academic conversation typical of college-level reading/writing. I share the Fort Lewis program’s view that one interest all students share, particularly those taking first-year composition courses, relates to these students’ desire to understand what it means to enter and ultimately succeed in a postsecondary discourse community. Again, in the case of traditionally viewed, often underprepared “average” to “below-average” K–12 students, such understanding is priority one—a subject many must master quickly in order to ensure their ultimate success in college.

In his “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae captures these students’ concerns well when he states: “Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion. . . . He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community” (134). Given the one-semester time frame I must follow to help these often underprepared students acquire the necessary reading/writing competence to complete their community college work, I attempt to “jump-start” or “cognitively resuscitate” (Paul and Elder) them from previous underpreparation toward a level of accomplishment that allows them to move forward effectively. I do not seek to minimize the task as I present it here, as it is indeed challenging, but, along with all other open-admission college composition instructors, I must enthusiastically embrace the task and see it as possible. Therefore, in working with these students, I seek to accomplish the following sequence of reading/writing activities designed to support their mastery of the necessary academic moves for commencing their own entries “into the conversation”:

- Portfolio Essay One: Identify and discuss already existing personal application of the “core moves.”

- Portfolio Essay Two: As one participant in the academic conversation reading another participant, practice how best to read and respond, both objectively and subjectively, to a college-level text.
- Portfolio Essays Three and Four: Provide a knowledge-making contribution to a larger conversation, including references to print, Internet, and/or personal interview sources (extensive reading and/or onsite work required before drafting begins). Essay Three includes a choice of five topics and some choice of readings from among a menu I provide. Essay Four includes a choice of two broad topics, and the students select the readings, interviews, and other resources themselves—including required selection of at least two sources from any of the TCC Library online databases.
- Portfolio Essay Five or Final In-Class Essay (including at least one week to prepare): Identify and discuss one's reading/writing accomplishments for the term, citing from one's own work to support points made.

As an example of the third essay, I offer Barry Epperson's essay, and I thank him here for his permission to use it. Barry is a wonderful student and honored veteran of the "I did it my way school of hard knocks." He and I share that particular "degree," so we developed a productive working relationship early on in the course. For this paper, Barry could choose from among five topics, two of which are more traditional, academic-style essays, and the other three involve both online and onsite research at notable locations in the area, including St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, Wakulla Springs (a state park), or an urban art park named Railroad Square. Barry chose to write about Railroad Square. He had three weeks in which to identify his opening perspective, research the conversation surrounding the park, locate his contribution to the conversation, and

then complete his essay for pre-portfolio evaluation. The steps he took roughly followed the assignment details presented as follows:

Railroad Square

Visit an interesting place “in your own neighborhood,” have fun, and even write a paper too! Do observations “on-site,” while also reading wonderful materials on related websites.

A. Clarify your position on/understanding of the topic at the start of the reading/writing process. Consider reflecting on these questions:

- What do you know about Railroad Square?
- What might you want to learn about Railroad Square?
- What might you eventually say about Railroad Square in your essay?

You might consider freewriting as one approach to accomplishing this goal.

B. Read and write abstracts (at least one paragraph summary and one paragraph response) on at least six of the more developed, multi-paged linked sites you encounter on the website highlighted below:

<http://www.railroadsquare.com/>

C. Also, visit Railroad Square any time you'd like. Friday aft./evening and also Saturday are often “happening” there, with shops, cafe, artists in studios, etc. particularly this Friday, which features the “First Friday” celebration. Also, the FSU BFA in Studio Art program has a working studio there you might be interested in seeing. While at Railroad Square, please complete at least four pages of your own “on-site” observations, including:

- your notes of what you see and hear
- at least two on-site interviews with employees and/or visitors
- at least one 10-minute freewriting done at the location itself

The four pages are just a minimum. Feel free to write more, as these notes will no doubt make significant contributions to your essay. Please photocopy these notes and submit with your abstracts by the end of the first week we work on this essay.

- D. Begin writing your drafts. Peer review takes place at the end of week 2; please bring two copies of a completed, typed draft to review with a classmate. The essay is due at the end of the third week; please submit two copies of the final draft, peer review materials, a Smarthinking response (required), and all earlier drafts and pre-writing.

While it is not perfect, I believe Barry's essay captures well the spirit of this paper—indeed also the spirit of Barry's always-open-to-possibilities approach to his schoolwork, having returned to college after walking away five years before. Each day he made his best effort throughout the semester, and I remain much inspired by those efforts. In the case of this essay particularly, his abstracts reviewing several websites associated with Railroad Square were nicely detailed and appear to have provided him with a useful “feel” for the place. In the end, though, he chose to make his contribution to the conversation as an interview-based “live” experience, the way he thought would best convey the points he believed were important to make.

Here is Barry's essay, the concluding document in this reading and writing portfolio overview. Enjoy!

Barry Epperson

John Pekins

ENC1101

06/20/2007

A Haven for Inspiration

Whether one is looking for a place to be inspired, write the next great American Novel, chill out and ponder life, or find some funky décor for one's new place, there is a wonderful spot for all these purposes and more right here in town. Tucked away, a hidden treasure among the drab colors of brick and dirt just over the tracks on Tallahassee's south side is a haven of color, life, free expression, and even a little historical vibe. One enters with a generally curious and slightly guarded feeling and then departs with an open new perspective and appreciation for the town we all live in.

The name Railroad Square makes this place sound like a noisy clanging industrial rail stop from the early days of the 20th century. The square which I am referring to once actually was just that, as I have come to understand. It's right off of Railroad Avenue just after you pass the tracks and it opens your mind to a world of art and culture as well as digging into the very spirit of humanity. Not very much information about its history was found in this expedition to the artsy side of town. Mainly a forward sense and a sight for the here and now is what I most took from the patrons and owners alike. This statement may seem contradictory, as many of the shops and art itself come from the past, whether it be vintage clothes or old bikes.

Once a rail stop full of warehouses and even munitions and ration storage facilities during WW II, Railroad Square's earliest signs have almost all but vanished. In the 1960's the land was bought up in order to create a small art commune, as I was told by Bali Hi's own Bill Grace. Since that time the Square has been a refuge for Tallahassee's art community, creating a haven for the right-brained individuals of our society. The now brightly colored buildings and vegetation seem to have cleared all knowledge of the past presence of the industrial revolution. The very earth itself contributes to the reinvention of this place as a natural place of symbiosis, with vines and braches steadily gaining on the aging tin structures. The old rail tracks through the center of the square are now barely visible, as they have been overrun with dirt and grass.

The few places where the tracks emerge give off a faint voice of the past and really bring the older soul of the place to life, as if it's saying, "I will not go quietly," a sentiment echoed by the train pulling through the neighboring rail station, blowing its whistle and clanging its cars together over the track breaks.

The once cold, lifeless, boring tin buildings are now vibrant with bright color, lush greenways with very interestingly soulful industrial art, and huge sculptures of manipulated metal and misplaced wood making unknown statements and telling stories. Amidst all this lifeless life a small community emerges. It has the feel of a small Caribbean fishing market with the wavy sided almost patchwork buildings, while also giving off the feel of an upstate New York hippie town. Some shops are stuffed to the brim with old knick-knacks and gadgets, while in others both vintage and news cars wait to be customized and or repaired. Many aromas fill the air, including hot asphalt, stale cigarettes, patchouli oil, coffee and cloves. Unexpected smells of motor oil, saw dust, and grass take their place as well. The many plants covering the fences almost cut this place off from the city and bring you into your own world. Your mind can be free to run rampant, and you can really be anywhere you want to be.

Railroad Square contains not only art in the visual form, but also in the spiritual, mental, technical, musical, and culinary. Tallahassee Buddhist Community headquarters located here pays tribute to Karma as the only place with a restroom still accessible after hours. In addition to its many art galleries, Railroad Square also contains Tallahassee's only rock gym, as well as custom bicycle shop, an auto shop, a custom amplifier and effects manufacturer, a mallet percussion manufacturer, a stereo equipment sale shop and many vintage clothing and furniture shops.

Walking among the buildings and vines one day, I stopped in to check out one island décor and furniture place. Bali Hi is a small quaint shop that sells mostly South Pacific décor and goods. As you walk through the door, the owner Bill or his wife and co-owner Elaine greet you immediately. There is a very nice hint of teak and bamboo as well as various scented oils in

the air. Bill is very nice and eager to strike up a conversation. On this day, Bill happened to notice the Northwestern Native American artwork tattooed on my arm and immediately started in on his experiences living in Washington State. As we spoke, I eventually learned that Bill and Elaine are not only entrepreneurs, but also humanitarians. They always strive to ensure that the artisans who create their products are paid fair wages for their efforts in order to help improve the quality of life in which they are working. The couple visits the places first hand and witnesses the conditions where the products are handmade, bringing back these quality items themselves. I also spoke with Bill a little bit about the history of the building, and he gave me his little run down that I explained previously. He also said he loved what the Square had become because it created a place where the rent was cheap enough to keep the prices down for the consumer. Items in the shop range from 1 dollar to 600 dollars, with a majority costing less than 100 dollars, and include everything from coat hooks to lamps to entire canopy beds, Hawaiian shirts, and dressers.

I searched for someone not working, someone who was just there to experience the park like I was, to get another take on this place. I found a young woman named Marie, who had never been out of her car in the park before. She had driven through but never had the inclination before to exit the vehicle. She said that on this day she felt like a change and that she wanted to experience a side of Tallahassee she had never seen before. While visiting on this very hot Sunday she equated the place to a ghost town that is full of life, very good for inspirational thinking.

She stated, "Color is everywhere. From the side of a building to the back of a dumpster no part seems to be left out." Also she noted that the square seemed to be a place of free expression. At first I figured she was referring to the sort of retro hippie sort of attitude hanging in the air but she explained it was the various phrases in graffiti on some of the buildings. She made other comments about how relaxing the air was, though she offered one criticism: "A lemonade stand is all that this place needs." It was about 95 degrees in the shade. I told her I

was sure the people of the square would probably welcome the idea with open hearts, and she should get it started up.

Together we visited the 621 Gallery and took heed of the various multi-media displays. We viewed many works of local artists, from sculptures to photographs and video art. The place is not air conditioned and very hot in the summer, but the art is more intriguing than heat is uncomfortable. One picture that stands out in mind was one of the first you'll see as you enter. The media seem to be paper and ink, and the art depicts crumbling buildings topped with an old galleon. Also there is a bust of what looks like Joseph Stalin at the bottom of the building and gargoyles pulling the building to the ground. I see it as a tribute to greed for power being the downfall of society.

With its many facets and niches this place grabs hold of you and pulls on so many emotions inflicted by memories. You leave with a very different perspective of our town. I've been in the general vicinity of the Square many times in the almost seven years I've lived in town, but never saw it for its truly unique beauty. I noticed leaving that the borders of the Square are stretching, and that the art community is leaving its mark outside, overflowing to the nearby intersection of Gaines and Railroad. The buildings in that area have been decorated in tag art, giving them a sense of style completely their own. The kudzu and branches grow over everything as if they are taking it all back for nature. An old gas station on the same corner I've visited so many times, now closed for about a year, takes on the look of an abandoned mine deep in the hills. I saw on my way home a new aspect of art versus nature and the combined effort to overthrow the manmade concrete and steel structures of our civilization. Tallahassee is very full of art and culture. Many murals grace the sides of buildings and buses painted with the same fashion and style the Square reflects. They act to bring us back to a time we don't even think of, though we long for the simplicity. I never knew the world existed through these sorts of eyes, but I have now opened a new window and can gaze upon the world with a fresh view. The

Square is a portal for the transformation of the mind and soul, and I recommend anyone looking for a refresher in body and spirit take a nice summer stroll around the block.

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Conclusion

Although I have taught reading/writing for over thirty years, I have never struggled with a piece of writing as much as I have struggled with this essay, and I believe the reason is that my understanding of the points discussed here is still clarifying, even now as I write this closing section. Arriving at the end of the process, I find this work easily as humbling as it may be clear and/or helpful, and I can only hope the results do some good, somewhere, somehow, in spite of my continuing lack of full understanding concerning the matters discussed.

I believe real struggle to make meaning, to succeed at a challenging task—such as I have described in this essay—often lies at the heart of what we call the written language process. As a result, we often find ourselves, as reader/writers, wandering landscapes we have not seen before, and, if we have seen them before, they are landscapes we certainly don't always understand. The horizons lie before us open, unbounded—at times exhilarating, other times terrifying, and still others somewhere in between. I believe these are our students' experiences as well when we ask them to accomplish any written language task, only minus the years of postsecondary discipline and professional experience. Yet they press on, driven by some urge they perhaps can identify, or not, but urged on nevertheless, seeing these matters through in the midst of at times great

emotion, great questioning—not only related to specific goals of each reading/writing task but also related to the true value of these educational tasks in the first place. They also question themselves as participants in an education system that devotes itself to these tasks, and they question even their own projected views of themselves as eventual products of this education system, as users of whatever creative and critical thinking tools they gain from it, as participants in the job market, as providers for their families, and as beneficiaries of whatever security and esteem their educational accomplishments might eventually make possible for them. For many “average” and “below-average” students, such open, unbounded speculation can in turn provoke terror, anger, despair, and more, all because of their inability to consistently “crack the code” of academic accomplishment. In conversation, many reveal a personal sense of themselves as “smart,” but when this intelligence finds no successful expression in the academic environment, they turn away with great discouragement, as well as with many unresolved emotions and questions about themselves, about their futures, and also about a system that was more effective at discouraging them than affirming their intellectual competence.

All of these ruminations open out to a renewed appreciation for questions—the students’ questions and our own questions, too—as meeting points among us, whatever our respective regions of academic competence might be (thank you again to Richard Paul, Linda Elder, and the Fort Lewis College Writing Program). Perhaps it is in our shared experience of questions that students and educators can, from both sides, begin the process of abandoning fixed perceptions of our educational experiences, and also of each other, so that public education can truly provide all students the best possible opportunities to accomplish its foundational and truest goal: the promotion of knowledge, to the benefit of students, their families, and our society. At the end of this essay, therefore, my wish is that all engaged in the learning enterprise approach each other in

that spirit of spacious, unconditional inquiry—where intelligence may seek intelligence, where dedication to possibility may meet determination to make possibilities real, where “disconnects” may become opportunities for greater coherence and success. If we seek the best from each other in that spirit, we should all find much to enjoy from the surprising, surely wonderful adventure to follow.

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