

***Composition Studies* at 50: The New Work of Writing Instruction as a Way Forward**

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This journal, originally, *Freshman English News*, is our field's oldest independent journal. It evolved from publishing news-based items related to first year writing courses to "reflecting the changes going on in the developing fields of rhetoric and composition" ("History"). It is this theme of evolution that I want to take up in my reflections of the 50th anniversary of what is now *Composition Studies*, occurring during the same year as the CCCC 2022 convention, where I served as chair. From evolution, I then will chart a path forward as we consider the next 50 years of scholarship in *Composition Studies*.

As articulated in the call for proposals for the 2022 CCCC convention, higher education has evolved from a gate-keeping, admission-based enterprise toward a student-based decision-to-attend enterprise, one with declines in enrollment ("College Enrollments"). In the call, I wrote:

Let's consider the following facts: (1) There are fewer high school graduates, and the rate of high school graduation continues to decline (Nadworny 2019); (2) postsecondary enrollment has continued to decline since 2011 (Nadworny 2019; Nietzel 2019); (3) in 2017–2018, whites comprised the minority of college enrollment for the first time; and (4) despite the fact that the pool of Black and Latinx 18-year-olds in the US is not shrinking at the same rate as the pool of white 18-year-olds, especially in regions like the Midwest and Northeast, Black enrollment has fallen sharply since 2017 (Miller 2020). Given these sobering statistics, students are now making choices about whether or not they want to enroll in a postsecondary institution, making competition among postsecondary institutions keen with more pressure being put on chief marketing and recruitment/enrollment officers to sell the optimal college experience to prospective students. ("2022 Call")

This changing landscape invites us to reflect historically, to when we as a field were required to consider open-access and open admissions (especially within two-year colleges) as part of writing pedagogy in higher education. In 1971, *Guidelines for Junior College English Teacher Training Program* was published in response to the open admissions movement and the "community college boom" (567). As Jensen and Toth also note, "The 1971 *Guidelines* anticipate the 1974 *Students' Right to Their Own Language* statement, which was authored by a committee that included several of the same two-year college

faculty (most notably Elisabeth McPherson, who became the first community college faculty member to chair CCCC in 1972—see Smitherman; Parks” (567). That year, 1972, is the year in which *Freshman English News/Composition Studies* was established. The *Guidelines* anticipated increased instruction for diverse learners including “minority literature” and critical language awareness, as applied to student demographics and populations deemed to be remedial (567).

We can learn many lessons from the shifting demographics associated with the open admissions movement 50 years ago and the declining enrollments we see happening today. Here are three.

It is no accident that many institutions, including those with some of the lowest acceptance rates, are now considering test-optional admissions—with the whole California state system now going test optional (Neitzel). In fact, two-thirds of all U.S. higher education institutions are now test-optional (College Post “Two-Thirds”). Institutions of higher education understand that they are no longer in a position to keep students out of higher education, especially when based on culturally-biased metrics. Given that the shifting demographics of U.S. higher education institutions reflect a more culturally diverse student body, test-optional admissions policies are seen as a way to create fewer barriers in access in order to increase enrollment.

Test-optional practices have a great impact on how we do writing placement into first year writing. If this wasn’t already “Freshman English News” to readers, it certainly requires greater agency than we once imagined. Considering writing placement “democracy’s open door,” Christie Toth analyzes the impact of directed self-placement practices at two-year colleges, a population ripe for making connections between historical open admissions movements and current test optional admissions practices (7). All of the 12 institutions from which Toth collected interviews previously used standardized and multiple-choice tests to make decisions about placement into writing courses (8). Seven institutions changed to directed self-placement to accelerate progress toward degree completion, while participants from five colleges

reported that these changes were fueled by institutional involvement with non-profit organizations like Achieving the Dream, funding from large foundations, and/or the influence of reform-oriented higher education research emerging from academic centers like the CCRC. In five cases, developmental education reforms affecting placement were also a response to state-level policies either encouraging or mandating change. (8)

Similar to test optional admissions practices, another lesson we can learn from the current enrollment landscape of higher education also has a great deal to do with access: cost. While revisions to admissions decisions do open up new opportunities for access, admission in and of itself does not address the lack of affordability with earning a college degree. To improve timely progress toward the degree, as Toth suggests, institutions consider directed self placement to enable students to move directly into first year writing courses that fulfill general education requirements without taking basic or remedial writing courses that only count for elective credit. But timely progress toward the degree isn't the only consideration at work here: While basic writing courses typically count for elective credit only, students are in fact still stuck with the tuition costs associated with enrolling in these courses. Thinking back to the enrollment picture I outlined in the Call for Proposals for the CCCC 2022 convention, I noted how students are flipping the script. They are making decisions about whether or not they want to enroll in college in the first place, in part because college is expensive (“2022 Call”).

In a recent *Forbes* article, “A New Study Investigates Why College is so Expensive,” Preston Cooper identifies the following reasons for this reconsideration of college’s affordability: “students overestimate the return to a degree; colleges are not transparent about their true prices; too few institutions operate in each regional market; and there are significant barriers to entry for new educational providers” (par. 4). In terms of solutions to these problems, Cooper identifies a two-pronged approach: 1) transparency in terms of providing better financial aid data and net pricing, and 2) “opening the higher-education marketplace to competition by removing accreditors from their role as gatekeepers of federal financial aid, and instead allocating funds based on student outcomes” (par. 14). Again, the solution is eliminating gatekeeping mechanisms that deny access by making college less accessible and affordable.

The final lesson we can learn from the shifting demographics of higher education enrollment requires us to have candid conversations about what these shifting demographics mean. While there are fewer high school graduates due to lower birth rates, the most recent projections reveal the following:

the racial/ethnic distribution of U.S. high school graduates will reflect the strong increases in high school graduation that have occurred in recent years. What used to be the coming diversity of U.S. graduates is now reality. Among the 90 percent of Class of 2019 high school graduates who were from public schools and for whom race/ethnicity data are provided: 51 percent of U.S. public high school graduates were White non-Hispanic, 25 percent were Hispanic of any race, 14 percent were single race Black non-Hispanic, 6 percent

were single-race non-Hispanic Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (of these, 6 percent were Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander graduates), 3 percent were non-Hispanic multiracial, and 1 percent were single-race non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native. (“Appendix”)

Put simply, the population from which colleges and universities must find students appear to be more brown and diverse, and higher education depends on these populations of students in order to survive. While test-optional admissions and affordability may provide access to a more brown demographic, those practices are front-ended and do not address ways to retain students, especially as related to academic excellence and culturally responsive curricula. It is, perhaps, for this reason that I connected the 2022 Call to diversity, equity, and inclusion work. This is, perhaps, where composition studies (as a field) can make its greatest contribution: in considering higher education’s enrollment challenges in relationship to access. An approach that addresses both admission and retention is necessary to make sure that students graduate from our institutions.

Connecting retention and first year writing is, again, not “Freshmen English News.” Pegeen Reichert Powell’s scholarship has explored at length connections between retention and first year writing. Building on this scholarship, Lockett et al. also provide data as evidence that first year writing initiatives can significantly shift institutions’ first-to-second year retention rates. Based on their retention initiatives in first year writing, the retention rate “increased from 36 percent to 64 percent with the population of students with the highest likelihood of leaving the university, students who would have failed first year writing” (132). What is also significant about these efforts is the fact that two-thirds of the students participating in a retention-based first year writing course, designed to provide intervention for those in danger of failing, were nonwhite. Initiatives such as these provide one of many potential roadmaps for how we make our work as a field relevant with regard to diversity and inclusion and higher education enrollment.

In summary, we have a number of challenges as teachers and scholars navigating the new higher education landscape; however, our previous and existing scholarship equipped us to address higher education’s challenges. As I move from the 2022 Program Convention Chair’s role into the CCC Chair’s role, I’d like to conclude by highlighting three key foci that and themes that consider our future in higher education:

1. *Higher Education enrollment and our responsibilities as a discipline.* Questions we need to be equipped to address include how we re-

think our approaches to dual enrollment, directed self-placement, and recruitment and retention in ways that enable the institutions from which we come to survive. If the institutions where we work cannot survive or thrive, how can we support members of the field in doing the work of the field and our organizations?

2. *Diversity, equity, and inclusion across the discipline.* Every new initiative, working group, or policy we adopt or take a stance on must align with the organization's commitment to DEI principles. Not only does the survival of institutions and higher education depend on it, but as a field, our expertise and influence within the broader higher education landscape also depends on it.
3. *Public facing outreach and dissemination of knowledge.* As a discipline, we need to be the leading voice on how writing pedagogy and institutional practices influence the landscape of higher education. We need to explore more deeply how we demonstrate our ethos as experts and leading scholars to the broader public, and begin to influence public policy and decision-making, especially within this new higher education landscape.

As we remember the past 50 years of *Composition Studies*' influence on the field, it is my sincerest hope that you will join me in charting a new path for our work and higher education over the course of the next 50 years.

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