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The Writing Exam as Index of Policy, Curriculum, and Assessment: An Academic Literacies Perspective on High Stakes Testing in an American University

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Abstract
Academic literacy is a policy goal universities implement through curricular and assessment decisions that are generally discipline-based. Disciplinary genres are traditionally seen as relatively fixed entities, easily evaluated by practiced members of the field and able to be emulated and mastered by students with training. This study examines the interplay of policy, curriculum, and assessment as they concern academic literacy in higher education and explore how writing assessment is employed in the maintenance and verification of academic literacy. The research took place at a small university known primarily for its pharmacy school and preparation for careers in the sciences and health sciences. The university is unusual in that it requires that students pass a writing proficiency exam in order to graduate. This research employed ethnographic methods and textual analysis to discover the interaction between university writing policy and its real-world effects. Data was collected in the form of fieldnotes of my observations of the Writing Center and interactions on-campus; ethnographic interviews with faculty, administrators, and students; course syllabi and other site documents; and exam bluebooks.

This study looks at the use of the five-paragraph theme as an assessment tool, an academic genre rarely seen outside of composition classrooms and essay exams. It also evaluates the social and institutional function of a high-stakes testing policy, and how the policy serves to balance curricular ideologies with other constraints. It shows how universities, increasingly working under a business model, make curricular and assessment decisions in the interest of balancing hiring costs, academic ideology, and so on, in an iterative process. The results of this research have implications for evaluating writing policy in higher education institutions, and the use and structure of writing assessment in other arenas as well.

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THE WRITING EXAM AS INDEX
OF POLICY, CURRICULUM, AND ASSESSMENT:
AN ACADEMIC LITERACIES PERSPECTIVE
ON HIGH STAKES TESTING IN AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Jennifer Maria Freeman

A DISSERTATION
in
Education

Presented to the Faculties of the
University of Pennsylvania
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
2007

Nancy H. Hornberger
Dissertation Supervisor

Graduate Group Chairperson
To Val,

Whose love and faith give me strength
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is often said that "it takes a village" to raise a child, and I believe that the saying is no less true when applied to completing doctoral dissertations. This study is as much an accomplishment of my colleagues, participants, family, and friends as it is my own. I have been blessed with the people in my life, and I am so grateful.

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The students, faculty, and administrators at USU—my colleagues and my friends—deserve special recognition. USU was my professional home for seven and a half years, and the experience was formative. In my evolution from tutor to instructor to researcher, my friends at USU mentored me, laughed with me, and ranted with me. In support of this project, they offered their time, their insights, and their stories. I hope that I can give back to them as much as they gave me.

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ABSTRACT

THE WRITING EXAM AS INDEX OF POLICY, CURRICULUM, AND ASSESSMENT:
AN ACADEMIC LITERACIES PERSPECTIVE ON HIGH STAKES TESTING IN AN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Jennifer Maria Freeman

Dr. Nancy Homberger, Committee Chairperson

Academic literacy is a policy goal universities implement through curricular and assessment decisions that are generally discipline-based. Disciplinary genres are traditionally seen as relatively fixed entities, easily evaluated by practiced members of the field and able to be emulated and mastered by students with training. This study examines the interplay of policy, curriculum, and assessment as they concern academic literacy in higher education and explore how writing assessment is employed in the maintenance and verification of academic literacy. The research took place at a small university known primarily for its pharmacy school and preparation for careers in the sciences and health sciences. The university is unusual in that it requires that students pass a writing proficiency exam in order to graduate. This research employed ethnographic methods and textual analysis to discover the interaction between university writing policy and its real-world effects. Data was collected in the form of fieldnotes of my observations of the Writing Center and interactions on-campus; ethnographic
interviews with faculty, administrators, and students; course syllabi and other site documents; and exam bluebooks.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Overview of the Study

Midway through their coursework at Urban Science University (USU), all students must sit for the timed writing proficiency exam (WPX) that is required for graduation. A month later, the students learn whether they have passed or failed the exam. Sixty percent of them breathe sighs of relief and move on with their academic studies. About forty percent, however, are confronted with the reality that an interdisciplinary committee of USU faculty has deemed their writing skills inadequate and so they must retake the exam the following year. Those who do not eventually pass cannot graduate.

High-stakes writing testing at the university level is unusual, but not unheard of, in the United States. In some cases the tests are entrance or placement exams and in some they are exit exams. At USU, by contrast, the exam is a mid-program hurdle. In all circumstances, high-stakes testing is instituted primarily to address a perceived deficiency in the skills of the student body, and to ensure that all students attain a preordained minimum skill level. What is of interest to me, however, is how universities decide what that minimum skill level should be and how they determine whether that level has been reached. Are the persons and bodies responsible for the assessment and maintenance of that skill level truly in agreement? If so, or if not, what effect does this have on the instruction and assessment of student writing? Does the quality of the students' daily writing get lost in the politics of proficiency?
Literacy, in the most commonly used definition, refers to the instrumental ability to read and write. At the university level, all students are presumed to be literate, but not all students are presumed to be 'good' writers. Good writers are generally identified by their high grades in writing-intensive courses, or perhaps they are identified simply by their choice in their major: English majors are likely good writers; chemistry majors are probably not. In fact, strong writing abilities are generally thought to be the domains of the humanities and social sciences, while the sciences and trades are considered writing-poor fields. These pervasive stereotypes privilege some forms of writing above others. In practice they may be quite off the mark, because they beg the question: what is good writing? What is considered 'writing'? These questions are foundational for the emerging field of Academic Literacies, into which this project intervenes.

All academic institutions, and by extension all disciplines, require writing as part of their core curricula and training. Despite differences between disciplines in curricular emphasis on writing, the ability to read and write well is generally seen as a cornerstone of academic and professional success. To that end, first-year students at nearly all colleges and universities in the United States are required to take at least one composition-intensive class, frequently in the form of English 101. Composition is the only subject that is required of all students in higher education, although universities vary in their approach to facilitating students' writing development. Some universities have adopted comprehensive Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs, while many rely on a sequence or selection of particular composition-intensive courses to transmit this material. There is a range in degree of emphasis that individual institutions place on explicit writing instruction, and this range is influenced by the higher education
institution or major program. Institutional policymakers justify the inclusion of composition curricula by pointing to the cognitive benefits of writing. Composition is said to strengthen students’ analytic ability and self-expression and therefore help them realize their academic potential.

Instructors are frequently more concerned with what students cannot do than with what they can. When describing students’ writing difficulties, instructors often cite poor organization, sloppy grammar and mechanics, inadequate vocabulary, plagiarism, weak content, or deficient reasoning abilities. When explaining why students write poorly, instructors often refer to inadequate learning or teaching at the elementary and secondary levels, student resistance or laziness, lack of disciplinary emphasis on writing, deficient home preparation, and even mental inadequacy. This deficit orientation to student writing dominates in many educational institutions. Any and all of these explanations may be true in particular cases, but other orientations to academic literacy provide a more nuanced picture. The New Literacy Studies and its theoretical offspring—Academic Literacies—situate literacy practices in their social contexts and challenge deficit orientations like Study Skills or autonomous models of literacy which reduce it to a set of instrumental proficiencies (Lea & Street, 2000; Pardoe, 2000).

In a more perfect world, the many and diverse ways in which students create text would be more widely recognized. While the essay text is a dominant school genre, students also take notes, write lab reports, complete worksheets, prepare summaries and response papers, make flashcards, fill in short answers to test questions, and scribble comments in the margins of their textbooks (for starters). All of these literacy practices have generic forms, but not all of them are considered ‘real’ writing or worthy of

3
evaluation by a more practiced tutor (Gee, 2000; Maybin, 2000; Pardoe, 2000; Street, 1997).

Gee’s notion of Discourses is helpful in elucidating understandings of literacy as a social practice. He defines a Discourse as “a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts,’ of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network,’ or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’” (Gee, 1996, p. 131). Primary Discourses are formed as part of one’s first social identity, while secondary Discourses (such as those of the school, workplace, or church) are acquired as part of what may be described as a social apprenticeship. Because one’s primary Discourses may in some cases inhibit the smooth acquisition of socially and economically valuable secondary Discourses, in the school context certain students remain academic stragglers or outsiders. From a social justice perspective, there is a need to break open the secondary Discourses of what constitutes a legitimate academic text, and for this reason, careful ethnographic examination of prevailing Discourses (and social practices) around writing in academe is a necessary first step.

This dissertation is concerned primarily with the role that one high-stakes writing exam holds in a university—its history, its policy, and its practice. This work situates the exam in relation to curricula, assessment, and policy; students, faculty, and administrators; and the academy and the workplace. Each of these players is important to understanding the creation, implementation and effects of the exam. An ideological model of literacy allows for exploration of “contests over meanings, definitions and boundaries and struggles for control of the literacy agenda,” and can therefore better
encapsulate the complexities suggested by the WPX policy at USU (Street, 1997, p. 48).

Gee et al. (1996, p. 22) write, “In the case of any Discourse we can make a distinction between the espoused goals and values and the goals and values that actually emerge in practice”; this distinction or question is the heart of my study.

Rationale for the Study

In my dissertation I approach this question of academic writing standards through the framework of Academic Literacies which is useful because it contests traditional skills-based approaches to writing and further encourages challenges to dominant forms (Lea & Street, 2000). This line of inquiry has direct implications for assessment, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs, and higher education systems in a state of flux. This dissertation speaks to the role of standards in higher education, an issue with particular salience in the current political and educational climate. Pardoe discusses the difficulty of researching literacy and student writing because of “the challenge of understanding practices that are already very firmly divided up as either ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ adequate or inadequate, successful or unsuccessful, dominant or marginal” (Pardoe, 2000, p. 150). My work extends the analysis beyond these dichotomies.

By orienting my work in Academic Literacies, which has only minimally dealt with assessment in academe, I am in a better position to evaluate the socially situated nature of this topic. Assessment is the place where values about writing are revealed, even if not formally elucidated (Owen, 1997). For this reason, an ethnography of one particularly high-stakes example of writing assessment offers insight into Discourses about writing and writing proficiency in higher education.
The Research Questions:

1. How have institutional policies on writing instruction and assessment shaped the academic literacies of students at USU?
2. How does the USU core curriculum address academic literacies and in what ways does it respond to, reflect, and challenge policy and assessment?
3. How well does the USU Writing Proficiency Examination reflect curricular and institutional goals around academic literacy, and to what extent does it drive them?
4. What are the implications of this case study for wider discussions on the relationship between higher education policies and academic literacies?

Overview of the Methodology

I became interested in the history and function of the WPX as a consequence of my employment at USU. I worked as an ESL specialist in the Writing Center and an adjunct instructor of ESL and English Composition from September 1998 through November 2006. In these roles, I taught grammar and composition to hundreds of students. My position in the Writing Center involved preparing weak ESL writers to pass the WPX, and over time I became conflicted about the policy. On the one hand, I firmly believed that every college graduate should have minimal writing skills and a facility for critical thinking. On the other, I saw students who had become friends grow disheartened and angry, as they were ultimately penalized for their inability to master the exam. While I agreed with the goals of the exam, it pained me to see how students got lost in the
requirement. Studying the exam in depth using qualitative methodologies would allow me to better understand the functioning of the university with respect to policy, and it held the possibility of illuminating confusions about the exam and improving my ability both to tutor/teach writing and advocate on behalf of students.

This study was intended to be written as a critical ethnography, balancing traditional and careful methods of data collection and analysis against a research agenda intended to stimulate discussion and reflection among participants (Foley, 2002a; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). The study was completed primarily through use of ethnographic methodologies including participant observation; semi-structured interviews with faculty, administrators, staff, and students; and review of site documents including university statistics, site documents, and bluebooks. Data was collected from April 2003 through September 2005, and then it was compiled and coded using Atlas.ti—a qualitative data analysis software program. Grounded theory methodology was employed in the development of themes and arguments. A running document of emerging themes was maintained throughout the study, and these themes and insights were systematically checked against the available data, expanded upon, or discarded.

Overview of the Findings

This study set out to describe the interplay of policy, curriculum and assessment in the maintenance and development of students' writing proficiency in one American university. What emerged was a picture in which a temporary policy initiative in the form of a writing exam—the WPX—displaced efforts at direct curricular reform. The exam policy was created to address faculty and industry concerns that many students
were graduating with weak writing skills, and the exam was designed as a measure to ensure that these struggling students were promptly identified and given writing instruction. Over the years, the university developed an extensive system of remediation, because it was simpler to move a percentage of students through the Writing Center than tackle the underlying problems that gave rise to the assessment in the first place. Bureaucratic structures made it difficult to institute wide-ranging curricular reforms in the university from the top down, and contributed to tensions between departments and between administration and faculty. At the same time, bottom-up curricular initiatives springing from students or particular faculty members are difficult to implement across the university due to those same bureaucratic structures, as well as norms around faculty autonomy and professional expertise, and the students’ status as apprentices. As a result, the exam was frequently constructed as a necessary evil that would spur students on to seek assistance with their writing abilities because, as individuals, faculty and administrators felt that their hands were tied to enact broad-spectrum changes.

Faculty and administrators were interviewed about their perceptions of the exam and its relationship to the requirements in individual courses in the core curriculum. An examination of this core revealed that the bulk of both writing instruction and writing assignments in the students’ first two years came in the required Humanities sequence, especially in English 101. However, due to rising numbers of students, budget shortfalls, and faculty resistance, responsibility for teaching English 101 fell almost exclusively to adjunct instructors. As part-time employees, these adjuncts had little connection with the university outside of their class sessions and they received scarce supervision. As a consequence, the writing program relied upon implicit assumptions that there was a
universal standard of practices and values that English composition instructors would uphold. As a further consequence, there was no assurance that what was assessed by the WPX would be transmitted or evaluated in a similar fashion in English 101. Moreover, because the WPX is an internal, anonymous assessment administered over a year after students complete the English 101 course, there is no measure of the effectiveness of particular adjuncts or instructors in fostering the desired writing skills in the student body.

Supporters of the exam were united by the high value they placed on objectivity in evaluating writing and their belief in a nearly universal standard of academic literacy. The anonymous grading of bluebooks by two faculty readers was frequently cited as a strength of the assessment, because in this way the scoring would not be biased against particular students or be susceptible to the whims of an individual grader. However, investigation of the structure of the exam and the grading procedures brought forth challenges to this view. Members of the committee and Writing Center staff perceived variation in grader subjectivities, and in some cases this variation was seen to harm some borderline students or it was utilized to give others a leg up with the requirement.

Additionally, while ESL and native-English-speaking students were presumed to fail the WPX at similar rates, ESL students took significantly longer on average to remediate. The University's de facto writing program was primarily reactive, rather than proactive. As such, the exam came to serve as a lightning rod for complaints about the skills of USU students, the instruction provided by faculty, or the priorities set forth by the administration.
The WPX presents a complex case in which policy, curriculum, and assessment operate largely independent of one another and the system breaks down. Despite generally unified and well-meaning goals for the students and graduates regarding the acquisition and demonstration of various forms of academic literacy, there remains tension between the university leadership, faculty and student body as to the best means to bring these about.

Limitations of the Study

The findings presented in this study rely in large measure on the stated perceptions and memories of the interviewed participants regarding a controversial assessment policy. The first limitation concerns the highly partisan nature of much of the information gathered. Each participant was a stakeholder in the university’s writing policy, whether an administrator, a faculty member, a staff person, or a student. This had a significant impact on both the collection and later interpretation of data in this study, because these biases had to be taken into account. Any statements in support of or against the existing writing policy could impact the policy’s future and by extension that individual’s roles and responsibilities with respect to student writing. In fact, one interviewee indicated that my research made him nervous, because its publication and dissemination could be used to alter his comfortable status quo (2004-03-18 FN). A second limitation of this study concerns its scope: because of the quantity of available data in relationship to the time available to gather information, decisions had to be made with regard to research priorities. These decisions were made by reflecting upon the data necessary to respond to the research questions effectively. Ultimately, the bulk of data...
was delimited to participant accounts of their own behavior and values, which were supported by additional evidence including copies of syllabi, class assignments, and exam booklets. A third limitation of this study, as suggested by the intention to write a critical ethnography described above, is the possibility of my status as both a long-term employee and researcher in the University to result in researcher bias. I did not come into this field site with a blank slate; I began the research as an employee of the University, with strong ties to the students and to my colleagues, and with years of experience training students to pass the WPX. Every effort was made to quell this source of bias through frequent discussions of emerging themes with USU community members and dispassionate outsiders, in hopes of converting my insider status into a strength rather than a weakness of the investigation.

Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter Two of the study presents an overview of scholarly research into the changing role of higher education as it has been influenced by business models and industry. This leads to a discussion of university curricula, addressing core curricula, Writing Across the Curriculum programs, and provides an overview of perspectives on the acquisition of academic literacy. Finally, it treats the forms, functions, and criticisms of assessment, particularly as it is used to evaluate writing proficiency.

Chapter Three describes the methods used in the study, including the setting, the researcher’s role as participant observer, data collection procedures pertaining to the selection of interview subjects and primary texts, and data analysis. It concludes with a presentation of the research questions addressed by the study.
Chapter Four presents the findings related to the development and maintenance of the Writing Proficiency Examination policy as a function of the interactions of the university's leadership, faculty and relationships with outside industry in response to perceived weaknesses in students' writing preparation.

Chapter Five is a discussion of the WPX as it pertains to the instruction and assessment of academic literacy in the university curriculum.

Chapter Six describes the design of the WPX and the grading procedures. It addresses the impact of the exam on the student body, and their efforts to understand and fulfill the requirement. It concludes with an examination of perceptions of the purpose of the exam and its success in achieving that purpose.

Chapter Seven discusses the findings presented in Chapters Four through Six as they relate to the research questions and rationale motivating the study described in this introduction. The chapter concludes with implications of this study's findings for writing assessment and instruction in the university.
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

This dissertation on assessment of academic writing in an American university takes as its foundation many streams of academic literature. The chapter begins with a discussion of the macro-level shifts occurring in university education and then specifically addresses the field of pharmacy. These shifts are marked by a trend toward the commercialization of higher education, and the increasing influence of industry on education programs. Second, various perspectives on the acquisition of academic literacy are treated, from instrumental views on writing to more nuanced models that take into account context and communities of practice. Third, I discuss the role of language planning and curriculum, from the 'cafeteria-style' core curricula that provide students with tastes from each disciplinary menu, to Writing Across the Curriculum programs that seek to build connections across disciplines for students and faculty alike. Finally, this chapter closes with a discussion of the purposes, effects and challenges of writing assessment as currently envisaged in the university.

Changing Role of Higher Education

Many universities are currently undergoing an identity crisis in response to changing characteristics of students, the emergence of new fields of study, and increased hybridization across traditional disciplines. Heightened demands on universities to be responsive to workplace requirements have further shaken the foundations of the ivory tower. Gee, Hull and Lankshear argue, “schools and universities, especially as they are currently structured, no longer have a monopoly on learning, and indeed are not always
well suited to the task” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996, p. 6; Usher, 1997). One might ask whether such institutions have ever monopolized learning, but the real issue is that the character of universities has undoubtedly changed increasingly to reflect the demands of industry.

A primary effect of the recent trend towards academic and industrial cross-pollination is that disciplinary roles are not as fixed. Whereas domains of knowledge, including methods and theoretical orientations, were once relatively bounded, there is now increased hybridity. My own field of Educational Linguistics is a clear example which draws from education, linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, to name a few of its disciplinary origins. At the same time, courses of study formerly grounded in multiple traditional disciplines are being reformulated as discrete disciplines in themselves, as with Pharmacy and Occupational Therapy, for example. This is reflective of the increasingly close relationship between higher education and the businesses into which the graduates are accepted. For example, as university and industry partnerships become the norm, especially in scientific fields like pharmaceuticals or engineering, research studies are frequently conducted in universities with the financial support of various industries.

Scholars are noting the trend toward instrumentalization of knowledge; knowledge for knowledge’s sake is no longer the purpose of higher education (Barnett, 1997; Benson, Gurney, Harrison, & Rimmershaw, 1994; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Griffin, 1997; Hoadley-Maidment, 2000; Scott, 1997; Usher, 1997). On the one hand, students complain loudly to faculty and administration about requirements and lesson plans that they do not perceive to be applicable in their future professional lives. On the
other hand, some industries are dictating to universities the skills that they wish for graduates to possess, including strong writing skills. This tension has not yet been resolved. As Jones writes, “A significant gap exists between the ideal professional education outcomes that are deemed necessary for effective performance in the workplace and the actual abilities and skill levels perceived by employers, supervisors, and recent college graduates” (E. A. Jones, 2002, p. 11). Thus, demands from both students and industry are changing the character of the modern university.

In their 1996 book, *The New Work Order: Behind the Language of the New Capitalism*, Gee, Hull and Lankshear put forth the idea that changes in industry have profound effects on the role of education in professional preparation. They note that “in particular, the new capitalism will progressively recruit schools to produce suitable ‘subjects’ or ‘citizens’ for new-capitalist Discourse in general and its manifestations in specific Discourses,” causing a need to reexamine the goals of schooling (p. 22). The direction and reciprocity of this influence is key, for instead of schools determining what is relevant to the intellectual and skills-based formation their students receive, businesses will contract with the academy to produce the workers they seek (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Griffin, 1997). Unlike the old capitalism, in which workers specialized in tidy areas of expertise such as crankshaft installation, the new capitalism requires smart, flexible, and creative employees who are adept at working across teams and interacting directly with the consumer (whoever that may be). In this sense, the new capitalism has an “increasing emphasis on personal transferable skills and generic competences” (Scott, 1997, p. 25). Quite often, the emphasis is on strong communication skills, as “college graduates are expected to read, write, speak and listen effectively to
develop and convey ideas, solutions or alternatives, and information” (E. A. Jones, 2002, p. 6).

In a market-driven educational economy, with thousands of higher education institutions competing for applicants each year, there is increased emphasis on a university’s ability to place students in graduate programs or high-paying careers upon graduation. This emphasis is reflected in the viewbooks colleges and universities distribute to prospective students, and in the numerous national college guides and rankings reports published every year. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in professional schools. Unlike institutions with an orientation toward the liberal arts, professional schools and programs appear to have an implicit (and even explicit) obligation to prepare their graduates for specific career fields.

The rapidly increasing numbers of both higher education institutions and of students enrolling in them have also contributed to the current climate in which knowledge is seen as a commodity. Colleges and universities are increasingly influenced by market forces, and are challenged to adapt their curricula to meet the needs and wants of a diverse and motivated prospective student population. In this formulation, students are “consumers” who purchase “knowledge goods” from universities, and “what counts is whether the goods are of reliable quality, are of relatively uniform character, and meet prescribed quality standards” (Barnett, 1997; Benson, Gurney, Harrison, & Rimmershaw, 1994; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Griffin, 1997; Usher, 1997). Student-consumers invest in degrees in much the same way they would cultivate a financial portfolio and they expect high returns for their investment of time and tuition.
Assessment has taken new importance in today's standards-driven educational climate, because of its presumed role in the maintenance of those standards within and perhaps across universities. Standardized testing is gaining importance at both the elementary and secondary levels, and many occupations have instituted boards for professional certifications. In the classroom, teachers frequently "teach to the test" both to ensure their students' success and their own professional futures. As far as "the end of knowledge" is concerned, the effect may be "the substitution of instrumental practices for cognitive norms" (Scott, 1997, p. 25).

Pharmacy and the Health Professions

In 1994 the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy dramatically reformed the pharmacy curriculum to account for changing workplace conditions in which pharmacists take more "active roles in recommending, monitoring, and assuming more responsibility for all aspects of patients' drug therapies" (Hobson & Lerner, 1999, p. 156). Hobson and Lerner explain that the writing demands on pharmacists will also be significant, involving electronic communications, forms, and letters. This is due to pharmacists' developing roles in educating doctors and patients in a rapidly changing industry, with expanding opportunities and direction in treatment and prevention of disease. Whether or not pharmacy students are prepared for these writing demands is up for debate.

Because pharmacy is a broad field encompassing many different sub-fields and specialties, the writing and other faculty in universities catering to pharmacy students need to take into account that "each of these represents different communities in and of
themselves, with their own values, mores, and biases, and their own texts” (Hobson & Lerner, 1999, p. 169). Without a deeper understanding of the professional demands that graduates will face, the education they receive may not be sufficient or appropriate. In their major coursework, pharmacy students are often prepared beyond the scientific and technical standards set forth for employment at retail pharmacy, while their writing skills continue to disappoint employers and faculty (GD, 2003-07-28 FN). While many pharmacy schools have begun to implement Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and writing proficiency exams in addition to the already required liberal arts courses, in reality “writing exists in only limited pockets of instruction outside the required first-year English. The struggle between pharmacist as scientist/practitioner and pharmacist as skilled communicator/healthcare provider is not necessarily resolved, despite accrediting recommendations and the perceived needs of working professionals” (Lerner, 2001, p. 16). This study suggests that these trends are evident at USU as well.

**Perspectives on the Acquisition of Academic Writing**

Scholars in various disciplines have addressed the production, acquisition, and identification of academic writing. These accounts vary in the levels of transparency and meaning they attribute to successful (or unsuccessful) academic writing. For the purposes of this research, I am limiting my attention to the orientations provided by studies of discipline/genre and Academic Literacies, because these most directly inform the discourses present at my field site at USU.

One of the tightest definitions I have found of literacy is that it “is best understood as a set of social practices; these are observable in events which are mediated by written
texts" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 9). Literacy events are foundational in any ethnographic exploration of academic literacy. A key component of this is the variability of literacy practices among social settings which again makes the appropriateness of a given sample of text entirely dependent on the social context in which it is produced or received (Ivanic, 1998).

All literacy events (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Heath, 1983; Ivanic, 1998; Maybin, 2000) occur in a community of practice (Gee, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Luna, Solsken, & Kutz, 2000; Maybin, 2000). Street expands Heath's notion of literacy events with the concept literacy practices, defining them as "the concepts and meanings brought to those events and which give them meaning" (Street, 1997, p. 50). When located in the English classroom, for example, literacy practices are never politically neutral. The curriculum serves to indoctrinate students into mainstream discourse practices which may be at odds with the social identities of students, particularly non-mainstream students (Gee, 1994). In her work looking at biliteracy, Hornberger (2005) refers to literacy instances as, "a term encompassing events, but also biliterate actors, interactions, practices, activities, programs, sites, situations, societies, worlds, etc." (p. 321). While my research is grounded in a monolingual environment, the term instances can comfortably be applied to the scope of this work.

Borrowing from Raimes (1991) and other work in English composition pedagogy, Canagarajah discusses four schools of thought regarding writing teaching: "those that focus on form, on the writer, on content, and on the reader" (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 148). The form-focused methods are closely aligned with the Study Skills model, emphasizing imitation of model sentences and essays. Writer-focused methods concentrate on the
cognitive processes utilized in writing, and center around “exercises for idea generation, organization, revision, and audience orientation” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 148). In Canagarajah’s formulation, the content-focused approach appears to resemble Writing Across the Curriculum programs, with its emphasis on building ties between disciplinary content and academic writing, and the reader-focused approach operates similarly. As he distinguishes them, the reader-focused approach “is a process of introducing students to the values, expectations, and conventions of the disciplinary communities addressed by the students, following pedagogical practices similar to the content-focused approach” (p. 149). Perhaps in this way, the content-focused and reader-focused approaches could be seen as nested models similar to Academic Socialization and Academic Literacies, and Canagarajah suggests that “both approaches are, furthermore, influenced by sociolinguistic and ethnography-oriented communicative approaches, and naturalistic or situational research methods. Hence the conception of writing as meaning-focused, communicative, and situated in the knowledge claims and discourse conventions of specific academic disciplines” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 149).

**Genres and Disciplines**

A characteristic of the academy has been the division of academic knowledge into discrete disciplines or specialized domains of knowledge. As Blake puts forth, this division is fundamental to the power structure of the university which is predicated on notions of “disciplinarity, autonomy and authority” (1997, p. 152). He continues:

Notwithstanding openness to interdisciplinarity, the basic units of the university still tend to be its disciplinary groups. And the autonomy which
disciplines typically claim for themselves is not just social and institutional, but epistemological autonomy. They claim their own domain of interest, methods and methodologies, concepts and theories. Thus, it is 'bad form' for a philosopher to take a sociologist to task and vice-versa, unless the other has strayed into her field.

The presumption of autonomy seemingly legitimizes the authority of an academic. Her expert understanding of the potential and the limits of her autonomous discipline wins for her institutional authority—a right to resist critique from outside the discipline. (Blake, 1997, p. 152)

Baynham also observes the tension existing in academic communities, in which a heterogeneous academy is composed of discrete disciplines, that has had the effect of forcing students to write “themselves into a ‘disciplinary politics’” (2000, p. 18).

However, as McNair notes, disciplinary boundaries are neither natural nor permanently fixed: in order to understand who possesses authority over disciplinary knowledge it is necessary to understand “who defines the boundaries and membership of the relevant community, and hence who the knowledge ‘belongs to’ is a critical issue” (McNair, 1997, pp. 27-28).

That disciplines have developed and utilize distinctive writing genres is unsurprising to any of the more practiced members in a field; however, the language conventions that pertain to particular disciplines may be lost on students. Blumner (1999) cites the example of a student being penalized for misuse of discipline-specific terms, a case in which neither the student nor the professor seemed fully aware of the nature of the communication failure. Ultimately, these communication breakdowns can have the effect of discouraging student risk-taking, due to the material consequences of failed attempts at utilizing specialized forms. Unfortunately, overt instruction of disciplinary jargon and genres may occur more or less frequently depending on the professor, the department, or even the university. Consequently, the socialization of
students into their academic or professional discourse communities is often uneven. This circumstance can be particularly devastating for non-traditional students who, without explicit instruction in dominant school Discourses, "often gain just enough mastery to ensure that they continually mark themselves as outsiders while using them and are, at best, colonized by them" (Gee, 1996, p. 146). In his work, Gee is particularly concerned by the high price exacted by acquisition of secondary, academic Discourses when they are in conflict with students’ primary home- and community-based Discourses.

The divisions between disciplinary genres in the academy and professional genres in the workplace, which at first glance may seem absolute, in fact display many areas of overlap in skills. In her work, Hoadley-Maidment argues that "occupational groupings are another example of discourse communities," but observes that "closer examination... may reveal that vocational genres share some linguistic features with forms of student writing such as project reports. It could be argued that academic literacy is best approached through forms such as these, since students will be building on skills they already have" (2000, p. 169). In this way, a heightened awareness of context and writing purposes, on the part of both faculty and students, could facilitate the development of mastery of particular discourse conventions.

It is important to state that while disciplinary genres are often distinctive, they are not static. For example, scientific writing has changed appreciably over the years. Bazerman observed that the amount of text in individual articles in physics journals, including the number of references, had expanded exponentially during the previous century, possibly because of an increase in the amount of common theory from which data is drawn (Bazerman, 1988). Further, in their work examining the reading practices
of scientists, Berkenkotter and Huckin found evidence of changes in the disciplinary
genres within scholarly journals, and theorized that genre conventions were adapting to
accommodate the reading necessities of scholars pressed for time. In fact, in their later
work they found evidence to support their hypothesis that scientific journal articles are
moving towards an underlying structure resembling newspaper reports, allowing for
easier scanning for information (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).

Academic Literacies and the New Literacy Studies

Academic Literacies considers writing from a broader perspective than other
academic lenses looking at composition and rhetoric which have historically been
hampered by a focus on composition as it relates to the English discipline. In this way,
Academic Literacies has potential to unify various departments in their efforts to foster
strong writing skills within the student body. Considering writing in all its forms and
contexts, without privileging particular forms or contexts, allows educators to get beyond
the disciplinary limitations of WAC as will be described below. Lea and Street describe
three nested and evolving formulations of academic writing which transcend disciplinary
boundaries: Study Skills, Academic Socialization, and Academic Literacies as an
offshoot of the New Literacy Studies (Lea & Street, 2000).

Study Skills

Traditionally, writing in the university has been conceived as an instrumental task
that fairly easily transcends disciplinary boundaries. In this formulation, students need
merely acquire a generic skill pack involving the ability to produce grammatical
(Standard English) sentences, correct punctuation, an advanced working vocabulary, and cohesive paragraphs. The Study Skills model primarily attends to surface-level features of writing, and so lends itself to a deficit view of student writing. Under this approach, weak student writers can be remediated by simply attending to these grammatical and technical deficiencies (Baynham, 2000; Lea & Street, 2000). The Study Skills model has been roundly criticized for oversimplifying the socially situated and complex nature of writing in the academy. Pardoe criticizes deficit views of student writing, and the notion that successful writing is in fact rule-governed. In this view, he writes, “The qualities of successful texts” are “describable in terms of a monolithic system of rules, rather than being both highly underdetermined by rules, and highly varied within the complex and subtle conventions of established genres” (2000, p. 150).

While Study Skills is currently out of favor, traces of it remain embedded in much writing instruction in higher education. In particular, College Composition or Freshman English courses frequently require highly stylized forms of writing like the five-paragraph theme written in various modes (like definition, narration, exemplification, process analysis, comparison-contrast, division-classification, or argument-persuasion). The five-paragraph theme is pervasive, and is often constructed as the foundation for more complex forms of academic thought and writing. This reified academic essay is interesting as an object of study specifically because it is a genre that appears to exist only in Freshman English classrooms and writing tests, an impression that many Writing Across the Curriculum programs have borne out in other coursework. In fact, traditional composition studies has often limited its scope to the study of modes and school genres (Devitt, 1999, p. 180). The disciplinary isolation of Freshman English has resulted in a
neglect of a more comprehensive genre instruction that could ameliorate many student writing difficulties and faculty complaints. When students encounter differing genres and standards, they are often ill equipped by their ‘composition’ preparation to write successfully in their major fields.

Crowley suggests that “the myth of the academic essay continues to nurture massive Freshman English programs for reasons other than its salience to writing instruction: it fosters and supports the persistent American belief that universal standards of literacy exist, and it legitimizes and covers over the social and institutional functions of Freshman English” (1998, pp. 232-234). Crowley speaks forcefully against Freshman English and traditional composition pedagogy, and her criticisms merit expansion and further scholarly inquiry. The dominance of the five-paragraph essay in writing exams is one such avenue of exploration, especially as the form relates to the broader curriculum.

Academic Socialization

The weaknesses of the Study Skills model’s lack of attention to textual and disciplinary genres is addressed by the Academic Socialization model which recognizes that students need to be taught to write appropriately for academic discourse (Baynham, 2000; Lea & Street, 2000). Lea and Street describe this model as the “acculturation of students into academic discourse,” in which there is a noted “lack of focus on institutional practices, change and power” (2000, p. 34). While the model represents an improvement over traditional composition studies, it can be criticized for appearing to treat the academy as “a relatively homogeneous culture”; not theorizing “institutional practices, including processes of change and the exercise of power”; and treating “writing
as a transparent medium of representation and so failing "to address the deep language, literacy and discourse issues involved in the institutional production and representation of meaning" (Lea & Street, 2000, p. 35). Because Academic Socialization does not problematize the social structures into which academic writing intervenes, the model is incomplete.

**Academic Literacies, an offshoot of New Literacy Studies**

If the Study Skills model is nested into Academic Socialization, Academic Socialization is nested into the Academic Literacies model. Academic Literacies expands the Academic Socialization model by conceiving of literacy as a social practice, contested and meaningful (Barton, 2000; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Lea & Street, 2000; Street, 1994a, 1994b). In this model, literacies vary across various social domains and are in a state of flux, dependent upon power relationships and the social goals, expectations and needs of participants. In reality, Academic Literacies is simply the academic arm of the New Literacy Studies (NLS), which takes prior work conceptualizing literacy as an instrumental skill and expands the definition to take into account its context and social functions. In the view of NLS, no text—be it a grocery list, a prescription, or a book—can be taken independently of the context in which it is created and consumed. In fact, a text divorced from all contexts has no value or meaning (Gee, 2000).

Academic Literacies recognizes that defining literacy in absolute terms is problematic, especially when that definition is asked to stand up across time and space (Graff, 1994). In a similar vein, Ferdman and Weber describe reading and writing as
"practices occurring in a social context, guided by intention, laden with values, and 
taking on forms and functions that differ according to time and place" (1994, p. 14).

People’s adeptness at various literacy tasks is variable depending on the setting in which 
they are asked to write, the frequency they must engage in a particular writing task, and 
their familiarity with the literacy conventions in that context (Davies, 1994). A more 
situated view of literacy practices, and a more encompassing view of what constitutes an 
individual literacy, help to validate a student’s efforts to secure membership in a new 
discourse community. Hoadley-Maidment notes that “students are generally expected to 
learn three things linguistically: the language of the subject or subjects they are studying; 
the rules and conventions used by individual disciplines; and the more general features of 
adademic writing which make it instantly recognizable” (2000, p. 167).

A criticism of the Academic Literacies approach has been that it is in danger of 
sliding into linguistic or textual relativism, romanticizing “low status literacies and 
unsuccessful writing,” or being “apparently irrelevant to the main task of improving 
literacy standards and empowering people with the dominant discourses and genres” 
(Pardoe, 2000, p. 152). Further, it may be difficult or impossible to satisfactorily isolate 
and differentiate one literacy from another since the boundaries of these practices are 
often nebulous (Ivanic, 1998). In the same way, Ivanic has also criticized Gee’s notion of 
Discourse as being too monolithic as Discourses “leak into one another” (1998, p. 73). 
However, I think these criticisms are somewhat shortsighted, as they run the risk of 
falling back on idealizations of textual genres independent of the social contexts in which 
they were produced and consumed. For example, a successful English 101 essay in one
classroom might be a failing essay in another. Moreover, the porous boundaries of
various literacy practices do not necessarily preclude identification of those boundaries.

Academic Literacies differs from many other theoretical orientations in that it
encourages practitioners to challenge and redefine forms of literacy if they do not serve
their purpose or reflect their author. Lillis urges “researchers, teachers and student-
writers to imagine new possibilities for meaning making in academic writing” (2003, p.
197). Significantly, she stresses that students must be active contributors in the
expansion and redefinition of accepted literacy practices, and advocates “consciousness-
raising amongst learners about power and ideology in relation to language use” (2003, p.
195).

Curriculum

All college students must follow a program of study to obtain a degree. This
program may be more or less rigid depending on the major or school, but there is
nonetheless a structure of definite skills or benchmarks that students must obtain and
demonstrate. The diploma is an index of the student’s mastery of a particular subject area
of higher education, but within society, it is also a signifier of an adult’s status as an
educated individual. Within each major, college students move through a relatively
regimented set of coursework, perhaps most particularly in professional fields. Students
in professional fields generally take few elective classes, and have comparatively little
ability to select among required elective courses within their major as compared to those
enrolled in liberal arts programs.
In many respects, the issues and processes inherent in creating a comprehensive institutional writing curriculum parallel those studied and practiced by language planners and language planning researchers. For example, Hornberger’s model of twelve nested and intersecting continua of biliteracy can comfortably be applied to monolingual language planning contexts, especially when large numbers of immigrant students represented in the student body are factored in (Hornberger, 2003; Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2003). Here, I adapt her model to the acquisition of academic literacies in higher education, suggesting that university language planners write their language policies into relations of power that are circumscribed by the context, content, development, and media of biliteracy. Along these lines, planners make decisions regarding the balance of oral and written forms, reception and production, contextualized and decontextualized practices, simultaneous and successive exposure, and so forth. In the university, these practices may take form in the quotidian micro-level context of the classroom or tutoring session, or in macro-level institutional policies. Hornberger observes that in practice in educational policy, “there tends to be an implicit privileging of one end of the continua over the other” such that it becomes necessary to actively attend to ways in which learners may be disadvantaged by occupying the marginal side (Hornberger, 2005). Stubbs, writing about the British case, notes that the lack of an explicit language policy serves to privilege the practices of Standard English speakers over those of speakers of minority dialects and languages (Stubbs, 1994). In much the same way, haphazard or nonexistent formal literacy policies at the university level may suppress non-dominant forms.
Cooper writes, “Language planning refers to deliberate efforts to influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes” (1989, p. 45). This is not unlike a university’s efforts to socialize its students into the particular literacy practices endorsed by the university, the major discipline, or the receiving industry. In fact, one of Cooper’s descriptive frameworks presents “language planning as marketing,” and his account folds neatly into discussions of the marketization of higher education (1989, pp. 72-79). In order to flourish, universities must sell students and industry on their product: effective and relevant preparation of students to transition into their professional fields, in terms of both communication skills and content knowledge.

The Core Curriculum

Within most university curricula, undergraduate students, regardless of major, are required to take an array of courses in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. This is generally referred to as the students’ core curriculum and, while it may overlap with particular required major courses, this core is common to all graduates of a particular university. Through this array, the universities intend to turn out well-rounded, educated adults, with a conversational fluency in different schools of thought (Giroux, 2003; Ross, 2000).

The core curriculum, or general-education requirements, introduces undergraduates to the lower division courses that are foundational to their major work in upper division courses. As such, these lower division courses are always well attended because writing and math, for example, are necessary for success in advanced work in
many disciplines. The core curriculum also exposes students to potential majors and minors in diverse areas of study. Further, the core provides an analytic framework that helps students contextualize disparate fields and systems of thought (Jelinski, 1980; Ross, 2000).

Some universities have rigid requirements regarding the specific courses comprising the core, but others take a more ‘cafeteria-style’ approach, allowing a broad array of electives to fill core requirements. A criticism of looser requirements is that the courses may “contribute little in the way of a systematic overview of human intellectual and artistic achievement, which is the goal of a liberal arts education” (Nicholas O'Connell, in the preface to Ross, 2000, p. 5). Of course, this begets the question of what should be included in the core. Feminist and multicultural educators contend that some university core curricula privilege a narrow canon at the expense of the knowledges provided by marginalized groups (Giroux, 2003). Some writers, like Giroux, hold that university curricula are being negatively impacted by market forces [as described above] and the core is at risk of being gutted or eliminated in favor of classes perceived to have more transparent links to students’ professional futures.

Writing Across the Curriculum

Writing has its place in all disciplines (discrete or hybrid), although writing genres do vary across disciplines. Whether students are expected to produce essays, research papers, lab reports, formularies, or instruction manuals, all university students must become versed in various forms of academic literacy. Perhaps as a result of the increased permeability of disciplinary boundaries, writing across the curriculum (WAC)
programs are being implemented in many educational institutions, with varying degrees of oversight and efficacy.

WAC is premised on the notion that students’ writing skills must be scaffolded in all areas of coursework, and that increased interaction between core areas of study will strengthen students’ abilities. Thus, faculty from the humanities, social sciences, and sciences are encouraged to collaborate on the curricula in their individual courses to increase cohesion between them. A criticism of the way various forms of academic literacy are currently being taught is that it occurs in a haphazard way, as different disciplines and faculty have “different expectations concerning literacy practices” (Benson, Gurney, Harrison, & Rimmershaw, 1994, p. 67).

Most WAC programs have gotten past skills-based approaches to writing, and instruct students in looking for context to select appropriate forms and genres. They attempt to socialize student writers into various disciplines, understanding that writing is a social practice, necessary for acceptance into specialized academic and professional communities. This acceptance is contingent on mastery of the English language, but students “also need experience with the modes of inquiry and presentation, the rules of argument and evidence, the vocabulary, and the style expected of writers in their situation” (Kuriloff, 1999, p. 107).

While some universities have been extremely successful in implementing WAC programs, a challenge is presented uniting faculty who may be uneasy about bridging to other disciplinary areas or resistant to the notion of creating more work for themselves. For example, in some cases WAC consists of team-teaching courses that involve significant amounts of negotiation around curriculum and pedagogy, familiarization with
new content and modes, and interpersonal skills. In addition, faculty in WAC programs are typically asked to undergo continuing education in the form of summer workshops with booster sessions during the academic year.

WAC may further threaten disciplinary autonomy and authority. A criticism of WAC is that it “constructs the disciplines as idealized or inferior others who lack what only WAC can provide. This position suggests that only WAC conversion can make the disciplines whole” (Haviland, Green, Shields, & Harper, 1999, p. 46). Some have suggested that disciplinary lines are too deeply trenched, such that bridging them becomes difficult. Moreover, in the case of pharmacy and other healthcare programs, many instructors are also practicing professionals. In this circumstance, Hobson and Lerner write, “It is easy to erroneously assume that, as when working with many educators in the Arts and Sciences, we can safely find such meeting points as a common lexicon and definition base, commensurate epistemological vantage points, and shared experience as educators working with undergraduate students in a general, preparatory curriculum” (1999, p. 168). Overcoming these challenges is key to successful implementation of WAC programs.

Writing (Exams) as Assessment

The overt purpose of assessment in the academy is arguably to measure student mastery of the curricular material, and in the case of a student's poor performance, highlight areas in need of remediation. It may be motivational, encouraging students to become more active learners, particularly in courses outside their field of study. Assessment is also used to rank students competitively for placement in the workplace or
upper levels of study. In vocational education, it is often used to ensure occupational competence or restrict entry into a profession (Allwright & Bailey, 1990, pp. 182-183; Brady, 1997).

Forms of assessment often vary across disciplines and professional preparations. For example, the medical field relies less on written assessment than multiple-choice questions, oral examinations, and practicals. Many vocational and professional programs require still other national qualifying exams for admission into the profession. Brady suggests that vocational assessment, rather than protecting the “consumers” that the professionals will eventually serve, instead functions “to protect the interests of the profession” through gate-keeping (Brady, 1997). These universal professional boards or certification tests also often exercise a restricting influence on the curriculum, by delineating the knowledge that is validated within that community.

Assessment can take many forms, whether it is carried out within the classroom, within the institution, for entrance into graduate programs, or for professional certification. Thirty years ago, multiple-choice tests were the preferred means of evaluating grammar and language use. While these tests may demonstrate students’ recall and reasoning, they do little to evaluate students’ self-expression or ability to organize thoughts (Brady, 1997). In the 1980s, writing assessments involved student-produced essays that were scored holistically. However, this method does not attend to process (only product), and the essays produced bear little resemblance to more authentic writing tasks in other contexts (Yancey, 1999). Also, despite the intent of holistic scoring to provide a fairer means of evaluating a piece of writing, the reality is that the work is always compared against an ideal: hence, there is an implicit (if insidious) deficit
perspective (Haswell & Wyche, 2001). Holistic assessment, therefore, can be argued to privilege the literacies of certain students over others which has led some practitioners to develop assessment models more oriented toward social justice.

Current discussions of educational assessment emphasize the importance of formative assessment, stressing the need for explicit connections between curriculum and assessment (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Dann, 2002). In this model, assessment transparently reflects what is taught in the classroom, and its results drive future classroom activities. It is therefore neither a starting point nor an endpoint but a tool used for the betterment of teaching. Student understanding of the purposes and foci of the assessment task also receives importance (Allwright & Bailey, 1990; Brady, 1997). In the case of professional programs, it is recommended that courses be designed so that there are clear links between classroom concepts and professional practice (Hoadley-Maidment, 2000, p. 165; C. Jones, 1999). Instructors are asked to look beyond “simply using already existing methods which suit institutional systems and regulations” (Hoadley-Maidment, 2000, p. 177). Researchers’ and instructors’ critical awareness of the socially situated nature of the assessment’s design, scoring, content, and so forth, will hopefully yield a more liberatory model (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Owen, 1997).

Student Underachievement in Writing

As described earlier, one of the prevailing discourses about student writing in the university is that it is deficient. Most students are literate in the colloquial sense that treats literacy as an instrumental skill. However, this definition of literacy is insufficient, as evidenced when Botstein (the president of Bard College) laments, “the failure to grasp
the link between language, thinking, and life is equally responsible for the eighteen-year-old who cannot learn how to construct a coherent paragraph or sentence and for whom the rules of grammar in written work are, often despite reasonably correct usage in speech, seemingly a mystery” (1991, p. 58). Botstein presents a deficit orientation, yet competing discourses account for students’ academic struggles with writing in other ways. Benson et al., view “literacy not as a unitary ‘achievement’ but as a range of distinctive and specialised practices associated with particular social institutions,” thus “the distinctive literacy practices of higher education” may still elude many students (1994, p. 69).

Under a deficit model of student writing, the sources of difficulties are located within the students themselves. However, to Academic Literacies scholars like Benson et al., the circumstances in which students write contribute to their resistance, for “there is a feeling amongst thoughtful undergraduates that they do not really ‘own’ their writing because the direction, the ideas and the evaluation all come from elsewhere” (Benson, Gurney, Harrison, & Rimmershaw, 1994, p. 65). Non-traditional students may face other difficulties, because official institutional structures often do not provide full access to instructional, curricular, or epistemological discourses (McMillan, 2000, p. 149).

Furthermore, universities often provide little direct instruction about writing within the academy, assuming that most writing genres like essays and class notes “are ‘natural’ and straightforward” (Street, 1994b, pp. 18-19). Students are often flummoxed by instructors’ diverse expectations, and have little experience with context and practice to help them negotiate divergent practices across disciplines. Various theoretical frames
have emerged and evolved over the last thirty years that seek to demystify and remedy the 'problem' of weak student writers.

Exit Exams and Other High-Stakes Writing Tests

Given the importance traditionally assigned to strong writing skills, it is not surprising that some higher education institutions have resorted to high-stakes tests to ensure the writing proficiency of their graduates. Evaluation of writing proficiency has a long history in American universities. For example, at Harvard University, entrance exams involving expository writing on a previously unannounced topic were instituted in the 1870s, and they were introduced at Stanford in the 1890s. Students did so poorly on these exams that remedial courses were instituted, as students could not graduate until they had passed this initial assessment measure. However, remediation was to be addressed on the students' own time with their own money (Crowley, 1998, p. 73). Over one hundred years later, similar measures and outcomes are still seen in many American universities.

The reality is that assessments are only as good as their design and their graders. In the case of writing prompts, a poorly designed prompt can both confound students and bias readers. In their continued evaluations of Washington State University's annual writing placement exam, WSU faculty members found that certain prompts showed gender or ESL bias, and these were eliminated. They preferred to remove the essay question, rather than adjust the holistic rating rubric. The WSU writing staff evaluated the assessment routinely and modified it if it lumped students inappropriately, or if the results had an unsatisfactory distribution (Haswell, 2001; Haswell & Wyche, 2001). The
staff further sought student input on the relationship of the university’s two writing exams, the first-year and third-year exams, and modified them on the basis of student complaints about the rigid or non-existent appeals process and tenuous link between the optional portfolio assessment and related coursework (Nelson & Kelly-Riley, 2001). Of course, not all writing assessment tools in higher education are routinely or systematically evaluated and revised. In the case of high-stakes tests, this circumstance can be disastrous for students and, by extension, for faculty and administration.

High-stakes writing proficiency exams, while somewhat rare on college campuses, are certainly not unheard of, and where they exist are frequently controversial. Schwinge reported on a writing exit exam at Hostos Community College in New York that was the focus of student protests in the wake of massive failures and suspended graduations (2000). In fact, the Hostos exam is not the only such exam to have provoked student protests. A writing proficiency exam at UMass/Boston was found responsible for causing some students to stop their programs or drop out, and a later court ruling found it to be culturally biased. The end result of the complaints at UMass/Boston was a number of changes, including increased cultural sensitivity in the choice of prompts, and the option of a writing portfolio instead of the timed exam (Kiang, 2002).

USU is not the only pharmacy college in the United States to have instituted a writing proficiency examination; in fact, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy (MCP) in Boston instituted a writing exam stemming from “faculty frustration with students’ writing skills” in the wake of increasing numbers of transfer students and ESL students (Hobson & Lerner, 1999, p. 162). In the MCP exam, articles on the subject matter are distributed to students a few weeks in advance of the two-hour timed exam. Students
who fail this exam are forced to take a 3-credit course as remediation. While the exam format and remediation opportunities are slightly different in the USU and MCP cases, it may be noteworthy that both chose to adopt writing proficiency exams as a means of addressing a perceived problem within the student body, in light of their similar curricular foci and changing student demographics.

Criticisms of Assessment

For its virtues, assessment poses many problems for researchers and educators with a social justice orientation. Too often, assessments seem to be biased against particular groups, to discourage students rather than encourage them, and yield flawed estimates of the abilities that they purport to measure.

One of the first criticisms of writing assessment, particularly essay tests, is that it bears little resemblance to the writing students will produce in their academic, personal, or professional lives. For starters, most literacy events involve negotiation between writer and reader such that deviances in form or content can be quickly addressed. In assessment, those assessed have one opportunity to demonstrate their fluency and rhetorical skills, without feedback; yet, the act of writing into a void increases the odds that students may have difficulty demonstrating their true skill or knowledge. Also, many students (both native English-speaking and ESL) struggle to utilize language and structure arguments appropriately in the absence of context clues that might make genre or disciplinary orientation more evident (Sanderson, 1997).

One frequent source of student frustration regarding assessment is the feeling that the professor and, by extension, the institution do not value what the student values.
(Canieso-Doronila, 1996; English, 1999). Often, students subsume their own writer identities in favor of the known preferences of their faculty assessors, because to challenge genre or content norms could have material consequences (Hyland, 2002a). In their work looking at high-stakes tests for teachers, Luna et al., found that for the teachers, taking an external test with objectives decided by external evaluators proved an empty experience, even on the seemingly more open-ended prompt requiring a five-paragraph essay (Luna, Solsken, & Kutz, 2000). In assessment, unlike in other discourse communities, one set of participants (those assessed) has no influence on the framing of the discourse. More plainly, those assessed cannot negotiate the terms, since “the judgments about whether any individual examination script achieves a status of ‘prototypicality’ in the genre and discourse field are the province of the examiners, who represent the ‘parent’ discourse community, operating behind closed doors” (Sanderson, 1997, p. 86).

The practices of the examiners are worthy of research and discussion. Sanderson, writing about the A levels in Britain, observes that the examiners assessing the students are unlikely to have produced similar writing forms recently, if ever. Nonetheless, they are charged with determining student mastery of the discourse, and whether that student’s work rates acceptance into a constructed, and inauthentic, discourse community. Sanderson argues that examiners don’t rely on rubrics as provided by the Examination Board, but instead on “a framework drawing on an examiner’s knowledge of the linguistic market and broader cultural phenomena (perhaps a view of what ‘good students’ are ‘like’) which enable her or him to operationalize the criteria” (Sanderson, 1997, pp. 86-87). This is an unconscious process, he asserts, as examiners are often
unable to articulate the motives for their scoring decisions. Even efforts to broaden definitions of acceptability meet criticism, as they may threaten reliability and, perhaps more seriously, standards.

The bias of examiners is a perpetual source of complaint. Where examiners have explicit criteria for distinguishing good writing from bad, these criteria frequently, if not always, reflect established social structures with associated relations of power. Where assessment is conducted by more than one examiner, "we must rather look for complex processes of socialization which enable groups of examiners to judge often ambiguous texts with a sufficient degree of consistency" (Sanderson, 1997, p. 85). Even supposed solutions like blind assessment have their problems, because as much as readers "try to be 'impersonal' about it, the quality of the work, the choice of topic, what is written about it, and the discourses adopted in the course of writing: all these convey to us an impression of the writer, whether we are conscious of it or not" (Ivanic, 1998, p. 101). A related concern perhaps, is the uncomfortable circumstance of passing judgment on another person (Brady, 1997).

ESL students are frequently hard-hit by writing assessments conducted at universities catering primarily to a native English-speaking student body. This situation is frustrating to both students and faculty, who are unsure "whether the unsatisfactory essay can be attributed to poor academic acumen, failure to understand the course content or, since they are international students, poor use of English" (Brady, 1997; English, 1999, p. 19; Sanderson, 1997). If these questions plague faculty, the problem is perhaps worse for the language learners, who often incorrectly assume that with grammatical proficiency will come success in all aspects of English literacy and orality.
Despite popular critiques that school failure is primarily a problem of poor and minority students (Brady, 1997; Kynard, forthcoming; Ogbu, 1991; Zanger, 1994), new research indicates that schools are failing all students.

Even those with good grades do not ‘really understand’ what they are learning. Students in traditional schools, it is claimed, master only basic, rote, low-level skills, at best. While such students may be able to pass tests and carry out basic computations, they really do not understand, in any very deep way, what they are doing. (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996, p. 55)

This is a problem recognized across fields; in fact, the Commission to Implement Change in Pharmaceutical Education (1993, p. 19) reports:

Most students enter health professional schools, including pharmacy schools, as dependent learners; that is, they enter with the perception that it is the teachers’ responsibility to teach students while de-emphasizing, if not ignoring, the responsibility of students to learn on their own. Students come to health professional schools adept at memorizing facts, and the teaching methods at most professional schools readily focus on this ability. In practice, the practitioner must rely on his or her ability to interpret data in order to reach conclusions and solve problems. (cited in Hobson & Lerner, 1999, pp. 156-157)

Unfortunately, the same criticisms offered up of students are reflected in policy and curriculum, as Griffin writes, “the utilitarian ethos of competency has thus begun to find a grip on higher education with its emphasis on skills, performance criteria and measurable outcomes” (1997, p. 5).

Synthesis

This review of the literature suggests that writing policy is inscribed into contexts that cut across multiple levels and areas of analysis, such that a multidisciplinary perspective may be useful and perhaps even necessary to situate research of literacy

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practices. Higher education has been forced to submit to shifting populations of students who come to university as consumers with expectations that extend beyond knowledge for knowledge's sake. Reified constructions of disciplines and disciplinary genres do not account for the new and increasingly hybrid social contexts in which these disciplines and genres are practiced and applied. Nor can assessment be understood separate from the form and function that it takes in response to changing academic and professional milieu. In the next chapter, I elaborate on the salience of interdisciplinary perspectives and methodologies in providing a descriptive framework in which the development, performance, and maintenance of academic literacies can be articulated and understood.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

On May 9, 2005, I received a phone call from a sobbing Ping Yao, a student of mine from the USU Writing Center, who informed me between hiccups and tears that she had failed the Writing Proficiency Equivalency Exam. She was shocked and devastated, in part because for weeks I had been telling her that she was ready to pass and that she just needed to relax and focus on the task at hand. I was truthful in my assessment of her writing skills, and so her failure also caught me off guard. Unfortunately, this failure on the equivalency exam meant in all probability she would not be able to participate in the upcoming graduation ceremonies. Her parents were flying in from Hong Kong the next week to watch her receive her diploma, and chances were they were going to be sorely disappointed.

I told Ping Yao that I would go to the Writing Center the next day to investigate what happened and what could be done now. A few weeks earlier I had tried to do some preemptive advocacy work to ensure that she would receive a second equivalency exam in the event she failed, but the WPX Committee chair, Bill Martin, waved me off and said that we would deal with that problem if it arose. When I got to the Writing Center I confronted Dr. Eberbert about Ping Yao’s case, and pressed him to advocate for Ping with Bill Martin. We worked out that as a transfer student, Ping had been a victim of poor advising and harsh policies. I reminded him that Ping is a conscientious student, who attended appointments in the Writing Center twice a week for the past year. I pleaded with him to advocate for her for me, because I couldn’t afford to get on Martin’s bad side at this stage in my dissertation research. I also wrote a letter to the Pharmacy Department on Ping’s behalf, throwing a bit of research caution to the wind, asking them to please allow Ping to walk during the ceremony, and assuring them that Ping was likely to pass the WPPE on the first try during the summer Writing Proficiency course. [Note: the department did eventually allow her to walk, and Ping enrolled in the summer course.]

Ping Yao’s case, in many ways, exemplifies the issues that drove me to this research. In my tenure at USU, I’ve worked with dozens of students in close, one-on-one tutoring sessions, and with hundreds of students in my English Composition and ESL classes. In my role as educator, I have acted as an intermediary between students and Humanities faculty, students and administrators, students and the/my writing curriculum,
or students and mastery of academic literacy. I have helped students negotiate their relationships with texts and authorities as both abstractions and tangible entities.

My dual role as employee and researcher within the USU context has afforded me uncommon access and created associated quandaries and has colored my methodological approach in this research project. I would not be in this site if it were not for my desire to advocate for students and probe an unusual writing policy which in itself means that I must be doubly careful not to let my advocacy orientation color the collection or interpretation of data. I have had to take special care to temper my words in a way that does not place undue blame or praise on members of the faculty, the administration, or students, because my work realistically could significantly impact USU policy following publication and dissemination (Punch, 1998). Because this dissertation evaluates an ongoing assessment program, once published, it will have as its audience both external scholars and internal colleagues (many of whom happen to also be published scholars).

As a practitioner-researcher, I must “negotiate whose questions will be addressed and whose interests will be served by” my research (Greene, 1994, p. 531). The benefits and ethical issues present in practitioner research have been discussed in the literature (Punch, 1998; Zeni, 2000).

Based on the multiple perspectives to which my role in the university has given me access, these questions emerged as particularly salient to the USU context, and they also have implications for other institutions:
Research questions

1. How have institutional policies on writing instruction and assessment shaped the academic literacies of students at USU?

2. How does the USU core curriculum address academic literacies and in what ways does it respond to, reflect, and challenge policy and assessment?

3. How well does the USU Writing Proficiency Examination reflect curricular and institutional goals around academic literacy and to what extent does it drive them?

4. What are the implications of this case study for wider discussions on the relationship between higher education policies and academic literacies?

These questions cannot be answered through quantitative methods. Such a methodology, even if the numbers were generated from survey data, would yield different types of information and, possibly, conclusions than those I seek here. On one level the writing proficiency exam would be simple (or more straightforward) to critique using primarily quantitative methods. Les Perelman of MIT, for example, did a pilot study exploring the grading standards of the new SAT writing test and found that there was a clear correlation between essay length and score received (Winerip, 2005). This information is useful, but it does little to convey why length matters to readers, or to illuminate the culture of assessment and education that gave rise to such an exam. For these sorts of questions, qualitative methods of investigation like ethnography are needed.
Methodological Framework

The methodological approaches guiding this study were primarily critical ethnography (Foley, 2002a, 2002b; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Kiang, 2002; Smith, 2002) and practitioner research (Spindler & Hammond, 2000). The specific methods employed in this study are discussed below.

Ethnography

An ethnography, in its simplest sense, seeks to make plain the subtle machinations of everyday life. For this reason, at root, an ethnography includes: “The contexts: history, physical setting, and environment; number of participants, key individuals; activities; schedules, temporal order; division of labor, hierarchies; routines and variations; significant events and their origins and consequences; members’ perspectives and meanings; social rules and basic patterns of order” (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 491). Ethnographic methods have been employed in contexts outside its parent discipline of anthropology to such a degree that ethnography is no longer merely a borrowed research method but an integrated and integral subfield of education studies (Green & Bloome, 1997; Heath, 1982, 2000). Green and Bloom argue that “ethnography and ethnographic research continues to evolve and change as a consequence of the new sites (intellectual, topical, institutional, educational, physical, geographical, social, and cultural sites) in which it is situated, and as a consequence of the people who take it up and the agenda they pursue” (1997, p. 199).

Ethnographic writing, while seeking to represent the facts under study, strives for “analytic realism, based on the view that the social world is an interpreted world, not a
literal world,” in which “time, purpose, approach, language, styles, and loyalties are all implicated” (Altheide & Johnson, 1994, p. 486). Ethnographies are often produced from unstructured data from which researchers must yield analytic categories, as opposed to data which are already inscribed in categories (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Indeed, the construction of interpretations and theories about the social norms and practices in particular communities is foundational to ethnographic research (Green & Bloome, 1997).

This ethnographic study aims to be critical in the tradition outlined by Foley, which conceptualizes critical ethnography as “a well-theorized empirical study with a serious political intent to change people’s consciousness, if not their daily lives” (2002a, p. 140; Foley, 2002b; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2002; Kiang, 2002; Smith, 2002). This should not be understood as entering into a study with the results chapters already written; rather, it recognizes that research should not be published into a vacuum. As my dissertation topic was motivated in part by persistent criticisms from students, staff and faculty regarding the WPX, it is my hope that my work will help USU reconceptualize its writing practices.

Critical ethnographies may be said to differ from traditional ethnographies primarily in the selection of the project, but not in the framing of the analysis. Atkinson and Hammersley note that “most ethnography has been directed toward contributing to disciplinary knowledge rather than toward solving practical problems” (1994, p. 253). This does not have to be the case. As Greene observes, during program evaluation “inquirers have sought to augment local program understanding with the hope of moving toward program improvement” (1994, p. 539). Kiang’s (2002) chapter about his
Green and Bloome (1997) draw a distinction between ethnography-\textit{of}-education and ethnography-\textit{in}-education, whereby the former is conducted by anthropologists studying education and the latter by educational researchers, teachers, and others utilizing ethnographic methods to research their home field of education (understood to be both an intellectual and physical site). Along similar lines, they differentiate between \textit{doing ethnography} and \textit{adopting an ethnographic perspective} (p.183). In this formulation, adopting an ethnographic perspective is less rigorous than conducting a traditional ethnography because the methodology is more question-focused and reliant on a narrative shorthand. In essence, an ethnographic perspective is a methodological shorthand. Thus, research employing an ethnographic perspective would take certain aspects of the classroom culture for granted, and concentrate on a specific research concern, like documenting and critiquing classroom questioning practices qualitatively. According to Green and Bloome, many researchers confuse the two, and inappropriately label their work as ethnographies without demonstrating knowledge or understanding of ethnography either in terms of its history as an evolving discipline or as a rigorous methodology (Green & Bloome, 1997; Heath, 1982; Spindler & Hammond, 2000).

Spindler and Hammond suggest that “practitioner researchers approach research as a problem-solving device” while anthropologists’ “main purpose is to understand and explain cultural processes” (2000, p. 43). In this formulation, practitioner researchers may treat anthropologists’ explanatory project as one step in their research process,
whereas anthropologists may criticize practitioner researchers for giving the explanatory project short shrift. Instead, it seems that practitioner research might better be interpreted as intimately tied to critical ethnography as described above. In my research, I write from the perspective of a practitioner researcher writing an ethnography-in-education, and I specifically seek to situate the WPX in the social, cultural, and academic domains of the university. I attempt to locate the meaning of the exam as it is understood by the USU students, faculty and administrators, and explore how these individual meanings impact on practice and policymaking.

The case study has long been a useful frame for ethnographers to explore research questions into human activity. Examining a bounded system enables the researcher to describe that system more richly, and also to refine theory developed externally to that system. Stake defines a case study as “both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning” (1994, p. 237). I find this definition useful because it encourages a dialogic approach to research, between the process and the project. As I gathered data, I was informed of other schools with similar writing policies and encouraged to conduct ongoing research in both those other institutions and in the workplace environments that would come to accept USU graduates. Widening the scope of the research was tempting, but it would have hindered the progress of the case study. In fact, I found that the USU case was infinitely complex, as each new interview or day at the office gathering fieldnotes yielded new avenues of research and description—to see a world in a grain of sand, indeed.
Grounded Theory

Grounded theory provides a methodology for just such dialogic research. Strauss and Corbin define grounded theory as “a *general methodology* for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (1994, p. 273). Grounded theory is used to identify categories and themes in an organic yet active process that includes constant comparison. In a very real sense, grounded theory is rooted in means of data collection, storage, and coding and, for this reason has been closely associated with qualitative data analysis software in recent years. Later I will discuss how I employed Atlas.ti in my research.

Sociolinguistics

The field of sociolinguistics was born of the recognition that the theoretical approaches to the study of linguistics provided by generative grammar did little to account for ways in which speakers lived and breathed language in the real world (Bauman & Sherzer, 1974; Gumperz & Hymes, 1964; Hymes, 1962, 1967, 1972). Sociolinguistics called for the investigation of language in context. Hymes’ model of the ethnography of speaking provided an analytic framework drawn from both linguistics and anthropology in which the communication behaviors of individuals and speech communities could be described comprehensively and holistically. Later, Hymes added the concept of communicative competence to these discussions of language practice, situating discussions of language not only in terms of grammatical acceptability but in terms of social appropriateness (Hymes, 1972). In much the same way that oral discourse
requires observance of particular norms and rules, successful literacy practices also require communicative competence.

This dissertation is centered on how people write and how they talk about writing in the university, and how such discourse and textual analysis are key. In The Interpretation of Documents in Material Culture, Hodder emphasizes the importance of attending to the conditions under which a text is produced and consumed, particularly of noting whether “a text was written as result of firsthand experience or from secondary sources, whether it was solicited or unsolicited, edited or unedited, anonymous or signed, and so on” (1994, p. 394). Each document examined during this dissertation was evaluated in terms of the distinctions outlined by Hodder above. In the case of the WPX, exam booklets are anonymous, solicited, and written as a combination of firsthand experience and the secondary source of the exam prompt. In addition, the exams are timed, the topics seemingly arbitrary for the students, and so on. Awareness of these contexts of production and reception impacted the analysis of each document collected. For example, the fluidity of source data in the exam circumstance, firsthand experience and exam prompt, may cause confusion for students. Additionally, writing anonymously may provide an additional source of frustration because students feel that they are writing into a void, with no consideration given to their unique identities. The impact of the social circumstance of production and reception was integral to any understanding of the place of the WPX in relation to the students’ other work.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as it was developed by Norman Fairclough, seeks to demonstrate how macro-social structures are reflected in language use. Along this vein, analyses examine texts, discourse practices, and social practices, and the ways
in which they reflect and inform each other. Fairclough (2003) argues that texts (whether spoken, written, or visual) are always socioculturally situated, and that through the microanalysis of these texts one can gain insight into the prevailing social forces at the time of their production. In this way texts can both substantiate and refute claims made about orders of discourse and social practices. Thus, there are three levels of analysis: “analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution, and consumption), and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2). Any rigorous analysis would examine the relationships between all three levels. Fairclough emphasizes that textual analysis is incomplete without the frame provided by ethnography, and describes textual analysis as “a valuable supplement to social research, not a replacement for other forms of social research and analysis” (2003, p. 16). Through my collection of documents, my interviews with members of the USU community, and my fieldnotes gathered as a participant-observer, I attempted to account for the three levels of analysis described by Fairclough above. The open-ended interviews that comprise the bulk of this dissertation data provided opportunity to demonstrate how the macro-social structures at play in the USU case were reflected in the participants’ accounts of their own experience and perspective on writing in the university and the WPX, and vice versa.

Academic Literacies

A key component of data analysis is exploring the literacy practices in place in USU core curricula, and those surrounding the WPX. However, within the field of Academic Literacies there is relatively little discussion devoted to methods of research
within this orientation towards student writing. Maybin suggests three levels of analysis of literacy events: “Individual activities, understandings and identities”; “social events and the interactions they involve”; and “broader social and institutional structures” (2000, p. 198). She emphasizes the necessity of examining the dialectical relationship between these micro- to macro-contextual levels. Coming at the problem in a more methodologically explicit manner, Barton (2000) describes the process of researching literacy practices as follows:

1. Identify domain or domains
2. Observe visual environment
3. Identify particular literacy events and document them
4. Identify texts and analyse practices around texts
5. Interview people about practices, sense making (p. 170)

Barton’s framework, borrowing from both ethnography and sociolinguistics, provided a useful point of entry for examining the literacy practices in play at USU. My research process followed the five phases described above.

The Setting

Introduction to USU

Case study methodology has long provided a point of entry for researching questions that are too large in scope for credible inquiry on the scale of the planet, a nation or sometimes even a school district. The case provides a bounded system in which the researcher(s) can be assured a certain level of legitimacy when making claims regarding theory (in an instrumental case study) or the case itself (in an intrinsic case study) (Stake, 1994). The Writing Proficiency Examination at USU offers promise as both an instrumental and intrinsic case study: such high-stakes writing exams are in
themselves unusual in American universities, yet the practice of using assessment as a way of bridging policy and curriculum is a theoretical issue currently salient in all levels of education and the USU context reflects national tensions neatly.

The site of this case study, USU is a small private East Coast university known primarily for its pharmacy school and preparation for careers in the sciences and health sciences. It is divided into four schools: the Pharmacy College, College of Health Sciences, College of Arts and Sciences, and College of Graduate Studies. The Pharmacy College is the oldest and, as such, it retains a central position in the USU ecology. It is one of the oldest pharmacy colleges in the United States, and the pharmaceutical sciences remain the strongest majors in the USU curriculum. The university also offers degree programs in the health sciences, including occupational and physical therapy, and grants degrees in the general sciences like chemistry and biology, but not in the humanities or social sciences. The small graduate school enrolls about 250 additional students. USU’s orientation is primarily professional, and students in each major move through a largely standardized curriculum.

There are approximately 2000 undergraduate students at USU. Of these, about 67% are women. 53% of students come from Pennsylvania, and the remainder come from 39 other states (New Jersey is especially heavily represented) and 29 foreign countries. Tuition, fees, room and board came to $30,488 for the 2004-2005 academic year. Approximately 95% of students receive some form of financial aid which is both need- and merit-based.

According to the admissions guide, the student population is 58% Caucasian, 32% Asian, 6% African American, and 4% Other, although other internal statistics suggest
that the Caucasian population is currently only 51%. Approximately 1/3 of students speak a non-English language at home, although information about students’ first language is not collected. Of the Asian students, perhaps half are of Indian origin. Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese students also make up a significant percentage. To my knowledge, USU makes no particular effort to recruit minority students, so these statistics are noteworthy. It is possible the sciences draw high numbers of language minority students specifically because of the popular perception that these fields are less language-dependent or language-intensive.

The University prides itself on the superior preparation it gives students entering health fields such as pharmacy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy. Students are taught above and beyond what is required for their respective board exams, and the hope is that USU students will enter the professional world with distinction (GD, 2004-07-28 FN). All students are put through an intensive course load in biology, chemistry, organic chemistry, and their specialized subject areas. The most common majors also require lengthy internships and clerkships in hospitals, clinics, or retail pharmacies.

While in many respects my selection of Urban Science University (USU) as a research site was directly a consequence of my employment there, it displayed a unique combination of the many academic trends in writing that I hoped to examine. It offered an opportunity to interrogate the links between higher education and industry, as it is a fairly specialized professional school. It also appeared to be a promising site in which to explore the tensions of disciplinary accounts of writing as they relate to concepts of academic literacy (particularly as perceived by students), given that it offers no major concentrations in fields considered writing-intensive but has cultivated an exam policy
that prioritizes writing skills. In addition, the diverse student body of USU foregrounded issues of culture and practice as they concern writing. USU's small size and relative uniformity of curriculum also lent a manageable scope for research conducted by one person. Finally, the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPX) provided an important window into issues of assessment of writing proficiency, both because it is a high-stakes test and because it tests students' competency producing writing in a genre arguably external to their own fields.

**Negotiating Access**

As previously stated, I began working at USU in the fall of 1998 as an “ESL Specialist,” or professional writing tutor, in the Writing Center. During my third year, I was recruited to teach sections of English 101 as an adjunct, and later also taught ESL 096 and English 098 (the Writing Proficiency Examination intensive preparation course). Each year I worked with approximately 30-40 students one-on-one as a tutor, and taught 30-60 students as an adjunct. In the Writing Center, I worked almost exclusively with ESL students.

As a long-term employee, I was in a uniquely strong position to evaluate the WPX (Rist, 1994). First, my position in the Writing Center allowed me unfettered access to the exams of all students. Second, my long employment in various capacities at the University facilitated building relationships with all of the relevant parties. Most members of the WPX Committee freely chatted with me about their decisions on individual student exams, philosophies of writing, and concerns about the exam. The administration knew me by reputation from my students and colleagues, and three of the
senior administration officials' secretaries had taken my English composition course.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the faculty and administration wanted me to conduct this research, perhaps in part because they hoped that I could sort out unarticulated tensions about the future of the exam at the university. In fact, despite severe shortages of composition teachers in recent years, the department allowed and encouraged me to take time off from my teaching schedule to focus on my research. This treatment from faculty and administration has been beneficial to my research project, yet again their implicit agendas create challenges for presenting an unbiased, well-received account of the exam and writing culture at USU (Punch, 1998).

In sum, my employment at my field site afforded me many opportunities, yet my status as a practitioner researcher also requires caution. The advantages and pitfalls of practitioner inquiry are numerous, yet awareness of the influence of the researcher is key. Participants and community members may in turns hesitate or scramble to provide information with an eye towards influencing the research product. My role as practitioner within the USU context has the benefit of somewhat ameliorating this facet, although it also means that I needed to regularly check my findings against my own beliefs about how matters do or should play out because of my long acquaintance with my research site and my professional role within it. It would be all too simple to fall into the trap of writing this dissertation from the lens and political position of a Humanities department employee, yet that would cripple my research aim of describing the role of writing in USU objectively. As discussed by Sipe and Ghiso, “We do not approach sites or data as blank slates, but are influenced by our prior theoretical readings and life experiences” (2004, p. 473). Every effort was made to mitigate this influence through
careful adherence to the data, and to disclose when my own experiences within the institution pushed me toward a particular analysis.

Data Collection

Qualitative studies rely on diverse data types and sources of information, with the hopes of finding appropriate answers to their research questions within the triangulated information. Their product is not numeric, as with quantitative research; qualitative studies attempt to interpret social phenomena using linguistic and observational resources. To explore research questions looking at the intersection of policy and curriculum to evaluate the place of a high-stakes test in a university, it was necessary to collect site documents and conduct in-depth qualitative interviews. To supplement my long-term participant observation, data was gathered primarily during the 2003-2004 school year, although some materials collected earlier and later—university documents, field notes, and the like—also receive some attention. The data come from four primary streams: ethnographic interviews with university faculty, staff, and students; site texts such as bluebooks, syllabi, and policy memos; participant observation; and university statistics.

Interviews

The largest corpus of data for the study, aside from the WPX bluebooks, is interview data. Interviews were conducted with current and past members of the WPX Committee, selected faculty of core courses, key administrators, the staff of the Writing Center, and some students. The people selected for interviews were chosen primarily
based on their relationship to the exam, and their role in determining or upholding university policy and curriculum decisions. Students were interviewed based on noteworthy experiences with the exam or at the behest of faculty members seeking to assist this project. In total 28 interviews and focus groups took place with faculty, staff, administrators, and students [see Appendix E for list of interview questions].

I also interviewed a cross-section of faculty who taught the required introductory courses, and inquired about their curricula, their perceptions of writing, and their knowledge of the exam. The courses required of all USU students during their first two years of study include: College Composition, Introduction to Literature, Intellectual Heritage I and II, Introduction to Communication, Social Science, Introduction to Computer Applications, Biology I and II, Chemistry I and II, Organic Chemistry I and II, Mathematical Analysis I and II, and Physical Education I and II. These courses form the students’ only common academic foundation before they sit for the WPX, so the literacy practices of each had to be researched in order to understand more clearly how the WPX does or does not function as a measure of students’ learned writing ability.

The interviews were semi-structured, with hopes that by allowing individuals to expound on their particular concerns and areas of interest more, novel information would be gleaned (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The participants were prompted to provide their opinions and understandings of the role of writing in students’ academic and future professional lives, disciplinary genres, the WPX (its form, administration, policy and history), and the best ways to ensure students’ writing proficiency. Each interview was directly recorded onto the researcher’s laptop using a digital recorder. The audio recordings were then summarized and coded in up to two-minute chunks using the
Atlas.ti software, and particularly salient segments were transcribed verbatim. By clicking on a segment, code, comment, or quotation, the selected question and response from the original audio recording played aloud.

Figure 1: An index of participants named in the text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abigail Schwartz</td>
<td>Adjunct Instructor of English 101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allison Kearn</td>
<td>Mathematics Professor, member of WPX Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Martin</td>
<td>Humanities Professor, chair of WPX Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie Buford</td>
<td>Academic Vice President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Meyerson</td>
<td>Former President of USU</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carol Fierst</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danny Luong</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Geoff Davenport</td>
<td>Dean of Pharmacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenda King</td>
<td>Information Science Professor, member of WPX Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greta Vole</td>
<td>Adjunct Instructor of English 101, former Director of Writing Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hoa Vuong</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hussein Ali</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>James Eberbert</td>
<td>Humanities Professor, Director of Writing Center, member of WPX Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jennifer Barker</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jessica Applebaum</td>
<td>Pharmacy Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kurt Graham</td>
<td>Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loi Nguyen</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Davis</td>
<td>Humanities Professor, Humanities Adjunct Supervisor, member of WPX Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Ngu</td>
<td>Student, Writing Center tutor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Matthew Barney</td>
<td>Biochemistry Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miranda Gold</td>
<td>Humanities Professor, Assistant Director of Writing Center, member of WPX Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malik Smith</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missy Watson</td>
<td>Professional Tutor in Writing Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>Olivia Martinez</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Gabardi</td>
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<td>Ping Yao</td>
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<td>Ripa Patel</td>
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<td>Ryan Vermeer</td>
<td>Dean of Arts and Sciences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sultana Bashir</td>
<td>Student</td>
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</table>
Document Analysis

Document analysis is part of the core of this research on policy, assessment, curricula, and what it means to be academically literate. Naturally, the bluebooks from the WPX are texts of primary importance, as are other documents surrounding the exam—the two WPX questions, the scoring rubric used by the graders, and WPX Committee and other faculty memos regarding the exam. The Writing Center—the primary source for remediation opportunities and alternative assessment—also produced students’ guided practice WPX-style essays and their WPX-equivalency exam (WPEE) bluebooks. Copies of all students’ essays are kept in files going back five years. Each student file may contain from 3-50 writing samples, and often 1-3 revisions of the same essay. These files also contain the individual students’ failed exams and final passing exams. Furthermore, Writing Center tutors document the students’ progress on note cards after each appointment. For this study, some WPEE exams administered by the Writing Center were gathered and assessed in a similar manner to the 2003 WPX bluebooks.

A second data stream comes in the form of fieldnotes gleaned from participant observation of the writing practices at USU. The ways in which I was already installed in the USU landscape facilitated the collection of fieldnotes that I typed directly onto my laptop at my desk. Fieldnotes were formally collected from April 2003 through
September 2005, and were written in narrative form to capture details of participants, locations, events, and attitudes expressed. They also included some preliminary notes on interpretations of events described. In their book, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Emerson et al., stress the importance of immersion within a field site but are decidedly less prescriptive when describing how fieldnotes might look. Ultimately, they identify four implications: data are inseparable from the observational process, researchers must attend to the local interpretations and concerns of the population under study, synchronous fieldnotes are necessary for later more sophisticated accounts, and "such fieldnotes should detail the social and interactional processes that make up people's everyday lives and activities" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 11). Because this dissertation seeks to evaluate the writing assessment program currently in place at USU, participant observation "is ideally suited for constructing the emic meaning of program participation for varied participants in that particular context" (Greene, 1994, p. 539).

Finally, while this is primarily a qualitative study, some statistics were incorporated into the research where applicable. These statistics primarily came from three sources: the WPX Committee, the Writing Center, and the Admissions Office. First, the WPX Committee provided the pass/fail rates for the exam for the past ten years, and the corpus of results from the 2003 exam were compiled and analyzed. Second, the Writing Center maintains separate statistics for results of the WPEE, and the average numbers of appointments required to remediate ESL, native English speaking, and transfer students. Finally, the Admissions Office provided data about the student body composition, including numbers of transfer students, average SAT scores and high school compositions,
GPAs, percentages of US residents/citizens versus international and immigrant students, and so forth. This statistical data enriched the analysis of qualitative evidence.

**Figure 2: Sources of data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data type</th>
<th>Specific form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews with faculty, students, administrators and staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with WPX Committee members around grading process using think aloud protocol methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td>Fieldnotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>WPX bluebooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>WPX documents including exam prompts and holistic rubric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course syllabi and sample assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal memoranda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>WPX pass/fail rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing Center annual reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Admissions data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

The analysis in this dissertation was conducted using an ethnographic approach to the study of academic literacies, following in the tradition of sociolinguistic and education research. These fields typically draw upon a variety of methodological resources to account for the complex interplay of social and linguistic factors in particular educational contexts (Green & Bloome, 1997; Heath, 2000; Hymes, 1996). Thus, data were collected in an ethnographic fashion, yet the analysis was influenced by frameworks taken from ethnography, grounded theory, sociolinguistics, and academic literacies, as described above.
**Coding and Qualitative Data Analysis Software**

The process of coding the data was facilitated using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software that was designed with the principles of grounded theory in mind. ATLAS.ti allows analysts to assign codes to texts (either audio, video, or text files) in units of varying lengths, and to organize codes hierarchically or by network associations. I chose ATLAS.ti among other qualitative data analysis packages because it allows researchers to weight relationships between codes, and visually map the networks of codes, key quotations, and even primary documents (rather than creating merely sequential or hierarchic outlines). The network relationships can themselves be codified to illustrate causality, association, subterms or subordinate relations, or other relationships of the analyst’s invention (Barry, 1998; Coffey, Holbrook, & Atkinson, 1996; Pandit, 1996). Since the final corpus of data included fieldnotes, and dozens of interviews and writing samples, ATLAS.ti provided a useful means of managing, organizing, and critiquing the data. Nonetheless, as I will describe below, ultimately I did not utilize the more advanced functions available through use of the Atlas.ti software because I approached the data differently.

I used the ATLAS.ti program primarily as a highly efficient database to house my data, relied upon the various search functions as a means of identifying and retrieving important coded data, and then I left comments upon the excerpted texts. This data yielded from Boolean searches was then examined in sets, and in a separate Word document I maintained a list of emerging themes and avenues of analysis. In the early stages of drafting my data chapters, it was to this Word document that I returned; I sifted
through the pages of insights and themes I’d listed over the years and determined which still held promise for greater analysis and explication. I then reviewed the data again to evaluate the strength of my original lines of thought and refine my understanding of that theme or analytic avenue. I made the decision to utilize a separate Word file not because of a deficiency of the ATLAS.ti program but because of the personal preferences of this writer.

By design, the coding process evolved in phases, and codes were created and eliminated on the basis of their applicability to the data as it was being analyzed. Sipe and Ghiso (2004) describe the laborious process of generating categories and codes using a study of children’s literary response as a case, challenging the notion of unproblematic and emergent coding schema implied by some qualitative research. They found a need to respond to several problems that emerged with the coding schema: some categories and codes were too broad and encompassed too much of the data set to be useful; also, having too many or too few categories affected the ability to refine and manage analysis of the data. Similarly, in August 2005, midway through the process of data analysis, I found that my original codes were clumsy when applied to some of the data. I laid out my codes in note cards across the dining room table and grouped and re-grouped them hierarchically and thematically. This resulted in the elimination of 11 codes and the creation of 17 new ones, and in the necessity to revisit all the interviews and fieldnotes I’d coded (and recoded) earlier (see Figure 3). This paralleled the bottom-up process of code generation described by Sipe and Ghiso (Erickson, 2004; Sipe & Ghiso, 2004). The coding schema employed in this study was influenced by my use of the program ATLAS.ti to manage my data; codes were designed to be layered in Boolean searches.
that yielded the creation of super codes. Thus, “WPX” and “Gatekeeping/Graduation” were codes, and “WPX COOCCUR Gatekeeping/Graduation” was one super code. Analysis of the data pulled from super code searches allowed me to explore the range of positions that individuals might take on the gatekeeping function of the WPX, and produce a thematic analysis accordingly.

**Figure 3: Codes employed during data analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5-Paragraph Essay</th>
<th>Academic vs. Professional Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjuncts</td>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget/Money</td>
<td>Chapter FIVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter FOUR</td>
<td>Chapter SIX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td>Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 101</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeeping / Graduation</td>
<td>Genre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals / Strategies</td>
<td>Grading / Scoring / Evaluating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Instruction/Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Background</td>
<td>Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myths / Beliefs</td>
<td>Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real World / Employers</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remediation</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Third Reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Identity</td>
<td>WAC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPX</td>
<td>Writing Center</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several concerns have been cited in the literature regarding the use of data analysis software, and these had to be addressed. Naturally, a limitation of such software is that it is only as good as the coding system designed by the analyst. Another danger is the temptation to code each document only once and assume that the codes are accurate and complete. In this way the analyst can become distanced from the data, and so all documents should be periodically re-evaluated, especially in the event of new analytic insights (Barry, 1998; Richards & Richards, 1994). One of the strengths I have found of
ATLAS.ti is that codes, quotations, comments, and memos are always linked to the original document, so this last objection is less problematic with this program. In fact, I recoded pieces of data on an ongoing basis as I returned to the source documents in the identification and refinement of emerging themes, and I coded the entire corpus on three different occasions after new codes were developed in response to new information.

The management of data through use of Atlas.ti was directly linked to the processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification, as described by Huberman and Miles (1994). Data reduction involves the preparation of "data summaries, coding, finding themes, clustering and writing stories"; data display is the "organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and/or action taking"; and finally, conclusion drawing/verification occurs as a process of "comparison/contrast, noting of patterns and themes, clustering, and use of metaphors" and "confirmatory tactics such as triangulation, looking for negative cases, following up surprises, and checking results with respondents" (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 429).

Data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification occurred in the iterative process of data analysis using Atlas.ti.

**Analysis of WPX Bluebooks**

Pardoe (2000) cautions researchers of academic literacies to shed preconceived notions about writing quality, disciplinary boundaries, writing authority, or standard versus marginalized forms. He encourages researchers to treat both successful and unsuccessful samples of student writing (presumably as evaluated by teachers or other assessors) to the same rigorous investigative lenses and forms of analysis. He describes
deficit views of writing as hazardous to meaningful research, because such views do not recognize “the existing understandings and practices that are the basis for any further development” (2000, p. 150). In particular, researchers are urged to be wary of imposing positive or negative value on features of specific texts or literacy events, as these are in themselves socially constructed (see also Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Lea and Street (2000) likewise caution against making assumptions about the nature of successful academic writing or treating disciplinary genres either in isolation or exaggerating their differences.

I cite these researchers to highlight and clarify my decision to foreground the voices of the faculty and students to describe the content and form of the WPX bluebooks, instead of relying upon my own potentially biased or biasing analyses and interpretations. While some investigators have developed precise and less subjective measures of evaluating written texts, their methods were not appropriate for my purposes. For example, Hyland’s (2002b) research of specific lexical items like directives or hedges across disciplines and genres might have offered a useful investigative tool for comparing features of writing tasks that USU students performed in their core courses and on the WPX. However, analyzing the bluebook data along his methodological lines would have dramatically altered (and expanded) the scope and tenor of this research. It was not the intention of this researcher to provide an interpretation or an assessment of the material in the bluebooks but rather to utilize the bluebooks as a vehicle to explore how people made meaning of the exam.
The Problem of the Three Nested Models

In Chapter 2, I described Lea and Street's (2000) theoretical formulation of three nested models of academic literacy—Study Skills, Academic Socialization, and Academic Literacies. In fact, this work in Academic Literacies was foundational in my understanding of writing policy and the writing program at USU. Going into my research, I had already witnessed examples of a Study Skills orientation on the part of particular individuals, and I saw the work of the Writing Center relating to a process of Academic Socialization. With these examples in mind, I did not anticipate the challenges that I encountered when writing my first drafts of Chapter 5 that relate to the writing curriculum at USU. In these early drafts I attempted to organize the data along the lines of Lea and Street's (2000) framework and situate participants and events into one of the three nested models but problems arose when I tried to apply the data to the theory. I found that I could manipulate segments of text from any individual interview as evidence of an inclination toward any of the three models, particularly Study Skills and Academic Socialization. Working from interview data especially, it felt as though I were attempting to impugn orientations onto individuals and practices when in reality their words conveyed no internal consistency that would permit me to describe their orientations toward the acquisition and demonstration of academic literacy in this way. Had I anticipated this problem in the data collection phase, I would have revised my interview questions or methodology to account for this difficulty, as well as had my participants respond to circulating models of literacy in the literature. As it were, I grew concerned that I was attributing intentionality or reading too much into instructors' heads and belief systems based on the partial evidence available in the interview transcript, and therefore
it became necessary to abandon the nested models as an organizational framework in writing Chapter 5.

While the three nested models of academic literacy offer a useful analytic frame for practitioners and researchers, few faculty (and even fewer students) describe their models of writing in terms that easily lend themselves to categorization as proponents of Study Skills, Academic Socialization, or Academic Literacies. This begs the question, if people's understanding of academic literacy develops organically and independently of theoretical models, do they naturally flow through these three orientations or do they tend toward one or another of the orientations? Furthermore, are such models of academic literacy the domain of the researcher rather than the participant? The answer to each of these questions is, 'yes.' The participants did not explicitly describe how they developed or came to align with specific models of writing (with the exception of some Humanities faculty advocating a process approach), but they did have at a minimum lay understandings of what it meant to be academically literate and of appropriate ways to develop that literacy in learners. However, these lay understandings were often amorphous and difficult for participants to articulate. As I reviewed my interview notes I was reminded of the adage, "It's all very well in practice, but it will never work in theory" (Anon.). The models of literacy described in the literature frame modes of inquiry for the researcher; data can be examined in light of the models and the data that do not fit the existing models may then generate new theory.

The three nested models did not conform to my data as I had originally treated the models as being located on a continuum, and each orientation as monolithic. The consequence of this treatment was that participants' orientations appeared messy and
simultaneously located at multiple sites on the continuum. Upon reflection, I saw that the overarching trend in USU was to treat "writing" from a Study Skills perspective or based upon an autonomous model of literacy, in which "good writing" was unproblematically identified by correct use of grammar and demonstration of a "universal" logic in argument and organization (Street, 1994a, 1997, 2003). Conversely, at the macro level, disciplinary areas were seemingly approached from an Academic Socialization perspective, as the process of training students to be pharmacists, occupational therapists, or other health professionals was perceived as a more comprehensive endeavor. This analysis will be described in more detail in later chapters, including a discussion on ways of incorporating an Academic Literacies perspective across the curriculum in Chapter 7.

Synopsis

The data collection processes and methodological framework described in this chapter provided the structure of the analysis of the study. This exploration of the USU writing assessment policy was conceived as a critical ethnography conducted by a practitioner researcher. Zeni's (2000) and Zou and Trueba's (2002) edited volumes on qualitative research, critical ethnography, and practitioner inquiry in education provided important guidance in the crafting of the research project and in data analysis; their work illustrated and theorized that such research could be action oriented, empirical and objective. Green and Bloome's (1997) distinction between ethnography-of-education and ethnography-in-education allowed me to situation this study in the emic perspective that had implications for the analysis and presentation of the data. It was as a consequence of the study design rooted in practitioner research that grounded theory methodology
became most salient, as it stressed constant comparison in the evolution of interpretations and theories based upon a dialogic treatment of the data.

This study explores the situated literacy practices of students and university employees with respect to a writing proficiency exam. The field of sociolinguistics, loosely defined, has contributed much to the understanding of language use in oral and written forms. Specific methodological sub-areas of sociolinguistics such as the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1962) and the much later Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2001) were originally explored as possible primary avenues of analysis. The Ethnography of Communication/Speaking contributed to the construction of data, but the emphasis on natural, spoken dialogue did not make the methodology an easy fit for the analysis of the corpus of data produced in the study. While a methodology more immediately accessible for use with written texts, Critical Discourse Analysis champions microanalysis of texts, and this level of analysis did not conform easily to the broader-scope ethnography I was developing in this study.

The Academic Literacies orientation provided the theoretical and methodological flexibility I desired in examining the micro and the macro of the WPX case, treating both the specific, situated characteristics of particular literacy practices and the negotiated larger social contexts that could give rise to such policies and practices.

Chapters Four, Five and Six incorporate these methodological frameworks to present the findings regarding the intersections of policy, curriculum and assessment with respect to writing in the USU case.
CHAPTER FOUR: Writing Proficiency Policy: When the first thought becomes the last word

At USU, academic policy in general, and writing policy more specifically, occur at multiple levels: as it is laid out by administration and Faculty Council in policy documents; as it is carried out by faculty and examiners in offices and classrooms; and as it is performed and impacted by students and their behavior. It is the interaction of macro and micro levels, of official doctrines and unofficial practices, where policy is borne, observed, challenged, or maintained. While this dissertation looks at the interaction of levels through the lenses of policy, curriculum, and assessment, this chapter looks at the institutional history and culture that gave rise to the WPX policy, its impact on the University's budget, and on the creation of structures of remediation. Additionally, there is discussion of the political tensions and relations of power associated with the creation and maintenance of the exam policy. The chapter closes by briefly examining the uncertain future of the writing proficiency policy.

History

The pulse of the USU campus can be taken by spending time in the small pedestrian mall that bridges the administrative buildings and the classrooms. Students, faculty, and staff flow through the mall in waves, ebbing and flowing with the tides as governed by course schedules. The mall, tree-lined and verdant, is nestled in the U-shape formed by several campus buildings. A dozen benches line the perimeter of the wide brick pathway, forming quiet nooks where students and faculty alike gather to discuss
their daily lives, the coursework they assign or are assigned, their relationships with others on the USU campus, and so on. The mall is the center of extra-classroom life at USU. Indeed, to understand USU campus culture is to spend a lot of time participant observing the interactions in the mall. The Writing Proficiency Exam itself has its origins in dialogues in the mall.

In the early 1980s, the faculty and administration of USU began hearing repeated complaints regarding students' writing skills from the internship sites and businesses accepting their students and graduates. As a largely professional school, dependent on a strong relationship with associated businesses, this information was worrisome1. Naturally, these concerns expressed in the external community trickled down to the daily conversations of the faculty. Bill Martin, a professor in the Humanities department and a lifelong cigar smoker, can frequently be found on his favorite bench in the mall grading papers and waiting for an interruption. When asked about the context that gave rise to this writing requirement, Bill Martin explained that during this time in the early 80s he engaged in frequent conversations with other faculty about what they perceived to be failing academic standards in writing. These faculty worried that the University was graduating students ill-prepared to respond to the writing demands required of them in their professional lives, much less to meet reasonable expectations of writing proficiency

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1 Different major programs at USU are influenced to varying degrees by industry. The Health Policy, Pharmaceutics, and Pharmaceutical Sciences programs have close ties with industry, while Pharmacy is only minimally influenced by industry. Other professional programs such as Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy retain a high degree of independence. The University's mission as a whole is perhaps more greatly influenced by industry: leaders from the pharmaceutical industry typically serve on the USU Board of Trustees, including the presidents of Merck, Wyeth, and NevaRis. The Board of Trustees mainly concerns itself with funding or financial decisions, property decisions, and faculty tenures/promotions. While it may also discuss and make recommendations regarding curriculum, in this arena it does not officially approve or disapprove of policies (2004-04-15 FN).
while in the University. They wished to see writing incorporated throughout the students’ academic preparation in the form of a Writing Across the Curriculum program, and debated the best means of ensuring compliance from both students and resistant faculty members (Bill Martin interview 49:1). Eventually, they approached Faculty Council for permission to establish a formal committee, to take these concerns out of the mall and into the classroom.

In 1984, at the request of this original cadre of concerned professors formed spontaneously through interactions in the mall, a committee was officially created in Faculty Council to formally address the perceived writing problem through possible interventions and curricular remediation. Bill Martin was nominated chair of the committee, a position he has retained through its various iterations for over twenty years. This writing committee took the initial step of disseminating a survey within the faculty regarding the possibility of a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. As the writing committee originally envisioned, Bill Martin explains, USU students “would take writing intensive courses throughout their curriculum and across the full length of their careers here,” and it would be “a massive undertaking to do it correctly.” To implement a WAC program successfully, they felt, there would need to be significant collaboration across departments, additional training for faculty members, and a revamping of the existing curriculum. As described in the academic literature, the development of a successful WAC program requires that faculty from the outset educate one another on the conventions and practices in each of their disciplines and professional communities, and that they articulate and agree on the distinctions in form and lexicon between general writing and writing in specific disciplines (Russell & Foster, 2002). This formative work
would precede decisions associated with the design, integration, and implementation of individual WAC-oriented courses, the core curriculum, and major curricula. Hobson and Lerner write,

As we have repeatedly discovered in our work with pharmacy and other health care faculty and non-faculty practitioners, it is easy to erroneously assume that, as when working with many educators in the Arts and Sciences, we can safely find such meeting points as a common lexicon and definition base, commensurate epistemological vantage points, and shared experience as educators working with undergraduate students in a general, preparatory curriculum. That desire is rarely met. (1999, p. 168)

In each of the categories described above, the survey revealed a lack of broad faculty support for WAC (BM, 2004-04-06 INT). While the idea of WAC was popular within the committee, and more generally favored by other faculty, the other faculty members were not yet ready to commit to such a program in practice. The writing committee retrenched.

Because writing was peripheral in the school’s academic focus and culture, the committee concluded that it was necessary to “heighten everyone’s awareness about the importance of written communication” (BM, 2004-04-06 INT). My various conversations with professors who were on campus during that time period indicated that the institutional culture was still centered on the perception of USU as a college of the sciences, a pharmacy college, and the role that writing might play in the lives of pharmacists, health professionals, and scientists was only beginning to be articulated. This corresponds with accounts of trends in pharmacy and pharmacy education described in the literature (Lerner, 2001; Rosenthal, 2003). In fact, it was only through the personal ambition and efforts of the newly hired college president, Dr. Meyerson, who led through a business rather than an academic model, that the place and requirements of general
education received fresh attention. One professor related that during that time period in
the yearly meeting between the administration and Humanities faculty, the president, vice
president, and dean would report a unified message,

that what they'd hear from what they would call, The Industry, meaning,
you know, the pharmacy and pharmaceutical world, was that we were
doing a great job as a university... training our students in the skills they
needed for their profession. But what we weren't doing such a great job in
was teaching them to communicate better. Their communication skills
were inadequate and that that mattered in the industry. ... So we wanted
to give that a lot of emphasis and focus. (MD, 2004-04-05 INT)

Consequently, while some faculty might have been disappointed by the quality of writing
they received from their own students in coursework, the impetus for change in broader
University policy is generally credited to the external impetus or environmental factor of
pharmaceutical industry complaints (Cooper, 1989). The idea that the WPX was
instituted as a response to these external criticisms has come to dominate discussions of
the original purpose of the exam, with the perhaps unintended effect of absolving the
faculty of the responsibility for angling for or implementing this controversial exam.
This construction of the origins has trickled down to new and temporary employees as
well: One adjunct posited that there was no other reason for the University to make a
writing exam a graduation requirement, aside from pressure from business (TM, 2004-
04-14 INT). In her mind, to create such an institutionally and individually burdensome
requirement would not make sense if there weren't a larger carrot or stick driving the
program.

Significantly, without prompting, the theme of not wishing to graduate
“embarrassments to the university” as a motive for raising (and maintaining) writing
standards was repeated frequently in my interviews with both faculty and administrators.

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In each of these instances, they spoke as if advocating on behalf of “the University,” defending the reputation of a monolithic, if conceptual, entity (for a discussion of the university as a symbolic institution, see Myerson, 1997). At the same time that they wished to defend their personal standards as academics, the policy motivations were larger than their indictments as individuals. Ultimately, the blame for deficiency in the students’ writing would fall on the shoulders of the University, and not on their individual efforts, yet they identified with the needs and wants of the University entity. In this way, the exam functioned as a form of “quality control” of the University product, its graduates, in much the way outlined by Gee et al., in *The New Work Order* (1996).

The results of the survey created by the 1984 writing committee indicated that the faculty body rejected interference into their own classroom practices but still wished to indicate their general support of both strengthening and verifying students’ writing ability as future professionals. The committee struggled to identify methods that would allow the faculty continued autonomy in curriculum decisions yet still function to ensure writing competence and impart the belief that writing mattered. They concluded, as Bill Martin described, that “one way, draconian as it might seem, would be to make a writing proficiency exam that would be required for graduation” (BM 2004-04-06 INT)².

² The WPX, however, is not the only writing exam that students face during their careers at USU. Applicants who are perceived as weak are asked to write a timed essay on campus, which is then evaluated by the English faculty. The faculty have veto power over the admissions decision in the case of an exceptionally weak writer, although that may be more a matter of courtesy than policy. Furthermore, all admitted students take a diagnostic writing exam (DWX) when they arrive on campus. The Humanities faculty review the students’ DWXs in order to place them into first-year English courses. Average or above average writers are placed into one of three sections of English 101: honors, regular (with a cap of 23 students), or “special” sections for students in need of mild remediation (these have a lower enrollment cap of 15). Weaker writers are placed into English 098, or one of three levels of ESL (095, 096 or 097). The students who are placed into 095, 096, 097, or 098 must still take and pass English 101 in order to fulfill the composition requirement.
His words suggest several competing ideologies: first, that the assessment of student writing by means of a proficiency exam is taboo in his community of practice (teachers of English); second, that high-stakes assessment is an effective means of indicating what one values. It is uncertain whether this view is one he has developed in hindsight, or if there was reluctance to utilize a standardized test in 1984. Bill Martin went on to explain,

The reason for choosing an exam in terms of looking at our original concern was that we were graduating students who would embarrass us when they get out there with their writing skills. An exam seemed a practical way to identify those students, the ones who had very poor writing skills and who we would be hesitant to give a University degree to, and it gave us the leverage to make those students then do something about it. (BM 2004-04-06 INT)

In this statement, Bill Martin encapsulates several of the key concerns that motivated the creation of the exam policy: students were graduating with deficient writing skills, yet they were unidentified by the University at that time through existing mechanisms such as their performance in their coursework. What was called for was a means to identify and remediate those weak writers, but it needed to be practical with respect to university resources, balancing the normative and descriptive policy ends (Cooper, 1989). Further, as his words indicate, a result of the exam would be that the onus of remediation of writing difficulties would fall upon the student, rather than on the faculty or the programming. In the short-term, it was important to address the immediate writing deficiencies affecting existing students who were progressing toward graduation. This would take place while the larger, thornier logistical issues inherent in adoption of a WAC program (that would shift emphasis to the faculty role in facilitating writing development) were straightened out.
Thus, it was taken to a vote and the University’s Faculty Council decided to move forward with a writing proficiency examination (WPX) for the students. This was to be a temporary measure, to allow the writing committee time to develop a feasible plan for a more comprehensive writing curriculum within the university. In the meantime, the exam would identify those students in serious need of remediation before they entered their professional years or graduated, and it would give the university a sense of the scope of the writing problem on campus. As a result, the committee became the WPX Committee in light of its revised, if temporary, charge. While WAC was originally shelved as a policy initiative in the short-term, in fact it was never seriously revisited. Although the goals of improved writing for graduates and of creating more marketable graduates remained, through inaction, the future plans for a broad interdisciplinary writing program were largely abandoned.

As described earlier, the creation of the writing proficiency exam may not have taken place were it not for larger shifts in the institution’s structure brought on by new leadership. Whereas in previous decades the school could have been described as “a monolithic institution” focused on Pharmacy (as described by the current University president, Dr. Gabardi, 2004-07-13 INT), the 1970s, and especially the 1980s, was a time of dramatic expansion of focus. The then-incoming college president, Dr. Meyerson, restructured the administration in 1984 such that there were no longer just two deans—a Dean of Students and a Dean of Pharmacy—but three—a Dean of Arts and Sciences, a Dean of Healthcare (to whom the Department of Pharmacy now reported), and a Dean of Student Affairs. Suddenly, the historic dominance of the Pharmacy program was diminished, and the Arts and Sciences gained new prominence. Dr. Meyerson did this
not because the University was in crisis but because of his personal vision for the
University. He was an alumnus who had spent the previous 25 years working in the
pharmaceutical industry. Perhaps as a result, his wish was to ensure that graduates were
well rounded, both in their technical training and in their general education, so he sought
to create greater balance in their preparation in the sciences and the humanities. In
addition, management turnover in the Pharmacy program that went through five deans in
the years between 1984 and 1992 allowed for other divisions to gain power within the
institution. In particular, Arts and Sciences, a division that would become a new college
within the University, gained significant influence both political and curricular.

The College of Arts and Sciences is the home of the Humanities (which in turn
consists of faculty hailing from English, History, Classics, Art, and Foreign Languages),
Social Sciences, Chemistry, Biology, Math, Physics, and Computer Science departments.
While proportionately few students major in the College of Arts and Sciences, it does
have the most faculty and it is the seat of the general education curriculum on campus.
With the restructuring of the institution in the 1980s, the historic power relations between
the faculty changed. The relationship between administration and faculty was not free
from contention either; in fact, many faculty members were stunned by the imposition of
a business model on their academic institution despite simultaneously feeling that the
university had to adapt to respond changing forces in the higher education market. This
tension created by the application of a business model to education contexts is well-
documented in the academic literature (Barnett, 1997; Gee, 2000; Gee, Hull, &
Lankshear, 1996; Griffin, 1997; Rosenthal, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).
While Dr. Meyerson's personal ambition was to create a more liberal set of core requirements, this arena was still squarely under the control of the faculty. The newly created general education committee developed the core curriculum by determining outcomes they desired for the University's graduates, and then examining the process by which students would attain those outcomes (Rosenthal, 2003). This is parallel to the creation of the WPX, in which desired outcomes were identified and then a process for achieving those outcomes was developed. Dr. Garbardi, the current University president but also on campus during that time, noted that creating the core curriculum meant the scientists and the people in the clinical areas had to really consolidate what they were giving and make more room in the curriculum. And that was very, very difficult for everyone to do. And it also required that a lot of people philosophically agree that we needed to have the type of general education in this institution that would take our students for a lifetime of learning. (PG, 2004-07-13 INT)

In a narrow vote, the core curriculum was voted in place by the Faculty Council, in which the Pharmacy faculty members were finally outnumbered by faculty from other fields. The core was formally inserted as a requirement in 1991, and the credit hours required for general education more than doubled, from 26 in 1984 to 56 today. Figure 4 below maps out the core curriculum requirements finalized by the University in 1997:
Currently, the students’ first two years at USU are primarily spent completing general education or core requirements in the following nine areas of study: communications, literature, world culture, mathematics, moral reasoning, historical study, fine arts, natural sciences, and social sciences. While this core curriculum addressed various elements of the students’ liberal preparation, including communication, this should in no way be considered a WAC program, as each of these elements were addressed in individual courses and not across the curriculum in a holistic manner. For
example, "communications" is addressed in the English 101 course, but not in other
general education requirements.

The WPX did not factor into the planning of the core curriculum; it remained an
independent assessment tool used by the university and still disconnected from the
required coursework. As the Dean of Arts and Sciences told me, the WPX is not under
the purview of the general education taskforce, and a new Faculty Council committee
would need to be created if it were to be evaluated (RV, 2004-05-05 INT). As such,
policy structures within USU divorced committees tasked with assessment of general
writing skills from those with the content of general education, and so further rendered it
difficult to integrate writing assessment (as it is currently tied to the WPX) with
instruction. Thus, after the adoption of the new core requirements in 1991, verification of
the students' sufficient writing skills would continue to be determined through the WPX
and not through their satisfactory completion of these general education requirements.

Because the WPX was instituted as a stopgap measure for broader curricular
reform, it is surprising that the function and future of the exam was not evaluated
alongside the revision of general education requirements. In fact, this omission speaks to
a paradoxical compartmentalization of learning outcomes and strategies in the
development of USU academic policy, against the desire frequently expressed by faculty
and administrators to provide students with a more holistic and integrated academic
experience so that they may better thrive in an increasingly hybridized professional
world.
The Logistics of the WPX Policy

Once the exam was approved as policy, it was necessary to address logistical issues including the exam format, the scoring procedures, and the structures to be created for its maintenance. It was determined that the exam would be a pass/fail bluebook exam in which students would be given two hours to respond to one exam prompt in essay form. The prompt would address some social or policy issue (for example, animal testing in product research) and provide background information that the students could utilize when responding to the question. Beginning in 1994, the amount of information provided in the exam prompt was reduced to one page, and two questions on different issues were given to allow the students choice—one question would address a topic outside of the school (usually related to healthcare), and the other would address a campus concern (like grading policy) [see Appendix A for samples of past prompts]. The first trial run of the exam was given in the Fall of 1985, and it was subsequently given every year in the Spring. The first class to be impacted by the exam as a graduation requirement was the class of 1989.

Traditionally all students have taken the exam two and a half years before their graduation or internship year, giving all students an equal time of two years for remediation. This meant that students in the Pharmacy program, a 6-year plan of study involving a final year of rotations off campus, took the exam in their 3rd year, while all other majors took it in their 2nd. It had been that way since the exam was instituted as a graduation requirement for the class of 1989.

In Fall 2003, the Pharmacy program instituted a change whereby students would take the exam in their 2nd year. The motivation for this change was to ensure that
students were adequately prepared for the rigors of the 5th year, in which they were assigned a great deal more writing. Also, the Pharmacy program wished to ensure that students weren’t receiving writing remediation in their 5th year, a reportedly very challenging academic year according to students and faculty alike. The Pharmacy program announced its intent to alter the existing WPX requirement in a Faculty Council meeting which reportedly caused a shouting match in the meeting, with Bill Martin livid that the move would reduce the WPX committee to a board doing the Pharmacy program’s job for them—ensuring that their students can write. In this way, he interpreted the actions of the Pharmacy program as infringing on the autonomy and authority of the multidisciplinary WPX committee, and by extension as devaluing the committee’s work in relation to its own program needs. The WPX committee, he charged, was instead a group facilitating a requirement for all students (BM, 2003-09-05 FN). Bill Martin lost this battle, and in March 2004, both the sophomore and junior classes of Pharmacy students sat for the WPX.

This incident speaks to Martin’s territoriality over the administration of the exam and his role as executor of WPX policy, but more significantly it points to larger questions about the purpose of the exam. If the exam is intended to ensure that students have attained a certain level of academic literacy before they are released into the professional world by the University, then the policy should have remained as it was. If the purpose of the exam is to ensure that students have attained a certain level of academic literacy while they are still students at the University, the policy change moving the requirement earlier for Pharmacy students does not carry huge import. Furthermore, if the second interpretation is the correct one (and the fact that the measure passed
indicates that it may be), then what is suggested is that the very timing of the exam is somewhat arbitrary, but not irrelevant. While the long-term marketing goals of producing desirable graduates for industry remain in play, what emerges, as a consequence of this department renegotiating the period during which its students will sit for the exam and when they may be remediated, is evidence of a burgeoning appreciation for the importance of writing proficiency as part of the students’ academic preparation (Cooper, 1989). This shift corresponds to changes within the pharmacy professions (an industrial community in which many USU pharmacy faculty still claim membership, in addition to their professorial duties) emphasizing increased facility in both oral and written communication (Hobson & Lerner, 1999; Lerner, 2001). Despite this external professional shift, among science faculty there remained resistance to dramatically altering their own classroom practices, and instead they sought to have writing development fostered by other means within the institution.

When the WPX Committee was officially incorporated through Faculty Council, it consisted of the original cadre of self-selected individuals who were interested in the writing problem and willing to put in the work. These members hailed from the Humanities, Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, and Information Sciences departments. They extended an invitation for all interested faculty to join. Notably, until 2004, only one person from the Pharmacy program had ever served on the committee. Although in general the chair of Faculty Council appoints new members to committees, the WPX committee has retained independent control over its membership. Currently, new members are largely recruited by Bill Martin or other members of the committee.
Bill Martin has been chair of the WPX Committee since its inception, and perhaps for this reason the exam is frequently referred to as “Bill’s Baby” anecdotally among faculty members. Faculty are often drawn to join the committee because of their personal investment in the issue of student writing, but confess that this committee does not function as other committees do. One member commented that “it’s not really a committee so much, it’s just, you know, graders. We don’t really discuss...we never have discussion about is this the right format” (ANON, 2004-05-04 INT). In the same way, the other committee members do not create exam prompts, because Bill Martin writes all of the exam questions. When there are other logistical issues to be addressed by the committee, the chair makes unilateral decisions about policy. This member felt that the situation may be due to historical precedent rather than a lack of openness to discussion, and that the status quo went unchallenged because either people didn’t care that much, they felt that the many hours they put in grading sufficed, or because turnover rendered the issue moot. Another faculty member, a past member of the WPX committee, suggested that Bill Martin was very stubborn and resistant to changes to his exam. The consequence of this view of the committee, whether truth or projection, is that all aspects of the exam are identified as primarily the domain of one member of the faculty—Bill Martin—and, by extension, of his department.

The faculty volunteers who comprise the WPX Committee are recruited on the basis of interest. This makes it unique among faculty committees, as most have their members nominated by the head of Faculty Council. Recruitment for the WPX committee can be tough, because the faculty members are selected based on not only their willingness to volunteer, but their perceived commitment to fostering writing skills.
in students, their own writing abilities as demonstrated in memos and other distributed writings, and their ability to work well with other WPX committee members. One committee member suggested that when he attempted to recruit faculty for the committee they treated it as a political hot potato (2003-12-09 FN). Biochemistry professor Matthew Barney confessed that he was reluctant to voice his support of the WPX too loudly lest he be recruited to serve on the committee (MB, 2004-05-14 INT). Being a member of the WPX committee entails significant amounts of work, because committee members grade many dozens of papers each year with no financial incentives or reduction in their regular responsibilities.

Bill Martin said that when recruiting new members of the WPX committee he looks for “someone who is willing to do it, someone who we believe has reasonably good writing skills, and who we also believe could work well with the rest of the committee” (BM, 2004-04-06 INT). In this way, membership on the committee is constructed as a burdensome honor. I found it interesting that a faculty member’s own writing skills, as perceived by his/her colleagues, could serve as part of the litmus test for membership on the committee, but other members concurred on the importance of this characteristic. Anecdotally, faculty members frequently comment not only on the content of written communications by other faculty and administrators, but also on their form. Misused punctuation and awkward sentences in a public memo invite quiet derision from faculty, while well-written missives engender feelings of respect and good will toward the writer. To be invited to serve on the Committee, at least among its members, is validation of the faculty member’s own vision and skills.
When the Faculty Council voted to institute the WPX as a requirement, it did not make it a University-wide requirement. Instead, each individual degree-granting program adopted it as a requirement for its major. This was a deliberate move designed to impart the view that strong writing skills were valued as part of a student’s major preparation and not as a generic hurdle put forth by the University. However, no students that I spoke with were aware that the WPX was a requirement of their major department (and not the University), and indeed this subtle distinction was never articulated to me by anyone outside of the WPX Committee. For all intents and purposes, for most students the onus of the exam policy was on its stewards—the WPX Committee and, by extension, the Writing Center and the Humanities department. In this way, as will be discussed in greater detail later, students came to associate the exam as an obstacle put forth by the writing faculty (again, ignoring the multidisciplinary composition of the WPX Committee), and the WPX was placed experientially out of the training that they were receiving toward their ultimate professional goals.

Each April, all department chairs receive lists of scores earned by the students in the March exam. As such, it is each department’s responsibility to track the progress of its own students with respect to the requirement and ensure that they were compliant. Different programs have taken to the responsibility of monitoring students’ WPX performance with varying degrees of dedication. The Physical Therapy program is cited as being particularly strong in this respect. It keeps a close eye on its students and, if they fail the exam, students are sent a notification letter by the head of Physical Therapy that emphasizes the importance of writing in their future careers. Then, copies of the letter are sent to each student’s advisor who sets up meetings with the students to emphasize
the importance of writing anew. In contrast, the school's largest program, Pharmacy, is felt to be least supportive, tending to impart the message that the WPX is simply a requirement "to be taken care of" rather than an integral part of their education experience (2004-03-16 FN). In this way, Physical Therapy represents the ideal of the WPX policy, using the diffusion of communicative innovation as a language planning framework as described by Cooper (1989). With each communiqué, the 'innovation' of solid writing proficiency is imparted to students. Although the graduation requirement serves as a compelling (or coercive) incentive for students to adopt this communicative innovation, the requirement is scaffolded and legitimized by the departmental faculty's support.

If the departments do not notify the students about their performance in the exam, the students can find their scores posted outside of the Writing Center (unless they request that the scores be reported privately). Additionally, they may contact the Writing Center or Bill Martin to learn if they passed or failed. The public posting of exam scores by student number is customary at USU, and in this respect the WPX mirrors other elements of the students' academic experience. Still, an effect of the placement of these scores outside of the Writing Center is that the exam, as discussed earlier, is seen as belonging to the domain of the Writing Center and the Humanities department, just as the posted score of a Chemistry final belongs to the Chemistry Department.

The Impact of Budget on Composition Instruction

The WPX, in its position as a device to ensure student writing proficiency, also serves as a point of leverage for the Humanities department with respect to adding new
courses and receiving additional funding from the administration for its writing programs. In time, with expanded course offerings the department could hope to institute its own Humanities major. One faculty member described the exam as the Humanities department's way of holding administration "by the balls," although he suggested this interpretation was only ever insinuated, not spoken aloud (2003-09-16 FN). The Humanities department may have some cause to feel defensive; it is a program without a major, in a discipline that is seen as peripheral to the science and professional training the students receive, and its budget is always strained. Dr. Buford commented,

> There's no question that faculty in the humanities, math, physics, computer science, social sciences, feel a much larger territoriality based on job security. If we stopped requiring writing courses, for instance, which I don't expect us to do, but if we stopped requiring writing courses, who would lose their jobs? Because would pharmacy majors voluntarily select writing courses? No. Would they voluntarily select the IH [Intellectual Heritage] courses? No. A few of them would, but most of them would not. (BB, 2004-05-06 INT)

Carol Fierst, a Humanities professor, suggested that writing has yet to find its place at the school. Most students, she observed, "walk into school with the idea that writing is not important because they're entering into a career" (CF, 2004-05-25 INT). I asked ESL Pharmacy students in a focus group to explain how they perceived the writing demands of their future careers and they were ambivalent. One remarked, "Don't get us wrong, English is important for us as Pharmacists...but not writing." Another added, "Someone will correct writing" (ESL FG, 2004-05-20 INT). Over the course of my data collection, I repeatedly encountered examples such as these, revealing that students tended to treat writing as an instrumental skill, divorced from the requirements of the professional worlds in which they expected to dwell. In this way, 'writing' was treated from a Study
Skills perspective, yet career training was seen as a form of socialization (Lea & Street, 2000; Pardoe, 2000; Street, 1995).

Within USU, the academic preparation students receive in the required one-semester English 101 course, the purview of the Humanities department is most closely associated with the format of the exam. Yet because there is more than one year between completion of English 101 and sitting for the exam, experientially most students, faculty, and administration do not link performance with the exam as it associates with performance in class. In fact, there is absolutely no record-keeping on campus that associates WPX scores with grades, coursework, or faculty. There is a neither an explicit nor implicit link between class performance and exam score. More significantly, from a policy perspective, the instructors’ ability to transmit or foster the minimum standards of academic literacy as assessed by the WPX is never measured. Instead, hiring and firing decisions are made on the basis of perceptions of professional competence largely gleaned from out-of-class interactions between faculty, the absence of negative incidents, or popularity with students as measured by end-of-semester evaluations. Observations of classes by the adjunct supervisor or the department chair are rare in the Humanities, and any submitted syllabi generally receive little or no feedback before being filed in a cabinet in the Humanities department’s building stairwell.

Another budget-related facet of the ‘English 101 issue’ concerns the University’s heavy reliance on adjuncts to teach the composition course. Financially, it makes good business sense to rely on adjuncts for this course. USU adjuncts in the humanities are paid $1800 or $2000 per course taught, depending on experience and length of
employment in the University.\(^3\) Adjuncts do not receive health or retirement benefits. As such, the cost associated with hiring an adjunct is a fraction of that of retaining a full-time professor. This hiring of adjuncts in lieu of more costly full-time faculty is a national trend, and at USU it is particularly evident in the lower-level courses (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Crowley, an opponent of required college composition courses, argues,

*The universal requirement exploits teachers of writing, particularly part-time teachers and graduate students.* The working conditions of teachers of universally required introductory composition courses are ordinarily less rich than those of other university faculty: such teachers usually are paid less, have no access to benefits or job security, have little or no advance warning about what and when they will teach, and have inadequate office and communications facilities. (1998, p. 241)

The circumstance at USU is by no means unique.

Expanded enrollments and a revised core curriculum created the current reliance on adjuncts in the Humanities. Due to the nature of the work required, enrollment in Humanities courses is capped at 23 students; there simply aren’t enough full-time faculty in the Humanities department to instruct the students in the required 4 core courses (English 101 and 102, and Intellectual Heritage I and II) and still be able to offer specialized electives. Total enrollment grew by 83% between 1984 and 1994, resulting in a need for significantly more instructors of Humanities courses with capped enrollments. In addition, in 1991, when the Intellectual Heritage sequence was instituted as part of the core, many Humanities faculty went to teaching those courses in lieu of College Composition or Introduction to Literature (English 101 and 102, respectively),

\(^3\) Other area universities are known to pay between $3000 and $5000 for equivalent courses, which is also proportionately lower than what they pay their sitting faculty. The impact of this pay difference in the local economy is that USU is less competitive when hiring part-time instructors. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, this has implications on the ability of the Humanities department to hire its preferred candidates or retain them.
because they found these courses more enjoyable or appealing to teach. This resulted in a dramatic expansion in the number of adjuncts. Typically, at least 95% of English 101 courses are taught by adjuncts each year. The Humanities department hired 27 adjuncts to teach in 2003-2004, whereas the Biology department only hired 2. While the over-reliance on adjuncts has been perceived as a problem for some years, the administration recognizes that doing something about it is another issue. It boils down to money. The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences told me that the Chair of the Humanities had calculated that it would cost $300,000 to hire full-time faculty to teach English 101, and explained that he was unsure that the University could afford such “a big number.” At the same time, he wondered what the University was getting for its money. USU adjuncts teaching English 101 are not given a set curriculum or benchmarks that they are expected to teach. In part this has to do with faculty empathy for the difficulty of teaching the same course at multiple institutions. There is a desire to reduce the adjuncts’ burden by allowing them to design courses that would permit them to implement their syllabi across various institutions. From the perspective of one member of the Humanities department, the reluctance on the part of the Dean to create more full-time positions in English or to approve pay raises for adjuncts speaks to the value placed on writing on campus.

An example of this lack of priority for the writing program may be seen in USU’s pay for English adjuncts that is considerably lower than other area universities, colleges, and community colleges; the department struggles to hire and retain the best instructors. Mark Davis, the adjunct supervisor in the Humanities, describes the frustration of well-qualified adjuncts turning down offers because of the low pay, and being forced to hire
adjuncts tangentially qualified to teach Humanities courses, including a Ph.D. in History teaching the English course—Introduction to Literature.

Adjuncts are frequently very good instructors—creative, knowledgeable, and hardworking. However, because of their limited hours on the USU campus, their ignorance of the institutional culture, and their frequent turnover, they are often ill-equipped to advise or instruct students in the writing required later in their upper-level coursework, much less that assessed by the WPX. There is no material given to adjuncts that would educate them about the writing required in later Humanities courses, much less in their science programs. Many adjuncts with whom I spoke indicated that the sole information provided about the WPX came during their hiring interviews, and in that instance they were simply told that the university had a proficiency exam that was given to students each March in their second year. Nor were they explicitly instructed to prepare the students for certain structures as they would directly be assessed by the proficiency exam. However, as will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5, the end result is the use of the WPX to create standardization where it is lacking in the curriculum.

For its part, the Humanities department does attempt to exert some influence into the adjuncts’ curricula, recommending that they assign four to seven papers each semester and use a recognized composition textbook (of their choosing). One prominent member of the department is editor of several nationally used composition textbooks, and so some adjuncts have spoken of using her book, if only to throw support her way. The department also distributes grading standards for papers to all Humanities faculty and adjuncts, but admits that there remains a serious problem with grade inflation. Mark
Davis, the adjunct supervisor, notes that students are getting A's and B's for what should be considered C- or D-level work. When adjuncts do implement the grading standards, Davis says he'll get eleven students coming to his office to complain about their grades. There are two additional concerns related to adjunct grading practices: first, adjuncts who do follow the standards or who grade harshly may expect to receive negative evaluations from their students (which could affect their job security); second, students who receive artificially high grades may be shocked later to fail the WPX in the sophomore year.

**The WPX Creates a Wag-the-Dog Culture of Remediation**

Since its inception and continuing on to today, between 30-40% of students fail the exam each year. This has resulted in an extensive, and costly, system for remediation of writing skills. If a student fails the exam, s/he has three primary choices: wait until next year and take the exam again, sign a contract in the Writing Center for weekly tutoring appointments, or enroll in the Writing Proficiency Equivalency Course. While many students do opt to try their luck the following year, this option is strenuously discouraged by faculty and staff. During the school year, only one to four students enroll in the pass/fail Writing Proficiency Equivalency Course. Most students instead report to the Writing Center, where their failed bluebooks are available for review with the Writing Center Director. The Director or the Assistant Director reads the student's bluebook, and recommends a plan for remediation. Most often, the student is asked to sign a contract with the Writing Center in which they agree to attend weekly appointments with a professional or student writing tutor, and complete weekly assigned essays. All told, if students pursue all of the various opportunities for remediation available to them in the
two years between first failure on the exam and scheduled graduation, Bill Martin estimates they have about nine opportunities to sit for the WPX or its equivalency exam (WPEE).

The amount of remediation a student receives is based upon the Writing Center Director’s assessment of the quality of their writing based on the bluebook sample: relatively strong writers might be assigned a student tutor (an upperclassman who has worked in the Writing Center for a while) and weekly appointments; weaker native English-speaking students attend weekly or biweekly appointments with professional staff; weaker ESL students are assigned weekly, biweekly, or tri-weekly appointments with professional ESL specialists; and students in their final year are assigned biweekly appointments with professional staff. It is noteworthy that the Writing Center Director’s initial assessment of a student’s bluebook and subsequent decision regarding allocation of tutoring resources parallels in many respects the grading process of the WPX itself. However, while he only assesses the merits of one timed writing sample, in placing the student he must also consider factors such as the students’ year in school, their language origin (and years of residency in the United States, if applicable), and the number of tutoring appointments available that semester. In a very real sense the placement of students with writing tutors is an act of triage. The cost of the tutoring is covered in the students’ tuition, but the cost to the University is high. Although many students reported being satisfied with the remediation they receive in the Writing Center, there were also frequent complaints about the workload required, or about the lack of academic credit. The benefit of completing the Writing Center contract, however, is that the students become eligible to take a Writing Proficiency Equivalency Exam (WPEE) at the end of
each semester. For most students, it is far too risky a gamble to wait to sit for the annual WPX, and so they have little choice but to sign up for a Writing Center contract.

Each semester the Writing Center accepts 70-115 students on writing contracts (see Appendix F), for a total of approximately 4400 weekly appointments per year. In fact, two-thirds of the Writing Center budget is devoted to preparing students to pass the writing proficiency exam. When the Writing Center was created in 1984, it occupied a small conference room. Today, the Writing Center is located in a large open space with half a dozen café tables, a conference table, offices for the Director, Assistant Director, and a shared one for adjuncts. A dozen computers are available for students’ use, and there are multiple file cabinets that house records and study materials. At any given time, 4-7 tutoring appointments may be taking place. The Writing Center is consistently over budget, and the source of that shortfall comes because of the needs to prepare students to take the WPX. In this way, the budgetary concerns end up pitting the Writing Center management against administration and occasionally the Humanities department in the fight over meager resources and vision for the direction the Writing Center’s activities should take.

Bill Martin, the chair of the WPX committee, said that he “98% agreed” with the criticism that a disproportionate amount of Writing Center resources were devoted to the exam, but felt that the solution was to have more resources directed to a larger Writing Center, instead of scrapping the exam (2004-03-16 FN). Weeks earlier, he suggested that if the Writing Center was concerned about its ability to remediate large numbers of students failing the exam, it should set a limit to the number of contract students it was willing to accommodate each year and accept them on a first-come, first-served basis.
Any students above that number would be the responsibility of their own departments to tutor. However, none of the departments (including the Humanities department) offer separate programs of dedicated writing tutoring to their students. Any writing tutoring that does take place outside of the Writing Center is typically in a conference between a faculty member and his/her student on a particular course assignment. In fact, from my experience, I would be shocked if a department ever did offer WPX preparatory sessions—to do so would be to infringe upon the roles and responsibilities of both the WPX committee and the Writing Center, and it would also represent a significant amount of work for the department in question. While Martin may have suggested that the Writing Center turn students away to force a department’s hand, in reality such an action would only serve to harm or hinder the student. Furthermore, the Writing Center staff are unlikely ever to turn away a student in clear need of remediation, because they treat remediation as their fiduciary duty.

Martin said he did not want a situation to develop in which the Writing Center and the WPX committee were bending over backwards to accommodate departments that weren’t doing their full duties to students (2004-02-24 FN). In this way, although the exam could be a point of leverage to institute widespread curricular change, it seems clear that it has never served that purpose. The forcing of the hand, as it were, would appear irrelevant unless the major programs felt invested in ensuring that their individual students fulfilled the requirement, such that they would ask their faculty to assist in developing students’ writing in the both the upper- and lower-levels of coursework. In order for this to happen, there would need to be a profound shift in the dominant views on literacy at USU. My data indicate that most faculty have a bifurcated understanding of
literacy; on the one hand, the majority would seem to believe that there exists an unproblematic and universal literacy that is (or should have been) transmitted during primary and secondary schooling, and on the other there are professional genres which students must be taught explicitly in higher education. Put differently, the orientation to “writing” is described in terms akin to that of the Study Skills model or as an autonomous skill, yet the teaching of genres such as lab reports and formularies is framed as an instance of Academic Socialization (Lea & Street, 2000). The WPX is intended to verify that each student is proficient in this base literacy, but the connection between this base and the other writing forms required as part of their academic and professional preparation is never articulated, and doing so is perceived as out of the purview of most USU faculty.

Barton and Hamilton hold that “literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships,” and by extension I would posit so do the norms and understanding of those practices and pedagogy (2000, p. 12). In fact, relations of power have plagued the exam. Although the Writing Center is the primary source of curricular support for the WPX, there are times when there is contention between the administration, the Writing Center, the Humanities department and/or the WPX Committee. One afternoon in April 2004, the new Director of the Writing Center, James Eberbert, approached me (as the senior tutor there) to get information about the protocol for dealing with student complaints in relation to the University chain of command. An ESL student who failed the exam complained to the Dean of Arts and Sciences, who referred her to speak to Dr. Eberbert. This angered both Bill Martin and the chair of the Humanities department, who indicated to Dr. Eberbert that they felt that the Dean was
subverting Bill Martin's authority as chair of the WPX committee. For his part, Dr.
Eberbert had unwittingly violated the unspoken culture in the Humanities department that
was to present a united front with respect to the exam. By reviewing the failed exam with
the student and explaining her failure on behalf of the committee, he had allowed the
break in the chain of authority to occur. Although Bill Martin would likely have referred
the student to the Writing Center for remediation in his consultation, it was important that
the administration acknowledge his authority (2004-04-15 FN). The incident ultimately
blew over without further discussion, probably in part because it was impossible to
determine if the Dean was acting in bad faith. Regardless, the small flare-up points to the
territoriality and possessiveness the Humanities department displays with respect to the
exam, particularly where concerning what it perceives to be a hostile administration.

The Future of the WPX Policy

The future of the WPX at this point remains uncertain. It does enjoy broad
support within certain segments of the faculty who see it as a necessary device to ensure
that students achieve certain standards of academic literacy before graduating and
pursuing their professional careers. A new member of the WPX Committee from the
Math department, Allison Kearn, spoke to me about the WPX:

Am I an advocate for it? Yes. I think it's extremely important to have
something in place like this. Do I want to get rid of this? No. I think that
it is so important to make sure that our kids have a minimum requirement
of writing skills before they leave here. I think that's extremely important.
And right now it is the only tool we have. Right now I think it's doing its
job. That's what I think. (AK, 2004-05-06 INT)
Her view is not uncommon. However, increases in the real numbers of students failing the exam (as a consequence of increases in the real numbers of students on campus) have turned the spotlight on the exam policy. Bill Martin argues that the exam’s design is not responsible for the students’ performance on it, and the school would be better served by tackling what is happening in admissions or in the classrooms. Implicit in this argument is the view that the exam itself is a neutral assessment, one that measures a universal and objective standard of academic literacy. As will be discussed in Chapter 6, whether or not what the exam tests should be acquired by all students is open to debate, but it is not neutral or a null genre. When I asked him about the possibility of the exam being abolished, he replied

> It’s not going to solve the problem of the students, who will not go into the Writing Center on a voluntary basis to deal with their problems. And so we will be graduating students who can barely speak English, who can’t write a sentence, pharmacists who don’t know the difference between ‘affection’ and ‘infection.’ And I don’t want to be overly dramatic about it, but that will happen if this goes away, and I think it’s likely that it will eventually. (BM, 2004-04-06 INT)

Some members of the administration, including the Academic Vice President Buford, have made no secret of their wish to see the exam removed. In this case, they would like to see writing assessment take place within the students’ courses, with a particular emphasis on outcome measures directly tied to the curriculum (2005-08-31 FN).

The University is currently reviewing the general education requirements again, and some faculty suspect that the ultimate goal is to return credit hours to the major curriculum through a focus on outcomes. This means that fewer courses would be required of students in the College of Arts and Sciences, as the general education benchmarks could be fulfilled within their own departments. One faculty member
thought the administration might be seeking to revamp the general education curriculum by “starting from ground zero,” concerning themselves with broad-brush “outcomes” that would have to be fulfilled rather than particular courses or disciplines. It would suggest a move to a more cafeteria-style method of course selection. In this way, the “ethics” or “history” outcomes might be satisfied in “History of Pharmacy” courses, and not in the Intellectual Heritage or History courses offered by the Humanities department. He wondered if perhaps he was paranoid, but explained that he had heard that Dean Vermeer said “We shouldn’t leave it to the experts,” meaning that history requirements need not only be determined by the historians, for example (RV, 2004-05-05 INT; MD, 2004-04-05 INT). If true, this would present a direct challenge to the notions of disciplinary authority that have previously been enjoyed by faculty in higher education, and it would speak to the commercialization and increased hybridity of knowledge (Blake, 1997; Blumner, 1999; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002; Russell & Foster, 2002; Street, 1997). A “History of Pharmacy” course, for example, could represent a terrific opportunity for WAC collaboration, if WAC were promoted. However, some USU faculty seem to suspect it more likely that a pharmacy professor would be recruited to facilitate the course, without a background or a fluency in the conventions that govern the discipline (and community of practice) of history. Similarly, the historians in the Humanities department do not have a background in pharmacy history, and would feel ill-prepared to offer such a course themselves. WAC has been criticized as a colonizing force upon disciplines, such that “after colleagues are converted in Writing Across the Curriculum, writing in their courses will function in the ways we want it to: as a mode of social behavior characteristic of a particular discourse community” (Farris, 1992, p. 113;
Haviland, Green, Shields, & Harper, 1999). In this case, and particularly given the Humanities department's minority role in the university and in students' major preparations, there seems to be a real fear that the department's contributions and expertise will eventually be subsumed by disciplinary outsiders.

Bill Martin described his view of the current situation:

I think it's a two-pronged attack in terms of trying to show or imply that there are a lot of problems with the exam, and at the same time say that there's something better to put in place. And that something better would be WAC. And I have no problem with the idea that a good, well-funded, well-staffed WAC program that had full support of the faculty would probably be a better way to improve students' writing skills. Just for beginners it would be something that would have to cover the entire 5 or 6 years that the students are here, so it's going be a much longer exposure. Instead of waiting, say, until the 3rd year and then failing the exam and having them get tutored in their 4th year. So, I think it would be a great idea. I don't think the administration has a clue what it would cost to run an effective WAC program. (BM, 2004-04-06 INT)

Various faculty and administrators agree that WAC is a more comprehensive program to ensure students' writing development than relying on a high-stakes exam, yet few believe that there is support for it across the faculty. One faculty member felt that people paid "lip service" to the idea of WAC, but that they would not be interested in it if they addressed all that would be involved in implementing the program. He was concerned that discussions of WAC were a convenient way to talk about getting rid of the writing proficiency exam, but the exam would not ultimately be replaced with anything of substance, and the University would return to graduating students who can't write (MD, 2004-04-05 INT). Another faculty member worried that the administration would simply scan existing course syllabi for instances of writing assignments and re-label them WAC courses. In this way, the University could get a "WAC" program for free, yet it wouldn't
address, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5, the fact that assigning writing is different from teaching writing (BM, 2004-04-06 INT).

The University has flirted with other forms of writing assessment, but none have had staying power. Portfolio assessment, popular with many instructors today, was attempted once for two years in the early 90s as an option for Writing Center contract students in lieu of the equivalency exam. This alternative assessment was abandoned as certain issues emerged—unsatisfactory essays were included within the portfolios, there was no way to tell how much time students spent on papers or how much assistance they received, and students with satisfactory portfolios still couldn’t produce acceptable work in the timed exam. USU has also battled rampant plagiarism on campus, and portfolio assessment would not be able to control for this easily. It is commonly known that the fraternities and sororities on campus have file cabinets with copies of exams and old papers that go back ten years, and these infractions are even more difficult to catch than papers cribbed from online sources (CF, 2004-05-25 INT). In addition, as enrollment numbers have skyrocketed at USU, it would have been impossible to assess the students’ portfolios in a reasonable amount of time, thus placing undue burden on the committee (2004-05-10 FN). Further, by examining previous policy decisions and institutional culture, one can extrapolate that portfolio assessment would be unlikely to be adopted for the simple reason of money—carrying out this sort of assessment would require immense professional and financial resources. Anecdotally I was told that one of the deans was looking into the possibility of a computer-graded writing exam, yet that remains unconfirmed (2004-05-28 FN). In the end, it seems doubtful that the WPX would be
replaced by an equivalent assessment, but instead the university would pursue other avenues of policy change.

While many aspects of the WPX are under criticism, the policy itself remains and is not under formal review. Any serious review of the WPX program would require the University to consider initiating dramatic policy and curriculum reforms. Dr. Vermeer, the Dean of Arts and Sciences observes,

I would say that in the academy, and faculty as a collective group, may be politically liberal in whatever ways but I think as a group they are very conservative in how we approach education. We don't change very rapidly. I think we're more like the Catholic Church—centuries is good, geological time. We tend to be wedded in how we do things. (RV, 2004-05-05 INT)

As it stands, the WPX has become part of the status quo. Despite the machinations of the past 20 years, the collective faculty is still unwilling to consider WAC, the administration is trying to avoid extending budgetary resources, and students are failing the WPX in much the same percentages.

Conclusion

We return this discussion of USU writing policy to where it began—in the mall. After twenty years, Bill Martin and other concerned faculty still meet on the benches between classes to discuss their students' lackluster performance on their assignments, the sense that the university doesn't take the "writing problem" seriously, and their hopes to witness lasting curricular change.

So long as the assessment of student writing is disconnected from the curriculum, the assessment and the students will be in jeopardy. However, for the faculty the exam
has often been used as a means to avoid interference into their own classrooms. As we have seen, when in the 1980s the professors were given the opportunity to address their students' preparation in terms of their own pedagogy, they opted to pursue an assessment strategy instead. There is no evidence from the data I’ve collected that, presented with the same decision today, the faculty would not make a similar decision. Meanwhile, because of the charter given to the Faculty Council, the administration is powerless over direct curriculum and assessment decisions, but it yields its influence by withholding monetary support or allocating it in particular ways. The faculty and administration seem to be at a stalemate with respect to moving toward the ultimate goal of improving student writing through curriculum reform instead of this high-stakes exam. Perhaps the only way for real change to happen is for the student body to organize in protest against the WPX. When posed with the question, Dean Vermeer responded, “It would force our hand” (RV, 2004-05-05 INT).
Any understanding of the policy of the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPX) is incomplete without a concomitant review of the relationship between the exam and the University's overarching curriculum. This chapter addresses the role of the faculty and the institution in the development of curriculum, the dominance of adjuncts in the pool of composition instructors, and the burgeoning role of the Writing Center in writing instruction on campus. These dimensions are tied to the literature on academic literacy, writing across the curriculum, language planning, and assessment.

Through interviews and informal discussions, I attempted to gain insights into the exam as filtered through accounts of the classroom. What emerged was a picture of a proficiency exam that was largely disconnected from the curriculum. I asked each of my interviewees, "What is the relationship between the WPX and the curriculum at USU"?

One individual, Academic Vice President Bonnie Buford, responded:

My understanding is that the Writing Proficiency [WPX] was designed as a gatekeeper to analyze whether students had developed appropriate writing skills to move into their professional years. I can't see much of any connection of the Writing Proficiency to anything in the curriculum, with the possible exception of some of the sections of English 101. And when we've had some external people look at the writing program and the Writing Proficiency there's been some concern also about that. Are we offering the students the appropriate education to be able to pass the Writing Proficiency and the answer has often been 'no,' we don't address it. So I perceive a real disconnect between the WPX and most of what else we do. (BB, 2004-05-05 INT)

Dr. Buford's words highlight the central problem of the exam—responsibility is placed on the students to pass it, while comparatively little responsibility is placed on instructors.
to prepare students for the exam. Some members of the administration, from Dr. Buford to Dr. Vermeer, the Dean of Arts and Sciences, have openly expressed their desire to eliminate the exam. However, they are just as open to admit that they have no institutional authority to alter the curriculum—that power rests exclusively with the faculty.

If the USU administration, or even the Faculty Council, did wish to alter an existing course’s curriculum to make it more aligned with the exam, they would be unable to do so. In fact, once a course is already in the system, the Faculty Council’s Curriculum Committee has no leverage, because the opportunity to withhold support for that course has already passed. The process of approving courses can only move in one direction, and this is perceived as an issue of academic freedom for faculty members who wish to retain control over the content and structure of their own courses (AK, 2004-05-06 INT). Even department chairs—the authority figures most likely to be able to wield influence over a faculty member’s decisions—seem reluctant to direct the content of an individual course in their program, unless perhaps it is a part of a larger sequence of content-area coursework. Furthermore, when a prospective course is up for review, the Curriculum Committee can make suggestions about the wording in the syllabus and can ask clarification questions, but it cannot direct course content. In fact, the Curriculum Committee’s sole source of power in this respect regards approving or disapproving new courses. This bureaucratic structure was surprising to me, because it appeared to leave little room to implement adaptations to the University vision.

When the situation is examined against larger trends in higher education toward a business model in which knowledge for knowledge’s sake is devalued against profession-
directed education, the faculty resistance to challenges to their autonomy and authority on
the classroom level is less surprising (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Griffin, 1997; Jacob
Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The system of checks and balances present within the
University bureaucracy allows the faculty to retain control over their individual curricula,
while administrators have leverage over them through allocations and other measures.
On the whole this system serves to protect students and faculty from being impacted by
radical shifts in their academic programs imposed by outsiders to the discipline, but its
dark side is revealed when institutional inertia prohibits innovation, as in the case of
developing a comprehensive USU approach to fostering students’ academic literacies.

I became concerned with exploring how and why USU courses came to be
structured as they were with respect to writing and, by extension, to the WPX. When I
asked the Academic Vice President, Bonnie Buford, how writing policy revisions were
implemented on the classroom level she said,

It has to be done by faculty. At this university the faculty control the
curriculum. My role is to be a nudge, to try to convey the value that I put
on our graduates being competent writers. To convey my concern that
we’re teaching the students the kind of writing they need to do. That we
look at the students’ needs and not necessarily focus on just faculty
desires. (BB, 2004-05-06 INT)

Thus, there is no policy handed down about how and why writing is taught in the
university (AK, 2004-05-06 INT). Instead, instructors are urged to incorporate certain
practices into their syllabi by administrators and other faculty⁴, and it could be said that

⁴ Students have the opportunity to provide formal feedback on a course and its curriculum in their end-of-
semester evaluations, yet it is unclear how great an impact these evaluations have on future curricula.
Anecdotally, some faculty have told me that they never look at their evaluations because they feel they are
broad curricular change occurs as a sort of democratic domino effect—enough faculty have to buy into a particular idea in order to exert social pressure on individuals about best practices. This process is described by Cooper (1989) as the diffusion of a communicative innovation, in which potential adopters pass through the stages of awareness, evaluation, proficiency, and usage.

As will be explored in this chapter, the ideology of many USU faculty is that 'writing' is the domain of the English teachers, and so the responsibility of instruction in writing forms should fall to them. As such, the diffusion of the communicative innovation of explicit and critical writing instruction across disciplines is hindered, because it contradicts the overarching perspective that writing instruction is the domain of English professors. “In practice,” Dr. Buford explains, “the Humanities department has been the seat of most of the delivery and development of most of the writing” (BB, 2004-05-06 INT). This is, however, a role about which the Humanities department is somewhat ambivalent.

The Humanities Department as Outsider

In many respects the Humanities department, both physically and philosophically, perceives itself as outside of the fold of the larger USU community. Its offices are located in a converted house on the periphery of the campus, and the department’s faculty travel to other buildings to conduct classes or participate in University life. Perhaps not a waste of time. In my own practice, I read each end-of-semester evaluation carefully and occasionally made decisions to remove particular readings from future syllabi on the basis of student complaint; however, I generally ignored those that suggested that I reduce the workload or become an easier grader. As it were, I suspect that student input has only a limited impact on the content of the curriculum of particular courses (and less so on the organization of a major program), and the degree of that impact is dependent on the sensibilities of the individual instructor.
surprisingly, the Humanities department often feels misunderstood and peripheral to the University's mission. Adjunct instructor Abigail Schwartz mused,

I think it would be interesting to have more cross communication between... Humanities and the Sciences so that that could really be articulated across the University. It seems to me that there's this clear division... My sense is that the science people and the administration don't value what the Humanities people are trying to do. I think that that creates another obstacle that the Humanities people have to overcome. (AS, 2004-06-02 INT)

Her words point to the perception common among Humanities faculty members that it is their responsibility to instill a high value on writing among students and faculty alike. The students are typically framed as having little intrinsic interest in developing their writing skills, and being particularly resentful of courses that they do not see as directly applicable to their professional lives (2004-04-19 FN). However, this disinterest may be based on a faulty understanding of their workplace demands, as health professionals are called upon to employ a variety of communication strategies due to their expanding interactions with care givers, patients, and their families, among others (Hobson & Lerner, 1999). Schwartz expressed that based on what she'd seen of students, "Clearly they value what they do in the sciences, but I don't know how much they value writing."

English faculty complain that students treat their courses as their last priority, coming to class unprepared but flush with excuses about competing demands from their science courses in the form of exams and long lab hours.
Adjunct Faculty and English 101

As described in Chapter 4, within USU the vast majority of English 101 and English 102 courses are taught by adjuncts—temporary part-time staff. For many adjuncts, teaching at USU is an opportunity to earn a little extra money on the side. Several are senior citizens retired from full-time work as faculty or teachers in other institutions, while others are young professionals still struggling to find full-time work as professors in a competitive market. For these adjuncts, teaching composition at USU was always framed as something to be done in the interim, and the position was never expected to lead to a career within USU. This reality, unsurprisingly, colored their understandings of and approaches to their role within the University. English adjuncts frequently felt conflicted about their experiences at USU. On the one hand, they found it rewarding to work with both the Humanities department and the students. On the other hand, they felt that the institution undervalued their contributions. An adjunct complained, “In a sense the department and the University is saying ‘we don’t value what you do very much because we’re using just adjuncts to teach these classes and we’re not paying you very well.’ And that sends a message as well. And especially Humanities adjuncts are being paid less than adjuncts in other departments” (AS, 2004-06-02 INT). This adjunct, who had come to the university from a career in the public schools, was shocked to discover the “ridiculous salaries of adjuncts” and asserted, “Everyone ignores the fact that there is this whole subset of workers who support the tenure system, the high salaries, the research grants, and it doesn’t really get addressed” (AS, 2004-06-02 INT).

5 Within this dissertation the terms “English 101,” “English Composition,” “Freshman English,” “Freshman Composition,” and “College Composition” are used interchangeably, as they are among the faculty, administrators, and students of USU.
As discussed in the literature review, with the increasing corporatization of the university this issue is unlikely to be resolved in the near future (Barnett, 1997; Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996; Griffin, 1997; Hobson & Lerner, 1999; Jacob & Hellstrom, 2000; Oblinger & Verville, 1998; Scott, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Usher, 1997).

At USU, English composition adjuncts teach the vast majority of introductory English courses, while full-time faculty concentrate their efforts on the Intellectual Heritage sequence and their pet electives in upper-level courses. The adjuncts form a sizeable, yet mostly voiceless and nameless professional workforce on the USU campus. Many students feel little personal connection with the instructors of their English 101 courses; a professor in the Sciences observed that although she had heard great things about certain sections of English from her advisees, when asked, the students could never remember their teacher’s name (AK, 2004-05-06 INT). The high turnover rate in this transient professional population likely contributes to this circumstance. Despite the Humanities department’s best intentions, supervision of the composition adjuncts is lax. Mark Davis, the Humanities professor to whom the supervisory duties ultimately fell, teaches a full course load and serves on several committees. He is active in University life, and maintains a close, even advocacy-oriented role with many USU students. He had agreed to supervise the adjuncts until the University was able to hire a Composition Director (a newly created position), because it was understood that the Director would then assume this supervisory role. In fact, he has been the de facto adjunct supervisor for over five years.
The Common Syllabus in English 101

All the Composition adjuncts I spoke with cited similar orientations to USU and what was to be expected of them. They said that they were given guidelines in terms of the minimum number of required papers, and they were given a range of readers (English Composition textbooks) to choose from. Several chose a reader that was written by a full-time member of the Humanities department as a means of throwing support her way, although they were not pressured or encouraged to do so. In addition, the adjuncts were told that they should assign a screening essay on the first day of class to determine if the students' placement was correct; in particular they should look for any outliers in terms of exceptionally high or low quality, or a predominance of ESL errors. Description of the WPX policy received scant attention in the informational hiring interview; the adjuncts typically only learned that the exam existed and that students took it in their second or third year. Professor Davis admitted to being frustrated that more feedback wasn’t given to adjuncts about the WPX after their hiring interview, and indicated that currently unless the adjuncts take the initiative to learn more about it themselves, they would possess very little information. Further, one adjunct reported that when he asked Bill Martin about getting more information about the WPX it never arrived, and he did not follow up and ask again (TG, 2004-04-29 FN).

Adjuncts related that they were not given many specific guidelines as to how to structure their courses, and so they were given room to teach the material according to their preference. In practice, formal feedback on adjunct syllabi appeared atypical unless the adjunct expressly requested it. Even Tony Grant, a recent law school graduate teaching English for the first time, said that he only talked with the department "some"
about his syllabus, but never received specific feedback on the final document (TG, 2004-04-29 FN). The lack of direction was more frustrating than freeing for some adjuncts, and two suggested that the adjuncts would be well-served if the university invited and paid adjuncts to attend symposia and meetings on campus.

The implication of this curricular leeway would seem to suggest that there is a roughly standard, common understanding about the content of English 101 courses within American universities. This assumption is problematic, as a cursory review of the English 101 syllabi at USU reveals great diversity in the instructors' idiosyncratic pedagogical styles which ranged from an emphasis on a process approach to one that solely evaluated product, from assigning fiction narratives to journal articles, from grammar-focused exercises to a focus on argument, among other distinctions. Yet out of this diversity, students are presumed or intended to master the instrumental and universal writing skills that would serve as a foundation for all other literacy events. Russell writes that there is

an implicit assumption that general-composition courses should teach students from any background to write correct and coherent expository prose for any purpose in any social or disciplinary context—and that a student's failure to do so was evidence of the need for more elementary training or remediation, as it came to be called. (1991/2002, p. 8)

Similarly, Crowley argues that “the academic essay” dominating Freshman English may be considered a mythical genre, explaining,

The idealist notion of “the academic essay” (a euphemism for the five-paragraph theme) assumes that rhetorical situations are similar or the same across a certain range of possible settings, that instructors can forecast the parameters of such settings, and that students can adequately meet the terms of any given discursive situation by applying a handy set of discursive formulae. (1998, p. 232)
While the concept of a universal literacy (or literacy foundation) appears impracticable or illusory upon dissection, this belief of an autonomous literacy is pervasive at USU and other institutions, and it underlies policies and practices that relegate writing instruction to particular delegated experts.

English Composition readers vary superficially in their organization, orientation, and sample readings, but all are typically structured to guide students methodically through process approaches to writing academic essays in various modes. These modes include narration, description, exemplification, definition, comparison/contrast, division/classification, process analysis, and argument/persuasion. The readers also instruct students in the use of effective thesis and topic sentences, different organization schema (chronological, thematic, etc.), appropriate tone and style, and so forth. As seen in the literature described above, for the superficial differences that exist between these readers, there is an implicit assumption that the outcomes for the students will be the same—they will gain a fluency in producing a variety of writing styles, and be able to present cogent arguments in response to diverse subject matter. This transmission of appropriate academic form appears to be seen as relatively unproblematic, and English teachers speak of presenting the materials in ways similar to those through which they “learned to write” or master these academic genre. In this way, language planning is influenced by the socialization of authorities (Cooper, 1989).

Again, the lack of extensive directions for adjuncts does itself indicate an ideology in which the content and structure of standard Freshman Composition courses, as taught in universities across the United States, is perceived as unproblematic and relatively standard. This interpretation helps reconcile the apparent disconnect between
the somewhat lackadaisical supervision the adjuncts receive when teaching English 101 and the dedication the Humanities faculty profess and practice in delivering their own course materials to students.

While the lack of commonality across adjunct syllabi is taken for granted as fact by USU faculty and administration alike, the Humanities adjunct supervisor, Mark Davis, told me that upon reviewing the adjunct syllabi, he found that they did generally fall under the guidelines set by the department. There were not major outliers in terms of number or type of assignments required, and found that adjuncts assigned similar amounts of readings. Nonetheless, he is working to standardize the courses by putting together a more narrow set of requirements and standards, so that there is even less disparity. He acknowledged he had been keeping things in a holding pattern, in anticipation that the University would hire a Writing Program Director. However, the search committee was unsuccessful and in 2005 the search was subsequently withdrawn. As a result, Davis intends to increase his involvement with adjuncts and impose more standardization by giving out more comprehensive guidelines, choosing one grammar handbook to be used by all faculty, and limiting the selection of readers from which the faculty can choose to three or four.

Assessment and Instruction Disjunct

Grade inflation in the English Composition sequence also concerns Davis, and he intends to address this situation in coming years. Although the Humanities department does broadly endorse a particular holistic grading rubric to evaluate student writing [see Appendix C], in practice it appears that adoption and use of the detailed standards is not
so broad. Davis found that in one English 101 class the instructor had given 24 A’s in a class of 29 students, and saw that A’s were liberally given in other adjuncts’ courses as well. He wants to stress that the average grade in the class should be a C, and that B’s and A’s should be reserved for above average and exemplary work (MD, 2005-07-11 FN). It is unlikely that 24 students in a single class were exemplary, but quite possibly the instructor misapplied or simply did not apply the rubric to their writing. The problem with grade inflation may more correctly reside in the students’ persisting mismeasure of their own abilities. When this lack of awareness is applied to the WPX two years later, many students are shocked to find that their writing performance was judged substandard in the wake of “above average” or “exemplary” performance just two years prior.

It has been suggested that it would be possible to get around the disconnect between the WPX and coursework by incorporating the exam as a capstone requirement within the English 101 course itself. Mary Ngu, like many other students at USU, said that she felt that passing English 101 should be sufficient to indicate a student’s writing proficiency. However, when I suggested that in that scenario students might be expected to pass the course with a B-minimum grade, she rejected that idea saying that it would invite grade inflation, presumably above and beyond the grade inflation already present. She said that if a student had a 2.8 it would be pretty easy to negotiate with the professor to pull the grade to a B (2004-04-13 FN). Mark Davis is similarly concerned. He worried that if the WPX were instituted as the capstone requirement of the English 101 course, the repercussions of failing the course along with the exam might be unduly harsh (especially considering how that failure might impact the students’ GPA or progression through their coursework). His view was seconded by several students I spoke with who
were receiving remediation in the Writing Center (ESL FG, 2004-05-20 INT).

Furthermore, multiple composition instructors expressed concern that the writing assessment utilized by USU in the WPX was different in both form and spirit from the process and understanding of writing that they worked to foster in their own classrooms. One new adjunct, a retired high school English teacher, was surprised to discover that a number of her students hadn’t been introduced to the writing process approach in high school. She described working with the students on pre-writing, drafting, revision and editing, following the recommendations of the textbook. As such, she was equally dismayed to learn that the WPX, like the SAT today, was going to direct students to “sit down, write what you can in this limited period of time, and also not use a computer.” In this way, she confessed, she “wasn’t sure how the exam connected to the structure of English 101” (AS, 2004-06-02 INT).

In Fall 2003, a former student of mine, Caroline Orchard, came into the Writing Center to sign a WPX contract. I was shocked to see her, because I remembered her as being one of the strongest writers in my English 101 course in Fall 2001. In particular, I remembered the creativity she evinced when she handed in a well-written essay in the form of a brochure, complete with copyright information from a fake publishing house. She had sought permission in advance to go off-genre on the assignment, and I allowed her to do so because she had demonstrated a clear understanding of genre conventions in earlier assignments (2003-09-10 FN). The incident was formative for me, because for the first time I experienced first-hand how a student could excel in an English 101 course and still come up short when faced with the constraints of the exam. If English 101 is accepted as the general education course in which students can best be prepared to write
in the manner required by the WPX, it is worrisome that some instructors find the task to be inauthentic.

Science Courses

Within the University, it is generally understood that students are expected to do little or no expository writing in their science-based general education requirements. While some students interpret this omission as evidence that writing is peripheral to their major and professional preparation, for the faculty the lack of writing assignments is generally presented as a logistical issue. Science faculty, particularly in the introductory courses, have every reason to refuse to assign writing under current conditions. Quite often, enrollment in these introductory courses exceeds 200 students, and the professor’s primary obligation is to prepare students with the content knowledge required to succeed in the subsequent courses in the sequence. Science faculty sometimes resent instructions to assign more writing in their classes because they feel that they have enough to do delivering the content for which that course exists, without trying to figure out how to design an effective and meaningful writing assignment. Biochemistry, for example, is a class in which two professors team-teach material to 250-270 students. The only writing students turn in, in a highly loose definition of ‘writing,’ is a daily, ungraded problem set used solely for attendance purposes⁶ (MB, 2004-05-14 INT). In such a lecture course, imposing additional writing exercises would likely represent an illogical strain on the professor’s time and energy. The professor would only be able to assign short writing assignments, if any, if she were to commit to allow the students opportunity for free

⁶ Acceptable answers on these problem sets include single words or numbers.
exposition on ideas. However, assigning writing is different from teaching writing; to require short answer essays on an assessment is a far cry from taking time out of lecture to explain appropriate genre conventions and to teach the disciplinary jargon or register. Moreover, many science professors would feel ill-equipped to do so, having learned the discourse themselves through years of apprenticeship rather than explicit instruction.

In the smaller lab sections, the students are taught to prepare lab reports according to specifications, but their long lab hours are spent running experiments. One science professor analogized lab reports to the fill-in-the-blank Mad-Libs that his daughter plays with, dismissing them as requiring little cognitive effort on the part of the students as writing genres. Lab reports tend to be short and technical, and the graders are most concerned with clarity when evaluating them. Thus, while an opportunity for creating more expansive writing assignments could exist in the laboratory sections of the introductory Biology and Chemistry courses, the professors are already occupied with ensuring that students require this more restricted writing competence.

A few faculty members outside of the Humanities and Social Sciences do attempt to incorporate more extensive written work into their general education curricula, but these efforts stand out as the exception to the rule. Alison Keam, a Math professor, assigns a 5-page, in-depth research paper in her introductory math classes, and the students prepare it in stages. Over the course of the semester, students are required to hand in their working bibliographies, the mathematical examples they intend to use, and finally the final draft at the end of March or the beginning of April. Still, she explained, she was never able to hand the papers back until the last day of class because for her grading was a challenge. She was committed to reading each of her students’ papers
carefully, and that took time.

In upper-level science courses, students do conduct some literature reviews with respect to drugs and conditions, and in fifth-year pharmacy they prepare some case studies. In practice, USU students do not compose extended pieces until they are perceived to have the fundamentals of content behind them. This is, of course, after they will have sat for the WPX. As such, the writing that they do as part of their major preparations has little impact on their ability to pass the WPX. Olivia Martinez, an ESL student in her fifth year, complained that she had failed the WPX multiple times, after earning top marks in her course writing assignments. She explained that in the previous year she had taken nine classes, and each class required a 15-page paper. She earned A’s on each of these long papers, and so she was shocked to fail the exam. She thought that it was clear that the graders of the exam were different professors, and wondered if, by failing her writing, the graders were suggesting that her other professors were “stupid” (OM, 2004-05-20 INT).

Some professors, including science professors, would prefer to pursue a more comprehensive WAC program, but have expressed that they become jaded by the lack of broad faculty support for such curricular innovation. Jessica Applebaum, a Pharmacy professor, resigned from the WPX Committee in protest after 10 years of service because she felt like no progress was being made toward building writing into the curriculum after Freshman Composition (JA, 2004-05-03 INT). However, in talking to other Pharmacy faculty about WAC over the years, she came to recognize that a lot of faculty felt uncomfortable with the task of grading writing, because they did not believe they were qualified. She found that “faculty, being reluctant to grade writing, were reluctant to
assign writing” (JA, 2004-05-03 INT). This reluctance’s origin, which is not commonly articulated at USU, casts the writing instruction divide in a more sympathetic light. Considering the competition and negotiations over turf between departments, the paucity of time the science faculty has to spend with each first- or second-year student, and the fact that “academics have diminished authority outside their own field,” it is not surprising that the burden of writing instruction largely falls on English instructors (Blake, 1997, p. 152).

Implementing WAC will require that faculty come together to articulate literacy practices and genre conventions unique to their disciplines, and to develop a model for literacy instruction within the University. In the book Writing and Identity, Ivanic expresses that “the value of studies of disciplinary discourse communities is not that they produce a taxonomy of their characteristics; but that they uncover in increasing degrees of subtlety and sophistication the social processes at work in such communities” (1998, p. 82). In this way, faculty would have the opportunity to build bridges not only between academic disciplines, but between the academy and the workplace. The academic literacies endorsed by the university may not ultimately match those required of professional discourse, despite a desire to socialize students into that discourse while in school. Berkenkotter and Huckin postulate,

It may be the case, for example, that writing-across-the-curriculum programs should try to sensitize faculty in the disciplines to the fact that, in contrast to the specialized rhetorics they routinely use in their professional writing, the genres of the undergraduate curricula are characterized by quite different textual features and conventions, given their classroom-based contexts and rhetorical functions. (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 13)

It is apparent that any comprehensive program to foster students’ writing development
will need to account for subtleties in context, practice, and power relationships, and to this end an academic literacies orientation is well suited for the task.

As seen, a tension within the University concerns the use of assigned writing. Several individuals emphatically expressed that “writing assignments are not the same as writing instruction.” Fifth-year Pharmacy student Olivia Martinez remarked that her teachers at USU “never” taught her how to write (OM, 2004-05-20 INT). She might not have been concerned about this because the high marks she received on class assignments indicated that she did not have any noteworthy writing issues. However, when she failed the WPX multiple times and was forced to seek remediation she became resentful that there was a disconnect between the standards of her instructors and the WPX assessors, and that she was not previously taught to bridge that gap.

Bill Martin noted that most instructors felt that they gave writing importance because they assigned it, although quite often the writing assigned by instructors is short-answer, graded primarily for content, and which does not require the student to develop a large plan of organization and argument structure. Quite often, in classes across disciplines, large writing assignments are primarily given at the end of the semester. In this way, there is little room for feedback that might push the student further in future writing assignments. Because students often do not even collect their final papers, many professors have opted for an economy of effort—they read the paper, offer cursory comments, and assign a grade. It is only if students request it that these faculty return to the paper and write more extensive feedback. In these respects, the treatment of writing in many courses is paralleled by the practices surrounding the WPX.

Thus, the formal writing program at USU is hampered by a reliance on little-
supervised adjuncts in early English courses, by the expectation that writing instruction falls primarily under the purview of those same courses, and by limited writing instruction or assignment in content-centered classes in the students’ first and second years of study. As such, for roughly a quarter of USU students, continuing instruction and maintenance of writing skills is concentrated in the remedial efforts of the University’s Writing Center.

Writing Center

Traditionally, writing centers occupy a role of curricular support for University students and faculty. Students seek out tutors in the writing center to receive feedback on outlines and drafts of course assignments, and the emphasis is on scaffolding students’ writing development rather than overtly independent instruction (Broder, 1990). The Writing Center at USU is unique when compared to writing centers at other universities because of its primary role in remediation of students preparing for the WPX. Each semester, roughly 100 students attend weekly or biweekly tutoring appointments with professional staff in preparation for the WPX. The situation is frustrating for Writing Center leadership. The Director of the Writing Center, Dr. Eberbert, hoped that more English 101 instructors would offer their students extra credit for coming for help on a paper, so that the Writing Center could finally function as “a writing center,” and not just the “Writing Proficiency Center” (2004-10-12 FN).

Currently, approximately two-thirds of Writing Center resources go to WPX contracts annually. Dr. Eberbert reports that the total adjunct budget for professional tutors is $40,000/year, but the costs for the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 budgets exceeded
the allocation by 30% each year bringing the expenditures to $52,000. In total, $34,700 was spent on tutors for the WPX writing contract students in each of the past two years (JE, 2006-03-15 Correspondence). Dr. Eberbert has complained to the administration that he will be unable to stay within budgetary caps so long as the Writing Center continued to work with WPX contract students. He estimates that the University could save 50% in remediation costs if it replaced individual contracts in the Writing Center with a pass/fail WPX remediation course (2005-04-25 FN).

The Writing Center’s auxiliary instructional role as a consequence of the WPX policy may also serve to alter ideologies about the acquisition and/or maintenance of academic literacies at USU. One Writing Center professional tutor critiqued the emphasis on remediation for the WPX as being detrimental to students’ perception of writing. When they passed the exam their contracts were fulfilled, and it might be the last time they set foot in the Writing Center. A problem with this orientation, she observed, is that students tend to come to believe that once they pass the exam they’re done, and they know all there is to know about writing (2005-04-18 FN). This perspective is anathema to the concept of writing development endorsed by Writing Center faculty and staff.

However, while many students eschew the Writing Center once they have passed the exam, a significant percentage do return for help on course assignments, whether it is because they have become more aware of their writing challenges, they appreciate the boost that the Writing Center’s input can give on their course performance, or they have built a good working relationship with individual members of the staff (or some combination of the three) (ESL FG, 2004-05-20 INT). In my own experience as a
professional tutor at the Writing Center, I had many students return to consult with me on assignments and even on University policies after passing the WPX. A couple students have even contacted me personally to seek help on writing they have had to produce after graduation, including application essays, cover letters, and business plans. In these cases, it is clear that the remediation they pursued for the sake of passing the WPX also served to instill stronger literacy practices in the students as lifelong learners.

*English as a Second Language Students*

All of this is complicated by the reality that the USU student body is approximately one-third ESL. The true number of ESL students on campus is impossible to measure, but a significant proportion of the Asian students are relatively recent immigrants to the United States. One Indian student joked that among his friends they called it the University of Shahs and Patels, because of the unusually high prevalence of Indian students on campus (2004-05-14 FN). The large numbers of ESL students sometimes strain the University's resources, because many require significant interventions in order to bring their language skills up to the level required by their coursework and the WPX.

Meanwhile, ESL students frequently express frustration about the WPX policy and their requirements for remediation. They feel that their status as non-native speakers of English puts them at a disadvantage academically, in comparison to native English speakers who only have to worry about passing content. Danny Luong, an ESL student from Vietnam who spent over three years on contract in the Writing Center before passing, said he felt that the University should lower the standards for passing the WPX.
when a student is not a native English speaker (DL, 2004-05-20 INT). Another ESL
student, Veronica Fields, noted that she had only been in the United States for nine years
and so it was unreasonable to expect her to produce error-free writing (2005-04-07 FN).

While the ESL students tended to fixate on grammar as the source of their writing
difficulties, they also struggled to master new rhetorical strategies and organization
schema across multiple disciplines. Canagarajah observes, “To be academically literate
in English, second language students have to acquire not only certain linguistic skills but
also the preferred values, discourse conventions, and knowledge content of the academy”
(1999, p. 147). Quite often, the norms and subtle distinctions associated with particular
literacy events are never clearly articulated by the professor, and successful models may
not be distributed either (Soter, 1992). Occasionally, there also are questions of
intercultural gaps or misunderstandings, as many ESL students are relatively new
immigrants to the United States. Student Hussein Ali laughingly recounted being
befuddled by an exam prompt exploring Internet dating, as he had never been exposed to
American dating customs (HA, 2004-05-20 INT). Hoa Vuong, a Vietnamese ESL
student, explained to me that part of her difficulty producing writing for the WPX was the
expectation to come up with three points to back up her thesis. Her father, she explained,
would never give any reasons to back up his belief when he asked her to do something.
According to her, in her culture, no one was ever expected to back up their opinions with
support (HV 2004-03-12 FN). Not without irony, she wasn’t able to further back up this
assertion.

Many ESL students report being highly successful in their college coursework,
and see the WPX as an unusual and unfair burden. However, as will be illustrated, the
writing difficulties of many of these students are severe. I asked Ripa Patel, an Indian student of mine in the Writing Center to write a practice essay about the WPX requirement, using a one-sentence prompt: “Do you think USU should continue to use the WPX?” This is the essay she produced, transcribed exactly as she wrote it on notepaper:

Writing is very critical. There are many types of writing such as argumentive, research, experimental, etc. UUS has the Writing Proficiency Exam as a requirement for graduation since 1984. This exam is for 2 hours in every spring year for students to take who are half way through their academic program. These essays are argumentative which tests the students’ ability to form logical arguments for or against an issue. However, in past few years there has been some issues and debates about usefulness and fairness of the exam among the student population. Some have been suggesting to eliminate the WPE. On the other hand, some are strongly advocating form this exam. I believe, that WPE should be eliminate b/c the topics are unfair and not enough time. Futhermore, students who are eligible to take this exam have passed their Freshmen courses which requires writing. Lastly, this kind of writing is not going to help students in their career.

The first reason for not having WPE as a requirement for graduation at USU is b/c the topics design are unfair and not enough time to [unintelligible] an essay. Many of the topics given in WPE are really unfamiliar; therefore students have a difficult time to give examples and come up with ideas in 2 hours. For example, topic on donating organs which is very unfamiliar topic for me. Therefore, to come up with critical or argumentive reasoning is very difficult for me. If person is not familiar with the topic then writing an essay on that topic can be very difficult. 

Futermore, 2 hrs are not enough to come up with good writing with less grammatical mistakes. Therefore, WPE should not be a requirement.

The second reason the WPE should not be administered by USU is b/c many students who are eligible to take this exam have passed Freshmen courses which have English courses such as English composition I, II, and Literature which requires writing. These courses have argumentive, research, critical reasoning, and all other types of writing. For example, I have passed all this classes with A or B grade but I have not passed my writing Proficiency yet. Eventhough I have been now practings to write 2 essays every week, I have failed atleast 4 to 6 trails. Opponents belive that this is a good measure of a student’s ability to think critically about issue. However, I think that it is very frustrating, depressing, and one of the ways for USU to maintain its high standards.

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The third reason the WPE should not be administered by USU is b/c the exam is not going to help students in their career. However, USU’s administers believe that by WPE students will be help in their professional career. I believe that professional writing in science or pharmacy related areas is very different from the WP’s argumentative essays. For example, I am Pharmacology/Toxicology major and I read many journals and research articles, these writings are very different. Furthermore, one of our Professors related to the field agrees with us the WPE is not going to help us in professional career. The reason WPE is not going to help is b/c professional writing is very different and with experimental datas and not argumentative essay. Therefore, I believe that WPE should not be requirement for graduation from USU.

In conclusion, USU should not have WPE as a requirement for graduation b/c it is not a good measure of student’s ability to think critically about issue with a limited time period. Writing on the topics to whom students are unfamiliar is very unfair to students. Student population opposing WPE also believes that after passing the Freshman English courses which requires writing, taking WPE should not be required. Furthermore, this type of argumentative essay writing is not going to help students in their professional career either and The reason is that the professional writing is very different and experimental writing. Therefore, USU should not have WPE as a requirement for graduation. (RP 2004-04-05 SD)
Ripa's essay exhibits a strong understanding of the genre, and structurally it is quite solid. She opens her essay with a strong statement (line 1), and immediately moves to provide initial evidence for that statement (lines 1-2). She introduces the topic with relevant and specific background information (lines 2-6), and she takes the additional rhetorical step of presenting the controversy and her position in brief (lines 7-14). Additionally, she links her sentences with appropriate transitional phrases. While her presentation of the controversy is weak in content, her introduction demonstrates familiarity with the discourse conventions of a five-paragraph theme.

Ripa has further organized the arguments in her essay well, generally keeping the focus of each paragraph on the topic described in the topic sentence. In the first body paragraph (lines 15-24), she immediately and succinctly in her topic sentence presents the two-part argument that the topics are unfair and there is not enough time given to write on them (lines 15-17). She cites the specific example of essay questions on organ donation (line 19) as evidence of an unfamiliar topic creating challenges for student writers. She closes the paragraph in line 24 by reiterating her thesis, a strategy I had encouraged in our tutoring sessions as a means of maintaining a cohesive argument.

In her essay Ripa demonstrates awareness of the genre conventions, adeptness with transitions, and she provides relevant and appropriate supporting evidence. Her thesis is clear, and she summarizes the essay neatly in her conclusion. Nonetheless, this essay is a mess. She struggles with mechanical issues like spelling errors, capitalization and punctuation; and she drops articles, morphemes, and other lexical items. When she writes, "However, I think that it is very frustrating, depressing, and one of the ways for
USU to maintain its high standards” at the conclusion of the third paragraph (lines 34-35), she mixes her support, including both negative and positive aspects of the exam. It’s a jarring and ineffective, if not also true, statement.

Ripa’s writing level and issues are typical among the weaker ESL students on contract in the Writing Center. Referring to the holistic rubric used to score the WPX (Appendix C), I would rate her essay in the 3-range in the first three categories addressing organization and support. However, the sentence-level issues are squarely in the 1- and 2-ranges. This essay would not be sufficient to fulfill the WPX requirement. I had been hired by the Writing Center to serve as a rainmaker of sorts when remediating critically weak ESL cases7, yet cases such as Ripa’s would continue to frustrate me.

Ripa told me she strongly believed everything she wrote in the essay. I had worked with her for two years before she produced this, and I’d seen her writing progress incrementally in her assigned essays. I had come to strongly suspect that Ripa had mild, undiagnosed dyslexia in addition to being a second language learner, and so I worked to discover what the university would do in a case such as hers8. If she were diagnosed as dyslexic she would be exempted from the WPX requirement; however, she would have to pay to be tested out of her own pocket. When I suggested that she might pursue this avenue she became acutely uncomfortable, and she never did seek independent testing.

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7 My students’ pass rate of approximately 66% each semester was the highest of any Writing Center employee working with ESL students. ESL students on contract in the Writing Center failed the WPX and the WPEE at high but widely varying numbers; on a given exam, the ESL fail rate might fall at 60-90%.
8 Notice, for example, the reversed letters in “UUS” and “desgin” found in lines 2 and 16. This is by no means a sure indicator of dyslexia, but the similar and persistent pattern of such errors in all of her handwritten writing samples suggest that she would be a candidate for evaluation by a specialist in learning differences.
Purposes

Despite the reality that writing instruction is often peripheral to the training students receive in their science and health professions classes, all of the instructors I interviewed, across disciplines, indicated that writing would be required of students throughout their professional lives. Several individuals, administrators and faculty alike, indicated that many graduates only work in retail pharmacy for a few years, but ultimately pursue other avenues in industry because they want to be challenged. To that end, the function of writing as a means to foster critical thinking skills is foregrounded. Kurt Graham, Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs, explained that advancements in modern science occurred so rapidly that the knowledge students acquire in their major coursework is out of date when they graduate; thus, teaching the science content was secondary to teaching critical thinking (KG, 2004-05-20 INT). In the context of literacy practices, this means that instructors have to be wary of adopting a skills-training approach to composition instruction, as

This approach can lead students to the conclusion that so long as they apply these conventions and styles, like some kind of template, they will be fulfilling the expectations of their readers. What is ignored is the need for students not simply to ‘know’ the conventions but rather begin to understand how these styles and conventions can be used to represent and construct students’ own meanings. (English, 1999, p. 18)

The University wants to guide the students to be prepared for eventualities of their future careers, including writing reports. They note that research scientists, physical therapists, and occupational therapists all have to write reports as part of their professional duties. Math professor Alison Kearn does not feel that students who come to the sciences, the health professions, or to USU do so because they fear writing or they do not want to
write; instead, she feels that they come because they love science, or desire the financial rewards that a pharmacy career would offer. She explained,

> Anybody who knows anything about science knows that you’re gonna have to write. It’s a given. If you’re on the research end, you’ll still need to write. And a lot of people who come into the sciences, especially chemistry and biology, they’ve already been through science papers. They have to write papers, they have to write scientific papers, so they have an understanding that they need to be able to write. (AK, 2004-05-06 INT)

She acknowledged that she herself had believed the myth that when she got out of college she would never have to write again, but laughed and said “Boy, was I wrong! I always have to write: I have to write reports, I have to write emails...if you don’t have proper grammar skills....” She noted that for some people, writing was a disciplinary concern that belonged to English, “even though writing is in everyday life—you’re constantly writing” (AK, 2004-05-06 INT).

What is the purpose of writing in a university education? Repeatedly, what emerged was a focus on writing as a tool to be used in professional contexts. As Vice President Buford queried, “Are the communication skills that our faculty believe our students need the same communication skills that employers or graduate schools are looking for in our graduates”? She felt that there needed to be a balance between faculty and employer viewpoints and noted, “If faculty members...and those faculty members who think most about writing are clearly from the Humanities...if the only model they have is the model of how they learned to write by analyzing literature, that may not be an appropriate model for our students.” She continued, “Most jobs are not looking for the ability to analyze literature” (BB, 2004-05-06 INT). In this case, the socialization of the authorities charged with teaching writing is different from that of the administration, the
science faculty, and industry professionals (Cooper, 1989).

This tension regarding the purposes of writing and the skills needing to be fostered cannot be resolved simply. Dean Vermeer observed that the place where writing can be practiced with the least difficulty in the students’ first two years is in the Humanities sequence, and he expressed a desire to see more extensive writing take place from English Composition through Intellectual Heritage, remarking that only certain sections of Introduction to Literature and Intellectual Heritage are writing-focused (RV, 2004-05-05 INT). The lack of continuity in the students’ writing experiences, he felt, had negative consequences when they came to sit for the WPX at the end of their sophomore year. His concern was that students were not asked to repeat and practice their writing through their coursework, and used the subject of math as an analogy. He explained that students’ math skills were supported and scaffolded through multiple math courses, and then later while making calculations in chemistry and pharmacy, for instance. He wished to see students’ writing development supported in a similar fashion.

One primary theme emerged with regards to the University’s curricular approach to education. It recognized the institution’s competing emphases on training as opposed to education of students that is probably a relic of the University’s historic focus on preparing students to enter the pharmaceutical industry. This split tends to provoke faculty ire. One faculty member, discussing the educational culture of USU remarked, “If you are going to call yourself a University, you better act like it. Don’t act like a trade school”! (CF, 2004-05-25 INT). Another popular faculty member in the Sciences provocatively stated, “There’s not a lot of support for education on this campus, let alone writing.” When probed to expand on that statement, she confessed that the orientation
was so geared merely toward professional preparation, toward utilitarian coursework in lieu of a well-rounded education, that she was “a little scared” and that it “freaked her out.” Furthermore, she was convinced that this attitude extended beyond the student body (AK, 2004-05-06 INT). In many respects, this view paralleled individuals’ construction of USU as either a university or a professional school, and this is a tension that has not yet been resolved. Dr. Meyerson restructured the University in the 1980s to incorporate a more liberal academic foundation, and to move away from its nearly exclusive emphasis on Pharmacy, yet for many students and some faculty the belief persists that the appropriate orientation and mission of the University lies in preparing students for a smooth transition to the workforce to the exclusion of all else.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the structural factors that inhibit broad-based curricular reform at USU. First, University feedback on or approval of an individual course’s curriculum can only take place when it is proposed; once a course is in the system, only the faculty member and his/her department chair have the ability to enact reforms. Next, the coupling of institutional budget shortfalls with a growing undergraduate population has resulted in the necessity of hiring large numbers of adjuncts to teach composition courses. While adjuncts generally demonstrate dedication and professionalism in their teaching, the lax supervision and the high turnover rates borne of their low pay and outsider status make it difficult for the University to develop a more rigorous or comprehensive writing program.

Furthermore, resistance on the part of full-time faculty in both the Sciences and
the Humanities to incorporate more writing instruction (if not writing assignments, more generally) has resulted in the Writing Center playing a central role in the writing preparation of roughly one quarter of USU students. In the twenty years since the Writing Center was created, it has experienced exponential growth in the physical plant, the professionalism of its staff, and in its responsibility within the University community. The Writing Center devotes a third of its resources to assisting students with course assignments, and fully two-thirds to remediating them for the WPX.

Unlike most high-stakes exams in other academic institutions, which hold material rewards or, perhaps more correctly, material threats for students and teachers, the central problem of the WPX is that it is exclusively the students who are held accountable for their performance, and there rarely is discussion of curriculum failure. This is, of course, a function of the policies and practices associated with the exam. English 101 is the course in which students produce writing most parallel to that assessed on the exam, yet the records of students who pass or fail the exam are not, and have never been, associated with their performance in English 101 or with the professors who instructed them in that course. Taking a broader view, statistics of the pass and fail rates according to major program are not assessed. As such, there is no concomitant evaluation of instructors, courses, or major curriculum associated with students' performance on the WPX. Further, because the exam is an internal University instrument, the University itself is not threatened by high rates of students failing. Unless a critical mass of students were to experience delayed graduation and protest as a consequence of failing the WPX, the University as a whole would not face social stigma or external sanctions as a result of the WPX policy.
CHAPTER SIX: Assessment

The Writing Proficiency Examination (WPX) at Urban Science University (USU) plays a central role in the maintenance and evaluation of local writing standards. While detached from the USU general curriculum, it is the primary means for the University to assess and ensure students’ writing proficiency. Because it is a graduation requirement, it is also a high-stakes exam. As was discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, the WPX was created and is currently maintained through the complex interaction and competing and cooperative goals of faculty, students, and administrators; policy and curriculum; and academia and industry. It is worth taking time to examine the WPX itself, from the tangible artifacts to the social effects.

Exam design

The WPX is an annual pass/fail essay examination offered each March to students in their second year or above. It is a two-hour timed exam, closed book, and handwritten. Students do not need to register to sit for the exam. Through mass emails and posted signs, eligible students are instructed to report to exam rooms assigned based on their last names, to prevent delays as a result of overcrowding in particular rooms or a shortage of materials. Examinees must bring their student ID and a pencil, and they have the option of bringing a dictionary (bilingual or English) and/or thesaurus, but not a grammar book. When the students enter their assigned lecture hall, they are free to sit in any available seat and they disperse according to their preference. In each room, two to
four proctors distribute bluebooks, instructions, and exam prompts, and field last-minute questions before commencing with the exam (Appendix A).

When the exam start time arrives and the room quiets, one proctor reads aloud the instructions and directs the students to begin writing. The proctor reads aloud the same instructions printed on the students' exam prompt:

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Develop your argument in a carefully organized essay of approximately 350 words. You have approximately two hours to complete the essay. Try to allow time to proofread so you can check sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation. Do not be afraid to cross out, use arrows to move paragraphs, or make other changes; however, your writing must be legible. You may use any of the ideas mentioned in the question, but avoid repeating the *exact* language of the question. You must argue a specific position; don't simply explain the various aspects of the problem. (2003 WPX prompt)

The exam hall is silent, as students read over the prompt and begin to compose their essays. At this point, the proctors remain observant at the periphery of the room, watchful for the raised hands of students needing assistance, and ready to collect completed exam materials as the students finish. Once the student has handed her bluebook over to the proctor, she leaves the room.

As indicated by the instructions, the students are expected to take a position on an issue and to prepare a persuasive essay in response. While students are not explicitly directed to produce a five-paragraph essay, in practice this is the format that dominates student academic writing, and particularly in assessment contexts (Crowley, 1998; Nesi, Sharpling, & Ganobcsik-Williams, 2004; Russell & Foster, 2002; Street, 1994a, to name a few). Describing the genre, Lillis notes, "This essay is of a very particular kind, with an emphasis on logical argument with a rigid notion of textual and semantic unity" (2003, p. 205). The exam prompts themselves sometimes implicitly suggest such an
organizational strategy. Question A of the 2003 WPX (Appendix A) provides the students with three supporting points against the use the anti-plagiarism service Turnitin.com, and three in favor of it. Thus, the examiners are indirectly suggesting that three points are required to develop the argument sufficiently. Question B does not provide explicit arguments for the students to use, but it does provide relevant examples from which students are expected to extrapolate their own arguments. Because of the example set in Question A, and because of the dominance of the five-paragraph theme in writing assessment, it is logical for students to presume that three supporting points would be necessary for successful development of an essay in response to Question B.

To ensure fairness, the exam bluebooks are submitted anonymously, and they are identified only by student number. Each exam is scored holistically by two members of the WPX Committee, working independently, and they evaluate the merits of each bluebook using a standard rubric that addresses both content and form (Appendix B). The same rubric has been in use since the exam’s inception. The graders assign the bluebooks scores ranging from 1-4: 1 and 2 are failing scores, while 3 and 4 are passing ones. If the two graders disagree whether a bluebook should pass or fail, a third reader is brought in to break the stalemate. Occasionally, some readers elect to add a plus or a minus to the assigned score if they are on the fence about the bluebook’s rating. If one grader writes a 2+ or a 3- on the back of a bluebook, the exam is also submitted to a third reader.

The graders meet in the Writing Center to score the exams, where snacks are provided by Bill Martin and paid for by him or the Humanities department. There the bluebooks are laid out in stacks—Writing Center contract students’ exams are pulled and
graded first, so that they may be notified quickly whether they have fulfilled the terms of their contract; all other bluebooks are distributed randomly. Many graders do choose to read exams within the Writing Center during the first couple days of scoring, but later take stacks of 10-20 bluebooks to their offices to review on their own schedule. When they have graded these bluebooks, they return them to the Writing Center and receive another set.

The reading season lasts approximately three weeks each April; during that time, WPX Committee members will score from 50-150 essays each. Over the course of the grading process, Bill Martin will review most of the bluebooks, if only to confirm that the other graders are adhering to the standards set forth by the rubric and grading appropriately. If, for example, he notices that a reader has failed or passed an unusually high percentage of bluebooks, he will approach him/her to advise of the discrepancy. Finally, when the readers are finished with the complete lot, the scores are checked, rechecked, and the students’ results are posted outside of the Writing Center. Next to the scores is a notice informing students to come to the Writing Center to discuss failed exams and remediation options.

**Examination of 2003 Bluebooks**

The five-paragraph theme is a dominant genre in American schooling, such that it is often perceived to be value neutral and universal. However, students’ uneven performance when producing the genre can indicate the socially situated nature of the task that extends beyond superficial grammatical features and the defining organizational schema. Question A of the 2003 WPX asked students to evaluate whether USU should
subscribe to an internet-based service that would screen all student writing samples for evidence of plagiarism (Appendix A). The prompt offers suggestions for supporting arguments in favor of and/or against subscription to the service, and directs students to choose one position to defend. Luna et al., investigating teacher testing, observed that a "seemingly open-ended prompt actually calls for a rigidly structured response in the form of a traditional five-paragraph essay" (p. 283).

To illustrate this point, I include paragraphs taken from two student exams below, both arguing against utilizing the Turnitin.com service because of the effect it would have on relations between students and faculty [see also Appendix D, which is a transcription of five randomly selected student bluebooks from 2003—two failing exams, two passing exams that went to a third reader, and one high passing exam]. In the exam prompt, the supporting argument is phased, "Those who oppose such services argue that they create an atmosphere of distrust between faculty and students. By using this service, the instructor is assuming that all students are guilty of plagiarism."

The two students' treatments of that suggestion follow:

**SAMPLE 5 - PASS**
Score: 3, 3+
By informing students that such a process will take place each and every time a paper is handed in for grading, this will create a rather uncomfortable environment. Obviously, students who are guilty of plagiarism will not be pleased with the new method that is being enforced. On the other hand, an innocent student may feel violated. In a way, this procedure implies that one is guilty until proven innocent. For example, a particular student was unsure of the citations he had made in his essay. He did not intentionally perform an act of plagiarism, but now he must fear

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9 The bluebook samples are transcribed exactly as they were written. Sections that a student crossed through are similarly marked in type. The notation T[ ] is used to identify sections of text that were added to the handwritten sample through use of carets or arrows.

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future prosecution. The barrier of trust between instructor and student breaks, once such a program goes into effect.

This excerpt from a passing essay demonstrates a confident writer’s voice and a fluid style (Ivanic, 1998). Idiomatic expressions such as “rather uncomfortable,” “will not be pleased,” and “guilty until proven innocent” jump off the page as a wink between writer and reader. The choice of language suggests the student’s wry humor, and through its very employ suggests membership (or at least apprenticeship) in the eventual reader’s community of practice (Christie & Unsworth, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). The writer is plainly well acquainted with the five-paragraph theme, and s/he structures this paragraph adeptly. While the example is not particularly well developed, the thrust of the student’s intention can be inferred. The paragraph closes with a return to the thesis, but it is an allusion and not a repetition.

SAMPLE 1 – FAIL
Score: 2, 2
First, USU should not subscribe to a service similar to Turnitin.com where students submit their papers through this service rather than directly to professor because there is a distrust between professors and students. Professors who do not believe their students capability to write their own papers will effect the students emotionally. Students feel their is no sense of continuing education because professors always suspicion of their students plagiarizing. It makes the students also feel they are incapable of writing their own papers in their own words. For example, a girl at Temple University dropped out of school because professors do not believe that she could write a perfect essay. She used many difficult terminologies to express her feeling thoughts. So, professors asked other professors from the English Department to double check her paper. It is so sad just because some students who write a perfect paper without or spelling mistakes professors assume they plagiarize. Therefore, I USU should not subscribe service like Turnitin.com because the service only do more harm to students than good.
Third, when professors have their students directly submit their papers to a service like Turnitin.com, they assume that their students are guilty of plagiarism. Professors believe that all students copy others' work page by page and word by word. Plagiarizing someone's work is not a serious crime that students committed. Sometimes students use other people's work to guide them in writing the paper. For example, in literature class, I read many poems and I have difficulty interpreting the poems. I have to write two-page essays on Shakespeare poems that we read in class. Therefore, I looked at the internet and read how others approached in writing the essay critiquing Shakespeare's poem. I might use one or two ideas from the original writers just to direct me on how to approach Shakespeare's poems. I paraphrased the sentence and made it my own. Therefore, if it taking one or two lines sentences from the original writers and use it on your own words, students should not be guilty of plagiarism. Therefore, I USU should not consider the service because not all students plagiarized.

To the practiced reader, this second excerpt immediately reveals a number of issues in form and content that would indicate a less proficient writer. In contrast to the excerpt from the passing exam, this failing essay addresses the issue of trust across two (of three) body paragraphs, violating a convention of the genre, which typically calls for three distinct supporting arguments. This violation is more apparent because the like paragraphs are separated by the second supporting point, and because the use of "First" and "Third" in the opening of each paragraph suggests that there are three main points. In addition, there are also frequent errors in orthography, grammar, and punctuation. Although none impede comprehension, these errors are distracting to the reader. A superficial glance at the bluebook shows that the writer made frequent corrections to the essay as s/he wrote. Words and phrases are crossed out and inserted, making the text.
more difficult to read. While this might be thought to bias a reader against an exam, my casual review of the passing 2003 bluebooks for this bias did not suggest this was the case. Because most students compose essays on a computer, a medium that allows for easy revision, such markings were common.

However, this is not the work of a writer unfamiliar with the conventions of the five-paragraph theme. The passages indicate that the writer has some knowledge of the genre, and s/he employs certain standard rhetorical strategies, such as including a clear topic sentence at the front of each paragraph and a sentence reinforcing the point at the conclusion. The student provides additional explanation of his/her topic sentence in subsequent lines, and includes a detailed example in each paragraph. Nonetheless, the passages feel choppy instead of fluid, and it is as though the student were following a template for the construction of a five-paragraph theme instead of treating the essay as a persuasive conversation with the reader.

A close reading of the excerpt also suggests that the student may be ESL, as when the student writes, “she used many difficult terminologies to express her thoughts.” A native English speaker would normally use “terminology” in the singular, as a mass/uncountable noun. The plural form of the word is most typically used by academics, and the very fact of the writer’s sitting for the exam and the other features in the text indicate that is not the case here. In the next excerpted paragraph the student says s/he has “difficulty interpreted the poems,” and that s/he must “write two pages essay paper on Shakespeare.” Taken alone, these grammatical errors would be unlikely to result in failure on the exam, but when added to the other issues in the bluebook it is clear this is a failing bluebook.
Finally, the student’s example supporting his/her third point is an affront to most instructors, as s/he describes acts of soft plagiarism as being innocent. With this argument, the student unwittingly signals that s/he is not a proficient academic writer in the United States context, because uncited use of another’s ideas is anathema. Although the graders who delivered the failing grades did not provide commentary on this essay, it is reasonable to assume that this student’s essay betrayed a need for further writing instruction from the university.

Perceptions of the Rubric and the Grading Process

The WPX Committee meets a few times each year before the March exam to discuss grading standards and grading procedures. Bill Martin convenes these training sessions to ensure that graders are on the same page. He distributes copies of the rubric and bluebooks from prior years and the committee goes through them one by one, critiquing them, offering possible scores, and then receiving information about the scores that these past exams ultimately received. In this way, Bill Martin strives to ensure validity in the exam’s scoring procedures and to offer support to new and old committee members. However, the sessions also reveal a lot of disagreement in terms of what areas get priority from individual members of the group (MD, 2005-07-11 FN). They further underscore the reality that ultimately Bill Martin’s word stands as to whether or not an exam should pass or fail, because he has selected the scored exams that will serve as the committee’s standards when assessing future bluebooks.

Students and faculty alike tended to appreciate the grading policies surrounding the WPX for the efforts towards achieving objectivity. One science professor
unconnected to the exam felt that the exam’s grading structure was as equitable as could be done, given the nature of the task (MB, 2004-05-14 INT). His opinion was echoed by student Mary Ngu, who appreciated that the exam was scored anonymously by multiple people. She added that this further made it difficult to argue that the scoring was biased, because the graders needed to achieve consensus about an unknown student’s work (MN, 2004-04-13 FN). The scoring by multiple readers was also a comfort to the graders, who knew that it was not their decision alone to fail a student with all the consequences that a failure might entail. New grader Allison Keam, of the Math Department, described feeling reassured that there would be another reader evaluating each bluebook, because she sometimes privately wondered if she could judge students’ writing well when coming from a math background. She said, “A lot of what helped was knowing I wasn’t the only read. Now that hurt on the third reads. When you’re the third reader, you’re making the decision and you know it. When I picked up a third read I was very aware of what was going to happen” (AK, 2004-05-06 INT).

As a new member of the WPX Committee, Keam had initially wondered whether or not she was qualified to judge students’ writing on the WPX. This was surprising to me, as she is one of the few Math faculty members who assign significant writing in her courses. She explained that it gave her comfort to know that the exam would be evaluated by at least two graders, because in that case she wasn’t the only one making the decision whether the students’ writing was sufficient or not. Her primary concern was that she would be too harsh or that she would expect too much of the essays, because she feels that she tends to be hard on her students in her classes. In the end, during the WPX
training sessions she was relieved to see that her first instinct about whether a bluebook should pass or fail had been right each time (AK, 2004-05-06 INT).

However, not all members of the University were convinced that efforts towards objectivity in grading were ultimately successful. USU President Gabardi was concerned that “writing proficiency is subjective,” and wondered whether if the panel of graders repeated their efforts five times over five days the results would be the same. Nonetheless, he also felt that the definition of proficiency was becoming more and more adjudicated in the mind of the University because, as he described it, people need to be able to communicate crisply and clearly (PG, 2004-07-13 INT). The implication of his words was that proficiency was an objective concept, but people were subjective in identifying it; this incongruity is indicative of his ambivalence towards the exam. Sanderson, exploring the practices of assessors, describes the tension between objectivity and subjectivity in both outcomes and the means of assessment as follows:

The absolute character of the judgment is clearly essential, given that the ultimate objective of the examination process is to render a complex human communication into a number: as the number can be seen indisputably as having an objective relationship with all the other numbers, so, logically, must the acts of judgment be seen as having an equally objective relationship with each other, and with acts of judgment which have taken place in other years. (1997, p. 84)

An assessment tool’s acceptance in a community of practice is contingent upon belief in the objectivity of the results and methods of an assessment tool.

Concern about the subjectivity of graders is not limited to administrators and select faculty at USU. Some students expressed the belief that the WPX graders approached each bluebook with preconceived ideas about what strong writing looked like. Malik Smith, a student, struggled to explain his view that the WPX was biased:
It seems like the system is set up for certain areas in order to pass... even the exam itself has a certain way of grading styles... so when it comes to professors grading these things, I feel it's not fair because, you know, they're sticking to certain ideas. Obviously, there's no perfect writers, I guarantee you, even those who passed. (MS 2004-05-20 INT)

For him, passing the WPX was a challenge because he did not know how to please the assessors, who he felt were evaluating his writing against a specific and unarticulated paragon of form. He accepts that one does not need to be a "perfect writer" in order to pass the exam, and yet he implies that only certain types of imperfections in writing are accepted by graders. He did not know the "certain ideas" that graders expected to see in passing bluebooks, and so he did not know how to write his essays to account for them. Furthermore, his repeated failures on the exam indicated that the graders did not approve of his writing choices, yet he was in the dark about what he was doing right. For him, the experience of the exam was one of frustration.

Graders are instructed to refrain from writing in the margins of the bluebooks so as not to influence subsequent graders, and the rear jackets of the bluebooks typically only carry the graders' initials and the numeric score they assigned. However, this practice was a source of anxiety for exam takers, who wished for explicit feedback on the nature of their failure on the exam. Some students voiced anger that the bluebooks were returned without commentary from the graders, contributing to the feeling that grading occurs within a black box. In our interview, Sultana Bashir, a fifth-year Pharmacy student, shook with frustration as she complained,

A lot of time you get this back and you have no comments on them and you wonder, did the reader even read it? ...Or just looked at it, the first sentence, "Agh, forget that, I'm not reading it," and let it go. It's just like, what is the point, what is the purpose? At least we'll know which paragraph, or which thesis, you didn't do good, or you are doing well, or
what they're looking for. You don’t get no comment back. You just get a comment back: Pass/Fail. “Oh, you failed.” Well, why did I fail, can you tell me? “No.” That doesn’t come by. And no matter how hard you try, they just don’t tell you, because there is no comment written on it. And that would be very important, at least for me, to know where I’m missing the point. I know I’m getting that from my teacher, but at the same I’m not getting that from whoever’s grading me, whoever this ghost person is. (SB, 2004-05-20 INT)

Sultana’s desire for feedback as a learner here conflicts with the WPX Committee’s need for expediency and increased objectivity in grading exams. While she does receive feedback from her Writing Center tutor on the nature of the problems with her failing bluebooks, ultimately she wants this information directly from the people she perceives as (and who are, legitimately) responsible for her failure on the exam.

The holistic rubric utilized by the graders allows for scores ranging from 1-4, but in practice the vast majority of bluebooks receive a 2 or a 3. In this situation, scores of 1 or 4 are used as a means of highlighting the bluebooks that are unusually noteworthy. I asked Dr. Eberbert if he ever gave scores of 1 or 4 on the exams he graded, and he said yes, but rarely. He considered the exam to be primarily a pass/fail affair, and used the 1-score to mark exams written by students who are “barely literate,” and the 4 for “stellar” exams (JE, 2003-09-16 FN). In the 2003 passing bluebooks, I only found one exam that received a 4 grade. Thus, while the exam’s 1-4 scale could only very generously be described as diagnostic, the practice of assigning 2’s or 3’s as simple passes or fails eliminates that option. Thus, students who receive either a passing or a failing grade have little sense of the quality of their writing based upon their performance on the exam.

In fact, even students on contract in the Writing Center (who had received explicit coaching to prepare for the exam) expressed confusion and frustration at the WPX
grading scale. In a focus group I held with ESL students taking the summer WPX Preparatory Course, three students explained that they did not understand the process of grading the WPX, and one threw her hands up and said, “I have no clue” (ESL FG, 2004-05-20). They elaborated that they did not understand the distinction between a score of ‘2’ or a score of ‘3,’ and they wanted to know how far the scores were apart from each other. Malik Smith wondered if a ‘2’ score meant that you totally couldn’t write, or that you could barely write, or what (MS, 2004-05-20 INT). These students wished that the grading scale was more extensive than 4 score options, and one expressed a preference for grading in a form to which they could relate, like a percent grade.

The Use of the Rubric

The extent to which the holistic rubric was used to guide a grader’s decision making varied, although all graders were familiar with the rubric. The WPX Committee members talk about using the holistic rubric to varying degrees. One said he used it extensively the first day he scored exams, but never touched it after that. For many graders, the decision to pass or fail an exam rested with the answer to a single question: “Would this student be an embarrassment to USU as one of its graduates”? (2003-09-16 FN; 2005-04-07 FN). One grader thought that this question originated from Bill Martin, but that is unconfirmed. Regardless, the theme of not wishing to graduate embarrassments to the University re-emerged repeatedly, now not merely as an origin of the exam policy, but a key factor in the process of evaluating student writing. In this way, environment factors were found to be significant in some graders’ decision making (Cooper, 1989).
Frequently, graders spoke of other, personal standards for judging bluebooks. Some individuals asked themselves whether or not the students’ writing indicated that they would benefit from a semester-long contract in the Writing Center, or if the issues were minor enough to be overlooked. When I worked as a relief grader in the Spring of 2004, I struggled with what it meant to be objective and fair when determining the adequacy of a particular bluebook. Truthfully, I found myself wishing to fail a majority of the bluebooks I read, and this concerned me. I realized that if the essays had been submitted to me in my English 101 courses, I would have come down hard on the students in grading. When I discussed my concerns with my colleagues at the Writing Center, one professional tutor for whom I held particular respect said that I should pass the bluebooks that I would give a grade of D or above in my classroom. That made matters easier for me, and my pass rate began resembling the average (failing approximately 40% of the exams). In the end I stopped grading after reading about 30 bluebooks, because I felt too conflicted by the process as a tutor and a researcher to continue.

While the exam is designed to ensure greater accuracy through the consensus of two readers, there was some debate about the impact that a first reader’s decision would have on subsequent readers (2004-04-13 FN). Bill Martin had not studied the impact of grader order, although he did concede it would be possible for it to be influential. One grader, Allison Keam, expressed that she did not look at the scores given by a first reader because she did not want to be influenced by those scores when she made her decision. She advised, “Go with your gut instinct, because if you sit around and question.... You can’t worry if it’s a 2 or a 3. You just put the number down. And that’s what I had to do.
I didn't want to dwell" (AK, 2004-05-06 INT). For Keam and others, the rubric served as a general guide, but decisions to pass or fail an exam were made in some measure both quickly and in an idiosyncratic fashion.

It was unclear how well a bluebook needed to fit into the rubric in order to pass, particularly if it demonstrated excellence in certain categories and inadequacy in others. While all graders described high familiarity with the rubric's contents, only some indicated that they kept the rubric out for reference as they graded each and every bluebook. As described, many graders resorted to single deal-breaker questions to assess a student's writing proficiency. Thus, it is possible to conclude that, in accordance with students' suspicions, some graders placed greater value on certain areas assessed in the rubric than others.

Members of the WPX Committee sometimes confessed their own beliefs about other committee members' grading standards to faculty and Writing Center staff. Among the USU figures most connected to the grading of exams or remediation of students, anecdotal and incomplete theories emerged about the predilections of particular graders. Some were privately considered easy, harsh, uneven, or consistently fair. The evidence driving these theories was often scanty, but still they persisted (2003-04-28 FN). One committee member, for example, indicated that he thought that poor handwriting was a factor in the decision-making processes of some of the other graders (2003-08-26 FN). Another felt that the Writing Center leadership held different standards for contract students than for the general student body, because they submitted comparatively weak essays from contract students to the committee hoping for a pass, but awarded a higher percentage of failing grades than the rest of the committee. The Assistant Director of the

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Writing Center, for example, has been known to have a fail rate around 70% in some years (2004-03-16 FN).

When I was reviewing the failed exam of a fourth-year Pharmacy student from Moscow, I found that the organization of her essay was seriously flawed, but noticed that the Director of the Writing Center, Dr. Eberbert, had only made a list of grammar problems as commentary on her bluebook (2003-08-27 FN). Writing Center employees cited one former committee member as being unusually harsh; Dr. Eberbert once argued with him about an exam he’d failed, claiming that the grader had done so purely because of a spelling mistake (2003-09-16 FN). Mark Davis, reflecting upon his own practice felt that he was more likely to attend to sentence-level errors than other graders which was surprising to hear because at the same time the Writing Center staff believe him to be sympathetic to ESL mistakes (MD, 2005-07-11 FN). Glenda King described her own grading emphasis to be on “a logical progression of ideas” in their own words, and not simply regurgitating the examples given in the explanatory materials (GK, 2004-05-04 INT).

Some members of the Humanities department felt that graders with English backgrounds were more objective, and that graders from other departments often relied upon intuitions and biases rather than solid English training when making their decisions. A former grader from the Math department, who also coached USU’s baseball team, was once derogatorily referred to as “that baseball guy” when he handed down an unpopular grading decision. The implication was that this professor was out of his depth when evaluating writing (2003-09-16 FN). Bill Martin, in contrast, said that committee members from outside of the Humanities often make better graders because they are
more willing to stick to the holistic rubric and less wedded to their own concepts of good writing. Martin cited the frequent writing and publishing that the baseball coach described above did in his spare time, and mentioned that in particular a Chemistry professor on the committee was an example of a very good, consistent grader (BM, 2004-03-16 FN).

Myths and Misconceptions

For USU students, the factors involved in the design and grading of the WPX appear to take place in a black box (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Not surprisingly, many myths circulate. Students have told me that they prepared for the exam by reading the news. For the 2003 WPX, the students were convinced that one of the questions was sure to be about the war in Iraq (which was dominating the news at the time), and so students crammed by reading all the news articles they could about the war. This was, as I explained to student Jennifer Barker, a misguided approach because no WPX question would ever require a nuanced understanding of geopolitical history and affairs (JB, 2003-12-05 FN). However, the myth had a seed of truth; indeed Bill Martin does look to recent news stories when developing potential WPX prompts.

Sometimes the simple logistics of sitting for the exam were a source of confusion for students. Greta Vole, former Director of the Writing Center, said that she had heard that students believed that sitting for the exam in the wrong room would result in automatic failure (students take the exam in different classrooms depending on the first letter of their last name) (GV, 2004-04-13 INT). A transfer student did not take the WPX as scheduled because he was under the impression that you had to register for the exam in
advance; he admitted that he had received an information sheet on the WPX in his Introduction to Literature course explaining the procedures, but he did not read it carefully. This absence meant that he would need to sign a contract with the Writing Center the following Fall, his senior year, because to wait until March to sit for the exam would be folly in light of the potential graduation delay (RP 2004-05-14 FN).

Students have learned that of the two WPX questions given each year, one is generally lengthier than the other. This has, in turn, spawned a new rumor: the shorter question always has a lower pass rate (VF 2005-04-07 FN). This rumor is a student invention, as no statistics have ever been compiled comparing the pass rates on particular questions over the years. Nonetheless, the rumor suggests that students believe that it is safer to respond to the prompt that offers possible arguments rather than risking developing arguments on one’s own.

One of my new and particularly resistant Writing Center contract students, Svetlana Sergeyev, asked me to include a note with her equivalency exam bluebook for the graders. I probed her for clarification, and she explained that one of her friends had told her that her preceptor just needed to include a note with her booklet indicating that this writing represented the best of her writing abilities and significant improvement. In this way, an ESL writing contract student could expect to pass. I told her that I had never written such a note and that to do so would be unethical, and further explained that the closest we ever came to such behavior with a grader was to tell him/her jokingly to “be nice” because these bluebooks were written by our students. Still, I stressed, we did not expect a grader to change his/her standards on our recommendation (2004-03-11 FN). Nonetheless, even a mock instruction like “be nice to them” stresses the local goal of
passing, and not the broader goal of ensuring writing proficiency. By extension, for a grader to be “mean” would be to fail the student and force them to receive more tutoring to improve their writing.

Another of my students joked that she would write her own note on the interior flap of her equivalency exam bluebook that read, “Dear WPX Committee: I have failed this exam 5 times and each time I have been told that I was this close to passing....” We had a good laugh imagining what the response to such a note would be, although when she submitted her bluebook later that month it was free from messages (VF, 2005-04-07 FN).

**Issues with the Format**

A professional tutor in the Writing Center, Tina Papadapolous, described the exam as “unnatural” because students no longer produce essays in bluebooks in their daily lives; instead, they use computers where they can easily delete, go back, and move sections. The writing process has changed, she stressed, and that is a serious problem for the success of the exam (TP, 2004-04-05 FN). Her concerns were echoed by an English Composition adjunct, Abigail Schwartz, who felt the exam was an artificial task because it asked students to write without using a computer and within a limited amount of time. This was in sharp contrast to the work she asked of her students in English 101. She thought the assessment of students’ writing could be strengthened by allowing them more time or to work on a computer, because then the readers would get a better sense of what students were capable of (AS, 2004-06-02 INT).
Dean Vermeer has spoken to several disgruntled students about the WPX, who complained that they were evaluated unfairly. At the same time, he explains, they do not understand the basis of their failure because there are no comments written in the bluebooks. In 2004, he had heard complaints from two students about failing the WPX. He described hearing complaints more frequently from students about the grades they received in their courses, but theorized this was because the grading standards were more easily understood. In the case of the WPX, the grading standards are mysterious to the students (RV, 2004-05-05 INT). When an irate student came to the Writing Center to discuss his failed exam, Dr. Eberbert told him that there was no way to determine exactly why he failed the WPX because graders do not give that information (2003-11-01 FN). Dr. Eberbert once described the exam policy as mimicking a “don’t ask, don’t tell” culture (JE, 2005-04-25 FN). An alumnus from the class of 1989 explained that the students in her cohort “knew” that their grades depended on “who you got reading your paper” (TB, 2005-09-19 FN). As such, students rely upon folk theories about how the exam is designed and what the graders are looking for in order to beat the system.

There have been two known cases of cheating on the WPX. In the first case, graders were bewildered by a bluebook found in the stacks that did not appear to answer either question provided in the prompt. The essay was a lovely short piece about being a student, well written and completely off topic. At first the committee wondered if the student had been handed an inappropriate prompt by a proctor accidentally, but when they looked up the student’s ID number they discovered that it was Loi Nguyen, a profoundly weak ESL student on contract in the Writing Center. Loi had once been my student, and he remains the weakest student I have ever worked with at USU—he had
trouble understanding simple spoken English. I remembered an incident that had happened a year earlier, in which I asked him why a boy might be upset to lose to a girl in a high school wrestling match and he responded “fight, kill, guns.” Upon questioning by the WPX committee about his mysterious bluebook, Nguyen explained that he knew that one question would treat an education topic and so he went online, found an essay on education, and memorized it. When he sat for the exam, he produced the entire essay flawlessly from memory.

In the second known cheating incident, another ESL student on contract in the Writing Center convinced a friend to sit for the exam for him. This Indian student, Suresh Shah, asked another Indian male to use his ID and take the exam for him; they were correct in assuming that the proctors would not look too carefully at the students’ IDs. Unfortunately for Suresh, his friend failed the exam. Later, when the Assistant Director of the Writing Center reviewed the bluebook she realized at once that this was not Suresh’s handwriting because he had been her tutee. If the friend had passed the exam, however, no one would have ever known about the deception.

Both cheating incidents speak to the desperation (and the resourcefulness) of students with respect to the high stakes of this exam. Loi ultimately failed out of USU because of poor performance in his other classes, and Suresh had his graduation delayed.

**Impact on ESL Students**

A concern of many faculty and administrators is that the WPX may be particularly (if not inordinately) burdensome for ESL students. USU President Gabardi noted that increases in “diversity” presented a new “obstacle” for the University in the
1990s; Bill Martin said the Asian student population had tripled by the late 1990s (BM, 2004-04-06 INT). Whereas the WPX was initially instituted to address students’ difficulties in composition, defined as a set of clear benchmarks along the lines of the Study Skills model, ESL students introduced problems of interpretation of the definition of proficiency (Lea & Street, 2000). He felt that the definition of proficiency had changed as a result in the rising numbers of immigrant students from a wide variety of nations, and this begged the question, “Is the WPX valid in these circumstances”? (PG, 2004-07-13 INT). Soter writes,

> If we argue that cultural diversity is a resource then we must also face the challenge of redefining the notion of community in academic contexts. For again, in arguing that cultural diversity is a resource, we implicitly accept the corollary that a resource is something to be drawn upon, to be utilized, to be mined, as it were. (1992, p. 54)

How to redesign the format or the scoring of the WPX to account for the diversity of the student body is a sticky question, one made more problematic in light of the view that the WPX is intended to assess students’ writing proficiency against a minimum standard for a universal literacy. In this case, the policymakers would need to first identify methods of incorporating students’ diverse backgrounds into the design of the exam, and then reconsider the minimum characteristics of effective writing. Addressing student diversity in assessment does not necessarily involve lowering expectations, but my data suggest that faculty would first draw this conclusion. Regardless of their initial inclinations, the question remains how to balance the needs of the growing ESL community and the integrity of writing standards.

> While ESL students are presumed to fail at similar rates to native English speakers, those who do fail generally take a much longer time to remediate in the Writing
Tina Papadapolous, an ESL specialist in the Writing Center, summarizes the problem:

ESL students do not lack in communication skills because they can do it in their own language. Their challenge is to take that strong first language of theirs and manipulate it, twist it, do whatever it is that they need to do to it, and reproduce it in English, and this is very difficult. Not only that, it becomes more difficult when you have students who are over the age of twenty-five because they’ve already fossilized their English. I mean, you could tell them a hundred times a particular grammar rule but... they’ll know it, they may even recognize it, but they’re still going to make the same mistake because they’re so stuck in that kind of mistake. (TM, 2004-04-14 INT)

She took particular issue with the two-hour time frame of the exam, because ESL students would require additional minutes to process the question, reflect upon it, write a response, and revise their response. The WPX, for this reason, is very difficult and frustrating for them. Ultimately, she concludes, “there has to be a little bit of leeway given to the ESL students” (TM, 2004-04-14 INT). The ESL students concur. Veronica Fields, a student from the Ukraine, felt that ESL students should be graded by a different standard; she moved to the United States nine years earlier without knowing a word of English and so argued that she was at a disadvantage compared with native speakers (VF, 2005-04-07 FN).

In 2004, a Vietnamese student named Danny Luong experienced a delayed graduation as a result of his many failures on the WPX. He had been receiving remediation in the Writing Center for over three years, coming in for appointments three or four times a week. He had been hired to work in a pharmacy in California, but he was forced to turn down the job offer, sublet an apartment from a friend in Philadelphia and take the summer WPX equivalency course offered in the Writing Center (DL 2004-05-20 164).
His circumstance was gut wrenching for the staff of the Writing Center, because we recognized how hard he had worked to improve his English over the years and how little progress he had made towards his goal.

Thus, the situation is also difficult for graders at times. Mark Davis, a faculty member with close ties to many ESL students, came in the Writing Center one afternoon during WPX grading season and announced that he was going to take a break from reading contact students’ bluebooks because they tore him up inside. He’d failed exactly half of the bluebooks he submitted that day (MD, 2005-03-30 FN). The pass rate for ESL writing contract students on the 2003 March WPX was 12%; on the 2003 April equivalency exams, the figure had risen to approximately 63% (2003-05-06 FN). This rise may be accounted for, in part, by the additional hour ESL students receive when taking the equivalency, and by the fact that students are given the option of writing their essays on a computer, if free computers are available. Many ESL students struggle to demonstrate proficiency within the confines of the March exam.

Writing Center staff, working from the pet theories they’ve developed about particular graders over the years, sometimes attempt to put their thumb on the scale, if you will, by directing certain bluebooks to graders whom they suspect will be more sympathetic to their students. Essays deemed particularly strong might go to tougher graders, whereas essays with ESL errors might be directed to Mark Davis because as an ESL instructor he is more experienced in evaluating such mistakes (2003-12-12 FN). This is a practice the Writing Center is not proud of, to be sure, but it is one born of care for the students and crisper understanding of the battles that individual students face in order to pass the exam. Thus, while the Writing Center itself is the home of nearly all
remediation of WPX students and the source of much advocacy for increased writing requirements, the faculty and staff engage in quiet but active resistance to the WPX policy on behalf of individual students.

ESL students pose a problem for the University because it is unable to determine their true numbers or the effects that being non-native speakers have on their progression through coursework. Dr. Buford notes,

> I think we have not been as good as we might be at truly identifying ESL students. The English placement exam has been of some help putting ESL students into ESL courses, and there seems to be some general correlation between their placement in those courses and the performance on the Writing Proficiency, but we don’t have I don’t think a really clear understanding of what our ESL students need. (BB, 2004-05-06 INT)

Because students do not indicate their language background in their admissions applications\(^\text{10}\), the identification and support of ESL students is based upon recognition of common ESL errors by Humanities faculty members. Thus, it is possible for students to slip through the cracks. The complexity of their language backgrounds, whether they’ve been in the United States for ten years, or studying English as a Foreign Language abroad their whole lives, is little understood (RV, 2004-05-05 INT).

With respect to the WPX, the ESL students become demoralized by repeated failures after semesters of intensive tutoring and practices. ESL Specialist Tina Papadopolous advocates altering the exam requirement to appease ESL students because “they may not know the language, but they know the color of money and they are paying hand over fist to be here” (TM, 2004-04-14 INT). She stresses that such students require leniency, because the pressure and rejection born of repeated failures on the WPX will

\(^{10}\)Only international applicants are required to submit TOEFL scores.
affect their other work as well. As has been seen, the WPX has an enormous, uprooting impact on the academic (and personal) lives of some ESL students; nonetheless, taken as a whole group, ESL students fail the exam at rates on par with native English speakers. In real numbers, more native English-speaking students fail the exam than ESL students (RV, 2004-05-05 INT). It begs the question, should the exam be changed to account for the percentage of ESL students with moderate to severe writing issues, or does it function to ensure that these students get the writing help that they need before they emerge from USU as graduates?

**Writing Proficiency and the WPX Requirement**

Ultimately, the analysis of the exam boils down to the simple question: Does the WPX do what it was intended to do? Are students better writers as a result of being subjected to this requirement? (RV, 2004-05-05 INT). Academic Vice President Bonnie Buford asks,

> If we’re left with just the Writing Proficiency, it comes back to the question of are we looking at the right proficiencies? And the proficiencies were, by default, were designed pretty much by the English faculty. Are those the proficiencies that as a University we ought to be teaching or testing? We haven’t answered that. (BB, 2004-05-06 INT)

Dr. Buford, in this statement and others, criticizes the WPX as being centered around priorities dictated by the Humanities department. However, her voice is unique on campus in this respect. More often, the problem is framed in terms of the appropriateness of the exam in assessing students’ writing as a global concept, separated from disciplinary concerns. The exam was designed to assess students’ proficiency in writing, and the degree to which this notion is unproblematic depends upon whom you ask. I
asked Dr. Gabardi, the president of USU, what he perceived the goal of the WPX to be, and he responded:

There is no goal...of a writing proficiency exam. It’s just that—it’s proficiency. You either have it or you don’t. You can’t be partially pregnant; you can’t be almost sterile. So you’re either proficient or you’re not. The question is, there is no goal, it’s hitting a benchmark. (PG, 2004-07-13 INT)

For Dr. Gabardi, the concept of proficiency is universal, and the skills demonstrated by a proficient writer cross disciplines and genres. He is not without criticism of the exam, or of the ability of graders to assess proficiency, but for him there is an objective measure of writing proficiency that need only be tapped into by the appropriate assessment tool. He does not assert the variety of skills demonstrated in the successful production of diverse genres, but I suspect that for him proficiency or academic literacy is autonomous, comprised as a set of discrete and transferable skills (Street, 1994a).

English adjunct Abigail Schwartz expressed mixed feelings about the notion of proficiency, noting

In some ways, yes, you should be able to do a basic piece of writing. On the other hand, there are so many kinds of writing that people do today. These kids do a lot of scientific writing. Kids use email all the time. And they use various kinds of shorthand for writing. And as I said a lot of writing is done on computers, so you can spell-check and revise your writing and change it as you go along. So I’m not sure if that holds up as a model anymore. (AS, 2004-06-02 INT)

Schwartz’s central issue with the exam was that the rigid and austere format did not incorporate the socially situated nature of writing, and so ignored the writing processes as they are authentically taught by instructors and practiced by students. For her and others, a better assessment would approximate the conditions under which students would be expected to write in their daily lives.
In a lighthearted exchange, I asked WPX Committee member Allison Keam what the purpose of the WPX was and she responded, “To make sure that people can at least write a halfway decent essay”? I laughed, and bantered “not a fully decent essay”? “No,” she countered, “I don’t know that I could write a fully decent essay in two hours” (AK, 2004-05-06 INT). Thus, the issue was not the utility or necessity of writing assessment but the form that such writing assessment took in relation to the curriculum and the impact that it had on students’ eventual writing development. Some faculty like Biochemistry professor Matthew Barney appreciated the effect of the requirement on encouraging development of students’ writing skills, although they were unsure if the exam was necessarily the best means of doing so. The elephant in the room in such conversations is that the better means might be instituting sweeping curricular reforms like WAC, a policy which the faculty were hesitant to endorse.

In the end, does the exam serve to ensure that the writing skills of USU students and graduates meet the standards set forth by the faculty? This is a matter of debate. English professor Mark Davis felt that if the WPX committee were to truly evaluate the WPX essays in terms of competence in college-level writing, they should probably be failing at least fifty percent of students (MD, 2005-07-11 FN). This points to a sickness in the university’s writing program, because it suggests that a large percentage of students are not receiving the instruction they need for their writing to develop. Unfortunately, this disparity is one that is not likely to be soon addressed (RV, 2004-05-05 INT).
Conclusion

This chapter has explored intricacies of the WPX’s design and implementation, the variation in students’ mastery of the five-paragraph theme, the grading process as understood by committee members and the USU community at large, the impact of the exam on ESL students, and different constructions of the purpose of the exam. Through this exploration, the data have shown a diversity of opinions regarding the exam’s function and form, and the net effect of these voices is one in which the WPX is received with ambivalence. A danger inherent in preparing this study, of the USU writing proficiency requirement, is that it is possible to come away with the conclusion that the messenger—the WPX—is the real problem. Despite the problems identified with the exam, ultimately it is only a conduit for information about the relative health of the University’s writing program.
CHAPTER SEVEN: Discussion and Implications

This chapter begins with an overview of the study, and then discusses the findings presented in Chapters Four through Six organized by theme. These themes respond to the research questions that drove the study, and they are interwoven with discussion of current theoretical perspectives. First, the chapter addresses the theme of the development and maintenance of assessment and curricular policy, exploring the institutional structures that make far-reaching reform difficult and incremental. Second, it discusses the institutional and individual debate regarding responsibility and authority in writing instruction, evaluation, and performance. Finally, it reviews the goals and outcomes of high-stakes writing assessment, as perceived and experienced by students, faculty, and administrators. Following the discussion of findings I present implications of this study for the assessment and instruction of writing in higher education, especially as they relate to current literature. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.

Summary of the study

This study was designed to describe the intersections of policy, curriculum, and assessment as they relate to one university’s writing proficiency examination (WPX). The WPX attracts immediate interest because it is a high-stakes exam functioning as a graduation requirement at USU, and approximately one-third of students fail it each year. As a result of this high fail rate, the University developed extensive and costly procedures for remediation of students’ writing skills. Using USU as a case study, this dissertation

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sought to address four primary and interrelated questions exploring the following: the impact on students’ academic literacies of institutional policies on writing instruction and assessment; the ways in which the core curriculum responds to, reflects, or challenges policy and assessment with respect to academic literacies; the extent to which the WPX reflects or motivates curricular and institutional goals around academic literacy; and finally, the wider implications of this case on discussions of higher education policies as they relate to academic literacies.

Through interviews with faculty, staff, administrators, and students; examination of site documents including WPX prompts, grading protocol, bluebooks, internal statistics, and syllabi; and participant observation, this study presents a qualitative account and evaluation of the social conditions that gave rise to the exam and facilitate its maintenance, and of the impact of the exam on students and, more broadly, on the University.

Major Findings

The first area of interest in this study was the role of institutional policies in establishing curriculum and assessment priorities and practices with respect to writing. Chapter Four explored the history of the WPX policy at USU, from conversations expressing a general dissatisfaction with students’ and graduates’ writing performance in the classroom and in industry, to the implementation of a formally codified system of assessment in the form of the WPX. The exam was instituted in 1985 as a temporary measure to identify weak writers approaching graduation while a more comprehensive curricular intervention was developed and implemented. However, as this exploration
revealed, the bureaucratic structure of the university makes top-down changes to the curriculum difficult, and faculty disagreements and resistance similarly create obstacles for bottom-up change. As such, the WPX policy became the centerpiece of the university's efforts to maintain writing standards, and the remediation processes became the site of explicit writing instruction for a sizeable portion of USU students.

Policy

In his seminal book on language planning, Cooper (1989) outlines four types of adoption related to communicative innovations: awareness, evaluation, proficiency and usage. These types evoke points on a trajectory of action, beginning with awareness and ending with usage as the ultimate goal. This framework can be comfortably applied to the case of writing policy at USU, against various possible innovations. If the innovation is defined as adoption of an Academic Literacies perspective on the instruction and assessment of student writing (most likely taking the form of a Writing Across the Curriculum program), the USU data suggests two interpretations—individual and institutional (Lea & Street, 2000). The beliefs of individual community members are diverse and comprise a spread across all four types, whereas the institutional culture is largely located in the category of “awareness.” The University community is aware of policy alternatives with respect to writing instruction and assessment, but it has not yet seriously undertaken evaluation of these options as replacements for the current system.

In part, this circumstance is due to the overarching trend in the University to treat literacy as an autonomous skill, and academic literacy from a Study Skills perspective (Lea & Street, 2000; Street, 1994a, 1997). While individual community members voiced
highly nuanced views of students' writing needs, for the University at large student
writing was deemed proficient once the graduation requirement of the WPX was
completed. Conversely, students' preparation for their professional careers is perceived
by the University as a process of Academic (and Professional) Socialization.

Much of the bureaucratic inertia around developing a more rigorous and
comprehensive writing program stems from the high value placed on faculty autonomy in
curricular matters. Blake suggests

The presumption of autonomy seemingly legitimizes the authority of an
academic. Her expert understanding of the potential and the limits of her
autonomous discipline wins for her institutional authority—a right to resist
critique from outside the discipline. (1997, p. 152)

For USU faculty, this autonomy is a matter of respect for their disciplinary expertise, and
for their judgment as professionals. As a matter of form, ventures into another
department's curricular turf in a Faculty Council meeting, for example, are perceived as
inappropriate and even aggressive gestures. Within a department there may be
discussions of the content of particular classes as they relate to others they offer, of
departmental grading standards, and of strategies for overcoming problems like
plagiarism, but faculty still retain a high degree of independence in developing and
implementing their own syllabi. A positive effect of this independence is that it may
allow faculty to be more creative, responsive, and responsible when delivering course
material. On the other hand, an imposed writing requirement in the curriculum would
likely foster resentment from the faculty members and it could subsequently dull the
quality of their teaching. At present, the aggregate of individual decisions on syllabi may
impact the cohesiveness of the university preparation in writing, but it does appease certain faculty concerns.

At USU, large-scale changes in University policies are brought about through democratic processes in the Faculty Council. These decisions are made by the acceptance of a majority of faculty, demonstrating widespread buy-in of a particular curricular idea. For this reason, measures that call for alterations to the day-to-day practices of individual faculty members are difficult to impose. In this way, short-term policy fixes like the WPX can easily become long-term policies. The WPX was adopted initially because it was simpler than the alternatives and it was then maintained because the status quo was simpler than a large-scale reform.

While the organizational structure of USU is one that calls for a high degree of cooperation in fostering curricular change, in practice it also creates tensions. The administrators, feeling powerless to directly influence faculty decisions, wield their influence through budgetary allocations. This can create an environment of antagonism between faculty and administrators, as the case of the Humanities department at USU illustrates. This may also produce tensions between autonomous disciplines, as there may be perceptions that one department is attempting to interfere in the practices of another or to question its professional expertise. The competition for resources also engenders this discord.

**Curriculum**

In the modern university, formal writing instruction is often largely delegated to English departments and, within such, to foundation courses taken in the students' first
year of study (Crowley, 1998; Lea, 2004; Russell, 1991/2002). This foundation course in composition, commonly called Freshman English, is ubiquitous in American universities, though its curricular content and utility is increasingly under attack. It relies on the concept “of a single academic community, united by common values, goals, and standards of discourse” (Russell, 1991/2002, p. 5). Addressing the purposes of the course, Crowley writes,

> Academics share the proprietary attitude toward Freshman English that is irregularly manifested in the culture at large. Some admit to a quite proletarian aim for the Freshman English program: it is to “remediate” students’ writing ability, bringing their skills up to snuff in order to meet the demands made on them by the more specialized, discipline-specific writing they will supposedly do in advanced university coursework. (1998, p. 232)

This premise is problematic, as the link between the essays produced in Freshman English and the writing characteristic of students’ later coursework is seldom articulated by professors, and it constructs the characteristic academic essays as a generic foundation from which students will later be able to extrapolate the conventions of new forms. Russell considers the separation of writing instruction from other curricula extremely problematic, and describes the problem as a result of a conceptual split through which knowledge and its expression could be conceived of as separate activities, with written expression of the “material” of a course a kind of adjunct to the “real” business of education, the teaching of factual knowledge. (1991/2002, p. 5)

This view is compatible with the Study Skills model, as it is reliant upon an autonomous view of literacy (Lea & Street, 2000; Street, 1994a). However, to divorce academic literacy from the contexts in which a text is created and received is to set students up for failure:
A skills-based approach to writing instruction...gives students a contradictory message. In the context of writing isolated from other subjects and other natural contexts, a correct paper is a good paper; but in courses in other disciplines and in professional contexts, correctness only carries the writer so far.... They need to know about language and language structures, but they also need experience with the modes of inquiry and presentation, the rules of argument and evidence, the vocabulary, and the style expected of writers in their situation. (Kuriloff, 1999, p. 107)

As I have argued, Study Skills is the prevailing model of literacy behind USU's curricular and assessment policies.

The study of the USU case examined the relationship between the WPX and the core curriculum. Throughout, participants asserted that more so than any other course, the English 101 course assigned writing most similar to that produced during the WPX exam. However, the course did not function as well as intended, due to a variety of factors. At USU, English 101 was almost exclusively taught by adjuncts because the department didn’t have the budgetary or personnel resources to provide full-time staff to cover this course. While many adjuncts were credited with being fine instructors, the dominance of adjunct faculty was cited as a problem for this course. Further, adjuncts were given the same independence experienced by other faculty on campus—the Humanities department provided broad guidelines for course content and the adjuncts were largely left to their own devices. It was unusual for the department to intercede in classroom affairs. Meanwhile, adjuncts’ brief time on campus limited their knowledge of the University practices, and made it difficult for them to establish lasting relationships with students. While faculty and administrators spoke favorably of intensifying the writing demands placed on students, reliance on adjuncts limited what the University could expect from its existing writing program.

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The science courses, particularly in the lower levels, expected little formal writing from students. The introductory courses in the sciences required few or no written assignments, and most exams were multiple choice. Given the exceptionally large class sizes, the faculty felt it would not be feasible to assign or, more correctly, to grade writing assignments. This was presented as a pragmatic issue, although it later emerged that many science faculty also felt unqualified to evaluate students' written work, much less instruct them in proper forms. This expertise belonged to the English faculty, a belief that was at times seconded by the English faculty as well. The only writing that USU students were consistently assigned in these introductory science classes were lab reports, and these were governed by such strict formats that they were once described as virtual "Mad-Libs." In students' early science courses, in particular, they were not expected to present arguments on scientific facts so much as report them. In the short-answer science exams, and in the papers assigned in upper-level courses, the students' work was primarily evaluated on the content and not the form. Perhaps not surprisingly, many students had the impression that writing was something that they did not need to do as science majors and that it was peripheral to their preparation.

In certain academic circles teaching the common rhetorical modes of the five-paragraph essay (i.e., description, process analysis, comparison/contrast) is currently out of favor (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Crowley, 1998). However, this type of instruction dominates the English 101 curricula, and the WPX implicitly calls for an argument-persuasion essay. The Science faculty indicated that the writing required in the WPX did bear some relation to that which the students would be writing in later life, citing the importance of organization (introduction, body, and conclusion), grammar, and
clarity. Pemberton (1995), for his part, agrees. He argues that undergraduates benefit from the education in the rhetorical modes and so forth because their early study in their major preparations draws heavily upon skills such as comparison/contrast and summary. For this reason, USU faculty valued the exam for ensuring that these skills were transmitted. Nonetheless, they thought that the writing tested by the WPX was most akin to what the students were doing in the Humanities. This belief had some merit, as argument essays do dominate in English, yet the Humanities faculty indicated that the five-paragraph theme was something that was generally unique to the English 101 course and did not reflect the writing produced in other Humanities coursework.

Some individuals were emphatic that assignment and instruction of writing are two different things, and they worried that many instructors and administrators did not appreciate the difference. For this reason, they were dubious of the potential for success of a WAC program at USU. They felt that it would be simple for instructors to add writing assignments to their courses and label them “writing across the curriculum,” yet without concomitant instruction these assignments would be empty exercises for students. Many faculty, across departments, relied upon the staff of the Writing Center to disambiguate the practices and forms expected in their course assignments. Faculty recommended the Writing Center’s services to their whole classes or to individual students who approached them for writing assistance.

In fact, the Writing Center emerged as the seat of much of the explicit writing instruction on campus, particularly for students who failed the WPX or the large numbers of transfer students who were excused from the English 101-102 sequence because of transfer credits. The effect of this was a writing program that was more reactive than
proactive, responding to identified deficiencies in the writing skills of particular students, rather than providing comprehensive initial instruction for all students. For students on contract in the Writing Center, and arguably for others as well, passing the WPX meant fulfillment of the writing contract (Appendix F), and some faculty were concerned that this arrangement inadvertently transmitted the message that writing education ended with the fulfillment of the WPX requirement.

Assessment

Universities adopt assessment policies for a variety of reasons: to measure learning, to indicate gaps in the curriculum, to ensure that students meet minimum standards, to motivate achievement, and to place students in courses, among others (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Brady, 1997; Dann, 2002; Haswell, 2001; Haswell & Wyche, 2001; E. A. Jones, 2002; Nelson & Kelly-Riley, 2001; Oblinger & Verville, 1998). Hoadley-Maidment advocates examining professional education through an Academic Literacies perspective because so much assessment in the university system requires students to write. Some disciplines—for example, medicine—minimize the role of written assessment by using systems based on multiple-choice questions, oral examinations and practicals, but many professional programmes use assessment strategies based on those associated with the underlying academic disciplines. (2000, p. 165)

In fact, the majority of assessment in universities is written and, as such, each instantiation is highly political; “Written (or any other) assessment can prevent people from entering the roles they desire for reasons that have little or nothing to do with their potential to learn or perform some specialized work well” (Russell & Foster, 2002, p. 26).
An Academic Literacies perspective can help assessment account for the complexity of literacy, particularly against the backdrop of authentic literacy practices (Street, 1997). Yancey describes two central problems with writing assessments like the WPX: “first, essay tests measure only products; second, and perhaps more important, the products they measure bear small correspondence to the kind of writing we see outside of an assessment context” (1999, p. 118).

This dissertation explored the WPX as a high-stakes assessment, and the ways in which it was experienced and perceived by campus stakeholders. The WPX, as a timed writing exam, differed qualitatively from the writing students produced in their coursework. While students were no strangers to timed, high-stakes exams in their science courses, the writing assigned to them in these disciplines differed qualitatively from the WPX. The essay format of the exam was familiar to the students from the English 101 course (and from their secondary schooling), but the practices associated with sitting for the exam were different than for composing a class essay.

The instructors of the composition course at times indicated that the exam did not truly match the practices they were hoping to get across in their courses. First, the exam was handwritten, whereas most students write their assignments on computers. This had implications for the construction of the text—handwritten essays are composed more or less straight through, while an essay written on computer can be rearranged, reworded, and edited with ease. Second, and more importantly, the WPX went counter to the writing process approach, in which students were expected to plan, draft, and revise. The timed nature of the exam made this impossible for a majority of students.
The grading process for the WPX was cited as an advantage by many professors and students alike; they appreciated the efforts made towards objectivity and fairness, as exemplified by the anonymous scoring and the multiple readers. Nonetheless, not all were convinced that the process was fair. First, the scoring process made challenging the results of the WPX difficult for students. Although the holistic rubric used by graders was readily available to students, they still found it difficult to rate their own work with respect to the rubric. Further, because no comments were written on exams by readers (aside from the numeric score from 1-4), the Writing Center staff were tasked with interpreting a failing grade for students. This was done somewhat disingenuously, yet with the best of intentions, because the Writing Center staff had roughly the same information the students did, and did not consult with the graders who scored the exams when providing this intermediary service. As a result, the staff were left to infer what the graders probably intended through the scores they assigned, based upon what the staff perceived as issues in the bluebook at hand.

While speakers from all language backgrounds were believed to pass and fail the WPX at similar rates, the differing remediation times in the Writing Center illustrated how some students were disproportionately impacted by the WPX policy. In particular, ESL students spent more time on contract in the Writing Center receiving remediation than native English speakers, and a few ESL students saw their graduations delayed as a result of being unable to pass the exam over successive attempts.

One administrator, Dean Vermeer, raises an important concern by asking whether students are better writers as a result of passing the exam, especially viewing it from an historic or retrospective view (RV, 2004-05-05 INT). The answer is we simply do not
know—the exam only measures students’ writing at a single point in time, without the gradations in scoring that would indicate if the student had made progress if s/he was required to repeat the exam.

Implications

The case of the WPX is interesting on its own merits, but its implications extend beyond the borders of the USU campus. Many universities concerned with fostering strong writing skills in the student body are faced with issues similar to those USU experiences. The U.S. Department of Education has recently presented issue papers advocating increased use of standardized tests at the university level to ensure that students meet certain benchmarks (Miller & Malandra, undated). While this proposal is sure to engender protest from many universities, as it already has the New York Times editorial staff, the trend toward assessment as a means of ensuring accountability is unmistakable (Editorial, 2006). Promoters of increased assessment see this as a means to bring about curricular change. Others advocate a move toward Writing Across the Curriculum or Writing in the Disciplines programs that they see as preferable to relegating composition to the English classroom. The USU case speaks to both the testing and expanded curriculum orientations.

The study yielded five primary implications for writing in the University, particularly as concerning the intersections of policy, curriculum, and assessment:

1. Assessment should be directly tied to the curriculum and/or specified outcomes.
Given the current national educational climate tying teacher and school performance (and their funding) to standardized test scores, there is a reticence among many educators to endorse more of this practice. There is a fear that assessment has the effect of dulling the educational enterprise by encouraging teachers to “teach to the test,” unwittingly sending the message that only that which is tested is important. Nonetheless, the case of the WPX illustrates that without institutional measures or policies formally linking assessment with curriculum, or assessment with faculty performance, it is the students who are the losers. They are burdened with an incomplete academic preparation, and then penalized for it. For this reason, the WPX should be reconceptualized as a formative evaluation tool, from which faculty can gain information about needed adaptations to their programs (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Dann, 2002). It may be that the WPX needs to be abandoned or redesigned entirely; the University could evaluate “methods of assessment for their ability to link theory and practice, rather than simply using already existing methods which suit institutional systems and regulations” (Hoadley-Maidment, 2000, p. 177).

Assessment is not without its purposes. Without the WPX, for example, many critically weak writers would graduate from USU without receiving additional, and in most cases, individualized writing instruction. The inability to write fluent, coherent, or grammatically correct English prose would hinder their professional progress, regardless of the specific, socially situated genres or practices expected by their eventual employers. At USU, the WPX serves an important function to identify students with writing problems and motivate them to seek assistance. Russell and Foster assert that “selectivity and qualification are essential to ensure competence” in the professions yet note that
examinations are themselves products of the social conditions under which they were created and thus carry with them histories of unequal relations of power (Russell & Foster, 2002, p. 25). They conclude that

The trick is to negotiate among stakeholders a test worth teaching to, one that will balance the demands of equity with the demands of disciplinary excellence. If there is collaborative assessment of student writing, then individual teachers must to some extent align their teaching (and the writing they have their students do) with the shared expectations represented by the test. (Russell & Foster, 2002, p. 28)

The design and practice of assessment should be revisited regularly, to ascertain whether or not the assessment meets the needs of the stakeholders, and the student stakeholders themselves should be consulted (Nelson & Kelly-Riley, 2001). Furthermore, the curricula scaffolding the assessment should also be evaluated and modified as necessary. To this end, a second implication emerges:

2. **Writing instruction should be proactive, not reactive.**

   As a result of the disconnect between the exam and the core curriculum, roughly one-quarter of USU students receive some form of remediation from the Writing Center in order to fulfill the WPX requirement at great cost to both the students and the university. In this sense, for many students the most comprehensive writing instruction they receive is in response or a reaction to their failure on the exam. Indeed, the USU WPX could more accurately be said to *test* students' writing proficiency rather than *verify* it. A verifying function could be achieved with more explicit and extensive writing instruction in advance of the assessment.
Reactive programs of writing instruction take as their starting point a student’s failure, thus operating from a deficit orientation. In this construction, tutors are tasked with identifying students’ problem areas in writing and attending to those primarily, with the goal of bringing the students’ writing up to an acceptable standard. Despite what is almost surely the tutor’s beliefs (and lessons) to the contrary, this practice sets up students to consider their writing preparation complete once they have reached that benchmark. In a reactive literacy program, it is difficult to instill the notion that for all people writing is a lifelong learning process.

A proactive writing program would determine the specific outcomes that the University wished to foster with respect to academic literacies and a sequence of courses or benchmarks would be developed for all students to that end. Some merits of this more proactive approach are that it would ensure that students’ writing instruction was not piecemeal and they would be encouraged to see how the elements of writing interlink. Further, students would develop into better writers as a result of increased practice because their skills would be scaffolded early and often. Moreover, the strengths and weaknesses of a student’s writing ability would not be assessed solely on the basis of a single timed writing sample. While assessments may continue to be utilized, the students’ writing would be evaluated and guided repeatedly throughout their University preparation.

3. **Writing programs benefit from increased collaboration.**

The USU case demonstrates that the development of a coherent writing program stumbles without organized collaboration between faculty across divisions, faculty and

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administration, industry and the academy. “Eventually and progressively,” Creme writes, “the student needs to be able to place that particular world view alongside others, including even ones she has forged for herself, and for this some kind of interdisciplinary curriculum in necessary” (1999, p. 464). Even if the university elects not to pursue WAC as policy, the preparation it provides students would be enhanced if there were structures in place encouraging regular, productive consultation and collaboration between departments.

The WPX was instituted to identify weak writers in need of remediation before graduation and to convey the importance on which the University placed strong writing skills; however, there was not simultaneous support of these writing skills across their curriculum. The fact that the WPX Committee was comprised of faculty from nearly all the departments was repeatedly cited as a strength, and Committee members from outside the Humanities took their experiences back to their own courses and their own departments. This is a positive first step.

Working within the confines set by the University’s hierarchical structure, a next step would be to form a Faculty Council committee looking specifically at ways of building partnerships between the disciplines. To begin, some courses in the Sciences and the Humanities may be linked, and the faculty could coordinate their syllabi to emphasize particular outcomes. This may require some difficult negotiation for, as Lillis asserts, “In an ever growing higher education system premised upon notions of widening access and lifelong learning, there is a need to re-examine what counts as relevant knowledge within and across academic disciplines” (2003, pp. 204-205).
Students should also be consulted about their writing preparation. Students are often left out of curricular discussions because they are seen as inexpert, yet they can provide important feedback about the effects and effectiveness of University policies and practices. Welcoming student input is another avenue of garnering student support for policy initiatives that at first glance are not intuitive for them. Competing visions for the University muddy the academic waters, yet increased collaboration can clarify them once again.

4. Faculty need explicit guidance and support in developing appropriate writing programs in their courses.

All faculty believed that it was necessary for students to have strong oral and written communication skills in order to succeed in the University and beyond. However, the faculty outside of the Humanities department, including those on the WPX Committee, expressed concerns about their own ability to evaluate or instruct students in writing. This uncertainty contributed to the paucity of writing assigned, particularly in the lower-level courses. In addition, the adjuncts teaching the composition courses were left largely to their own devices. While the Writing Center serves as a site of support for students, the faculty do not have assistance when it comes to developing their own writing assignments or grading rubrics. USU flirted with creating the position of a Writing Program Director, but abandoned it when a suitable candidate could not be found in the initial search. However, a Writing Program Director would be an excellent addition to the faculty, particularly to buttress efforts made by faculty new to the assignment of writing in their courses.
5. An Academic Literacies orientation would aid University writing programs.

What emerges from this case study of writing at USU is the recognition that the faculty and administration orientation toward literacy is between Study Skills and Academic Socialization (using Lea and Street’s (2000) framework). While among faculty there exists a nuanced understanding of genre and membership to various academic and professional communities, there is scarce explicit instruction for students in the socially situated nature of these genres and conventions and little room for students to put their own fingerprints on their writing products. The dominant faculty expectation that exposure to a form is sufficient for the learning of that form further hampers the progress of student writing. It is perhaps this disconnect between the products and the process of writing in the academy that portends the use of arbitrary exams to create a measure, however criticized, on which to indicate students’ membership in particular discourse communities.

Likewise, the one-size-fits-all, five-paragraph essay may not ultimately measure students’ degree of specialization as proficient writers once they have specialized into majors and proceeded towards graduation. This uniformity suggests an underlying autonomous model of literacy at work within the University, one that has creditably been shown to be mythic (Street, 1997). Russell writes,

In the rush to find a single comprehensive solution, academia never systematically examined the nature of writing or its potential for improving learning. The myth of transience masked deep conflicts in the mass-education system over the nature of writing and learning: what is academic writing and how is it learned? What is an academic community and who should be admitted? America has never come to terms with the submerged conflicts that underlie its attitudes and approaches to advanced literacy. (1991/2002, p. 9)
A more appropriate orientation may be for each individual degree-granting program to establish the skills that it expects members of its discourse community to possess, and to develop local means of establishing and recognizing the students' mastery of the discourse. In addition, students should be welcomed into this discussion, such that they can help faculty develop curricula and assessment tools that better reflect their identities as writers and, in many cases, apprentices in their professions (Abbs, 1997; Hoadley-Maidment, 2000; Lillis, 2003).

The University should consider developing a writing program and writing outcomes rooted in Academic Literacies—recognizing the social elements of writing production and reception and the power-laden choices, resistance and play that come with a deeper comprehension of the social functions of writing. An Academic Literacies approach has much in common with the WAC policies previously rejected by USU but, as Lea articulates,

Whereas 'Writing in the Discipline' programmes focus on the writing requirements of particular disciplinary and subject areas, the approach being explicated here is more appropriate for the increasing number of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary contexts, where students are undertaking courses based on a complex mix of disciplinary conventions and knowledge bases. (2004, p. 743)

In a school such as USU, where the majority of students are preparing to enter the health professions, interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary contexts are the norm. Scholars have identified challenges that Academic Literacies presents to curriculum designers, yet these challenges are not insurmountable (Lea, 2004; Lillis, 2003; Pardoe, 2000). Lea (2004, p. 744) lays out a series of core principles to guide course design in the Academic Literacies tradition, centered upon a critical examination of texts, meanings, and literacy practices;
the incorporation of viewpoints, meanings, and identities of a variety of stakeholders; and recognition of the power relations mediated in text production and consumption.

Ultimately, writing should not be divorced from context, as literacy is inherently ideological.

Limitations

This study examines and describes the creation, design and impact of a writing assessment policy in one university. The limitations of this work surface in two primary areas: difficulties arising from exploring a politically charged topic and elements of the study design. The WPX was chosen as a research topic precisely because it was a controversial and contested policy in the University, but this facet made researching it a delicate endeavor. While few individuals were ambivalent regarding the WPX requirement, their discussions of the exam or other University practices were sometimes strikingly cautious. As described in Chapter One, an individual confessed that my research made him nervous, and he was reluctant to share particular information with me (2004-03-18 FN). All of my participants had a vested interest in maintaining the WPX as it stood, or advocating an alternate vision of the University’s writing program.

Truthfully, as a practitioner researcher I have also felt conflicted about reporting certain aspects of the exam’s story, because of concerns about how my work will be interpreted and utilized once it is published and disseminated. To balance my personal concerns and those of my participants, I have endeavored to speak to a range of individuals on campus and give each of them voice. However, this is an imperfect solution.
The data collected was further limited by time limitations, and concerns about maintaining appropriately detailed scope. I had access to more data sources than were ultimately utilized, and these additional avenues were deliberately abandoned after reflection upon the information that would be gained versus the amount of time required for a thorough understanding of that data stream. For example, I chose to interview faculty of core classes in place of classroom observations plus interviews, because the time required to conduct sufficient observations would be enormous, but the information gained about the writing practices would be small (particularly in the Science classes in which the faculty reported no writing being assigned).

Conclusion

Ultimately, it may not matter whether students are judged to be competent writers on the basis of mastery of disciplinary genres or perceived generics like the five-paragraph theme—the genre itself only has value insofar as the University (and perhaps also the industries that accept its graduates) actively creates value for that genre, that exam, that body of knowledge. The WPX was created to fill a void in the curriculum, and to ensure that the students were able to produce writing befitting a university graduate. It is valuable to the University because it does identify weak writers on campus and it ensures that they receive additional writing assistance. In essence, the failure of the WPX is not in the motivations that led to its creation, in the format or the five-paragraph essay that students produce as a consequence—the failure is that in a system without accountability between teachers and students, between curriculum and exam results, teachers are not given the opportunity to teach to the test. Students write their
bluebooks into a void of policy and curriculum and the exam only lacks salience because there are not the institutional structures in place to give the assessment credence in relationship to the curriculum.

"Successful language planning is seldom a one-shot affair," writes Cooper (1989, p. 185). It has been over twenty years since the exam was first instituted, and USU is at a crossroads. While the budgetary, structural, and interpersonal constraints that originally gave rise to the WPX policy remain in force, USU has the opportunity to re-examine the interrelationship of writing policy, curriculum and assessment and develop a more comprehensive and responsive writing program.
QUESTION A

In recent years, colleges and universities have become increasingly concerned about the rise in student plagiarism. While instructors can use the internet to check for suspected plagiarism, this is time-consuming and not always reliable. Furthermore, such checks will not catch "recycled" papers which students copy from student essays previously submitted in other courses. To combat the problem of plagiarism, some universities are subscribing to services like Turnitin.com. Under this system, students submit their papers directly to the service rather than to their instructors; the service automatically checks papers for plagiarism, archives the paper so all future papers are also checked against papers submitted by students in that university, and then forwards the papers to the instructor. If plagiarism is suspected, the instructor is notified when the paper is forwarded.

Those who oppose such services argue that they create an atmosphere of distrust between faculty and students. By using this service, the instructor is assuming that students are guilty of plagiarism. They argue that it is the instructors' responsibility to recognize work that may be plagiarized and to check only those papers they already have reason to suspect. Additionally, the university will be paying to have thousands of papers processed when only a few may be plagiarized.

Those who favor the use of these services argue that students who are doing their own work have no reason for concern. Students who write their own papers will know that other students are not receiving equal or better grades for plagiarized papers. Moreover, if students know that all papers are being checked for plagiarism, the number of plagiarism cases will be reduced, which will benefit everyone.

Do you think USU should subscribe to a service like Turnitin.com and require all students to submit papers through this service rather than directly to the instructor?
QUESTION B

In recent years, the cost of medical malpractice insurance for doctors and other health care professionals has increased dramatically. Some doctors pay over $200,000 per year in insurance premiums. Last year, to protest these insurance costs, dozens of surgeons in Scranton, Pa., threatened to go on strike if the state didn’t do something about the high cost of malpractice insurance. In Las Vegas, 150 doctors at University Medical Center resigned as a group to protest high insurance premiums, causing the hospital to shut down the city’s only trauma center for 10 days; critically injured patients were airlifted to hospitals in California, Arizona, and Utah. In West Virginia, four hospitals transferred patients because two dozen orthopedic, general, and heart surgeons took 30-day leaves of absence to protest malpractice insurance costs. Surgeons in other parts of West Virginia threatened to join the walkout. Last December, in Philadelphia, almost two dozen hospitals prepared to shut emergency rooms because of a threatened strike by doctors. The strike was narrowly avoided when the state agreed to help pay the doctors’ insurance premiums.

Do you think doctors, surgeons, and other health care professionals should be permitted to stage walkouts or strikes to protest issues like salary, benefits, and insurance costs?
### Appendix B: The WPX Scoring Rubric

**Scoring Rubric Used by WPX Committee**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA FOR RATING STUDENT WRITING**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PASS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LEVEL 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops the assigned topic in an interesting way with some degree of originality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates a clear and effective plan of organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses support material that is specific and effectively selected for purpose and audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses correct sentence structure and shows skillful use of sentence variety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses specific, appropriate and concise language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes few or no mechanical errors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Developed, in part, from New York State Education Department, *Criteria for Rating Student Responses***

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### Appendix C: Grading rubric employed by the Humanities department

**GRADING OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN HUMANITIES COURSES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To determine the grade of a paper, a grade of C is the norm against which the paper is judged.</th>
<th>Representative characteristics of papers with grades of A through F, with the grade of C again serving as a norm and starting point:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A grade of C</strong> means that the paper is written at a level of proficiency that is acceptable for college students. In other words, a C indicates a level of work that a teacher can, in good conscience, endorse as legitimately college level. It does not mean that the writing is bad, weak, inadequate, or barely adequate.</td>
<td><strong>C</strong> The essay has a logical structure and adequate support, but may seem mechanical or formulaic, and perhaps could be more fully and concretely developed. The ideas are not illogical but may be commonplace. The grammar and mechanics are essentially sound, though there may be a few errors. The sentences may be wooden or relatively unsophisticated in structure; they do not seem “tight.” Vocabulary is somewhat limited; there is an over reliance on such words as <em>be</em> and <em>have</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A grade of B</strong> means that the paper is good, better than acceptable college-level work. If the instructor gives a paper a B, he or she is in effect saying that, for this one paper, at least, “This student is a good writer—not just all right, not just reasonable [sic] proficient, not just competent, but good.”</td>
<td><strong>B</strong> The essay is logically organized and fully developed. The ideas are sound and reasonable, but perhaps not notably original or exceptionally insightful. The grammar and mechanics are free of serious or numerous errors. The sentences are structurally complex and varied, and they link up with each other logically. The vocabulary moves beyond the routine and obvious.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A grade of A</strong> means excellent, far better than acceptable college-level work. If the instructor gives a paper an A, he or she is saying “This is truly an excellent piece of writing; it far surpasses what is expected of most college students.”</td>
<td><strong>A</strong> The essay is exceptionally well organized and developed. The ideas are logical and insightful, perhaps creative and original. The paragraphs are developed with relevant and specific details, examples, explanations or arguments. The grammar and mechanics are almost entirely free of errors. The sentences are structurally sophisticated—they demonstrate a command of advanced...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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subordinate constructions—and flow exceptionally well. The diction is precise, accurate, specific and varied.

| A grade of **D** means that the paper is written at a level of proficiency below what the instructor is willing to consider acceptable for a college student. If the instructor gives a paper a D, he or she is saying, “A college student should be able to write better than this; this is not college-level writing.” | **D**
|---|---|
| The essay has a vague thesis, or no thesis at all, and the organization is unclear or illogical. The ideas are trite or simplistic. The development of paragraphs is inadequate; the paragraphs lack specific and/or relevant support. There may be numerous and/or serious errors in grammar and mechanics. Some of the sentences may be structurally garbled or unidiomatic. Structurally, the sentences are unsophisticated and do not vary much. The vocabulary is limited; the diction lacks precision. | **F**
| The essay has no discernible thesis or organization. The ideas are immature. The development of paragraphs is completely inadequate; the paragraphs lack focus, coherence, and specificity. The grammar and mechanics are seriously flawed—there are many, and serious, errors. The sentences are frequently syntactically garbled or unidiomatic. Structurally, the sentences are very simple, perhaps very short or very “stringy.” The vocabulary is extremely limited; there is a tendency to use the same words over and over (especially the verbs *be* and *have*). |
Many colleges and Universities including USU are concerning about students plagiarizing. To deal with plagiarism, some colleges and universities think it is a good idea to subscribe services like Turnitin.com where students can submit their papers to these services to check for plagiarism. Other colleges and Universities think that the Turnitin.com service is time-consuming and not always reliable to check for plagiarism. I strongly disagree that colleges and universities including USU should subscribe services like Turnitin.com because First, there is a distrust between professor and students. Second, the professors should be the one to detect any plagiarism. Third, professors assume students are guilty of plagiarism.

First, USU should not subscribe to a service similar to Turnitin.com where students submit their papers through this service rather than directly to professor because there is a distrust between professors and students. Professors who do not believe their students capability to write their own papers will effect the students emotionally. Students feel their is no sense of continuing education because professors always suspect of their students plagiarizing. It makes the students also feel that they are incapable of writing their own papers in their own words. For example, a girl at Temple University dropped out of school because professors do not believe that she could write a perfect essay. She used many difficult terminologies to express her feeling thoughts. So, professors asked other professors from the English Department to double check her paper. It’s so sad just because some students write an a grammar free paper a paper with no grammar a perfect paper without or spelling mistakes professors assume they plagiarize. Therefore, USU should not subscribe service like Turnitin.com because the service only do harm students than do do more harm to students than good.

Second, USU should not have the students to submit their papers to a service like Turnitin.com to check for plagiarism because professors should be the one to detect plagiarism if students copying from other peoples work. Professors who work at USU for over 10 years should be very experience in detecting if students use others work. Professors work at USU more than 10 years read over thousands of students’ papers, so they can easily pick up a paper and tell which students plagiarize or not. For example, Professor Martin who teaches Writing Proficiency class can easily read a paper and noticed if the students actually uses their own examples to support their ideas. Many professors are highly experience and train to detach for plagiarism; therefore, USU does not need to subscribe such services.

Third, when professors have their students directly submit their papers to a service like Turnitin.com assume that their students are guilty of plagiarism. Professors view students who plagiarize is a serious crime that students make. Professors believe that all students copy others peoples’ work page by page and words to words.
Plagiarizing someone's work is not a serious crime that students committed. Sometimes students use other peoples work to guide them the right direction to write the paper. For example, in literature class, I read many poems and I have a difficulty time interpreted the poems. I have to write two pages essay on Shakespeare poems that we read in class. Therefore, I looked at the internet and read how others approached in writing the essay on critiquing Shakespeare's poem. I might use one or two ideas from the original writers just to direct me on how to approach Shakespeare's poems. I paraphrased the sentence & made it my own. Therefore, if taking one or two lines sentences from the original writers & use it on your own words students should not be guilty of plagiarism. Therefore, USU should not consider the service because not all students plagiarized.

In conclusion, many colleges and universities assume that college students are plagiarizing. However, having the services will not work because their are only few students may be plagiarized. USU should not subscribe such services because their is a distrust between professors and students. Professors should be the one to find out if their students plarized or not. Professor assumes all students are guilty of plagiarism.

SAMPLE 2

2 MD
2 RM

Many colleges and universities have become more concerned about the rise in plagiarism over the years. Plagiarism is when a person copies someone's work without giving them credit. To solve the problem of plagiarism universities are coming out with a program called Turnitin.com. Students are asked to hand in their work to the turnitin service where they check if any elements of plagiarism is involved in the work. After this process, the work is forwarded to the instructor. The service keeps a copy of the work for future use when evaluating other people's work. From reading the goals behind the service, I do not agree with this service because it may cause inconvenience for both students and faculty, it should be the instructors responsibility to realize the elements of plagiarism in one's work, it may also be waste of money for the universities.

Turnitin.com service may cause inconvenience to both the faculty and students. According to this program, when students are done with their paper, they have to bring it to the service and the service has to process the paper to check it. For example, if the paper is due on a certain day and the service were not able to process the paper on time, it may jeopardize the students grade. Some students may not feel comfortable in showing their work to anyone other than their instructor. The lack of time may cuase the service to slow down. All these factors may lead to inconvenience for everyone.

Responsibility is a major issue for students and faculty of universities because they are considered as responsible adults. Therefore, I believe it is the instructors responsibility to realize if any of his or her students are plagiarizing with their work. The selected instructors at this universities are well educated, well qualified and well paid.
Therefore, I believe that they have the ability to realize the difference between real work and plagiarized work. If this service is in process, the students may believe that the instructors sees all the students as suspects. Therefore, instructors need to use their quality and education in these matters rather than depending on a service to improve students education.

The universities may have a lot of expenses including salaries, food, materialistic expenses and many others. Therefore, the upbringing of this program may be waste of money. The universities may have to pay a lot of money for this service because the process may be extensively long. The universities should use the money on many other important ideas. In order to find the few students who are plagiarizing, the universities are wasting money by processing everyone’s work. This service many not be worth the money universities are saving.

Plagarism is becoming an issue in many colleges and universities. I do not agree with the service that USU is interested because it may cause inconvience between students and faculty, it should be the instructors responsibility to recognize fraud work and it may also be waste of money. I do not believe plagiarism is a main issue at Urban Science University. I do not believe it is right to intimidate the entire student body in order to reveal the few students who plagarize with their work.

Recently, the rise in student plagiarism have become a concern in colleges and universities. Since instructors don’t have the time to check for plagiarism, some colleges or universities are subscribing to Tumitin.com. Turnitn.com is a service that automatically checks papers for plagiarism, and also save the papers against future plagiarism. I oppose such a service as Turnitin.com to check for plagiarism. This is because first of all, the service only focuses on plagiarism from the internet. Second, the service may lead to a lack of trust between the students and the faculty, it assumes all students guilty of plagiarism. Lastly, the service may cost the school a lot of money.

Turnitin.com only focuses on plagiarism from the internet. This mean that students using papers from the internet are being checked on. What about students who are plagiarizing not from the internet, but from previous students who already took the class? Also, what about students who pay other students to write their papers? If this was the case, the service that the university would want to use would be unreliable. The university should realize that there are other ways students can plagiarize other than just the internet. Therefore, the service is inconvenient to check against plagiarism because it only focuses on one way students can plagiarize when there are other aspects to be concerned about.
Moreover, if the university does use this service, a lack of trust between the students and the faculty may occur. Students may get the idea that they are assumed to be guilty of plagiarism. When using this service, students losing the confidence to write good papers. If the service was used. For example, Mary, a college student, was assigned to write a paper about the Iraqi war. She had no idea on what to write about, and ever since the college started using Turnitin.com, Mary is afraid to get some ideas from the internet but she uses them anyway. Mary always uses to write writing good papers if she gets some ideas from other students’ essays on the internet. Therefore, Mary gets a bad grade on her paper because the service found a slight plagiarism since she uses some ideas from the internet, she felt less confident as a good writer. This scenario demonstrates that good students like Mary, are being assumed guilty of plagiarism.

In addition, using the service may cost the school a lot of money. Nothing is free, and The school should realize that the service is high-tech, and processing thousands of papers may be expensive to do. Such an expensive service may result in an increase in students’ tuition. It is much cheaper if the papers were checked by an instructor or two. Also, the school should realize that they are spending all this money for thousands of papers to be processed when the service would find only a few plagiarized. That would be a waste of money. If the service only found a few because the majority of students don’t plagiarize, Therefore, all that money spent on the service is a waste because it could be spent on other things like new printers, computers, or student’s needs like a tutor center. Moreover, such expensive service may increase students’ tuition.

In summary, Turnitin.com service that checks for plagiarism should be opposed. Such a service only focuses on one type of plagiarism. Moreover, the service assumes that all students are guilty of plagiarism. Lastly, the service is expensive and is a waste of money. All of these reasons are why a service as Turnitin.com against plagiarism should be opposed.

SAMPLE 4

Respect of another’s ideas and work is crucial in today’s society. The act of stealing another’s words or ideas is wrong and such behavior should be reprimanded. Cutting down on plagiarism within the school system is important so as not to give individuals unearned praise and recognition. However, the responsibility of diminishing plagiarism should lie in the hands of the individual’s educator: the teacher. Subscribing to a service like Turnitin.com should not be condoned by USU. Instead, the university should continue to rely on the competency of the teachers.
First, part of the problem with a service like Turnitin.com is that it will completely eliminate plagiarism. Although this is what the school system wants, it is also quite impossible. This service checks papers against well respected works as well as other students' papers. Eventually, the service will suspect someone of plagiarism when, in reality, a student may have come across an idea in a similar way as another student. Often students also help to proofread one another's papers, which could lead to the unintentional similarity in working as well. Although this could be plagiarism, it may also just be a coincidence. If the teacher was to rely on his own instincts when reading papers, this type of inconvenience would not occur.

Moreover, the cost of such a program must be outrageous considering the leg work it reduces for the teacher. With the high cost of USU as it is, the students would wonder where the money goes when considering the teachers' salaries. Considering that USU is not a large university and our class sizes are quite small, it seems frivolous to spend money on a computerized service when the teachers can already provide this type of work. However, if it seems necessary to obtain a service like Turnitin.com, USU should be able to use it on a limited basis only when clear suspicion is felt, allowing the teacher to make the final judgement.

Lastly, use of such a service would create an environment with little or no trust between the teachers and the students. All students would feel as though their academic integrity was always in question. This lack of trust could hinder students' tendencies to form professional relationships with their professors, which may affect their learning process and in turn, their grades. In an already stressful environment, it seems unfair to add the uncertainty of suspicion to the students' lives. By continuing to allow teachers to check the students' work, beneficial student-teacher relationships would not be in jeopardy.

Overall, it appears that turnitin.com may, in theory, appear to be a simple solution. On the other hand, the negative implications of using such a service may outweigh the simplicity of using it. This service would remove part of the teachers' responsibility and question their capabilities. Although plagiarism is undoubtedly wrong, discovering this type of wrong act should be left to the teachers to decide.

While student plagiarism continues to be a growing problem, new alternatives to checking for such plagiarism will not necessarily be beneficial. If the university subscribes to this type of service, it will create an atmosphere of distrust between instructor and student. The teacher is the sole person responsible for reviewing any papers that he/she assigns to the class. In addition, a great amount of money will be spent on this service (Turnitin.com). Overall, a subscription to Turnitin.com will not prove to be a sufficient way to solve this problem.

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By informing students that such a process will take place each and every time a paper is handed in for grading, this will create a rather uncomfortable environment. Obviously, students who are guilty of plagiarism will not be pleased with the new method that is being enforced. On the other hand, an innocent student may feel violated. In a way, this procedure implies that one is guilty until proven innocent. For example, a particular student was unsure of the citations he had made in his essay. He did not intentionally perform an act of plagiarism, but now he must fear future prosecution. The barrier of trust between instructor and student breaks, once such a program goes into effect.

The professor is the person who requests the class to complete a written assignment. Therefore, he/she should also be responsible for taking the measures that are necessary for reviewing and grading the paper. Suppose that the students are instructed to submit their essays directly to the service rather than to their teacher. In this case, how can the instructor be certain that the assignment was handed in on time? Furthermore, depending upon the time it takes for the company to process all of the papers it receives, there might not be a sufficient amount of time for the instructor to adequately read and grade each and every paper. This service basically takes away from the traditional role of an instructor.

Not only will Turnitin.com bring about conflict in the classroom, but it will also require the university to take on additional expenses in order to process every single paper that any USU student writes. Thousands of papers will need to be processed, even though there may only be a handful of papers that have shown any signs of plagiarism. If the university is already paying the professor, why should further contributions be made to support such a process. The end results are not worth the time or the money that is involved in this program.

In conclusion, I believe that if USU initiates a service that will automatically check papers for plagiarism, the disadvantages of this approach will far outweigh any potential benefits. The atmosphere of distrust between faculty and students will discourage these students. In addition, instructors will not be able to fulfill their teaching duties entirely, because the plagiarism service will take the place of a portion of their responsibilities. Lastly, the cost of processing the papers will bring about excessive and unnecessary expenses. Although plagiarism is a constant problem at colleges and universities, any such program will not stop certain students from committing the crime. I would like to go along with this old logic, “If there’s nothing wrong with it, then why fix it?”
Appendix E: Interview Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

Questions for All:

*Writing Proficiency Exam*
1. What can you tell me about the history of the WPX?
2. Why do you think the University instituted the WPX?
3. What are the goals of the WPX?
4. Do you feel these goals are being met?
5. What does the WPX measure?
6. How do you see the WPX relating to other courses in the University?
7. What do you think the best way to assess writing proficiency should be?

*Understandings of Writing*
8. What is the difference between academic writing and professional writing?
9. What is the difference between writing and literacy?
10. What is the difference between literacy and literacies?

*Wrap-Up*
11. Is there anyone else you think I should be talking to about the exam and writing at USU?
12. What would you like your pseudonym to be?

Questions for Faculty and Students:

*Academic Background*
13. Tell me about your own writing education. How was writing taught?
14. Can you recognize good writing when you see it? How can you tell it’s good? What about bad writing? What makes a piece of writing good or bad?
15. What do you think is the most difficult thing about writing? The easiest?

*Writing in Other Courses*
16. What types of writing do you require (or are you required to write) in your classes?
17. How does this relate to the type of writing required by the WPX?
18. Which classes at the University are the most writing-intensive?
19. How would you rate the writing skills of students at USU? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
20. Does the University emphasize writing in the curriculum?
21. As a minimum, what writing skills do you think all students should possess? How are those skills being transmitted to students now?

Questions for Faculty:

*Introduction*
22. What is your role at the University? What classes do you teach? How long have you been here?
23. How would you describe the students at USU?
24. What role will writing play in students’ lives after graduation?

*Regarding Individual Bluebooks that the Interviewee Scored*
25. What is your general impression of this essay’s strengths and weaknesses?
26. Why did you pass or fail it? Was this a tough decision for you?
27. (If applicable) Why do you think this exam went to a third reader?

Questions for Students:

Introduction
28. What year are you in and what is your major? What brought you to your major?
29. How long have you been at USU? What brought you to USU?
30. What do you hope to do after you graduate?
31. Do you feel you are a good writer? Why or why not?
32. Let’s say your professor assigns you a piece of writing. How do you approach the writing task?

Writing Proficiency Exam
33. Tell me about your experiences taking the WPX? Was it what you expected?
34. What had you heard about the WPX?
35. Did you pass the WPX the first time around?
36. Do you think you were ready to pass? Why do you think your exam failed?
37. How many times have you taken the WPX?

Writing Center Contracts
38. How long were you/have you been on contract in the Writing Center?
39. How many times a week did you go?
40. How did your writing change as a result of your tutoring at the Writing Center?

Questions for Administration and Faculty:

External and Internal Reviews of Writing
41. Can you tell me about the external and internal reviews the University is undergoing or has recently undergone with respect to writing, assessment, and writing across the curriculum?
42. What were the reviewers investigating, and what were the goals of the review?
43. What were the recommendations of the reviewers, and what do you think of these?
44. What changes in writing policy do you see coming out of these reviews?

Writing Proficiency Exam
45. How successful are students in your department at passing the WPX? What do you think accounts for those rates?
46. Given that the WPX is a policy ratified by individual departments, what is the view of your department of the exam?
47. Would members of your department prefer something else to the exam? If so, what?
48. How do you think the university can best confront the challenge of fostering strong writing skills in the student body?

Questions for Admissions Office:
49. Roles and responsibilities in admissions
50. Can you walk me through the admissions process as it is today?
51. Has that process changed significantly in the time you’ve been here?
52. What have been the motivations for such changes?
53. How is the process different for transfer students?
54. What does the University look for in applicants? What would cause the admissions office to reject an applicant for admission?
55. What challenges does the admissions office face?
56. How are admissions decisions impacted by policy decisions from above?
57. What percentage of admitted students are admitted directly into majors?
58. How much influence do departments have on admissions decisions?
59. How is writing proficiency of individual applicants determined before an admissions decision is made?
60. Are some admitted students flagged for writing support early on?
61. Is there any data kept on percentages of ESL students? How are ESL students identified in the application process?
62. Where do transfer students come from?
63. Why the heavy presence of transfer students? Is that typical?

Questions for President Gabardi
64. Tell me about your history at USU; my understanding is that you’ve had many roles here over the years.
65. How has USU changed over the years in its focus, student composition, curriculum, relationship with industry, etc.?
66. What can you tell me about the history of writing at USU? How has (your perspective of writing) changed in your arc from student to president?
67. Where would you like to see USU take its writing program? What direction do you think that the core curriculum will be going? WAC?
68. What can you tell me about the WPX? History, present, future?
69. How have the health professions changed over the years?
70. How would you describe USU’s responsibility to prepare its students for the professional world?
71. Is USU’s relationship with industry unusual? How would you describe it?
72. Where does writing come into play in the life of a health professional?
73. What elements of writing are most important to our graduates?
74. Is there anyone else you’d recommend I talk to?
Appendix F: The Writing Proficiency Contract

Name: ________________________________________
Address: ______________________________________
Email: _________________________________________
Advisor: ________________________________________

Student ID: ____________________________
Phone #: ______________________________
Expected Graduation Date: ______________
Major: _________________________________

Writing Proficiency Contract - Spring 2006
Deadline: January 27, 2006

What is the purpose of the contract? The purpose of the contract is to help you pass the Writing Proficiency Exam (WPX). In order to graduate on time, you must pass the exam by the end of your last semester on campus.

Who can sign a contract? All students who have failed the WPX may sign a contract. Transfer students may sign one if they missed an opportunity to take the WPX because they were not yet enrolled at USU.

What is the difference between a contract and a pre-contract? Contracts are signed by students in the third year (or later) who failed the WPX in their second year. They are eligible to take “Equivalency Examinations” that count the same as the March WPX. “Pre-contracts” are signed by students in their second year who wish to prepare for the March exam. They are not allowed to take Equivalency Examinations.

How long will it take to pass? The time varies, depending on the student, but most students need an entire semester; some need more than one or two semesters.

When should I sign a contract? Students who have failed the WPX in March of their second year usually sign contracts in the fall of their third year. Waiting may cause your graduation date to be delayed.

If I sign a contract, when will I take the WPX? An “Equivalency Examination” (which counts as the Writing Proficiency Exam) will be scheduled for all contract students at the end of the semester. Other exam times may be scheduled at the discretion of the director. (Note: The equivalency exam is not an option for pre-contract students, who must wait to take the exam in March of their second year.)

Who evaluates the equivalency exams? The exams are graded by members of the Writing Proficiency Committee, which consists of faculty in a variety of USP departments. The equivalency exams are not graded by the director or assistant director of the Writing Center.

Who will decide how many hours I need to spend in the Writing Center? The director of the Writing Center will determine how much preparation you need to write a successful essay. Most students will have one 50-minute appointment each week; some students may require more than one meeting per week. For any student, additional appointments may be required at some point in the semester.

What if this is my final semester on campus? The Writing Center will commit as much time as possible to give you the best opportunity to pass the exam. If the director determines that you require more than one meeting per week, then you will be responsible for coming prepared to all of your regular appointments. Failure to meet with your tutor as scheduled may cause your contract to be cancelled, which would mean that you would not be allowed to take a Writing Proficiency Equivalency Examination, which could in turn endanger your graduation.

Who will help me during my appointments? You will work with a graduate teaching assistant, professional tutor, the director, and/or the assistant director. In some cases, an advanced student tutor may be assigned to you.
What kinds of assignments will I have? Usually, you will be assigned an essay or a revision of an essay. Sometimes you may be required to prepare plans for essays or complete other writing exercises. Essay topics will usually require you to argue one side of a controversial issue, like the WPX questions. You may be asked to take a diagnostic test or work on a tutorial as well.

What will happen during my Writing Center appointments? You will go over the strengths and weaknesses of your assignments with your tutor or professor and discuss necessary changes. The focus will be on your individual writing problems.

What exactly do I need to do to keep my contract in effect? Basically, you have to make a serious commitment of time and effort. That means you must:

- Come to your writing appointments with fully prepared essays, revisions, or other assigned work.
- Spend a minimum of 2 hours preparing for each writing appointment.
- Limit your absences to no more than 2. *It is considered an absence if you cancel an appointment (without scheduling a makeup appointment), cancel a makeup appointment, come more than 10 minutes late, fail to show up for an appointment for any reason, or come unprepared.* If you have more than one appointment each week, you are still allowed only 2 absences during the semester. Absences from discussion groups are counted just like absences from writing appointments. Additionally, if you excessively cancel your scheduled appointments, your tutor may recommend that your contract be cancelled.

Remember, when you fail to show up for an appointment, you may inadvertently cause another student who needs help with a course paper to go without much-needed assistance. If you reschedule your appointment in advance, then your tutor can help someone who may need assistance with a course assignment.

What will happen if I am unable to fulfill my contract? The Writing Center will cancel it, even if this is your last semester on campus; *that means that we won't be able to help you prepare for the WPX or allow you to take an equivalency exam at the end of the semester.*

What happens if I cheat on an Equivalency Examination or have someone else do my homework? Any form of plagiarism or cheating will result in formal charges of academic misconduct. Penalties vary, but may include academic probation, loss of Writing Center privileges, or even expulsion from the university.

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I have read, understand, and accept the conditions of this contract. I agree to come to ___ appointment(s) each week. *I understand that the maximum number of absences will apply regardless of coursework, exams, work commitments, or illness.* It is my responsibility to keep track of my absences and to ask about my status, if I have questions.

I may cancel my own contract for any reason at any time by informing the Writing Center. I understand that my advisor may receive a copy of this contract.

Student Signature: _________________________ Date: _________________

Writing Center Director: ____________________ Date: ________________

James Eberbert, Ph.D.
USU Writing Center
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