We ought to be reasonable, or at the very least, committed—that in a nutshell is Richard Marback's point in "Being Reasonable: A Proposal for Doctoral Education in Composition Studies." His is a persuasive argument on behalf of an ethical and reasonable (or reason-able) discourse that would break down not only disciplinary boundaries, but those fissures that make it necessary for us to append public to intellectuals, so that today's true scholar must be a public intellectual. For Marback, a standard of reasonableness would act as an imperative to encourage scholars and students to make sense of their work to others, both within the disciplines and beyond them. For many reasons, it is no longer the case—if it ever was—that intellectuals (or scholars) are by definition socially committed actors involved not only in producing traditional scholarly research but also in shaping public policy and attitudes in the marketplace of ideas. The closest people we have to yesterday's Benjamin Franklins and Thomas Jeffersons are scholars first and public intellectuals second, the latter only consequentially as a result of the privilege and power afforded to them after having performed particularly well, contentiously, or quotably as academic scholars in the humanities: people such as Allan Bloom, Michael Eric Dyson, Stanley Fish, E.D. Hirsch, bell hooks, Martha Nussbaum, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Susan Sontag, or Cornel West; and people with closer ties to composition studies, such as Dennis Baron, Henry Giroux, Shirley Brice Heath, or Mike Rose.

The challenge of "going public," as Peter Mortensen phrases it, has already received substantial air time in recent years—for example, in the
pages of *JAC* 17 and surrounding the launch of the comparative studies PhD program at Florida Atlantic University for students interested in studying (and living?) life as a public intellectual. But we have not yet devoted much attention to how this interest in going public might affect doctoral education in composition studies in particular. There has been a backlash against going public as well, and the objections raised by those in and out of the academy may not have been addressed as thoroughly as they need to be. Jokes abound, such as the one reported by the *Village Voice*: “A public intellectual is someone who can talk about anything for five minutes and nothing for six.” Public intellectuals are “publicity intellectuals” (Romano), and the age of the reclusive and scholarly paradigm-buster has given way to the “academostar,” the neologism coined by Jeffrey Williams in “Name Recognition,” his introduction to the *Minnesota Review* ’s recently published issue on the topic, which was also spotlighted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. “Against the common academic anxiety of ineffectuality, especially in the humanities,” Williams writes, “the star system heightens the sense of the academic realm as one of influence, acclaim, and relevance” (qtd. in McLemee).

I don’t want to imply that Marback is surfing the wave of reform stirred by debates over the socially alienated and alienating academic intellectual, because I don’t think that he is. Rather, I want to suggest that his call for being reasonable might well shift our attention away from the old nut of what counts as reasonable (and bury it for good) and toward the ethical issue of *praxis*, to questions of how theory performs its work in the world, and what it makes us do and think as teachers of graduate students and as social actors ourselves. Marback recognizes that while there has been much talk about the need for scholars to “engage”—talk from within the disciplines, from administrators, and from the constituencies served by the institution—that talk hasn’t yet influenced to a significant degree how we conceive of doctoral education, which is the foundation of so much of what practicing scholars live for and what so many apprentice scholars must navigate as they seek to enter the profession.

With some few exceptions and possibly for important reasons, our doctoral programs in composition studies are not particularly public; our research and work in writing program administration is constantly under assault from entrenched programs in the humanities for not being intellectual enough; and our focus on teaching receives only enough attention from higher administration to ensure that we meet our primary obligation—so the argument goes—of delivering service courses for the univer-
sity. For composition studies, it is a serious challenge to suggest that we reconfigure doctoral education, especially when doing so has been so strenuously resisted (or impossibly complicated) by even the most enfranchised groups in the humanities. The causes must neither be light nor transient. They probably would have to be economic, political, or personal, rather than idealistic, for us to act; and then there’s no guarantee that when we’re done, students will be interested or that there will be anyone around after all the bloodletting and hand-wringing to make the changes stick. Stephen North’s argument in *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies* for a fusion-based curriculum at the doctoral level is at least in part an idealization of a situation that many would see first as a serious case of disciplinary politics gone bad, and the consequences for the program at SUNY Albany are serious indeed. Marback believes that we ought to be speaking not just with our graduate students about program reform, but with everyone else who might be interested or have a stake in what we do.

Marback draws inspiration from Robert Bellah’s essay in *Academe*, “The True Scholar,” arguing along with Bellah that our valuation of cognitive categories of research above the normative-ethical consequences of that research puts us in a precarious position institutionally and socially. Even though composition studies seems to have found a healthy balance of theory and practice, we’re not teaching our graduate students to be true scholars, and we may not be true scholars ourselves, at least not as Bellah defines them. And that’s really the problem, I believe. Bellah’s distinctions between the ethical and the cognitive are much too fuzzy. They do reflect a wider cultural attitude that academics think too much, teach too little, and do not live in the real world as most people understand it. In my view, the “merely” cognitive is not unequivocally asocial or necessarily restricted to a narrow sphere of like-minded experts. In his 1942 essay “War and Cultural Life,” Kenneth Burke—one of our most theoretical and socially conscious critics—had this to say about his decision to begin his trilogy on human relations:

The need to think of global war and of its counterpart, global peace, invites us to seek also a truly global attitude toward all mankind, with its expressions ranging from the austere down to the foibles of the human barnyard. The study of war aims should thus be grounded in the most searching consideration of human motives. So far, however, it seems that war aims are being treated as something of a cross between anticipatory or retrospective ideals and cameralistic proposals designed to enlist or
appease various economic interests. And more basic inquiries into human motives seem to have been postponed, as a luxury that the moment cannot afford, precisely at a time when the need for such a search is all the more urgent. (409)

Burke’s response was to write *A Grammar of Motives*, which by Bellah’s standards anyway, would probably fall under the cognitive category since in it Burke is not especially worried about translating a searching consideration of human motives into terms that everyone else can understand. There is a fidelity to the complexity of the subject matter that is important and that endures beyond the ebb and flow of the distractions of the moment. There is considerable danger, I believe, in overemphasizing what Bellah calls the ethical at the expense of what I’ll call the theoretical. There is the danger, I believe, that we will spend more time promoting ideas than thinking them through, shooting from the hip first and asking questions later.

Nevertheless, Marback’s call for being reasonable is a pragmatic one because it encourages us to shift our attention from measuring reasoned exception or dissensus with reference to disciplinary knowledge and toward judging what we think and write by what difference it makes, whether it has any value for others, or whether it might affect practice. As Marback rightly notes, *discussions* about what doctoral programs ought to be will be won by those with the power and the experience in administrative wrangling. Perhaps the *actions* of new and “true” scholars will speak more effectively for change, whatever it might be. The work that graduate students do can force the bureaucratic structures of doctoral programs to flex (or break), and then something will have to be done to rationalize and enfranchise the new orientations toward research and public discourse that emerge. Thomas Miller’s question—“Why don’t our graduate programs do a better job of preparing students for the work that we do?”—is an important one to ask right now. I would add another worth answering: Why don’t our graduate programs do a better job of preparing *faculty* for the work that *students* do? I have seen doctoral programs change most readily when it becomes clear that our students are doing work, or want to do work, in areas or forms not easily containable or explainable in the current configuration of most English departments with PhD programs in rhetoric and composition. The emergence of what Gregory Ulmer calls electracy has, for example, forced doctoral programs to address seriously the changing circumstances of research dissemination and creative work.
The call for true scholars committed to the normative/ethical rather than the cognitive is an expression of anxiety, and, unfortunately, it seems to come most often from those at a safe enough distance from its source to make us wonder whether the anxiety is private or public. It is easy for Bellah, a professor emeritus at Berkeley with an endowed chair, to speak about the overemphasis in the academy on the internal arguments that fuel the often-narrow research in our journals and that, consequentially, make it easy for people to rehearse the talking points of theory without pausing to judge them. Bellah is already a public intellectual, and his discussion of what it takes to be a true scholar comes in the same year that he was awarded the United States National Humanities Medal by President Bill Clinton. It is a great honor, certainly. But it is much more difficult for a graduate student or a junior faculty member to wield judgment as if it were a moral imperative than it is for Bellah to write in *Academe* that scholars ought to get off their duffs and start judging theories by whether they apply to individuals. Everyone probably hopes that his or her work will have some influence beyond some tight little corner of the world, but must we measure the value of scholarship by how well we (or others) market ourselves? When you are not afforded the luxury of public recognition or even the rewards of tenure or a well-paying job, small advances in research programs may look from the outside like self-indulgence. In Bellah’s view, scholars today are spending too much time exercising the freedom to do what they want rather than the freedom to do what is right and good (and public). Elsewhere, he makes this same claim, interestingly enough, against what he calls the “overclass elite” and, following Robert Putnam’s lead, even against people who bowl alone (see “Why”). Bellah carries this message with a missionary’s zeal. In the wake of the me-decade, he believes that just about everyone is guilty of too much navel-gazing.

Near the end of “The True Scholar,” Bellah recounts the story of how one of his over-eager students seemed too willing to accept that all human action is motivated by the struggle for capital. “Is that true of you?” Bellah asked him. “Are you just out to increase your capital? How could I ever trust you if that were true?” The student responded, “I never thought of applying this theory to myself.” Bellah concludes his essay with this rejoinder:

Well, theories do apply to ourselves, and they have tests that are both empirical and ethical. Often, it is impossible to tell where the cognitive leaves off and the ethical begins. Scholars live in the world, and the world
we live in right now is dominated by money. If we believe that the struggle for strategic advantage is the truth about human beings, then we should realize that we are not just teaching a scientific truth; we are preaching a gospel. We have done that before in our intellectual history, and we decided that it was wrong. But a lot of things that we thought had gone away have returned in recent years. So if we don’t think that the struggle for strategic advantage is the whole truth about human beings, then in our scholarship and our teaching we should begin consciously to accept that our work is governed by the virtue of judgment, at least in aspiration. That alone would be an enormous contribution in our present situation.

I think this explanation deserves some closer scrutiny for what it reveals about its reasonableness, about Bellah’s linkage of judgment with empirical and ethical tests, and about the dangers of making the act of judgment an implicit and personal virtue.

(1) Reasonableness. The student doesn’t respond to Bellah with “No, I’m not out to increase my capital,” but the implication is there in his admission that he hadn’t thought of the theory in personal terms. It doesn’t surprise me at all that someone might identify human motivation as primarily economic while disavowing its universality when pressed to apply it personally. One of the sneaky tricks of capitalism is to make us want strategic advantage but to couch the desire in moralistic terms (or deny it altogether). CEOs of Fortune 500 companies with golden umbrellas matching the national wealth of small countries will say they’re in it for the fulfillment it brings them. That doesn’t mean that they are, nor does it mean that the profit motive is implicitly bad. Perhaps it is just necessary. In any case, both the theory and the personalization (in this case, the distancing from the theory) is best viewed in the broader hegemonic structure that would mask contradictions by alienating theory from the ethical. The student doesn’t apply the theory to himself because we’re “supposed” to keep the motive at arm’s length, we’re supposed to, as the film says, Pay It Forward. In my view, an honest answer would have been, “Well, yes, as a matter of fact that does apply to me, and I wonder why you would think that would make me untrustworthy.”

(2) Judgment as an ethical and empirical test. What also troubles me about this example is that it sounds so much like what people do when they want to wield power from a safe distance. The evidence is anecdotal and personal, yet its lesson is taken as representative of a much wider phenomenon. It has the ring of a maxim, the magician’s trick of summing
up and smuggling in. I see absolutely no reason why the exercise of judgment—when conceived as the personalization of the theoretical—should or can function as an empirical or ethical test. I do see, however, how often judgment masquerades as social and ethical rationalization, a kind of macho subjectivity resistant to interrogation because it has the feel of common sense.

(3) Judgment as an implicit and personal virtue. One of Bellah’s chief claims throughout “The True Scholar” is that the liberal (and procedural) emphasis on freedom comes at the expense of the communitarian exercise of judgment, which can be quickly summed up as the evaluation of how theory explains or shapes what we do in the world. Judgment is not an inherent good because almost any action can be rationalized with respect to some normative value, whether that value is good or not. If anything, judgment—or the privilege to exercise it—is a consequence of freedom, not its cause, and in the case of the public intellectual, it is the freedom gained from public recognition, which too often also brings with it the license to reason anecdotally.

There is also another kind of judgment alluded to in the last paragraph of Bellah’s essay. He suggests that the cynics of the “strategic advantage” perspective preach gospel, not scientific truth. Of course they do, but it is not hard to see that capital is capitol just about everywhere you look. It was Freud himself in his Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, as Terry Eagleton notes, who wrote that “the motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one” (qtd. in Eagleton 151). In A Grammar of Motives, Burke argues that, as a matter of public principle, money can function as a substitute for god as a locus of motives. Bellah clearly regrets that substitutability and believes judgment to be inherently virtuous as the individual expression of freedom, the motiveless motive and the grounds for communal action, a disinterested but pure altruism.

I am much more taken by Marback’s more tempered and pragmatic sense of how judgment might be exercised by asking not whether what’s reasonable has integrity with respect to theoretical models or disciplinary knowledge but whether it makes any difference in what we do as teachers, scholars, or citizens. (It is a problem that vexed Wayne Booth throughout Modern Dogma and the Rhetoric of Assent.) The argument that what counts as reasonable should be measured by more than fidelity to disciplinary dogma makes good sense. Marback writes, “[S]tudent exceptions to research claims in composition studies [should] only count as
reasonable to the extent that those exceptions express a responsibility to purposes of teaching writing that themselves can be reasonably expressed in terms of individual aspirations, social norms, and political and economic conditions" (835). That argument is not inconsistent with those of resistance postmodernists, so long as being reasonable does not mean being exploited—politically or otherwise—by those same standards of reasonableness. Marback notes how easily the AAUP paid lip-service to "reasoned exception." The tendency has been for reasoned exception or resistance to become overly socialized and thus ironically unexceptional, so I'm eager to hear more from Marback about how we in composition studies can avoid being too hopelessly ourselves.

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Works Cited


Reviewing and Refocusing Doctoral Education in Composition Studies

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We need to establish curricular structures for our graduate programs in ways that acknowledge both the historical and the contemporary landscape. Successfully engaging in this task means doing more than calcifying old habits as we bemoan a constrained job market. Instead, we need to assess curricular offerings critically, to actually think again about what we require, and why, and whether the requirements continue to make sense in the contemporary context. . . . [W]e must convey to our students the complex intellectual relations and projects of the field as well as our obligations to be responsive to the world around us, using what we have come to know to make that world a better place.

—Jacqueline Jones Royster