We Compositionists: 
Toward Engaged Professionalism

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All professions are conspiracies against the laity.
—George Bernard Shaw

I think we ought to be more confused about what a profession is than we sometimes are.
—Laurence Veysey

At first, I thought graduate students in my composition theory seminar were just learning to be One of Us: being (super)critical, exercising intellectual arrogance, performing academic argument as ritual combat. Still, their impressions of compositionists—only slightly exaggerated here—struck me as bizarre, befuddling:

Compositionists are operatives in some secret, vaguely left-ish political movement.

Compositionists talk mainly to each other mostly about themselves.

Compositionists are by turns self-congratulatory, self-pitying, and self-loathing.

Compositionists like to complain . . . a lot.

For a while, I vigorously defended us compositionists against three of the charges (wink, wink). But lately, I’ve begun to think that their befuddlement at what strikes them as an almost neurotic discourse is not so strange after all. More than that: I’ve begun to share their sense that composition and rhetoric is stuck in a self-referential, recognizably middle-class psychodrama.

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While I'm aware of the absurdity of psychologizing an entire discipline, I suggest that compositionists' pervasive ambivalence about who we are and what we do is rooted in our collective inability to disentangle our disciplinary practices from our professional practices. While we wring our hands over the vagaries of a disciplinary system that does not accommodate our values, we lose sight of what is finally an even more important problem: our unwitting enactment of an anachronistic professional model—managerial professionalism. Put simply, I argue in this essay that "rethinking the discipline" is not enough; we must also reinvent the profession. I believe this is our only viable option if we are to have any chance of disrupting the widely-remarked corporatization of the academy, which has had such devastating consequences for academic labor practices, not least in composition and rhetoric.

Fear of Falling: Composition and Rhetoric's Disciplinary Guilt
The theme of the 2004 Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention—"Making Composition Matter"—is familiar. It echoes earlier CCCC themes, including "Connecting the Text to the Street" and "Composing Community." It recalls Marilyn Cooper's recent attempts to expand the readership of College Composition and Communication to include, among others, administrators, legislators, employers, parents, and alumni (364). And it's consistent with a whole range of efforts to make composition and rhetoric more "relevant," including various calls for "public intellectuals" (Cushman, Mortensen), the study of "everyday literacies" (Brandt; Daniell; Hawisher and Selfe); and service-learning (Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters; Deans; Herzberg; Wells; Welch).

What is behind this fear of not mattering? Program Chair Doug Hesse explains his choice for conference theme this way: "I hoped that we might treat our scholarship and practices not only as smart exchanges among ourselves but also as vital transactions with a world often not in our meetings, except by implication. How might we matter to students, citizens, and institutions—and still, of course, to ourselves?" (5). As I hope to show, this fear of not mattering—or, properly, of mattering only to ourselves—is pervasive in composition and rhetoric. And while it is in some respects salutary—providing impetus, for instance, for the worthwhile endeavors listed above—it also gives rise to what sometimes feels to me (and my students) like an almost neurotic self-questioning.

Consider, for instance, Robert Yagelski's complaints in his editor's introduction to The Relevance of English about our "ongoing profes-
sional obsession with self-definition” (5). Yagelski asks, sarcastically, “how many papers presented at the annual convention of, say, mathematics educators or biologists or even psychologists are devoted to questions of ‘disciplinarity’: What is biology? How do we define mathematics? Should we abolish psychology 101?” (5). First of all, it’s not at all clear to me why these are absurd questions; I can’t imagine how our colleagues could get away with not asking them. But I also wonder: If we compositionists—let’s let our English colleagues off the hook for a moment—are too busy navel-gazing to get on with our work, what is this work we’re not getting on with?

The short answer to this question is teaching. *The Relevance of English*, rife with powerful claims for the transformative power of teaching, does not offer a single sustained discussion of research or theory in its 17 essays and 3 exchanges. Indeed, Yagelski claims that “our classrooms, our curricula, and the structure of our schools have remained largely unchanged for most of the past century, despite various pedagogical reform movements, volumes of empirical research on writing instruction, and more theoretical arguments than we can cram into the ever-increasing number of professional journals and scholarly books” (4–5). This assertion is of course debatable—I, for one, think it’s a serious overstatement—but Yagelski’s point is clear: Our research and theory don’t amount to much. They are just what Hesse fears: exchanges only among ourselves.

Note, however, that this condemnation of research and theory appears in a book published by a scholarly press—and in a series called “Refiguring English Studies,” no less—creating a wonderfully circular, Woody Allenesque irony. We compositionists worry that we talk too much to each other, so what do we do? We talk to each other in print about this problem, diagnosing ourselves with narcissism, an unsettling insight that compels us to berate our flawed selves—again, in print . . . to each other. (I do not exempt myself. This essay stands as an apt example of the vagaries of the self-referencing discursive system: I am writing to compositionists about how we write and talk to each other about how we write and talk to each other. And I can’t say I feel all that good about it. Isn’t there more important work I should be doing?)

The culprit in all this, it appears, is disciplinarity. Numerous collections in composition and rhetoric offer sobering reminders that while we may have “made it” as a discipline, making it has its price, and that price is relevance. Examples abound:
The largely "self-congratulatory" (the editors' term) *History, Reflection, and Narrative*, which examines Composition and Rhetoric's growth as a discipline, nearly bursts with jeremiads about our special-interest infighting, arcane jargon, abdication of "practice" (again construed as teaching), community-enforced conformity, and a focus on critique rather than (re)construction (see Connors, Ohmann, Phelps, and exchanges). Robert Connors perhaps captures these worries best when he notes that "our movement toward disciplinarity may be a movement away from the human meaning of what we do" (16).

Several essays in Bloom, Daiker, and White's *Composition in the New Millennium* express the fear that Composition and Rhetoric is becoming irrelevant just like English Studies. The index of this irrelevance is the distance between what compositionists write about and what happens in writing classrooms. In other words, we know that we are irrelevant because composition "specialists" are removed from the scene that defines that specialty: the first-year writing classroom (S. Miller; Spellmeyer; Brueggeman). We are increasingly turning our backs on our mission, opting instead to theorize on the backs of abandoned writing teachers (Young). Kurt Spellmeyer sounds the alarm: "Surely we have arrived. But I still find myself haunted by doubt: where exactly does arrived put us? The truth may be that we have fought our way out of steerage only to claim a chair on the deck of a sinking ship, while we are eagerly waving our young protégées into the chairs beside us" (79).

The collection *Under Construction* contains several essays arguing that publishing scholars in Composition and Rhetoric systematically disenfranchise writing teachers. Chris Ferry claims that our disciplinary project requires that we pursue "scientific" knowledge-making "at the expense of seeing composition as an intellectual endeavor located in classrooms with students" (12). He and Peter Vandenberg both bemoan the "class system" that separates publishing scholars from teachers.

I am struck by two features of what we might call the "disciplinary guilt" that is audible in these texts. First, it pits compositionists—again, understood as publishing scholars—against teachers of writing. It has become an article of faith that compositionists have gained disciplinary authority only via the exploitation of writing teachers. Although I don't have the space to mount the countercase here, this argument—this assumption, rather—is not supported by historical evidence; it is a classic case of confusing correlation with causation. Anyone who thinks universities would not be exploiting writing teachers if composition and rhetoric had not gained disciplinary authority has not examined the material
history of first-year writing in higher education. At the same time, it is widely assumed that compositionists do not teach composition (see, for instance, David Bartholomae’s and Bruce Horner’s complaints about “composition ‘specialists’ who never teach composition” [Horner 390]). While many compositionists teach reduced loads, I don’t know any who “never teach composition.” Moreover, this line of argument plays into the hands of those who equate contact hours with faculty members’ productivity. Was I more of a composition “specialist” when I taught 5-5 at three different institutions, or when I had a 2-2 teaching load and led two statewide writing and assessment initiatives? Surely, time spent in the classroom is an impoverished metric for either teaching commitment or teaching impact.

Second—and more important for my present purposes—all the examples I’ve cited were written by well-known scholars in composition and rhetoric; these are people who choose to be part of the disciplinary system they’re critiquing. My point is not that they are hypocrites; like them, I am critical of this system in which I continue to participate. We compositionists know our Foucault well enough to understand that disciplinarity endlessly assimilates discourse, even when that discourse is anti-disciplinary (or postdisciplinary or nondisciplinary or whatever else we wish to call it). We know disciplinarity concerns the production and regulation of discourse, which in turn involves the production and regulation of individuals who are subject to the disciplines. And we know that this process of valorizing certain discourses means delegitimizing others and rendering them inaudible (Discipline; “Discourse”). So it’s not hard to see why we compositionists feel disciplinary guilt: we tend to think of our very mission as legitimizing and rendering audible the discourses of others, especially when they are marginalized.

At the same time, we understand that with disciplinary authority comes institutional cachet; our disciplinary work sponsors the apparatus that allows us to pursue our seemingly postdisciplinary or anti-disciplinary enterprise. So while we know that we are appropriating the very disciplinary assumptions, practices, and structures that have historically disfranchised us and devalued the teaching of writing (since it is “contentless,” void of disciplinary stuff), we feel we have no choice but to participate in this corrupt system (see Gallagher, Radical).

Now, if this all sounds a bit dramatic, that’s because for those of us who live it, it is. What compositionist, striving for tenure, has not wondered if her talents might do more good in the world outside the academy? What compositionist, upon earning tenure, has not felt some
guilt—and perhaps more than a touch of depression—as a result of being rewarded by a system that is demonstrably corrupt? What compositionist has not looked upon his publications and wondered, *Do these make a difference? How else could I have spent my time?* What compositionist, flying home from CCCC, has not despaired at the “environmental footprint” of that monster of a conference? In short, what compositionist has not worried that she is *a little too comfortable*?

And at the same time, it must be admitted that we compositionists fret over losing what we have—our jobs, our tenure, the respect of our colleagues, the relative autonomy of our programs, the colleagues we actually like, and so on. We seem to have grown into a distinctly middle-class anxiety famously described by Barbara Ehrenreich:

> a fear of inner weakness, of growing soft, of failing to strive, of losing discipline and will. Even the affluence that is so often the goal of all this striving becomes a threat, for it holds out the possibility of hedonism and self-indulgence. Whether the middle class looks down toward the realm of the less, or up toward the realm of the more, there is the fear, always, of falling. (15)

Whether we are looking “down” at “mere teachers” or “up” to our colleagues in literature and critical theory, we are plagued by self-doubt.

Of course, Ehrenreich was not writing about the disciplines; she was writing about the professions. And here we arrive at the crux of my argument: while it’s certainly true that disciplinarity poses serious problems for compositionists, it’s also true that we have a *professional* problem. Moreover, I believe it’s only through revising our professional practices that we can successfully ameliorate the more unsavory features of our work. “Rethinking the discipline,” as I’ve suggested, is not enough; disciplines have a limitless capacity to assimilate discourse—to the extent, in fact, that our collective hand-wringing over disciplinarity becomes disciplinary discourse. On the other hand, not only the substance but the *function* and *nature* of professions change to respond to—and sometimes to create—historical and social shifts. If we really want to change composition and rhetoric’s business-as-usual, we need to examine and change the professional model we practice.

Before I make that case, a pause for some terminological untangling.

**Disciplinarity and Professionalism**

In composition and rhetoric discourse, “professionalization” is often used to describe the process of becoming a discipline. For instance, the
subtitle of *History, Reflection, Narrative*—which, again, explores the nature of disciplinarity—is *The Professionalization of Composition, 1963–1983*. Similarly, Richard Ohmann wrote in 1976 that with the entrenchment of professionalization in English, “we can look forward with confidence, if not with pleasure, to more research, more unread articles, less relevance of literature to life, more seeking out of neglected works, more coverage for coverage’s sake, more minute specialization, more time-serving and ambition, less and worse teaching, less theory, less community” (17). For Ohmann and for many compositionists, “professionalization” names the process of giving in to the dictates of disciplinarity, including the insulation of professionals from outsiders (30). It is a commonplace in composition and rhetoric that professionalization is the process of scrambling after disciplinary rewards *rather than* doing the “work of the world.” Bruce Horner, Marc Bousquet, and others have called on compositionists to renounce academic professionalization and embrace instead organized political action and solidarity with “labor” (here construed as teachers). Horner exhorts us to “relinquish the quest for academic professionalization in defining the work of Composition and to construct a sense of tradition in Composition as an active and activating force central to its work” (“Traditions” 367). According to Horner, we need a “counter-hegemonic” discourse of marginalized tradition, which privileges “practical consciousness” and “working knowledge,” which are often unrecognized by “management” (read: scholars, WPAs,), concerned as it must be with our exchange value (371). Even more provocatively, Marc Bousquet advocates the extinction of the WPA. According to Bousquet, WPAs may represent themselves as advocates for workers (teachers), but they really represent the ruling class, since the success of that class is dependent upon the failure of the working class to win the labor struggle (499).

These arguments are compelling. Beyond their self-styled iconoclastic luster—for instance, Bousquet’s italicized insistence that composition “*exemplifies the ideal labor relation of the managed university*” (503)—they offer a kind of ideological purity that I suspect many compositionists find attractive (despite the angry responses Bousquet’s article engendered in these pages). Even Bousquet’s arrogant portrayal of compositionists as naïve dupes who do the bidding of capitalism might be forgiven since we do—yes, we really do—*want* to stop “pleasing the prince.” The problem with these arguments, however, is that they can’t *deliver* that ideological purity. Put simply, they don’t help us see how we might escape professionalization from within the academy. Can we
simply decide to repudiate professionalization while remaining active in academic institutions and disciplines—while, for instance, writing essays for *CCC* and *JAC*?

At the root of this problem—what I’m tempted to call an ideological impasse—is the conflation of disciplinarity and professionalism. These arguments equate professional practices with disciplinary practices and place them in opposition to “real work,” including organized political action. I believe this conflation is dangerous precisely because it constrains our ability to imagine—and, ultimately, to practice—professionalism (that is, a professional model) that extends beyond disciplinary strictures. It allows us no way to confront the institutional structures that we have inherited, leaving us with satisfying but ultimately empty calls to “rethink the discipline” or to “empower teachers as workers”—as if these were choices we simply had not yet thought to make.

I want to be clear: contending with inherited structures does not mean accommodating them. While I agree with Richard Miller that we need a “politics of impurity,” I emphatically do not agree that academics need to “leave off critiquing the academy for having failed to make good on its promise to deliver a meaningful, morally sacrosanct life and to begin, instead, to work within the fiscal and bureaucratic constraints that both enable the academic enterprise and limit its scope” (210). We should never leave off critiquing the academy; for progressive educators, the task is to change its most undemocratic and exploitative features. Certainly, this work includes political action—working with faculty, graduate students, and adjuncts to form unions and organize collective bargaining units, for instance. But that political action should be understood as a larger effort to change professional practices. The “choice” between professional-ization and political action is a spurious one and we can make little progress on either if they are carried out merely by arguing with each other about which is the proper work of composition and rhetoric.

At the root of this false choice is a particular version of professionalization and a certain understanding of what a profession is in the first place. That is, what passes for “professional practices” today emerged from a particular professional model with roots in a specific historical moment. It is important to examine this model because we will make little progress in reshaping our professional practices until we excavate the term “profession” from under the weight of its own regressive legacy.
Managerial Professionalism
Because we have not inspected the concept in significant depth, “profession” has become a mere commonplace in composition and rhetoric. It’s a placeholder in the discourse—useful as an epistemic and rhetorical shortcut, but dangerous for what it allows us to take for granted. When we use the term “profession,” we naturalize and make inescrutable a whole set of social relations. Moreover, this reification is particularly dangerous because it invokes the most regressive vestiges of an anachronistic model of professionalism.

That “commonsense” model of professionalism—managerial professionalism—teaches us that a profession includes the following:

- a body of knowledge, skills or techniques, and standards for ethical practice
- a formal system for admitting, training, and credentialing new members of the profession (usually involving higher education)
- a service ethos: that is, a commitment to serving others and society in general
- a system of self-regulation
- (accordingly:) autonomy from external regulation
- a certain amount of prestige in the eyes of the general public

But we should note that historians, sociologists, and economists provide no definitional consensus (within or across disciplinary borders), and, in fact, many scholars underscore the undefinability of “profession” (see, for instance, Abbott, Kimball, Veysey “Higher Education”). For instance, as Veysey notes, we tend not to consider poets professionals, though they appear to meet all these criteria. On the other hand, some musicians meet almost none of these criteria, but we may well elect to call them “professionals” as long as they make money at their craft.

Still, it is important to recognize that what we have come to understand as the professional ideal, however powerful, is but one version of professionalism—formative, yes, but also historically contingent (Kimball). We must recognize as well why and in whose interests this model of professionalism developed as it did.

Managerial professionalism was a product of industrial capitalism and constituted a thoroughly modernist response to the fragmentation and
social tumult of the time period that has been variously called The Gilded Age, the Age of Efficiency, and the Progressive Era. (These developments occurred in both the U.S. and in parts of Europe, including Great Britain, but I confine my observations here to the U.S.). It trained and installed a new class of “experts” to handle the technical problems and challenges emerging during that time. For this reason, managerial professionalism valued above all efficiency, rationality, and economy. As historian Bruce Kimball suggests, this version of professionalism was also premised on “the science of education.” During this period, the “institutional locus” of science and progress became higher education, with its specializations evolving around discrete bodies of knowledge (212). Today, of course, this development seems natural—an extension, perhaps, of distinctly American, Jeffersonian educational ideals. But as Kimball is careful to point out, it was not inevitable that education would become the primary institutional seat of science. That role could have been played by the military, the government, or industrial corporations, for instance. Instead, universities came to house the vast majority of scientists between 1860 and 1920. This development is significant for two reasons: first, it helps explain how this particular professional ideal took root in the national consciousness, and second, it helps us to see how education itself was professionalized around this ideal.

Like so many products of this period, managerial professionalism was the result of multiple, sometimes competing forces. In one sense, it was profoundly democratic; as Bledstein suggests, “The culture of professionalization incarnated the radical idea of the independent democrat, a liberated person seeking to free the power of nature within every worldly sphere, a self-governing individual exercising his trained judgment in an open society” (87). On the other hand, this “independent democrat” was also a specialist, a holder of expertise that the “laity,” by definition, did not have. He (the pronoun is purposeful) was a “scientist,” and thus dispassionate, detached from the world. And though his profession may have been informed by a service ethos, his primary responsibilities and loyalties lay with the guild of which he was a part. Thus, if managerial professionalism was infused with the spirit of democracy, it was also infused with the spirit of capitalism. As Larson explains, professionalization under industrial capitalism—as opposed, for instance, to professionalization under aristocratic patronage—became an attempt both “to constitute and control a market” for expertise (xvi). In an even larger sense, professionalization was an attempt to build an infrastructure for a new meritocracy in the competitive industrial economy.
Moreover, with the shift from industrial to corporate capitalism during the Progressive Era, the “sovereign person” became an “organization man.” As Larson explains, a subtle but significant mutation occurred here: the “free practitioner in a market of services” became “the salaried specialist in a large organization” (xviii). Thus, the “bureaucratization” of the professions facilitated the consolidation of this managerial model. These huge bureaucracies were viewed as good for American capitalism and American democracy: “Progressive reformers viewed the rise of bureaucratic organizations staffed by trained experts and employing scientific objectivity as the only way to sustain and renew the best of American democracy” (Hatch 6). This view effectively naturalized managerial professionalism: of course experts know what’s best; of course they will lead the way to a better tomorrow. Experts came to be viewed as controlling “the magic circle of scientific knowledge which only the few, specialized by training and indoctrination, were privileged to enter” while “ordinary” people became increasingly dependent upon experts (Bledstein 90).

The bureaucracy that did the most to propagate these views was the academy. Universities provided the ideological rationale for meritocracy and the knowledge and expertise that professionals would need to enter into and be credentialed in their fields. It’s true that, owing in large measure to the influence of the American Association of University Professors (1915), the “professional ideal” for professors was shaped by a resistance to corporate ideals and an insistence on academic freedom and self-regulation. But while professors’ professionalization developed in response to the centralized management of universities and the academic CEOs who embodied that authority, it was also part and parcel of managerial professionalism. This accounts for most of what we today take as the hallmarks of academic life: our “patterned isolation” (Veysey, Emergence); our relative autonomy and self-regulation; our curious blend of “free practitioner” and “salaried specialist”; and so on.⁴

As several essays in Burton Clark’s The Academic Profession suggest, however, that very term—the academic profession—is a misnomer. The academic profession houses, creates, and controls other professions. Also, as we have seen, it is implicated in and often conflated with disciplinary structures. Moreover, its workforce is “peculiarly heterogeneous” (Clark “Introduction” 5). In truth, the academy houses a diverse set of academic professions and cultures with nearly endless divisions of labor and various initiation rituals and practices, social interactions, subject matters, and so on (Becher, Ruscio). Clark summarizes: “The
contradictions could hardly be sharper: a strong stress on individuality occurs within guildlike and communitylike communal social units that are in turn encapsulated or closely supported by large bureaucracies and the modern state. A strange profession indeed" ("Conclusions" 372; see also Marshall 109).

So while the academy serves as the institutional locus of managerial professionalism, many academic professionals—including, of course, compositionists—do not fit neatly into this model. This disjunction provides an opportunity to disrupt professional practices we have inherited from managerial professionalism and to work toward a new model of professionalism more appropriate to our historical moment and more conducive to democratic practices. For compositionists, this should mean getting past our hand-wringing over disciplinarity and our dead-end arguments about whether we need to professionalize or engage in political action by forging a new model of professionalism and professional practices that themselves constitute political action.

A New Professionalism for a New Progressive Era
Managerial professionalism, as we have seen, is a product of economic and social forces emerging (or coming to a head) during The Progressive Era. A new class of professionals emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to anxiety about the rapid economic and technological changes of the time. These professionals, experts in their respective fields, had a mandate: to develop scientifically sound expertise to make social institutions run more efficiently, rationally, and cost-effectively. This effort included the schools, of course. An influential group of policy and administrative elites emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century hell-bent to align schools with corporate ideology and practices. As historian Joel Spring observes, school administrators during this period "professionalized around ... values of cost efficiency and school management" (250). Other historians (Tyack, Callahan, Cremin) have explored the rise of school boards, modeled on corporate boards and stocked with local businessmen committed to ensuring that the schools would not miss the scientific management boat. Callahan's summary captures the general trend:

The procedures for bringing about more businesslike organization and operation of the schools was fairly well standardized from 1900 to 1925. It consisted of making unfavorable comparisons between the schools and business enterprise, of applying business-industrial criteria (e.g. economy
Anyone with a passing awareness of what is happening in schools these days will find Callahan's description familiar. Today, public education is "contracted out" to for-profit companies. Schools are "sponsored" by corporations. Children are barraged by commercial advertisements as they walk the school hallways or sit in the stands at their schools' athletic fields. Kindergartners take standardized tests produced by private companies operating at an obscene profit. (Gallagher, "Seat"; Bracey.)

Placing these developments into a larger context, Michael Apple limns what he calls the "new managerialism," in which "a relatively autonomous fraction of the managerial and professional class has taken on even more power in directing social and educational policies in directions that actually give this particular group of people more power and new identities as well" (29). We see this in all areas of social policy, including tax policies, defense contracting, international trade, and so on. But nowhere is it more apparent than in education. Apple explains: "These are people with backgrounds in management and efficiency techniques who provide the technical and 'professional' support for accountability, measurement, 'product control,' and assessment that is required by the proponents of neoliberal policies of marketization and neoconservative policies of tighter central control in education" (57).

As an attendee of national conferences on educational assessment and accountability, I know some of these people. I have eaten well and drunk much at their lavish receptions (complete with huge ice sculptures, free desk calendars, and open bars). I have wandered wide-eyed through aisles of their products: textbooks, online tests, curricular and instructional packages (easily aligned to your state standards!), consulting services, accountability guides, software that runs validity and reliability checks on assessments—in all manner of colorful, interactive multimedia. I have even had a drink or two in their hotel rooms (they're kind of fun, these smart, brash, young professionals out to conquer the world and make a buck). I can attest that (as Apple notes) these people do not necessarily hold ideologically with the neoconservatives; in fact, many—maybe most—regard themselves as liberal. They consider their work "neutral": they are merely developing a product that the market needs. And yes, they mercilessly stoke that market—but, hey, this is America, right? They can't quite believe that no one has yet "tapped" this huge, stable market in this way. (They tend not to be students of history.)
And as they look to the future, they see another huge, related market: higher education.

We compositionists are no strangers to the new managerialism. The teaching of writing has long been “outsourced” to contract labor and, in some states, banished from the hallowed halls of universities altogether. For some time, well-respected compositionists in the City University of New York system have been warning us that responsible teaching and learning is often trumped by administrative efficiency and economy (Shor; Gleason; Soliday). Now, in higher education around the country, we see a focus on “outcomes-based assessment,” an accountability device driven by accreditation agencies and administrators, rather than teachers. As has long been the case in k-12 education, assessment is being used in postsecondary settings not as a formative tool for program and instructional improvement, but as a stick: a public accounting of bottom-line results. Writing programs—always viewed as a public commodity—are particularly vulnerable to these political forces.

None of this will come as news to readers of this article. My point is that the cure for the new managerialism is not more managerial professionalism. We compositionists cannot continue to believe that “rethinking” either the discipline or labor practices while continuing to practice professional business as usual will be enough to stem the tide of the new managerialism. Approaching our professional ills as a matter of rethinking the relationship between researchers-as-professionals and teachers-as-workers—whether “pragmatically” (Harris; R. Miller) or “radically” (Bousquet; Horner)—oversimplifies an academic labor system that does not conform to traditional labor categories. As much as we may hate to admit it, professors (including compositionists) are workers who experience intensification, deskill, and alienation from their labor (Aronowitz; Martin; Readings; Slaughter and Leslie).

Perhaps the most pressing task for “progressive” compositionists today is to disrupt the regressive tradition of managerial professionalism and forge a new model of professionalism for a new progressive era. The cornerstone of this alternative model would be participatory professional practices: shared knowledge-making with partners inside and outside the academy. In stark contrast to managerial professionalism, engaged professionalism would aim to democratize knowledge and knowledge-making, placing academic professionals in ever-expanding dialogue with other knowledge-makers (teachers, students, community members, policymakers, politicians, and so on). The very purpose of professionalism, in this model, would be to redeploy professional expertise as a tool
for expanding, rather than constricting, access to public conversations and institutional practices. Compositionists, for instance, would use their expertise to engage students, community members, policymakers, and others in reflective deliberation about the nature and purpose of writing and writing education. As "experts" trained and paid to study and practice writing, compositionists would be expected to know a great deal about writing. But our professional task as engaged professionals would not be to collect and protect knowledge from "the laity," but rather to collaborate with the laity to make and share knowledge about writing as broadly as possible.

What I have in mind here as a professional practice is similar to what James Slevin imagines as a disciplinary practice: "the act of inviting and enabling others to shape [the] conversation" (41). This disciplinary "refiguring" is important, but it does not reckon with existing institutional arrangements and cultures. As I discuss above, disciplines are more or less isolated from professional practices: "The disciplinary measure of success . . . purposefully displaces any accountability to people immediately affected by a practical innovation" (Downing 26). Indeed, for David Downing, the key to changing professional practices may be to unmoor them from disciplinary strictures, refusing to allow disciplinary criteria to remain the only measure of academic success and curricular planning. In other words, the best way to counter managerial professionalism, including the corrupt labor practices it sponsors, is to develop a professional model that expands beyond disciplinary metrics.

How do we begin imagining engaged professionalism? The good news is that some of the kind of work I have in mind is already underway and long has been, perhaps especially at two-year and liberal arts colleges. It is less familiar to those of us who work in large research institutions. The bad news is that more and more two- and four-year schools are adopting the research university model, effectively reducing academic professional practices to disciplinary activities. While many such schools continue to craft job ads that privilege service, for instance, the publishing requirements for those jobs often, and increasingly, resemble those of research universities. So if the ideas and practices outlined below are to take root, they must be made visible and argued for where they exist and initiated where they do not.

What engaged professionals can do:

*Seek out and form local alliances.* We can refuse to have our professional identities determined solely by our relationship with a national network of
scholars in our field. Alliance projects might include educational initiatives with PreK-12 teachers, union organizing with academic and other workers (along with other initiatives to improve labor conditions for workers), partnerships with community organizations, dialogues with policymakers, and so on. In my department, faculty work with local high schools, a multi-university peer review of teaching project, a National Writing Project site, the state department of education, the local NAACP chapter, a local rape crisis agency, a community playhouse, etc. My own work has included an ongoing PreK-16 articulation project with teachers in the schools, a three-year evaluation of my state’s assessment system, and a partnership with a local literacy center.

Create settings for dialogue, collaborative knowledge-building, and collective action. The alliances we form should not be about simply sharing our knowledge with others (popularizing our expertise), but about shared knowledge-making. For instance, although many state PreK-16 projects quickly devolve into deficit thinking and playing the blame game, our project generated fruitful cross-institutional dialogue and a collective articulation of educational values to which teachers across grade levels and institution types subscribe (see <www.nde.state.ne.us/read>).

Push academic institutions and professional organizations to value and reward engaged professionalism. Many compositionists already do the kinds of work I’ve outlined above, often “on the side,” or as part of their service requirement. What we have not done is lobbied effectively in our institutions or professional organizations to value and reward this work as central to our professional profiles. For instance, when I argued (unsuccessfully) for the annual reports I wrote as part of the evaluation of my state’s k-12 assessment system to be included in the research folder of my tenure file rather than the service folder, I was unable to call upon established professional practices and rationales supporting the rewarding of “local” research. Although I could provide detailed research protocols and demonstrate that these reports have influenced every public school in my state, it was my academic book, with sales at that time of barely 200 copies, that garnered—indeed, was virtually guaranteed to garner—a favorable review of my “research.”

What academic institutions can do:

Seek and form local alliances. As Derek Owens suggests, institutions of higher education are often among the least responsible stewards of local resources, including (but not limited to) human relationships. Materially, ethically, and intellectually, college and university campuses are often severed from the communities in which they are housed. Little wonder,
then, that academic professionals do not receive support and encouragement for local work with teachers, community groups, nonprofit agencies, etc. But colleges and universities are well positioned to facilitate meaningful local research and action on issues important to local stakeholders. For instance, the regents of my university have begun meeting with our state board of education to develop a range of initiatives related to cross-institutional work. These projects bring postsecondary faculty—including those of us in the Arts and Sciences—to the table of educational reform, connecting us as partners in this effort rather than architects of change for teachers in the schools.

Redefine traditional categories of academic work. In my view, research and teaching should be defined as two forms of the collaborative discovery and sharing of knowledge. "Service" should be done away with as a category of academic work, but academic professionals should be expected to demonstrate how their research and teaching both involve and affect others within and beyond their immediate institution. So instead of ticking off how many committees faculty sit on or how much administrative work they do, personnel committees might instead consider how professionals contribute to the collaborative discovery and sharing of knowledge in multiple sites—including, of course, on committees and in academic programs.

Design real peer review processes locally. At present, in most institutions, peer review is more or less "outsourced." Departmental colleagues make (or recommend) promotion and tenure decisions, but they rely heavily—sometimes exclusively—on the judgments of experts elsewhere (those in the candidate's field). We should allow departmental colleagues to render genuine judgments about candidates based on the quality of their work, as measured by how it involves and affects others. We should solicit testimony, for instance, from local stakeholders in the work of academic professionals—community members, policymakers, leaders of community organizations and educational initiatives, faculty and administrators from other departments, students, and so on. And this testimony should count. For instance, the letter in my tenure file from my state Commissioner of Education about the contributions I have made to the state's assessment policies should be considered more than "gravy" next to the letters of anonymous (to me, and in effect to most of my departmental colleagues) reviewers in my field who are qualified to comment on the influence of my scholarship on a very small circle of people. Similarly, as a member of our personnel committee, I would like to "count" those "outreach" projects of my colleagues as at least as important as the judgments of people I've never heard of whose credentials I don't understand and whose motives are obscure to me.
Reduce the cachet of academic publishing. There is a place in academic life for publications (say, an article like this one...), but it should be a much smaller part of the lives of academic professionals than it currently is. Reducing the pressure on academic publishing while ratcheting up the pressure for meaningful local contributions would benefit multiple parties. Academic professionals would benefit from a more realistic and fair reward system. They might also have cause to care more about their work and not just their curriculum vitae. Further, the quality of their research would likely increase with the reduction of pressure to rush publications to print. Universities and communities would benefit from faculty who consider themselves local citizens with considerable and useful expertise mobilizing conversations about important ideas and projects. The national publishing organs of the academic professions would benefit from becoming more sustainable. The environment would benefit from the reduction in print publications and enormous, resource-sapping academic conferences.

What professional organizations can do:

Seek and form local alliances. Like colleges and universities, professional organizations are organized primarily to serve the interests of a national network of professionals (and typically with the same kind of shameless disregard for natural resources). They tend as a result not to emphasize local political action. But since most politics, including most academic politics, are local, professional organizations such as the MLA and the CCCC would provide an important service by connecting with regional and state organizations to do grassroots political work. For instance, the CCCC could partner with various local teacher unions or with chapters of the AAUP to organize initiatives for collective bargaining and the building of a more just academic labor system.

Build professional advocacy networks to counter the new managerialism. As a colleague and I recently suggested to the leaders of CCCC, members of that organization should be lobbying across the country and in Washington against those who are stripping teachers of their professionalism and in support of those who empower teachers and students, rather than corporations and other experts remote from the scene of instruction. We should marshal resources for educational activists who wish to build alliances against high-stakes testing, for instance. This could include a research clearinghouse, a newsletter keeping the membership apprised of developments in educational policy at the state and federal levels, and advocacy workshops for those interested in organizing and mobilizing political action.
By way of concluding, let me say I recognize that my proposals are neither uncontroversial nor easy to achieve. The uncontroversial part doesn’t much concern me; I offer these ideas not as a program, but as a conversation-starter. Let’s talk about why these are good or bad ideas; let’s figure out, together, what engaged professionalism would look like and what its implications would be.

There remains, though, the matter of difficulty. Can we pull it off? Certainly we cannot simply decide to drop the managerial model in favor of engaged professionalism—especially if by “we,” we mean compositionists alone. Managerial professionalism afflicts the entire university, after all; if our colleagues in history, sociology, and biology continue to function as they always have, any gesture we compositionists make toward engaged professionalism will be just that—a gesture. But the point of engaged professionalism is to build dialogic, participatory structures: to invite others into conversation and shared knowledge-making. Although we might begin by talking mainly to each other mostly about ourselves, we will miss the point entirely if the conversation stops there. Our very work will be to reach out to others, inside and outside the academy, to build a broad coalition to change professional practices. And perhaps—just perhaps—with time and persistence, this conversation and the actions we take in response to it will bring us closer to Barbara Ehrenreich’s utopian program for the professional middle class: “to expand the class, welcoming everyone, until there remains no other class” (263).

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Notes

1. Ohmann’s position seems to have shifted, however. Though his English in America insists that professionalization is incommensurate with organized political action, he praises composition and rhetoric in more recent work for “professionalizing politics,” making social conflict and even partisanship part of what we do, even as we have become more “disciplined” (“Professionalizing”).

2. A recent explicit argument in favor of “professionalization” instead of political action may be found in Margaret Marshall’s Response to Reform, in which the author claims that “the argument that improving material conditions will lead to improved teaching . . . has to date relied on a rhetoric of labor that further distances teachers from the power of professionalization and reinforces the controls of management” (3). Like Bousquet, Marshall insists that we must
make a choice; but unlike Bousquet, she argues that professionalization must win out because "casting [material conditions of teachers' work] as issues of labor and not as issues of our profession reinscribes teaching as labor and professors as professionals because of their scholarly expertise alone" (139). Although Marshall questions the binary between profession and labor, verbal traps like this one ensure that we will not get out of it.

3. Although I don't have time to develop this here, this particular instance of reification is an important part of the larger process in which material conditions and relations of production operate independent of human consciousness.

4. David Damrosch recalls Clark Kerr's observation that we academics are merely a group of entrepreneurs with little in common other than our shared grievance over parking (56). He claims, for instance, that "[w]ith little or no direction coming from the top, the university bureaucracy really works as an antibureaucracy, whose ideal is to allow the greatest possible number of individuals to pursue their own private interests with the least possible interaction" (59). This seems to me an overstatement, as it ignores the ever-increasing authority of the university upper-administrator. Still, the quip usefully underlines an important feature of academic life.

5. This "neutral" stance contrasts with the "do it for the children" liberalism I found among the test developers and scorers I knew during the late eighties and early nineties. While the latter saw themselves as part of a social movement to improve education (the "standards movement," which would ensure that every child received a good education), the psychometricians and "consultants" I have met more recently are slick, urbane, self-interested entrepreneurs to the bone.

6. My reconception of academic work has some resonance with Ernest Boyer's argument for four types of scholarly work in Scholarship Reconsidered (1990). We share dissatisfaction with the traditional, trinitarian conception of academic work and we both wish to underscore how knowledge is used. But while Boyer made "scholarship" the central term for various deployments of knowledge (discovery, integration, application, and teaching), I retain the serviceable terms teaching and research while insisting upon the importance not only of affecting others (deploying knowledge) but also involving them in the making of knowledge. While I believe the latter asks more of us, I believe as well that it has a better chance of winning support in universities because it (deceptively?) retains two of the three traditional terms of our work while jettisoning—or renaming, really—what most of us consider the least savory of the three.

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