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Cracks in the Cornerstone: Toward More Informed Decision-Making in Rhetorical Education

Part of the journal section "Reviews and Responses" [A Review and Response to the 2015 Forum, Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community]

David M. Grant "*Cracks in the Cornerstone: Toward More Informed Decision-Making in Rhetorical Education*"

1. In their forum on the First-Year Cornerstone course, April Chatham-Carpenter and Deedee Heistad (2015) explain their memories of developing the program and sketch a vision of what they hope they have achieved. Certainly, all involved have worked "toward the goal of helping first-year students succeed in college," and they should be commended for their dedication and efforts to bring together often disconnected parts of the university in the name of improving student learning, retention, and overall satisfaction. As an early member of the planning team who assisted bringing the proposal for Cornerstone to the Liberal Arts Core Committee in 2010 and as a participant in teaching Cornerstone during its initial pilot, I would affirm that the program has great potential and that there was a great deal of excellent work laying important theoretical and philosophical principles for the course's aims, purposes, and outcomes. However, as Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad demonstrate in their forum and in other statements, those basic and important principles are not always what appear to lead the way. To their credit, Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad certainly spent many hours and worked very hard to establish the program and grow it. Yet, their forum allows a more distanced observation of their work, one which suggests areas for improvement and further research-based consideration so that Cornerstone might not only boast of its collaborative excellence, but also boast of its excellence in teaching first-year students the value of communication, critical thinking, and civility as a necessary and connected domain of life in the 21st Century. Such a program has the potential to significantly strengthen teaching, learning, scholarship, and service across the entire campus.

2. While I am more than sympathetic to the often difficult work of Chatham-Carpenter, Heistad, and the many adjuncts who have labored above and beyond their contract, I have to ask how Cornerstone might have been more responsive to scholarship and research, especially with respect to its emphasis on written composition, speech, and rhetorical pedagogy. One of my areas of specialty is in these very intersections, and so I may have a helpful perspective to offer. In my work with the Rhetoric Society of America, such as helping draft the "Mt. Oread Manifesto" with Bill Keith and Roxanne Mountford (2014), I have had the great fortune to hear

both written composition and speech communication scholars discuss how "boundary crossing," as Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad call it, is rooted in the intersecting histories, theories and methods the fields have developed over the previous century. While Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad are correct in some of their claims regarding the difficulties of managing Cornerstone and its need for faculty development, high-quality assessment, and recognition of deeply-rooted disciplinary practices and perspectives, I find it curious that they do not detail particular methods discussed by scholars of rhetoric, written composition, or speech communication. Rather, in the forum, these ideas are glossed without the kind of attention to subtleties and difference working with language entails.

3. At the heart of this essay, then, I call for Cornerstone administrators and UNI as a community to pay closer heed to the knowledge base of the scholarly areas of rhetorical education, composition, and first-year speech, especially Writing Program Administration (often designated here by its acronym, WPA). How to do this is a vexing but important question, not only for Cornerstone, but for general education and the continued delivery of high-quality instruction across campus. Sadly, because UNI has been traditionally underfunded, lurching from economic crisis to economic crisis, it has not been able to build in these areas and capitalize on them in the same ways as have the University of Iowa, Iowa State, and institutions of our own similar size and scope. For example, in the 2009 UNI English program review, the external reviewers noted with some concern that, unlike its peers and, indeed unlike most universities today, the department had only one faculty member specializing in written composition. Quite often a composition person or team – the WPA or WPAs – are faculty who play a leading role in shaping and managing the general education writing program or programs. They not only teach courses in writing and rhetorical theory, but also do the work necessary for the institution to ensure it is meeting its obligation in regards to writing and literacy. This may take on a variety of forms (see Gladstein and Regaignon 2012 for possibilities). And because it typically falls to a faculty member (or members) of the English department, it may not be a traditional administrator position, but be “instead quasi-administrative, characterized by a lot of responsibility but no authority and no budget” (McLeod 2004, 8). Echoing this, Schwalm (2002) regards some WPA work as “task,” rather than “position.” When a position, WPAs have a clear title, budget, responsibilities, and place within the administrative structure. When task it “is something that needs to be done around the campus, but it includes no positional standing in the administrative hierarchy and often is quite open-ended or ill-defined in terms of responsibilities, expectations, and rewards” (10). UNI has traditionally used WPA labor in ways that are based in the task. However, without a robust series of courses to underwrite additional faculty lines for the tasks of WPA work at UNI, there is simply little opportunity for the campus to know and understand, let alone engage in “best practices” discussed in the research.

4. A sentiment similar to the 2009 review is expressed in the English program's latest review of 2015, which, while praising many areas, also describes the curriculum as "strikingly traditional, not to say conservative" for its focus on literature. The graduate program in English was also highlighted for the way "it privileges literature, and this is problematic for meeting the needs of 21st century learners." In short, what UNI may not realize, because the English program is only

now realizing the scope of the matter, is that there has been what one reviewer verbally suggested was “a paradigm shift” in English studies. The study of literature and attention to close, critical reading has not gone away nor has it been replaced or devalued; it has been expanded to encompass writing -- the contexts of learning to write, written performance, technologies of writing, and "the intellectual as well as bureaucratic work involved in" coordinating and providing oversight of that learning, its contexts, and technologies (McLeod 2004, 3).

5. This paradigm shift poses specific challenges to both the Department of Languages and Literatures and to the university as a whole, especially with regards to courses like Cornerstone. I do not know if there has been a correlating shift in the discipline of speech and Department of Communication Studies, but the two fields are increasingly in dialogue. Without courses in the English major to justify the hiring of more composition and writing specialists who could inform the university on the methods it needs for sound decision-making, the department cannot fill positions. While the 2015 English program review suggested prioritizing the Professional Writing program (a minor) as a potential to underwrite this work, the department needs to maintain an eye on providing for the literature faculty already employed and protecting their already established workload.

6. Yet, hiring for a WPA position is similarly fought. Where would they be placed in the academic hierarchy? They would likely want tenure, as spelled out in the "Portland Resolution: Guidelines for Writing Program Administrator Positions" (1992). Where would it be granted? Would they be a deanlet without teaching requirements? What constituency of faculty would they oversee, how often, and could they oversee instructors of English yet not serve on any departmental PACs or other mechanisms of faculty oversight? What would ensure that their vision and actions would be heeded should there be a clash with either the head of Languages and Literatures, the department coordinator of writing, or the English faculty as a whole? What would safeguard the visions of these other constituents if the situation was reversed? And, as the testimonials by instructors in the article indicates, how would they guide the requisite collaboration?

7. Rather than answer any of the above questions, or even suggest these are the only important ones, I instead want to pose them to faculty, staff, and administrative officers. A genuine dialogue from these questions is better than a lone voice and adds to the collaborative spirit evidenced in Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad's forum. As with all dialogue, there will be some flim-flammery of jockeying for position, defending turf, and pitting offices (and their budgets) against one another in order to consolidate power and initiate one's own agenda. I'm sure this article can be cynically viewed as my own attempt to do the same. As sparingly as they may occur, such things happen to institutions in lean times. Yet, I also have faith that there are more good apples than bad in our endeavor and that these questions will be taken seriously by those good apples as a means to improve what we do. It will take a concerted effort of discussion and dialogue to treat with seriousness our common problems and eschew temptations to cynicism. Through honest dealings around real problems, I think we can help carve out a distinctive place

for UNI in the higher education landscape by tackling a very real problem. I've seen it done elsewhere -- it is often a route through which institutions manage to rectify, for a time, budgetary and political woes. We have both and so I hope to help make it happen again.

8. To be clear, I am not asserting composition or speech practices as the cure for all ills. I am pointing to these areas in the instance of Cornerstone as a case of what might happen if we bring more scholarly expertise to the table than we have done thus far. Composition is not about literary writing or providing an entry point to the English major, but about the everyday sorts of writing and literacy acts which human beings use to learn, coordinate activities, maintain relationships, and participate in social and civic endeavors. Speech is not just about how to organize a Power Point, but about how to work well with one's fellow human beings and maintain the interpersonal civility necessary for a pluralistic society. Writing and speaking are the very milieu in which all students of the university will be expected to acquire information, demonstrate their acquisition of it, and apply language to specific situations in order to demonstrate their capability to use information for purposeful ends. This cuts across STEM fields, humanities, performance, social science, education, and business. Scholars of speech and writing have a robust history regarding their pedagogies, the social and institutional contexts in which communication does and does not operate fully, racial and gender relations, class and labor barriers, normative assumptions of performance, rhetorical analyses of technical language and design, and, increasingly, how technology blurs the once distinct lines which sundered speech communication from literary English in 1914. Given this, there is opportunity to inform local decision-making outside the assumptions of what Julie Drew (1999) called "the universal teacher-subject" or the rather bland idea that all teaching (and teachers) is pretty much the same.

9. Instead of raising questions and then answering them like so many academic articles do, I will leave these answers up to you, the readers, in order to make my call for dialogue as genuine as can be. I hope it will allow a real conversation to happen. I will, however, provide information on composition, WPA scholarship, and speech, using that information to read Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad's forum such that I call out strengths and weaknesses. Doing so helps underscore and frame the questions from a research-based, disciplinary stance rather than from a stance of personal affiliation, political allegiance, or subjective whim. After providing my disciplinary reading, I then turn to some potential activities and methods UNI could undertake in response to its current predicament.

A Compositionist Reads Cornerstone

10. The way writing is embedded into the curricular structure and ongoing work of the university is exceedingly complex, requires an enormous amount of coordination, and could touch on activities as diverse as

working out the curricula for the various writing courses, ...be[ing] in charge of TA training, of finding ways to integrate the adjuncts into the program without treating them like superannuated TAs, and of teaching graduate courses (often pedagogy courses for the TAs but sometimes also the methods courses for secondary education,

courses in rhetoric, creative writing, technical writing, and literature). [Someone must] also handle grade complaints; plagiarism issues; staffing, hiring, evaluating, and sometimes firing TAs and adjuncts; working with the administration and other institutions on articulation agreements; and planning or helping to plan the program's budget (McLeod 2004, 8).

We have many, disparate personnel doing much of this work, but little coordination among them. As it exists at UNI, composition is largely defined by one graduation requirement: LAC 1A, a requirement outside the sole provenance of English, though quite informed by the department's faculty. College Writing and Research (CWR) used to be the main course for this requirement, though Cornerstone has surpassed it. CWR numbers have also been hampered by cross-listed, "writing-enhanced" courses in literature and philosophy, a series of decisions made over the years to handle enrollment bottlenecks and fend off waiving the writing requirement for some based on their standardized test scores. Add to this the various ways students earn credit for LAC 1A before even entering UNI – dual-enrollment, AP course scores, etc. – and it adds up to eleven separate ways UNI students can check that requirement off their list and graduate sooner, though perhaps not wiser (see Appendix). If this isn't complex enough, UNI, like most other universities, has additional courses in basic writing, a Writing Center, and departments and colleges with their own programs and messages about writing, their own assessments of it, and their own budgets.

11. Composition research and/or experience is necessary for the good functioning of writing instruction at UNI because investigation of "common-sense" assumptions about teaching writing has been part of the research, experimentation, and learning done in the field since at least the early 1960s. This began a period of research programs and theorization which led to pedagogical and curricular reforms (see Berlin 1984, Crowley 1998, North 1997, and Hairston 1982 for fuller historical and theoretical elaborations). These reforms began to see writing as an iterative rhetorical process rather than a simple matter of organizing one's thoughts and putting them down onto a page. As an iterative process, writing is understood as an activity through which learning happens, not just a measure of what students have already learned. As a rhetorical activity, writing depends as much upon the audience to whom one writes (often the teacher) and the writer's perception of that audience as it does upon competence with mechanics, genre, and grammar. Indeed, to even gain competence in grammar and mechanics students must be embedded within actual rhetorical situations and receive "readerly" kinds of feedback (Sommers 2010). Both teaching and assessment of writing, then, have turned from individual mastery of a single, finished product to the kinds of productions that support 21st century literacies: the kinds that understand a final product as arising from what Jonathan Monroe (2003) describes as the key to the success of Cornell University's WAC program, "the teaching of writing as a nexus of interaction" between students, instructors, genres, disciplinary knowledge, and institutional structures (258). Without including such knowledge at various stages of university planning and activity -- the *why* of the reforms as well as the *what* of the practices -- writing programs are likely to repeat past failures, squander resources sorely needed in other areas of the academic budget, and suffer from reputational damage among employment recruiters, alumni, and other stakeholders. This doesn't amount to letting the composition person or people do all the work.

Rather, the key to any program's success lies in collaboration and collective decision-making *based on this knowledge* to allow the different offices and personnel of the university work together in an informed way.

12. From this perspective, Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad's forum reveal a number of directions for both praise and blame. First, the very laudable and collaboratively developed schema of "three overlapping course goals" is a nuanced visual representation of the intertwined rhetorical and pedagogical theories discussed in the workshops where the curriculum was developed. The areas of communication, civility, and college success are inseparable as one leads into the other on both individual and social dimensions. It appears to crystallize a network of rhetorical theory as expressed in both written composition and speech communication (e.g., Smitherman 1977, Berlin 1988, Miller 1998, Keith 2007, Rice 2012, Rood 2014, Duffy 2014). Most appealing to me is the fact that it makes clear the imperative to not just teach for narrow, utilitarian purposes, but for an informed civil discourse which spans vocation, family, and civic participation. As Craig Rood (2014) asks in light of a debate between invitational and confrontational approaches to civil discussion, "How, if at all, is the debate over civility presented in introductory rhetoric courses, particularly writing and speaking courses? Put another way, how do theory and practice interact at the most basic level of contemporary rhetorical pedagogy?" (332).

13. We might ask the same question of Cornerstone in order to ascertain and align curricular initiatives and teaching practices across campus. The origin of Cornerstone's overlapping course goals as a product of the first, perhaps idealistic but still formative and important training sessions suggests to me that following such questions are a key promise of how Cornerstone's parts might come together. One can discern that such scholarship is the mortar which can also be helpful to building College Writing and Research, Oral Communication, and First-Year Studies into a more solid foundational block. It is a striking statement of vision and aspiration for Cornerstone, one that would easily be expected to guide and guarantee ongoing assessment and faculty development.

14. Yet, the subsequent description of the assessments makes little mention of these overlapping course goals, instead offering a description of "assessing one goal at a time," using LAC 1A and 1B measures for the indirect assessment, and importing the AAC&U rubric to guide direct assessment. To their credit, Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad clarify that "faculty focused primarily on both indirect and direct assessment of Goal 1 (Communication), whereas in future years, the emphasis will also include Goal 2 (Student Engagement) and Goal 3 (Civility)." However, even this treats the "overarching" goals differently than the graphic which highlights how these areas are *overlapping*. The questions to measure here are not about any one circle in isolation or even all three concurrently, but in the relations *between* the goals as students make connections among them. Measuring communication, civility, and college success separately offers little insight about how teaching communication might enhance civil discussions around difference or how the college success programs might lead to more critical thinking in combination with communication and civility. These things are instead taken as "chunks" to be looked at, perhaps reinforcing, rather than collapsing, academic silos. We have a serious flaw,

then, with a guiding vision and curriculum that has little or no connection to the assessment procedures.

15. It is possible, perhaps, that the goals developed above are simply added to the LAC 1A and 1B goals. However, doing so introduces confusion in what makes Cornerstone distinctive from CWR and Oral Communication since only the shared goals would be directly assessed. If we read Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad this way, Cornerstone would just be CWR and Oral Comm with a focus on "University Studies." It would have the same desired outcomes with some additional and preferred aspirations and topical content because LAC 1A and 1B remain separate in teaching, though covered within a single course. Without overlapping curricular content, Cornerstone can hardly be said to academically justify the work and resources devoted to it since there is no real payoff other than scheduling writing and oral communication over a single year. Everything else is added over and above the LAC requirements and even these are, apparently, taught and assessed without reference to or integration with the other two curricular requirements.

16. Taking student voices as an indirect measure is a start toward justifying these Cornerstone goals ("First-Year Student Voices" section), though we have only seven student responses (n=7) as evidence that "clearly something special is going on in this two-semester course." One has to further consider that students write and assemble their statements within a situation of what Pratt (1991) calls "unequal power relations." Students are aware that their instructors will be reviewing their statements and that those statements are political insofar as the students' grades depend upon them. They are not unvarnished truth. To think otherwise gives students too little credit for understanding how to maximize their potential for a good grade. Additionally, student responses must be read in light of the writing prompts. It is analogous to forming survey questions in the social sciences: asking "How did Cornerstone benefit you?" will yield a different set of responses than "What do you think (or feel) about Cornerstone?". Yet we are not given the language of those prompts, nor are we given any countering evidence from students who may have been dissatisfied with the program.

17. The inclusion of an external rubric from the AAC&U blurs things even further. The rubric is a broad, generalized overview of what any "Generic U" student *should* be able to demonstrate. As a matter of context, then, the results simply report the degree to which Cornerstone students appear to their instructors (those scoring the results) to be doing what any university might expect, not necessarily what is taught. The rubric is "adapted" as the rubric recommends: "the best writing assessments are locally determined and sensitive to local context and mission. Users of this rubric should, in the end, consider making adaptations and additions that clearly link the language of the rubric to individual campus contexts." Yet, the adaptations shown in the graphic are things such as "includes thesis or statement of purpose," the "appropriate balance between description/ narration and analysis," and "appropriate use of passive; Use of 1st person." While generally true to the recommendations of the rubric, such considerations focus on features of the final, written products irrespective of, as O'Neill (2011) summarizes decades of writing assessment, the "particular sources of error [which] may include the prompt – which may not

produce reliable results – as well as the administration and scoring of the essays." Considering the prompt is called for in the final bulleted list of recommendations and observations, but this, again, is something common to writing assessment and known to WPA scholars.

18. From the standpoint of such scholarship, these aren't so much findings of an assessment as they are the recognition of methodological flaws. We have a program which apparently 1) takes a high-quality, specific, and collaboratively designed schematic, 2) an "original description of the First-Year Cornerstone course" itemizing certain "commitments," and 3) already extant student outcomes for writing and speaking as its own goals and outcomes, but which then 4) measures none of these by taking an adapted pre-fabricated rubric from a national organization. While it may adhere to the recommendation to adapt, it appears unresponsive to "local context and mission," most notably in the misinterpretation of "overarching" as a substitute for "overlapping" and it presents its findings with methodological errors that may hamper the quality of the information generated. This poses problems for the entire edifice of Cornerstone, driving it by the decontextualized AAC&U measures of formal features rather than by the curriculum faculty originally envisioned and set forth as overlapping goals.

19. Indeed, the forum as a whole seems scattershot with approaches brought together piecemeal. For example, Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad state that within the common process of conflict leading to collaboration the "forming, storming, norming, and performing" of group dynamics,

it is clear that faculty members did not fully realize at the time that they were participating in important "boundary crossing" work..., in which there needed to be more focus on and appreciation of the varying pedagogical traditions of the two disciplines. Instead, as might be expected, most of the faculty were focused primarily on making sure that this first cohort of Cornerstone students achieved the shared outcomes of the course.

I am not sure what to make of several phrases included here, such as the assertion that faculty "did not fully realize" and what, exactly, "boundary crossing" means, either in White's dissertation or in their own understanding. One might suppose that the latter phrase means "more focus on and appreciation of the varying pedagogical traditions of the two disciplines," but this is a rather tepid statement for any interdisciplinary work. I would want to know how that focus might occur and by what means Cornerstone can foster that appreciation.

20. More theoretically, if we have a boundary, in what ways is that boundary configured and maintained? In what ways does such a boundary enact and enforce systems of power or epistemological stances? Is this boundary policed? What ideological blind spots might be revealed on either side when one acknowledges this boundary? What connection might it have to Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad's quote from Gerald Hauser regarding speech and composition as "balkanized" disciplines within the academy? Given the large body of work in the humanities and social sciences on boundaries and borders from Gloria Anzaldúa (1995) to Mary Louise Pratt (1994) to Walter Mignolo (2012), one might think answering such questions might offer a more concrete direction to planning, practice, and assessment. Such questions are commonly taken up

in composition and communication research (e.g., Miller 1994, Canagarajah 1997, Mao 2004, Bloom 2008, Bay 2010, Hesse 2010). Specific configurations of borders and their ongoing maintenance point to a particular set of methods to identify problems and work through them. Yet, at the end of Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad's paragraph we are thrust back to the problem of "the shared outcomes" I detailed above. Which shared outcomes? The collaborative schematic? The LAC 1A and 1B student outcomes? Or the outcomes set forth in the AAC&U rubrics? We have shifting targets, any of which might be called upon to justify action but none of which are grounded in the validity of the assessment data or in the more detailed scholarship of speech and composition.

21. The pre- and post-course surveys fare much better than the First-Year Student Voices section with $n=447$ in the fall and $n=327$ in the spring. We are also shown the survey language and rating system, so this is useable data. It indicates that, across sections, work is being done with regards to the rhetorical situation of writing and the presentation of speeches. Frankly, I feel addressing the rhetorical situations of writing and speaking are much of the battle and this is a particular point with which I concur with Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad. Cornerstone appears to have the usual arrangements as CWR and Oral Comm, at least as I have seen them taught at four different institutions and as I perceive them in talking with those in the field. So, as a note of caution which should accompany any such presentation of indirect measures, I would add that conclusions about the quality of that instruction remain unspecified. The surveys rely on broad, abstract terms such as "audience" and "purpose," terms which can mean one thing to one person or set of people and yet something very different to others. Similarly, affective states such as being "comfortable" are vague and dependent upon the individual and the setting. This last part, especially, is necessarily not a fault since introductory speech courses have perennially been concerned with aiding some students in overcoming the very real problem of speech anxiety (see Kelley and Keaten 2000). Nor are the measures of student awareness of how audience, purpose, and context matter in writing to be taken as critique or condemnation. Rather, all this must be put into an interpretive frame to prevent jumping to any pre-given conclusions or justification for action and resource allocation. As I read it, that context appears to suggest that Cornerstone's academic success may be simply on par with CWR and Oral Communication.

22. Beyond the assessment and generation of data about Cornerstone students, the use of peer mentors is definitely a good idea, as is the infusion of topical knowledge from Student Services. Kristin Woods notes that the peer mentor class "is framed by student development and transition theory, which provides a rich context for peer mentor reflection and discussion." However, with their own rich legacies of helping students transition from adolescents to adult writers, composition theory and English education research are notably absent. Nearly thirty years ago, David Bartholomae (1986) wrote how "Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion -- invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like History or Anthropology or Economics or English. He has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community" (4). We see here social development within institutional and disciplinary contexts, not another universalized, generic

figure: now a student instead of teacher. "Writing fellows" as they are termed at places like Wisconsin, Iowa, Brown, Colorado State, and Tufts, have much to compliment the theories Woods notes. Yet, there is no apparent reference to this research such as Emily Hall and Brad Hughes' (2011) work on the subject or on Carol Severino and Mary Trachel's (2008) work from the University of Iowa which details how veteran students can help newer students with a variety of academic discourse practices. Cognitive development, too, is part of learning how to teach writing (e.g., Flower and Hayes 1981, Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987, Penrose and Sitko 1993), yet nothing of this is mentioned in an article about a course that has a great deal to do with teaching written composition. Again, while Cornerstone may have some good practices in a generic sense, there are many instances of disconnection, of cracks in the Cornerstone.

23. I do not think anyone should be too quick to lay blame at the feet of Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad, nor do I mean to second-guess their decisions. As part-time administrators beholden to upper administration directives, there may be motives to which we are not privy or which have changed with the turnover in administration. Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad are also making a large number of choices, the reasons for which we may be unaware. Beyond this, Cornerstone was born at a volatile time for UNI and I don't think anyone can honestly say faculty and staff had an easy time in those years. That said, since their article has little substantive integration of composition theory or assessment, it does not surprise me that the strongest part comes from a mainstay of communication studies research methodology: a survey instrument. And this is my point. The knowledge of composition and speaking instruction is insufficiently integrated -- sometimes even done in error. The writing assessment does not connect well with the goals or rationale for the course, the overall logic is like a warren of postulates that circle back on themselves, and the supporting training still appears fundamentally disconnected from knowledge and scholarship about discourse practices and their role in student development and transition. What I point out here, then, are a few of the larger cracks in the Cornerstone, cracks that threaten its vision and the careful work toward its goals. But they are cracks that can be fixed.

Writing Assessment: A Case from the Department of Languages and Literatures

24. Having looked at some of the strengths and weaknesses of others and to be responsible in my call for dialogue, I need to give attention to my own work. Doing so is only fair and prudent. What I offer next is not necessarily a model for how I feel Cornerstone ought to do its assessments, though I would happily oblige to assist if asked. Rather, I offer my perspective on the 2013 Department of Languages and Literatures writing assessment as an example of how WPA and composition scholarship can beneficially inform writing assessment and connect that to faculty development, thus "closing the circle" (Burnham and Nims 1995) of assessment work.

Our assessment focused on the second of LAC 1A's student outcomes, those dealing with the process of writing. Students should be able to demonstrate:

a) awareness and skillful use of writing processes, including invention, drafting, revising, and editing

b) ability to recognize in one's own writing possibilities for improvement.

These are the important yet often invisible content of composition studies, the mental and affective “how to” processes of real writers and not the “what” of written products. This is not to say the end product is unnecessary. It is to point out that assessments which foreground what is right from what is wrong reduce writing to normative ideas of grammar and style (read: white and middle-class). There is far more going on in any writing situation than filling in grammatical slots. By looking at the processes used by students rather than just the products produced, we gain a more accurate description of what students actually learn in English 1005 and of what they may be capable after it.

25. English 1005 instructors submitted folders of student work during Spring semester 2013. These folders, or mini-portfolios, contained the total amount of written work for one research-based assignment. Instructors were told this work could consist of

- all drafts and revisions from each student,
- any pre-, post-, and intermediate reflections on the writing,
- any peer and instructor feedback, whether or not this is separate from the draft itself (e.g., marginal comments by instructors, written peer comments, or notes a student may take during a peer review or workshop session, etc.),
- the assignment sheet.

Collecting these various documents provided a better picture of the students' efforts, the degree to which their topic develops through their research, their stance toward the assignment, the kinds of help and support they receive, and the specific prompt to which they were responding. It was important for us to use a natural assessment method – one which looks at activities already occurring within the course – rather than introduce an artificial instrument, such as the AAC&U rubric, into the classrooms. These mini-portfolios of English 1005 student work were assessed both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, we counted the number of drafts, responses to them, and looked at where the responses originated (peer, instructor, writing center, or someone outside the course). This provided us with quantitative data about the amount of work students and instructors do in the course so we could ascertain the degree of variability students might encounter in the workload, the different configurations of process pedagogies used, and the degree to which there might be a correlation between engagement in a process and final qualitative results.

26. We then used an assessment method called Dynamic Criteria Mapping (DCM), developed by Bob Broad (2003) and tested by Broad, Adler-Kassner, et al (2009). DCM integrates a program's instructors into determining what is locally important, thereby building faculty expertise and development into the assessment process. It draws heavily from grounded theory research methods (Guba and Lincoln 1989, Moss 1996) as used in educational research. The authors of

the 2009 studies came from across a range of institutions and “found that careful, grounded discussion of local particulars created a language by which they could make connections across contexts that were formerly difficult to link” (10). This proved true for our assessment as well. In this way, we attempted to account for instructor variability, design of writing prompts, and local support opportunities from Rod Library, the Writing Center, and other institutional offices.

27. We collected 1,479 documents from 176 students enrolled in ten sections of English 1005, College Writing and Research. Not all documents were drafts of a paper, but they were connected to it in some way as described above. Averaged across the entire data set, students contributed a little more than eight (8.375) pieces of writing related to a single research-based assignment, three of those being actual drafts of their papers. Averaging within each section, the data showed a great degree of variance in terms of the number of artifacts contributed per section, or instructor. The lowest section contributed 3.94 pieces of writing on average and the highest 19.6. Curiously, later analysis of the data showed no correlation between the qualitative scores given and whether they came from a section with a high or a low number of artifacts submitted. In our estimation, this did not confirm or deny the value of process pedagogies since we could not be sure the instruction could be captured via documentary evidence. Some instructors rely on different pedagogical techniques such as group discussion and oral communication to achieve the same ends as explicit documentation. More study on this and how the talk among students and instructor might intersect with the introductory speech class would, I feel, be warranted (cf. Britton 1980, Kroll and Vann 1981, Weissberg 2006).

28. For the direct measures of the mini-portfolios, three readers were hired through an assessment mini-grant. These reader-raters generated criteria for assessment based on actual data and practice, rather than idealized possibilities or decontextualized desires (e.g., a national rubric). This process created an instrument that was both valid and reliable through constant attention to what students actually do. In writing assessment, it is important to understand the local context and to describe more than evaluate in order to get at criteria that can be as objective as is possible for a patently subjective enterprise. To accomplish this, a series of readings through a random sub-set of the mini-portfolios generated an initial list of qualities the instructors perceived as important. The discussion to generate these qualities began with the two LAC 1A outcomes being assessed, asking readers to find specific pieces of evidence in the student writing that they felt substantiated claims for and against these outcomes. This concretized abstract terms such as "skillful" or "revision," providing a means to discuss what the reader-raters saw as indicative or not of the outcomes. There was, then, a significant amount of discussion, debate, and even dissent as the criteria were built. Initial criteria were merged, revised, expanded, and sometimes deleted altogether in order to find the best possible guide for our reading of the entire data set. The end result was the following rubric:

Fig. A: 2013 L&L Assessment Rubric

Criteria	Succeeding	Completing/Satisfying	Progressing	Emerging
Synthesis	Integrates research, text, context, and experience to design unique insights that are acceptable to audience and purpose.	Integrates research, text, context, and experience to design insights that are generally acceptable to audience and purpose.	Introduces research, text, context, and experience, but they are not effectively integrated; may rely heavily on repeating ideas from sources.	Relies almost entirely on repeating ideas from sources.
Voice · Metaphors · Sensory Details · Deep Structures · Lively Prose · No/Few Clichés · Varied Sentence Structure · Varied Paragraph Purposes	Utilizes many of the techniques in a way that is effective for the audience and purpose.	Utilizes many of the techniques in a way that is usually is effective for the audience and purpose.	Utilizes some of the techniques in a way that is occasionally effective for the audience and purpose.	Demonstrates a limited attempt to utilize the techniques and/or is frequently ineffective for the audience and purpose.
Use of Sources	Includes sources that are credible	Includes sources that are mostly credible, and presented	Includes some sources, but may be	Attempts to use sources, but they are ineffective for

	and effective for the subject and audience.	effectively for the subject and audience.	missing evidence for key points, or use ineffective evidence for the subject and/or audience.	the subject and/or audience.
Revision	Significantly and successfully alters form, content, ideas, and sentences.	Significantly alters form, content, ideas, and sentences in ways that are often successful.	Alters work at the sentence level. No major changes are made to form, content, or ideas. May add large chunks of text without other significant changes.	Provides little or no evidence of revision.
Perspective	Acknowledges and engages other voices and ideas.	Acknowledges or engages other voices or ideas.	Acknowledges different voices or ideas, but does not fully engage them.	Maintains perspective despite sources that trouble it or offer greater complexity.

29. We can note that unlike the AAC&U rubrics, there are few places where formal features like thesis statements, passive voice, or grammatical competence are the main focus. Rather, the reader-raters felt that traces of mental processes, like synthesis and perspective, were important qualities to read for. Additionally, criteria like "revision" guided our reading across the various documents, providing critical context for student work and motivation as well as a more detailed degree to which students recognize what is set forth in the LAC 1A outcomes. Even “use of sources” was developed in a way which focused attention on more than mere citation style, but called on reader-raters to attempt to discern a degree to which the student used sources in a

manner responsive to both the assignment and their own purposes. In short, through an assessment of writing processes, features of product became part of the assessment only because they were the traces of deeper and more critical thinking.

30. This assessment allows all stakeholders – from instructors to administrators – a more concrete description of learning in English 1005: the typical number of drafts students submit (three per research paper); the amount of non-graded, ancillary writing students produced; the frequency and avenues of feedback students received; the degree of variance in pedagogical technique; and concrete articulations of what constitutes evidence for the LAC 1A outcomes. It does not supply any final answer about quality, but then what writing does? This assessment gives the campus a look into what colleagues are doing, the kinds of things they focused on in their teaching, and what others might reasonably expect of their students who have passed CWR. Such an assessment can lead instructors to reflect on their own practices, adjust them accordingly, and make changes in their teaching, feedback, and in-class assessments rather than having directives mandated from somewhere else. Why have multiple assessments to discover what instructors are already feeling and pondering, such as Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad's point that "often portions of essays were more informational or research-based instead of persuasive"? This is such a common problem with teaching that genre I have discussed it with other teachers since at least 1998 when I first began teaching composition. Why not let such knowledge inform the assessment process at the front end rather than build up to it as a conclusion which most composition teachers could have predicted? Informed by research in composition, writing assessment, writing program administration, and, above all by, the local instructors who teach the courses, DCM anticipates common findings like this and builds an approach to move beyond them through dialogue and collaboration.

31. The idea of collaboration bears scrutiny since in DCM every person involved both gives and receives. Listening to several stories of frustration about the limits of collaborative input from Cornerstone instructors both participating in Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad's forum and not leads me to believe the collaboration was superficial. Composition scholarship (e.g., Bruffee 1984, Trimbur 1989, Johnson 2004) understands collaboration as different from cooperation. Cooperation simply means everyone is invited to the table, irrespective of how much they might actually contribute. With collaboration, hierarchies dissolve and individual talents take over, even the talent of critique or pointing out problems. Everyone contributes equally in collaboration and it is a difficult process to do well, taking practiced skill to create and maintain the necessary conditions. The outcomes are far more satisfying because everyone feels they have some skin in the game. It is rather impossible to be truly collaborative with an external rubric.

32. While I do not presume to think our use of DCM or the final report was without its flaws, I have to note Todd Taylor's (2002) justification for using composition theory in identifying and following writing program principles. He writes

When cutting the first row in a field, some farmers set their plows opposite a fixed object like a tree or pole at the far end of the field and use it as a guide. They then stare at this guide, steering directly toward it as they establish the first row. This

practice helps shape a straight initial row, which is important, since wavers in the first row will be multiplied throughout the field, decreasing the potential yield of the crop (235).

Perhaps a bit outdated with the advent of GPS, Taylor's analogy remains apt. "[J]ust like the farmer's guiding object, the perhaps distant, abstract principles (the theories) we hold in focus will subsequently shape our practice" (235). Had the departmental assessment more resources available to it, DCM could have accommodated an even greater number of instructors, adding to the shared vision and how we aim for LAC 1A outcomes. But even our small group made more transparent what happens in the classroom, what we want to see students do, and how we think students are doing the intellectual work requisite to higher education.

33. I do not condemn the use of the AAC&U rubric *tout court*, though I do not entirely condone it, either. It can provide comparative data and suggest opportunities for further assessment and data gathering. It can even provide a more "objective" measure of a final, written performance some stakeholders may feel they need. However, it provides little connection to the needs of instructors. Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad showed they did their homework by presumably asking their reader-raters how the rubric ought to be adapted, so their research is not without its merits. Yet, I am unsure where it is grounded or what "distant objects" it is focused upon and, therefore, how it makes its claims to proceed in certain directions and not others. Is the rubric simply to justify that Cornerstone is teaching writing and speaking generally? Or is it used to clarify its teaching for campus stakeholders and therefore lead others, including teachers of Cornerstone, to reflect upon and improve their own practices? Are written composition and communication fluency adequately positioned to drive choices regarding the curriculum? Or are there other factors, even non-curricular ones, driving the investment in Cornerstone and its expansion?

Further Directions

34. A recent op-ed article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* questions whether or not the relentless assessments required by accreditors, state agencies, and administration are actually improving the college experience or inflicting harm. Erik Gilbert, Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Arkansas State, compares ongoing assessment with the over-diagnosis and treatment of certain kinds of skin cancer, a practice medical studies have shown to actually harm more than heal because of the secondary effects of the treatment. Admitting the stakes are much lower in education than in medicine, Gilbert asks

Are we using assessment to find minor shortcomings in our teaching and curriculum, changing what we do in the hopes of remedying those shortcomings, and in the long run having no real positive effect on the quality of our graduates and institutions? Are we, in effect, finding and treating harmless academic microcarcinomas rather than real problems? And, if so, what might be the consequences of all this?

These are smart questions about our practices and such reflection is a responsible activity. Indeed, if Andrew Delbanco's article in the New York Times Review of Books, "Our Universities: The Outrageous Reality," is any indication, such reflection is becoming both commonplace and more public. Nothing in these sentiments negates assessment, but we have to admit that not all assessments are equally beneficial. We would not value a medical assessment conducted by someone without the requisite training and background; a podiatrist has little business assessing heart conditions and a lab technician has little business performing surgery. Even in education, we would not think just any teacher could assess biology courses or a mathematics program. While there may be lots of knowledgeable people in broad areas like medicine or education, there are specialties and sub-specialties within them that should be acknowledged because the information they can provide is crucial. Such is the case even within English which has distinct yet overlapping areas of literature, creative writing, linguistics, and composition. Specialists in any area need to be able to communicate their knowledge and their assessment procedures to a more general audience and provide the necessary transparency, but they also need to be able to provide the requisite background and knowledge to prevent flawed methods, faulty assumptions, and missed opportunities. At no time is this perhaps more important than when budgets are thin and efficiency at a premium.

35. So, what can UNI do to maintain a more stable object that provides the vision necessary for a project like Cornerstone? I don't doubt there are those who would still say that grammatical competence, a twenty-page research paper, or some other test of a final product are the lodestars we seek. I disagree. As I have explained here and as research over the past decades has shown, these are invalid measurements. Even if we would want to know whether students today write better or worse than they did in 1965, we still leave out a crucial variable: ourselves. Looking through any archival material will alert one to just how much reader expectations have changed over the years.

36. The first thing UNI might do is just what Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad also advocate: that there be a "university-wide discussion on exactly how faculty are intentionally and consistently moving students towards... higher levels of writing proficiency in other classes." We need a broader conversation about writing instruction at all levels of the institution. As noted above, there are eleven different ways students can earn LAC 1A and the University Writing Committee has shown that most universities require two courses of composition instruction for graduation while UNI requires only one. As students take advantage of more and more opportunities to satisfy the single requirement, Cornerstone and CWR will continue to dwindle. But even beyond the numbers, there are questions of educational transfer that need to be brought to bear on planning and oversight (Nowachek 2011). How, for instance, do students take what they learn in Cornerstone, CWR, or Oral Communication and apply that in subsequent courses? Are students provided with a clear connection between these foundational courses and courses in their majors? How do pedagogical initiatives guide students through varied expectations of genre, tone, style, and formatting with a clear and consistent rationale? Where are students struggling the most with the skills covered in these courses? Such an undertaking might be pertinent to

UNI's next reaccreditation but whether or not there is interest and/or resources for this, the conversation should happen sooner rather than later.

37. A second thing UNI might do is remain open to ongoing questions of writing. The University Writing Committee, which I currently chair, is a sub-committee of the Faculty Senate that has produced several assessments of "the culture of writing" on campus. Part of this work is interpreting institutional data like NSSE results. While the initial look at the NSSE Writing module survey showed that we were above average in terms of the page-length of papers, the Writing Committee discussed this information as 1) student recollections and, therefore, an indirect measure, and 2) as potentially indicative of assigning the typical "research paper" common in school-based settings but rare elsewhere. Longer papers are not necessarily better. As LAC outcomes affirm, writing is more than a finished product: it is both the product and the process, both noun and verb. And as Ryan Skinnell (2016) points out, "basic skills are not basic in the sense of being prior to more complex instruction—they are basic in the sense of being fundamental to all instruction." Writing is a basic skill in just this regard. It affects every student at each level of learning and should be tended to as an ongoing concern, not as a problem to simply be fixed and forgotten. The University Writing Committee, I hope, produces data and interpretations that are useful for faculty and administration to keep thinking and discussing student writing.

38. Third, I would follow the University Writing Committee's recommendation that UNI institute two more writing-enhanced courses with at least one being "in the discipline." Naturally, this can be developed as part of or in light of the data generated from the above questions. But, as 21st century employers' and students' needs are increasingly concerned with communication and its technologies, every student will need to demonstrate speaking and writing proficiency at an advanced level for their area of specialty. Getting students ingrained into activities that lead to proficiency, such as revising and proofreading, take repeated attempts and consistent messages about their importance.

39. Fourth, UNI should make sure Cornerstone, College Writing and Research, and Oral Communication are guided by the best possible research and theory from their respective areas. As noted above, this can head off methodological errors, anticipate common conclusions already understood by instructors, and provide specific grounding to features being discussed. Such insight and leadership coupled with disciplinary knowledge benefits the institution as a whole, providing information that improves instruction, saves time and resources, and addresses the concerns of accrediting agencies and other stakeholders. While Cornerstone leadership has changed to provide a pair of English and Communication Studies co-leaders, the fact that these co-leaders are neither tenured nor tenure-track poses serious questions about labor practices and the potential for administrative influence. As contract employees, they simply have neither the latitude nor the protection necessary to work effectively in such a leadership position. Moreover, despite their years of incredible teaching experience and their instructional acumen – qualities quite useful and needed in these areas – they do not have the research background argued for here. Thus, as no disrespect to them, but in some sense out of protection for their employment, I

would argue that tenure-line faculty need to lead Cornerstone, either in conjunction with or separate from departmental coordination of their respective LAC 1A and 1B courses.

40. Finally, all faculty can help by assigning more and varied writing in their courses. This can be as both formal and informal assignments where feedback on them goes beyond grammar and surface features. I know many faculty already do this and I hope they, in turn, support their colleagues in creating and working with writing assignments. Between the years of about 1982 to 1993, UNI had a fairly robust Writing Across the Curriculum endeavor. The university was listed in a national registry (McLeod 1988), had resources to bring in nationally-known consultants like Toby Fulwiler, and produced several high-quality newsletters and publications for faculty and students. It was led by smart and energetic folk, some of whom are still working and contributing to our academic and civic communities. We should listen to their stories. We might not find much has changed, but perhaps we can find new ways to do old things or even spot repeated patterns that can be addressed and improved.

41. For any of this to happen and for UNI's ability to help students succeed in 21st century literacies, we need to communicate high-quality information. Chatham-Carpenter and Heistad may have begun this process, but it remains rather generic and subsequently fractured. There is a wealth of experience being brought to bear on the course and its place in the undergraduate curriculum; I applaud all who have been involved. Yet, there is still work to be done. A key portion of knowledge remains left out. It is knowledge that, as I demonstrated here, could help improve nearly every aspect of Cornerstone and much of what happens around campus. This improvement won't be a one-way street but will also affect College Writing and Research, Oral Communication, the University Writing Committee, and other areas involved with the execution and implementation of rhetorical education at UNI. The key is, as with Writing Program Administration, Writing Across the Curriculum and other, broader, institutional endeavors, that those affected have a voice and are listened to, choosing to act because they have been listened to, consulted, and instrumental in the process.

Appendix A: Ways to earn LAC 1A credit at UNI

Type	Score/ grade needed	Notes
TESTS		
AP Language and Composition Test	3, 4, 5	Satisfies LAC 1A only.
AP Literature and Composition Test	4, 5	Scores of 4 and 5 satisfy both LAC 1A and 3B.
CLEP Composition Exam	59+	Cannot replace or be substituted for course on transcripts.
COURSES		
Dual-enrollment (high school/ community college) transfer credit	A, B, C, D	“Composition II” transfers for LAC 1A credit. “Composition I” does not.
Transfer credit from another university	A, B, C, D	Generally credits satisfying writing credit at another university are accepted to satisfy LAC 1A credit.
UNI COURSES		
English 1005 – College Writing and Research	A, B, C, D	Admissions uses this as default course for assigning LAC 1A credit transfer.

English 2015 – Craft of Academic Writing	A, B, C, D	ACT English/ Writing score of 25+ needed.
English 1120 – Introduction to Literature (Writing Enhanced)	A, B, C, D	ACT English/ Writing score of 25+ needed. Satisfies LAC 3B and 1A. Credit cannot also count toward English B.A.
English 2120 – Critical Writing About Literature	A, B, C, D	ACT English/ Writing score of 25+ needed.
RELS 1020 – Religions of the World (Writing Enhanced)	A, B, C, D	ACT English/ Writing score of 25+ needed. Satisfies LAC 3B and 1A.
University Studies 1059 - Cornerstone	A, B, C, D	Students cannot have earned credit for either LAC 1A or 1B. Year-long course which satisfies LAC 1A and 1B.

Total : 11

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