

TILTING AT WINDMILLS: REFIGURING GRADUATE EDUCATION IN ENGLISH
TO PREPARE FUTURE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE PROFESSIONALS

by

Darin Lee Jensen

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TILTING AT WINDMILLS: REFIGURING GRADUATE EDUCATION IN ENGLISH
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Darin Lee Jensen, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2017

Advisor: Robert Brooke

This dissertation makes recommendations for the reform of graduate education to better serve current and future two-year college English instructors. The author undertakes historical and archival research to write a history of how English instructors have been prepared for the distinct profession of two-year college teaching. In addition, the author interviews two-year college English instructors from around the United States to chronicle their preparation narratively and how said preparation has affected their working experience. Drawing on the historical, narrative and current practices found in the research, the author details specific interventions, in the form of equity-centered partnerships, to improve preparation of community college writing faculty, including partnerships between graduate programs and two-year institutions, explicit and specific graduate coursework, and recognizing and promoting two-year college composition research as a discipline. In addition, the author examines how reform movements surrounding graduate school should incorporate these equity-centered partnerships into their programs to move English graduate education's locus toward equity with two-year college English.

Dedication

This labor is dedicated to Sara. This labor is for Max, Ian, Lindsey, and my students.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

A Polemical Introduction: Establishing Ethos, Values, and Vision

I have chosen to title this a “polemical introduction” after Northrop Frye’s

Anatomy of Criticism, where he argues:

This book consists of "essays," in the word's original sense of a trial or incomplete attempt, on the possibility of a synoptic view of the scope, theory, principles, and techniques of literary criticism. The primary aim of the book is to give my reasons for believing in such a synoptic view; its secondary aim is to provide a tentative version of it which will make enough sense to convince my readers that a view, of the kind that I outline, is attainable. The gaps in the subject as treated here are too enormous for the book ever to be regarded as presenting my system, or even my theory. It is to be regarded rather as an interconnected group of suggestions which it is hoped will be of some practical use to critics and students of literature. Whatever is of no practical use to anybody is expendable. (Frye)

My work in this dissertation is synoptic in that it attempts to bring together historical and practical strands of the community college’s mission and function, graduate preparation, intervention, and thinking about the democratic purposes of education. It is an essay using the older conception as it is an attempt, certainly an incomplete one, to bring these topics together. Finally, I too, offer an “interconnected group of suggestions” that I hope to be of practical use.

However, I am a good postmodernist and know that many lenses are left out of this dissertation. The subject of class is not examined critically in this dissertation. There is work to be done to understand how first-generation and working class graduate students frequently end up teaching in community colleges. There is work to be done in understanding the ideological constructions of literacy education and how those constructions inform pedagogy. Moreover, race is not critically examined in this

dissertation. Finally, gender is not examined critically in this essay. Women do most the teaching in English departments at community colleges. Without doubt, there are several reasons for this fact. Community college faculty, while teaching arguably the most diverse set of students, are less diverse than their four-year college and university counterparts (Suchor, personal communication, (NCES, *Race/Ethnicity of College Faculty*). This fact is troubling and deserves more investigation than it has received thus far. Class, race, and gender are important components of the story of who ends up teaching in the community college English classroom. They are not parts of the story told in this dissertation though. Instead, I am looking at how community college are prepared for what Mark Reynolds has named the “distinct and significant profession” of community college teaching (Reynolds). I offer a synoptic view of how mission, graduate preparation, and the narratives of fifteen community college instructors create a case for the interventions I describe. I do not think these are the only interventions needed. But I do think they are attainable interventions. Therefore, my choice in promoting them is pragmatic and tactical.

This dissertation insists that graduate faculty must reform graduate education in English so that it can meet the needs of community college instructors of the present and future. I write this introduction because I want to establish my ethos. I have been a teacher and an administrator at community colleges for fourteen years at the time of this writing. I have taught as an adjunct, a full-time instructor who had the equivalent of tenure, and as an adjunct again. I have taught dropouts and honor students, hard luck cases and murderers. I have been a subject-matter coordinator, a department coordinator, and a director. I have hired nearly 100 adjuncts as well as full-time instructors and a

couple of deans, too. I have sat on governance committees and participated in Higher Learning Commission projects. I have a deep respect for what the community college does, as well as a deep ambivalence about how successful we are. I believe in the vision first established by the Truman Commission in 1947 that the community college is about equity and democracy. But I have seen students being “cooled out” (Clark) and shunted into low-level work. I have heard students called “customers” by well-meaning administrators who seem unconscious of their neoliberal rhetoric.

I first began working in a community college in the fall of 2003. I had a master’s degree in English from a large state university in Kansas and had returned home to Omaha where, for a variety of personal reasons, I was place bound. My master’s degree had a teaching practicum of a somewhat innovative design—the graduate students took a small class each semester that discussed methods of assignment design and portfolio assessment among other things. In the second year, students worked on CVs and teaching philosophies as they prepared to go on to other degree programs or enter the workforce in some way. Looking back, the program was a good one, but lacked any mention or preparation for teaching in a community college—an institution about which, to my knowledge, none of the professors knew of or ever mentioned. That isn’t to say that there wasn’t discussion of community colleges. At a Halloween party, I had my first introduction to this conversation when a graduate student, dressed as Sir Philip Sydney no less, lamented that all our MA was preparing us for was to teach at a community college. I wondered at his assertion. I didn’t understand it to be honest. Later, I found out that other students, as they finished their MAs often moonlighted at the community colleges within driving distance to the state university. These were place-bound students

who could not have left for another degree or who were doing low-residency MFAs and using the teaching at the local community colleges for modified version of a teaching assistantship, or to make enough money to eat. Looking back, I see my ignorance of community colleges to fit in with the scholarly conversation captured in Grubb's *Honored but Invisible*, a book published in 1999, which is a comprehensive examination of teaching in the community college. Grubb found that other than a "few smaller empirical pieces" there wasn't much extant scholarship on "what teaching looks like in the 'teaching college'" (Grubb and Worthen 11). It was not a wonder then that in 2001, I was unaware of the community college.

Later, when it turned out that my family and I couldn't move to pursue my doctoral studies, I began to look for a teaching job. I applied at community colleges and some other places. I heard nothing. Getting desperate to have a job that fall, I applied to an ESL adjunct position at a community college that was a 30-minute drive from my home. I didn't have any coursework in second language acquisition or linguistics. I talked my way into the position because I had been a high school Spanish teacher and the group of students I would be teaching would all be native Spanish speakers at the college on a grant program. Because it was a grant and not in an academic department, I was paid per contact hour—23.00 per hour for 20 hours of classroom teaching per week, I think. This, situation, too, I was to find to be common in the literature of the community college. Reynolds and Holliday Hicks' volume, *The Profession of English in the Two-Year College*, chronicles many such instances over the forty-year span from the 1970s onward. In that volume, Marilyn Smith Layton writes about following her husband to Michigan and earning an MA there and only hearing about the profession of the

community college from an advisor (Smith Layton 28). She also recounts being given “two classes of composition—English 101” with just three days to prepare to teach the class (28). Smith Layton also recounts one her first evaluations where a student told her that she was a good teacher, but that she knew “nothing about the lives your students live” (29). While my working-class background gave me a keener insight into the lives my students led in some respects, much of what Smith Layton rings true for my experience and for the experience of many community college teachers. We are not prepared.

In that first position, there were no benefits or sick days or retirement or anything else. I loved the students and I was certainly getting a crash course in teaching, but I needed a real position because my wife and I had a baby on the way. I tried to pick up more adjunct work in the English department there, but the union rules wouldn’t allow me to have more teaching than what I already had. I was exploited labor—“adjunct scum” as I came to think of myself. On the plus side, I gained my first knowledge and experience in teaching ESL. I parlayed that ESL experience into a job as an international admissions advisor at the local state university. After a year and a half, the community college program called me back and invited me to apply for a position running their international programs—the very program where I had been an adjunct. I took the job. This moment of the narrative seems like a good one, after all, I was working hard and getting raises. I finally had benefits and a retirement account. Yet now I was hiring adjuncts and writing grants while managing mundane activities like getting students to and from the airport as well as assisting them with their immigration documents. It was challenging work and the students were great for the most part. However, I wasn’t a

teacher and that's what I wanted to be. What's more, I was hiring part-time ESL instructors into the same kind of half-life where they are not only not valued at their place of employment, they also do not earn enough to achieve financial security. I had gotten out of it just as soon as I could and hiring folks to that position made me feel complicit with an unjust system.

To cut a long story short, by 2009 I was in the middle of a second graduate degree—this time in language teaching. I was hoping to finagle my ESL and international experience to get a full-time teaching position. Luckily, another position opened in English at the urban community college in Omaha and I made it through the application process to the second interview and teaching demonstration. Somehow, out of more than 140 applicants, I landed the job and began as a full-time instructor at a community college that fall. I had been hired as an English instructor who would have half his load in basic writing. I had made sure to look up and read about basic writing and reading pedagogy on the web before my interview and I made it through. It is worth noting here that this was the second time that I had been given a position to teach a marginalized population without proper training or professional preparation. I came to learn through my work teaching and through my research that this situation is commonplace. I think like many people who arrive in this situation, especially knowing what we know about the job market, that I was right to feel like I'd hit the lottery. I was getting a raise of a few thousand dollars, I wouldn't have to punch a clock, and I'd have summers off to camp and raise my children. Really, I had arrived.

When I got to my community college, though, I quickly found that I knew very little about the institutional type, the mission, the student population, the tensions

between the transfer and job preparation missions And I immediately found that what I didn't know very much about was the teaching of basic writing or developmental education. What's more, as I began my full-time teaching there, we were in the middle of the great recession and every class was full. People believed that if they could get an education, or survive on financial aid long enough, that things would turn around for them. I had classes full of profoundly different students who were at vastly divergent levels. There were students who had just come from prison. I even had a student who had been a reality TV star that first quarter. My lessons from being a TA helped. My experience advising students helped. My experience teaching ESL was especially helpful, but none of them prepared me for the distinct profession of teaching English at the community college. I blamed myself for this. I think this is a common move. Clearly, I hadn't taken the right classes. I was a fraud. There, of course, is also a tendency to blame students. Why aren't they prepared? Why aren't they serious? Do they have an ability to benefit? Maybe college just isn't for some people anyway.

However, I quickly came to learn that most of my students were earnest, if unprepared. They didn't know the game of education, its language or discourses. And their circumstances were often astonishingly difficult. I encountered poverty as I never had before. I encountered students who had been abused or who were recovering addicts (or not recovering). I encountered men who had worked hard, but whose job was gone or whose body couldn't do the work anymore. They were all there to make a new start. These second chances fit neatly with Mike Rose's work on the community college, which he sees as a second chance institution (Rose *Possible Lives*; Rose *Back to School*). But it wasn't the whole story.

Frankly, the experience began to radicalize me. It began to bring me to my own class consciousness. I could see in these students' struggles with opaque systems that seemed designed to confound them rather than empower them; these were some of the same frustrations I had encountered as I worked my way through my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I was beginning to see systems as barriers and a much more significant source of trouble than I previously had. My students shared the same "bootstraps" narrative I had once had, but it began to ring false. I was coming, as Patrick Sullivan does to believe that "our work is about education, reading and writing, and literacy, of course, but it is also about class, gender, and race, and inequality and poverty. It is about freedom, social justice, and the ideals of a democracy"(Sullivan, "Teacher, Scholar, Activist", 332). But I didn't have access to the rich history of thinking about this at the time. I was frustrated and just beginning to attempt to contextualize my students' and my experience. Of course, while I felt alone in this regard, Grubb's examination of teaching at the community college showed that many instructors struggled with the broad demands of their profession which included "core areas of academic preparation, occupational instruction, remedial/developmental education [...] short-term job training, workforce development, and community service" all the while being committed to a vast array and diversity of students and student ability (Grubb and Worthen 6).

In a parallel way, I found that I hadn't been well prepared by the system of education either. I found that I needed a whole new education. Luckily, I was finishing my second MA and had the chance to take a course in Composition and Rhetoric—being introduced to the discipline as well as educational methods, discourse analysis, and linguistics in other courses gave me a concrete set of tools to use with my students. I was

learning things on Monday or Wednesday night that would make it into the next week's lesson plan. I began talking about discourse communities and registers in specific ways to my students. I was explicitly discussing the interlocking systems in which we interact and live. Like my former classmates in Kansas, I was designing my own teaching assistantship while educating myself. But still, this education lacked any direct coursework on the community college, its students, or its purposes and history. There was a great deal missing to be honest. I needed to understand and access the notion, as Sullivan puts it, that "open admissions two-year colleges are dedicated to the proposition that it is unacceptable for any American to be trapped by his or her history, by class or race, or by a higher educational system designed to perpetuate privilege and wealth (Sullivan, "Teacher, Scholar, Activist", 335). I needed this to develop my professional identity and to help my students move forward in their lives.

Nell Ann Pickett described the community college as democracy in action and this is a rhetorical construction that most of my colleagues who are engaged in ongoing professional dialogues in organizations like TYCA want to propagate (Pickett). However, the modern community college, which emerged after World War II as an institution aimed at providing educational access to all, struggles. Encapsulated best in the 1947 Truman Report, the mission of the community college has been development of access to education and development of democracy. To summarize, the commission, appointed by President Truman in 1946, had the mandate to find a new direction for American higher education. It called for "the establishment of a network of public community colleges that would charge little or no tuition, serve as cultural centers, be comprehensive in their program offerings with emphasis on civic responsibilities, and would serve the area in

which they were located” (Truman Commission 33-34). It is a deeply progressive and expansive vision. Sullivan and Toth name this time as the “moment when the modern two-year college—with its mandate to democratize the nation’s postsecondary system—was born” (Sullivan and Toth 3). Over time this mission has become muddled, and has transformed into what Harbour identifies as its normative vision, from access to completion (Harbour). Cohen, Bawer, and Kisker call this change the vocationalization of the community college (Cohen, Bawer, and Kisker 39; see also Brint and Karabel). Whichever is the case, these narrow visions complicate the democratic vision because narrow instrumentalist market-based notions of the purpose of education do not necessarily maintain democratic principles and their development as necessary. The democratic vision is further complicated by the rise of market-based logics over the last thirty-plus years. By market-based logics, I mean the ideology of neoliberalism, which can be defined as a “set of economic principles and cultural politics that positions the free market as a guide for all human action” (Stenberg 4). The idea of the public good is under deep duress—state funding for community colleges at the state level has dropped precipitously, tuition has risen, students go into debt. Harbour’s analysis of available research over the last three decades shows a nearly 40 percent drop in state support of community colleges (Harbour). Community college tuition has risen 24 percent over the last five years alone (Covert). All of this contributes to the more than 1 trillion-dollar student loan debt that Americans have, a figure categorized as a crisis by many. Access to educational opportunity is expensive and is becoming more so every year. Notably, this is all true at a time when income inequality is variously described as being the worst since either the Great Depression or the Gilded Age (Lindert and Williamson). We might

categorize all of these changes as a product of neoliberalism, an ideology which posits all individuals as “rational economic actors” who are individually responsible for everything in their lives (Stenberg 5).

Patrick Sullivan challenges two-year college professionals to change the dominant narrative about community colleges, to share the many successes we have (Sullivan, "Teacher, Scholar, Activist", 340). This dominant narrative centers around a narrowed purpose of education that prizes education for workforce development to the exclusion of other traditional purposes of education such as the development of human beings and the development of citizens. Sullivan's assertion resonates strongly. However, as I'll point out in the following chapters, it isn't just that we must challenge the dominant narrative about community colleges, it's that we must acknowledge the competing narratives and missions of the two-year college. A 2012 American Association of Community College AACC report points to seven areas where the community college is struggling. The first is the low completion rate, which according to the National Center of Educational Statistics is 29.4% for the Fall 2010 cohort (AACC, 2016 Fact Sheet). It should be noted that time to graduation is calculated by NCES at 150%, so the figure means that of students who began school at a two-year school in 2010, that only 29.4% had graduated in three years (National Center for Educational Statistics). Others include lack of community support, reduced state funding, underprepared students, a debate over remedial education (its place, efficacy, role as a barrier, and even its continued existence), lack of collaboration between school and a graduate skill gap. The Completion Agenda, asserts Harbour in *John Dewey and the Future of Community College Education*, is the paramount driving force in the current reform movement for the

two-year college. This reform movement has several components, including the completion agenda, the reform and elimination of developmental education, and a further concretizing of the link between education and workplace preparation. This agenda, argues Harbour, replaces the first vision of community colleges (espoused in the Truman Commission), with an economic normative vision.

My dissertation provides a mechanism in Equity-Centered-Partnerships (described in chapter four in detail) which allows for many of the problems the AACC identified in their report to be addressed, while helping to push for a democratic normative vision of the community college. I have chosen to locate that challenge and that work within the context of preparing teachers to work in the community college. I have chosen the phrase equity here for a couple of reasons. One definition of equity is fair and just. I am asserting that partnerships between two-year colleges and graduate programs could be fair and just. But equity can also mean ownership, or a share of ownership and this connotation is important in my configuration of these partnerships as well. Both graduate programs and two-year colleges must own graduate education for the sake of its future, utility, and effectiveness. For too long two-year colleges have had no equitable stake in the configuration of the training of graduates. To be brief: I envision equity-centered partnerships as reciprocal local agreements and programs wherein two-year college English departments and graduate programs collaborate to create meaningful, sustainable reform that prepares graduate students for the two-year college classroom and the distinct challenges of that institution type.

The dissertation operates from some assumptions that readers may or may not share. I believe the purpose of education is to prepare people in their own best interests. I

want to stop for a moment and unpack this notion of who names these best interests.

Patrick Finn in *Literacy with and Attitude* spends a large portion of his book discussing this idea. For him, an education in students' own best interests requires that education make students aware of their "three categories of citizenship rights": civil rights, political rights, and social rights (Finn 157-8). To go further, Finn critiques the U.S. school system, which he sees as reproducing class, rather than creating class fluidity. He does this through a compelling analysis of Anyon's landmark work critiquing school systems. In the community college, the narrow instrumentalism of reproducing class or mere job preparation of managing Clark's "cooling out" is not in the students' best interests. What is in students' best interests is to be in an educational environment where they can interrogate the school system they find themselves within, explicitly learn about their rights as citizens, and negotiate and work for a curriculum that allows them to make informed decisions about their future. To be clear, this work is Freirean in nature in that it should ask the students and the community what it is that the students want and need. The community that receives attention in the community college in my experience is given voice through organizations like the chamber of commerce, which in my estimation reduce the purpose of education to instrumentalist and economic purposes rather than a broader more holistic conception of education.

Finn argues persuasively that powerful literacy is a teachable skill and that teaching it is a "matter of justice" (Finn ix). My years teaching in the community college have led me to commit to this work wholeheartedly. I believe, too, that education is about helping citizens engage in democratic processes. Here I follow Rose, Gallagher, Dewey,

Pickett, Sullivan and a host of others who predicate the two-year college as an important site of human and democratic development. Rose writes:

while acknowledging the importance of the economic motive for schooling, our philosophy of education—our guiding rationale for creating schools—must include the intellectual, social, civic, moral, and aesthetic motives as well. If these further motives are not articulated, they fade from public policy, from institutional mission, from curriculum development. Without this richer philosophy, those seeking a second chance will likely receive a bare-bones, strictly functional education, one that does not honor the many reasons they return to school and, for that matter, one not suitable for a democratic society” (Rose, *Possible Lives*, 185-86).

So, educating students in their own best interests is also the work of building a democratic and equitable culture and society. This philosophy guides my work in the classroom, my scholarship, and my community activism.

Further, I believe firmly in the potential of writing studies and writing classrooms to be a site where students can engage in this kind of critical work for their own betterment and the betterment of their community. It is important that betterment be defined by the students and community themselves. Mary Louise Pratt’s configuration of working in the contact zone is well known. She defines contact zones as "spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths as they are lived out in the world today" (Pratt 34). The community college classroom and the institution itself is a contact zone where class, types of literacy and the contested ideologies of democracy and neoliberalism meet. In my estimation, preparing teachers to work in these contact zones is of vital importance to students and the country.

I understand these are contested ideas in our larger culture. Few ideas are without their critics. However, I do not come to them naively as I hope my experience illustrates.

Rather, I have come to see these contested ideas as values which should be struggled for in our classrooms and institutions. In his essay “Virtuous Arguments,” John Duffy explicitly discusses how the writing classroom is a site of democratic development. He argues that first-year writing “is a well-organized, systematic, and dedicated effort taking place each day to promote an ethical public discourse grounded in the virtues of honesty, accountability, and generosity” that it is the one guaranteed place in the curriculum where a student can engage in a course of “ethical communication” (Duffy). I agree with Duffy and wish to amplify his sentiments by arguing that the first-year writing course is also the site where students can begin to engage in powerful literacy which can help them to understand, resist, and the discourses that shape their lives. While Duffy is arguing specifically for the first-year writing course, the democratic mission of the community college makes his argument directly applicable to the context of this dissertation. Again, I do not argue this naively—I have taught more than 100 sections of first-year and developmental writing and know this is hard work. It is also hopeful and necessary work. These are values worth the struggle.

This dissertation chronicles the mission and history of the community college. It looks at the incomplete and uneven professionalization of the two-year college English instructor drawing on scholars such as Tinberg, Andelora, Sullivan, among others. I have spent a chapter synthesizing the lived experience of teachers who work in this environment. The point of this dissertation, my PhD program, and my involvement with the profession over the last five years has been to become the teacher-scholar-activist that Jeff Andelora and Patrick Sullivan assert as our potential identity. I believe this is the whole new education I was looking for as I encountered the difficulties of being a teacher