Access and Excellence: The Writing Program Then and Now

Jennifer Clary-Lemon

Abstract

This interview-based study of ten teachers and administrators fundamental to the establishment of the University of Winnipeg's Writing Program examines the discourses of access and excellence that emerged in discussions of its establishment and change over time. Such discourses set up common arguments about the function of higher education, its purpose, and who it should serve. Terminology associated with both access and excellence implies a view of education dependent on academic standards and quality control. A discourse analysis on the interview transcripts resulted in five themes that showed varied approaches to conceptualizing access and excellence in the Program's 30+ year history: 1) Access as Unqualified/Underprepared; 2) Access as Social Justice/Inclusion; 3) Excellence as a Standard/Exclusion; 4) Excellence as Research; and 5) Access and Excellence as Developmental Processes.

The writing program at the University of Winnipeg (UW) has a documented thirty-year history of being the first writing program in Canada, emerging as a unique national case study for activity in writing and rhetoric (Clary-Lemon, 2017; Kearns & Turner, 2016, 2006, 2002, 1997; Turner & Kearns, 2012). Moving from a program housed within an English department, to an independent program, to a program housed within a stand-alone [department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications](#)[1] has meant that the writing program itself has undergone many changes from its inception as a program designed to serve students who were in a variety of ways underprepared for writing tasks in university (M. McIntyre, interview), to a program housed in a disciplinary department that serves students at all levels in an undergraduate major. It has also meant that the priorities of hiring and expertise have shifted over time to accommodate a shifting programmatic vision. In 1986, when the program began, professional training in the area of composition was not available in Canada, and the six faculty members first hired to work in the writing program were appointed at the rank of Instructor. In later years, the program and department were able to hire PhDs in the fields of English, Writing Studies, and Communication Studies, thus constructing a trajectory of increased professionalization and disciplinary affiliation. These themes have been well-traced in Louise Wetherbee Phelps' 2011 Fulbright report documenting a six-week study and curricular evaluation of the department in which she noted that the "institutional tension between access and excellence" that has characterized the department's history suggests that present-day interpretations of its identity may construe "access" within a "service" mission to teaching underprepared writers, "while 'excellence' is attributed to the ideals for scholarship and knowledge-making embodied in the major, graduate studies, and faculty publication" (p. 14). These interpretations, however, are nuanced and situated within changing historical and institutional contexts. This study, which is based on the discourse practices of interviews with ten teachers and administrators who helped found and shape the program over time, indicates that although *access* and *excellence* can present and has at times presented such a tension, the history of the writing program has also been steeped within hybrid, relational movement between these discursive and often polarizing terms.

Discourses of Access and Excellence: Background and Method

Linguists, rhetoricians, and English studies scholars have recognized that the use of the terms "access" and "excellence" in higher education are more than simple catchphrases to describe student populations or expectations for research quality. Instead, each has emerged as a *discourse* of higher education, in which discourse is used in the Foucauldian sense to mean "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1969, p. 49), thus both enabling and constraining what is possible to say in any given moment and constructing specific realities about any given object. Similarly, James Gee (2011) defines

---

[1] See https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/rhetoric/

capital-D "Discourse" as languages and practices that, together with particular tools and symbols, work to construct a "socially recognizable identity" (p. 201). Given that the writing program's historical identity may be located in a perceived tension between its missions of *access*—attributed to its service mission—and *excellence*—attributed to its production of knowledge—I've chosen this discursive frame within which to locate my research question: how have those who have been the closest to the formation of the writing program interpreted its missions of access and excellence over time, and how might that shape the program's future?

Pegeen Reichert Powell (2014) speaks of discourses of student retention in writing instruction that emerge from "a configuration of textual and social practices" (p. 55); similarly, Jenny Williams (1997) connects the discourse of access in higher education with discourses of selectivity and equity that concomitantly construct polarizing opposites. This is echoed by Allan's (2007) examination of the use of "excellence" in university mission statements and dictionary definitions in order to situate it within the tradition of Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (1983). Allan's discursive approach to language locates excellence as a keyword, using Williams' work, noting that keywords are "significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; [and] they are significant, indicative forms in certain forms of thought" (Williams, 1983, p. 15; see also Gentz, 2009). While scholars who do research in the area of higher education, student retention, and teaching and research excellence may examine different objects of study, they are engaged in an examination of the discourses of higher education that set up common arguments about the function of higher education, its purpose, and who it should serve. Terminology associated with both access and excellence imply a view of education dependent on academic standards and quality control; as Jenny Williams (1997) notes,

> Words such as access, standards, academic excellence, mature students, consumers, enterprise, quality, are used as shorthand descriptors of who should or should not be let into what sort of academia and on what terms. Such 'icon' words have become embedded in "polarising discourses" (Ball S. J., 1990); the simplistic opposition of alternative understandings:

> elite v. mass

> standard v. non-standard

> traditional v. non-traditional

> quality v. access

> academic v. vocational

> qualified v. unqualified

> academic freedom v. government control

> research v. teaching (p. 25)

An examination of how such discourse has influenced the perception of UW's writing program over time is warranted, given the writing program's unique history as an access initiative, first designed to accommodate the shifting demographics of university students in the 1980s (first generation, low income, English as an additional language). In its thirty-year history, its mandate has not changed, but its student populations at the second year and higher have enlarged its charge: the department now teaches writing on a vertical, as well as horizontal curriculum, and engages student majors in areas of disciplinary expertise.

In order to undertake this research, I recorded and transcribed ten interviews with teachers and administrators central to envisioning and constructing the writing program in its early years. Because the institution is a small one and the cohort of parties involved in the construction and revision of the program are known or can be easily located, each participant agreed to be named in this research. I spoke to four individuals who have been associated with administering or evaluating the program over the course of its history (Neil Besner, Mark Golden, Michael McIntyre, and Bill Rannie), and six who had a primary teaching role[2] in the program (Robert Byrnes, Judith Kearns, Jaqueline McLeod-Rogers, Sheila Page, Deborah Schnitzer, and Catherine Taylor)[3]. The interview was designed to understand the historical contexts of the writing program over time, as well as why it was created, its institutional mandate, who it serves and has served in its various iterations, and how those transitions have affected university programming about writing. I then conducted a discourse analysis on the interviews, isolating instances of the use of the terminology "access" and "excellence" or its equivalent use—similar to Williams' (1997) list of polarizing terms above—with a focus on Gee's notion of *significance*, with my attention in each case toward the question "how is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?" (2011, p. 17). I then examined preceding and subsequent phrases around access and excellence terminology in order to establish common patterns of thematic language use. The results in the following discussion establish five topical thematics that emerged around access and excellence: 1) Access as Unqualified/Underprepared; 2) Access as Social Justice/Inclusion; 3) Excellence as a Standard/Exclusion; 4) Excellence as Research; and 5) Access and Excellence as Developmental Processes. As I examine each of these thematics in the following sections, I argue that paying attention to the significance of access and excellence in the writing program over time allows a deeper understanding of what is possible to imagine in a programmatic future where student populations urge a rethinking of this discursive dichotomy.

Access as Unqualified/Underprepared

Williams (1997) notes that "access" in higher education traditionally "prioritizes provision for groups historically excluded from higher education" (p. 42). These groups can vary widely: students returning to university at an age later than 18 ("mature students"), first-generation university students, low-income students, students of colour, students for whom English is an additional language, students with disabilities, students facing location-based diaspora (rural/urban, international). In terms of writing programs, there is a

---

[2] There was some overlap in these categories, as Neil Besner originally taught in the early program, but went on to act later both as Dean of Arts and Vice-President Academic, with administrative oversight for the program.
[3] Interviews were conducted between June 2015 and March 2016.

long history of the mandatory first-year writing course as being the outcome of the exigence that "Johnny can't write," an outcry against illiteracy and declining standards in higher education, from the course's first inception as "English A" at Harvard in 1885 to its continued iterations in writing programs across the United States and Canada (Connors, 2003; see also Russell, 2002). While those who choose to teach writing contemporarily are trained in pedagogical practices, writing theory, and rhetorical approaches—that is, the disciplinary content of writing—the mandatory writing course retains much of its loaded history in terms of remediation, preoccupation with error and student readiness, and perception by university faculty that the job of teaching writing is an insufferable chore (Gold, 2008). How faculty and administration talk about the mandatory writing course that, together with the writing centre, have historically made up the Writing Program at UW has much to do with the ways that universities have traditionally articulated thoughts about student writers and writing over time. As one interviewee noted of interdisciplinary colleagues, "they didn't see us as a legit department." Another acknowledged, "There's lingering stigma up to this day... I don't think they are as deep or as insidious as they used to be, but there are still people in the institution who think the teaching of writing is a high school remedial preoccupation that doesn't have to do with real scholarly thinking."

In the thematic of "access" as meaning underprepared or unqualified for university study, interviewees often echoed these historic sentiments in ways that, as Williams (1997) notes, produce "negative statements concerning the problems of particular groups of students and the 'excessive' investment of time and staff they need" (p. 44). When the Writing Program was established in the late 1980s, it was funded from redressment grant money from the provincial government in the amount of $400,000 (N. Besner, interview).[4] These funds were later augmented by grant funding from the Bronfman Foundation, and university capital funding to establish a computer writing lab and peer tutorial program, which provided the exigence for ongoing funding by the University Grants Commission of the provincial government and allowed for a second round of faculty hiring in 1991 (M. McIntyre, interview). The impression on the university community was that special funds were being used to begin an access program, and often created a perception of mild resentment among disciplinary faculty that trickled into those who taught in the writing program. Between common cultural sentiments about writing and who is responsible for preparing student writers for university writing demands, a lack of professional training in the discipline, and institutional resentment around resources, discourses of access in terms of such negative statements were clear in the interview corpus, as these samples show:

> So there was a tension that had built by the mid-80s between access and excellence and the
> Writing Program was seen as a way of bringing everyone up to par so that a variety of people

---

[4] At the time, university funding was mediated through a body called the University Grants Commission (UGC). The University was able to make a case to the UCG that because of its student demographics (primarily on the basis of the largest percentages of both part-time and first-generation students in Manitoba), it needed an adjustment to core funding. While the UCG could not change core funding, it could give project-specific funding in the form of a "redressment" grant (M. McIntyre, interview).

from a variety of backgrounds, including some sub-standard K–12 education backgrounds, would have this acculturation experience in which, not just to learn how to write an academic essay, but in which people could learn what university was all about and how to think like an academic. (C. Taylor)

But going back to the access thing, if we're taking in students who don't have ability in writing, it compounds all of the problems that I've just been talking about. They can't write when they come in, not because they're not bright enough or anything of that sort but just opportunities and background. Then those are the ones we have to make sure they can write when they come out and that's the most time-consuming job in the whole university I think, to try to do that. You could almost give them no other courses and it would take full-time attention to that. And that's again a very expensive thing to do. (B. Rannie)

So in terms of the access, we had those populations. We had First Nations populations, overseas populations. We had students moving in from rural areas. We had students coming out of city high schools with low graduating averages. And those, they were the ones that we were really looking at, especially in Development Rhetoric, to get them acclimatized, to help them learn writing process, to give them the support through the tutoring. And to give them the confidence to go on and finish off the writing requirement with Rhetoric 1 and then move on from there. (S. Page)

So, there's about eight folks who stayed here for a long time and all of us were pretty receptive I'd say to access and making, you know, opening the portals of the university and reducing the sense of once you got students who were maybe not totally prepared that they would leave. So, it was definitely seen as not an anti-intellectual program but an access-oriented mandate… my sense as a member of the program is when the next group came in with the revision of the writing program that saw it grow forward into a department eventually the access element was seen as maybe less pressing or less interesting. (J. McLeod-Rogers)

What these students lack, what access students lack, as we'll call them, students who in theory need writing instruction or just many people look like they need writing instruction, are in fact—suffer from a drastic lack of language. (R. Byrnes)

Again, it [the Writing Program] suffered the stigma at the outset of being a place where people went to fix things. Like the dentist, you have a problem with a semicolon or whatever. (N. Besner)

If we're saying "at risk," even if we're using [the term], it's just huge because we use standards all the time. We use rank all the time. We, everything about the way in which we

organize ourselves, has I think some, has some pretty undemocratic implications. (D. Schnitzer)

Faculty and administrators of the writing program have a clear sense in these examples that access is taken to mean addressing student populations who, in various ways, are being perceived as being underprepared to write—whether in naming specific student demographics, assigning blame at the high school level, noting student "backgrounds" and "opportunities," or intimating what students "lack" that requires a "fix." Such demographics are partnered in polarity and tensions with preparation and academic acculturation of the more traditional university student. Yet it is not without a critical stance on such an approach to access; as one interviewee notes, to denote a student as "at risk," for example, suggests the structure of standards, qualifications, and exclusion that they are marked as unlikely to survive. As well, written into the discourse of access here is that access programs are terrifically "expensive" and are a drain on the University's staff and resources.

The discourse of access is not singly faceted into simply denoting student populations and resource requirements, though as Williams (1997) points out, access discourse writes various categories of difference (like class, race, and age) into institutional discourses under one umbrella category as though these different demographics can somehow be comparable to one another. On the one hand, using access to signify underprepared students tends dangerously toward simple categories that suggest who deserves or is ready for university and who is not—and thus may be used to keep some populations in university and some populations relegated to failure. On the other, interviewees also cast access as an inclusive move toward social justice, a thematic I next take up.

Access as Social Justice/Inclusion

Often administrators see access programs as resource-intensive moves toward student enrolment and recruitment, as enrolment numbers are used as a performance indicator for provincial university funding. Those who are invested in the pedagogical mission of access programs, however, are often focused on the message of inclusion and social justice, with the notion that involving underrepresented students in university life and addressing their needs helps, overall, to remedy the structural inequities that plague higher education in its focus on credentialing dependent on stratification, hierarchy, and prestige (Davies & Guppy, 2010; Davies & Zarifa, 2012). It's important to note that "access" can be used to suggest a variety of positions about higher education, from a social justice orientation to one that is associated with traditional educational priorities of levels of student preparation and a concern with enrollment figures. To that end, not only is the discourse of access associated with a lack of preparation demonstrated by the focus on underrepresented populations as noted in the above section, but it also is concerned with Williams' (1997) suggestive "icon words" of "social justice, political literacy, empowerment, and community development" (p. 42). As she notes, a discourse of access that sees it as a route toward social justice disassociates itself from a view of access that is dependent upon traditional goals in higher education that rely on hierarchy, "modularization," and higher education as a consumer product (p. 43). Instead, this view of access acts "not just to stimulate individual or even group mobility, but to act as a catalyst to both community

developments and to change higher education itself," asking "What changes to pedagogical style, to the curriculum, and to assessment techniques are necessary to achieve this?" (p. 42).

From its inception, the Writing Program struggled with these questions, primarily because it was the first of its kind in the early 1980s. As a result, the group of core faculty instructors hired to teach in the program were collectivized and drawn into delivering a "common curriculum," staffing a writing tutorial program, and encouraging students' use of word-processing technologies through the computer writing lab, all without similar national models or peer faculties with which to build community. As Deborah Schnitzer, one of the first instructors in the writing program, put it,

> [I]f we had blueprints to work with I think they were chronically under developed… But we had an understanding, a shared understanding of what it was we wanted to do and a notion of a centre and what that would do in supporting students who were coming in from all different kinds of places to support the courses that were being developed and to support what we had I think envisioned: a lively and changing culture in the university. Or a way of informing a possible changing culture and university, opening up what they understood their student body to be.

This set curriculum emerged from a feminist and social justice–oriented teaching philosophy that worked with innovative teaching methods: small, workshop-sized classes, team teaching, a peer tutorial program, and common curriculum across sections. The curriculum, as Jaqueline McLeod-Rogers, one of the first instructors in the program notes, was not oriented per se around students who were seen as somehow lacking, as much as on good principles of writing pedagogy:

> The intellectual development for our students had to do with writing so you [students] would have gone on to become involved with administration of a tutoring centre or tutoring. So, then you would really have to think about how do you teach writing, what are the principles of writing that are portable? So, it was really very much a writing-based pedagogy and program focused on adapting curriculum to students.

Moreover, best practices of writing pedagogy were concerned with Freirean notions of higher education that worked to empower students with literacy education, and many historic[5] and contemporary[6] initiatives of the writing program emerged out of such goals:

---

[5] Elements such as pass/fail writing courses, small class sizes (15 to 18), the peer tutorial program, student diagnostic essays and staff meetings on timed holistic scoring, instructor one-on-one tutoring and conferencing, writing courses for specific Indigenous groups from Peguis and Fisher River, writing courses for specific cohorts from Indonesia, Malaysia, and China (S. Page, interview).

> [A]ccess is telling students what you bring to the university you've already got it. We'll find what you know, we'll polish that, we'll make you a better writer, we can work with peer group skills, we'll make your approach to learning more manageable. But basically you're looking at the learner as already coming whole and in place. (J. McLeod-Rogers)

> I really thought we would dismantle and that the professionalization would be all of our responsibilities, students would be professionalized, we would be professionalized but with whole sight, you know? So, it wouldn't be professionalized into the existing rank, 'cause I thought, that's not good for us, but it would be professionalized into that sense of the multi-dimensional beings that we were. And that when mothers [in the Rising Sun school initiative] came, they came with the experience of mothering, with the experience of coming from another country, with these five languages that some of them spoke, that that would be so deeply honoured, right? That it wouldn't be a broken English that anybody ever said, nobody was to be fixed here. I had this really deep sense of how we could encourage these differences so that this integration and intersectionality and a definite, like this really sensitive democratization that I felt would work against, you know, departmentalization or syllogisation or isolations or separatism. I just, I was pushing for that. (D. Schnitzer)

The set curriculum of the early Writing Program, with its attendant commitment to community development and empowerment, as suggested above, endured changes after the second group of instructional staff was hired in the early 1990s. Those changes, which allowed more instructional freedom, created some internal friction; as Catherine Taylor noted, "I think that we saw their [the second group of hired staff] rejection of that set curriculum as part and parcel of just lacking a commitment to the idea of access and excellence and I think we very strongly believed, at the beginning, that you needed to be working as a collective almost in order to make this thing work as beautifully and as strongly as it could." However, despite the discord such changes suggested internally, the new instructional staff nonetheless held on to the notion of access beyond its negative connotations of lack, and toward a version of access as equity borne of self-reflexivity:

> [S]tudents can come in thinking about their having a deficit addressed and if instead we can talk about university writing in the broader terms we're familiar with as opposed to a particular type of writing that has its own challenges that we can make explicit and work on and make interesting to try to meet. That's a way of allowing all of the students in our classroom to feel that they've got something to gain from it. (J. Kearns)

---

[6] Many contemporary fixtures of the Writing Program have emerged from these historical components: the Transition Year Program (https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/assc/transition-yr-program.html), which takes a cohort approach to first-year Indigenous student writers, specific stretch cohort courses for EAL writers, one-on-one peer tutoring, class size caps of 28 at the first year.

> [Reading proficiently] that's the product that a liberal education should produce and it can't be done by one, you know, 50 cc's of penicillin injected in the first semester at school, or even the same amount injected at the last semester at school—it has to be a continuous practice and improving consciousness… about the writing process itself. (R. Byrnes)

Despite the changing nature of the program over time, the "access as inclusion/social justice" thematic was woven together from its centered focus on student experience, pedagogical flexibility and innovation, and commitment to diversity as a value of higher education. This discourse of access downplays qualifications and admissions and aligns instead with promoting knowledge acquisition that recognizes student agency. At the same time, noting access as a movement toward inclusion did, as Williams' (1997) suggests, construct its opposite position in the thematic of an emergent discourse of *excellence*, suggesting excellence itself as a particular standard of exclusion.

Excellence as a Standard/Exclusion

In defining excellence, it is important to note, as Brusoni et al. (2014) do, that the word itself suggests "competence as the starting point" (p. 21). Thus developing mastery, underpreparedness, or remediation—all suggesting an emerging competence—directly contravenes the starting point of excellence. This is what Williams (1997) means when she suggests that discussions of selectivity and higher education—the question of who should attend university—give rise to polarizing discourses of inclusion (we should let everyone in as a democratizing move toward mass education) and exclusion (education is a privilege meant for the most qualified, elite persons who are capable of meeting a universal standard). In university mission statements and elsewhere in the marketing of higher education, as Allan (2007) contends, the language of excellence—associated with words such as "*standards*, *benchmark*, *best practice*, and *quality*"—suggest "current agendas related to 'quality control' and verification" (p. 57). It is no surprise, if we refer back to Williams' (1997) list of polarizing categories that the use of terms like "non-standard" and "non-traditional" to represent "shorthand descriptors of who should or should not be let into what sort of academia and on what terms" (p. 25), that these descriptors also often are used to describe student populations that fall on the opposite side of "excellence," associated with high levels of academic achievement, a meeting or excelling of a particular standard, and a superiority to others (Allan, 2007, p. 60).

Excellence, when viewed in this way, was often seen as coming from without by writing program faculty, that is, from other university departments without an access mandate. However, such attitudes also shaped faculty's self-perception of the role of writing in the university, particularly in the early years of the writing program:

> So, it was definitely seen as not an anti-intellectual program but an access-oriented mandate. Then against that would come even from the English department that housed us

this reminder that there is also the standard of excellence. So, they would say we don't care, you know, even when you're evaluating writing, we don't care so much about the affective goals, we're interested in the cognitive outcomes. (J. McLeod-Rogers)

We are to help the "core" work with the students who are admitted here. But the real core, the heart-and-soul core, is intellectually rigorous academic offerings. And the Writing Program was just supposed to make that work better. (C. Taylor)

Here, faculty in the early iterations of the program note the pressure of an academic standard and intellectual rigour that places expectations not on pedagogy, process, empowerment, or social justice, but on outcomes, measures, and an academic "core." Such a focus on excellence in the writing program as a path to improvement, betterment, or developing competence situates the spectre of excellence here within a discourse of what Allan (2007) terms "a technical ideal of performance" (p. 57). This ideal is situated within the language of measurement and assessment that defines educational standards, as Bill Rannie, an administrator who helped initiate the writing program, describes:

At the start up it [the Writing Program] was meant to serve a remediation function just by the nature of the rules. If you got 90% we're not going to deal with you, those who got below 90%... That says remediation right off. I mean if you can write we'll give you a pass, we'll waive the requirement, which is too bad in a way because you can always make a writer, a good writer better.

Thus excellence is situated within a quantitative discourse of rules, requirements, and standards set in place to exclude underprepared students from university (and track their inclusion through specificities of access programming), separating qualified writers from unqualified ones, prepared students from those underprepared and in need of remediation. As Allan (2007) suggests, such an approach to *excellence* suggests that it "can only be achieved by the few; since educational achievement depends on ability, there will be a small number of high achievers and a much greater number of relatively lower achievers." In the discourse of higher education, "the best institutions will attract the high achievers, and vice-versa" (p. 64).

Even as the writing program has seen recent changes in establishing a vertical curriculum and departmental status, faculty struggle with trying to rectify the openness of inclusion associated with access and its original mandate and the standards of exclusion associated with excellence, which suggests a high degree of faculty professionalization:

[T]he university doesn't have a master plan to produce good writers as part of the Liberal Arts mission, and so forth. So one can imagine this could all be done if there were enough people with rhetoric and communication composition backgrounds hired to implement it, institute it, but I see no prospect of that happening. (R. Byrnes)

As Bob Byrnes, teaching faculty in the second iteration of staff hiring for the writing program, suggests above, the tension of the polarization of excellence—associated with "good writers" and those with the disciplinary background to teach them—is one that surrounds the discursive construction of excellence, moving it beyond only a term of exclusion and standardization and toward an affiliation with professionalization and research. As the Writing Program changed from a horizontal, first-year curriculum to a Centre with an undergraduate major, and finally to a Department of Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications expected to deliver disciplinary programming in three disciplinary areas, interviewees often represented excellence's association with disciplinary inquiry and research expertise.

Excellence as Research

Excellence emerges as a standard for higher education, as Vaira (2009) has it, that is bound up with international rankings of universities that rest on particular "legitimated sets of excellence criteria on which evaluation and rankings are built" (p. 141). Of these criteria, research has emerged as the most elite in strata, "still now represented and valued as the most 'noble' function of an institution, and as a benchmark or indicator for national and international excellence" (p. 149). Thus it is little surprise that as interviewees considered the role of excellence within the writing program, that often their deliberations around excellence focused around differing rankings of staff hired in first and second waves. The first wave were hired as instructors upon the Writing Program's creation; the second wave were hired on the tenure track through the English department in the mid-1990s (N. Besner). As the Writing Program progressed through subsequent iterations of an independent Centre (in 1995), developed an undergraduate major (in 2003), and shifted into an independent department (in 2006), it began to hire in disciplinary areas beyond English studies. Together, these moves toward independence from the English Department and an increased disciplinary knowledge in the fields of Rhetoric, Writing Studies, and Communications Studies represented by faculty hires in these areas contributed to interviewees housing talk of excellence within these developments. Hires at the rank of Assistant Professor (as opposed to Instructor) are research-oriented; similarly, the say on university committees that make programmatic decisions (like consideration of independence, developing major curriculum, or advocating for departmental status) depended on those voices required by union contracts to have such a say; that is, those within the professoriate.

The decision to hire Instructors to staff the writing program in its inception was not one that those who recall its start-up were entirely happy with, as Neil Besner, who helped hire the first group of writing program faculty, explains:

> the first cohort of people were hired as instructors; and a mistake in my view. A mistake driven by resource considerations because the people who were hired as instructors, when we started to try to think about how they could more properly integrate with and enter into the professorate, we were told, "No. They are going to remain as instructors. That's the way this cohort is going to react." In fact, in the second phase of hiring… I guess in that second phase, they were professors…. And so there was a degree of what you would call,

professionalization, respect, profile, all welcome, brought to the writing program at that point which had been lacking because everyone was looked upon as junior as an instructor.

Besner summarizes the shift in rank from Instructor to the professoriate as a way for the program to gain credibility and respect that is enfolded into the structural systems of university rankings and evaluation: professors research, and thus bring more credibility to a program's activities, based on universities' stratification and rewards systems. This is echoed by Michael McIntyre, the Dean who catalyzed the program in the 1980s:

> I think the evolution from writing program to centre to department is largely perceived as earned and appropriate. And I think part of that was fueled by the excellence of the people…. By the trajectories of their own careers they showed they were worthy, not only of tenure track appointments, but, they were worthy of constituting a department, a focus of excellence.

Here the move to link professorial rank to excellence is overt; this is echoed by many who witnessed the shifts in the program over time:

> [T]he necessary steps were taken so we could start to have an intellectual structure to build courses and a kind of vision of how it constituted a disciplinary area for students to go forward and study…. that was more of a nod to excellence. (J. McLeod-Rogers)

> Because with the advent of real, you know, people with graduate degrees in Rhetoric, we were able to start thinking about expanding our offerings beyond academic writing and start looking at offering upper year courses. And then it's just sort of a logical progression from there to go from a centre to a department. (S. Page)

> Well, the Writing Program is kind of an outside certification requirement when you think of the curriculum of the Department as an intellectual enterprise beholden more to a discipline than to a mission within an institution. (C. Taylor)

> We're another department as opposed to a sort of special unit. So I think that an increasing sense of our disciplinary independence and our being an entity like other departments has really been helpful…. Students understand writing as an area of inquiry, "rhetoric, writing and communication," that they can pursue in the same way that they do other areas so that there's less an attitude that it's simply a skills-based course. (J. Kearns)

Whether refining the link between excellence and research to mean intellectual rigour, disciplinarity, or the development of curriculum beyond the first year, faculty in the program show a clear distillation of

excellence to mean that which is associated with the professoriate ("real… people with graduate degrees in Rhetoric") and upper levels of teaching which tend toward discipline-oriented and theoretical content, as opposed to teaching writing at the first-year level carried out by instructors. Again, this posits in opposition not only dichotomous terms such as excellence/access, but also research/teaching, and professoriate/instructoriate that work to construct expectations about value in higher education.

Thus far, we've seen the discourses of access and excellence set up in these contrastive ways, born from both the increased market-driven competition in higher education for student bodies (on whom funding models depend) and the structuration of higher education as a selective enterprise. However, one last way that interviewees talked about both access and excellence managed to challenge this dichotomous view, focusing less on either as a mark of legitimation and more on both as interdependent processes always in the making.

Access and Excellence as Developmental Processes

Thus far, both *access* and *excellence* have emerged as part of dichotomous discourses that assume each to mean the other's opposite, along the lines of Williams' polarizing categories. However, while interviewees acknowledged these emergent tensions, they also often recognized their interrelated qualities: rather than seeing access as only a movement to prioritize underrepresented demographics on university campuses, interviewees saw access as an acknowledgement of a process of recognition of universal potential. Similarly, rather than note excellence as serving solely a function of exclusion, interviewees located excellence in a near horizon rather than an exclusive now. Together, these positions locate both access and excellence as developmental processes that not only can peacefully co-exist, but in the case of building students' writing facility, augment one another to provide a promising educational space for all students.

These intermediate, rather than polar, positions are reflected in literature on higher education that question both excellence and access as totalitarizing moves in one direction or the other. In regards to the discourse of access, in which often universities focus exclusively on *admissions* (which forward concepts of selectivity, exclusion, institutional autonomy, and market success), an intermediate position might focus on access as a condition of *potential* (which forwards concepts of development, individual merit, and creative growth over time) (Bravenboer, 2012). The same applies to excellence; as Brusoni et al. (2014) point out, if excellence is "linked with unexpected outcomes… which prove better than anticipated," such as innovation, excellence is mounted as a developmental process that emerges over time, rather than a universal static concept that focuses on selectivity and exclusion. Both intermediary positions emphasize not only these terminologies as processes, but also highlight elements of innovation, creativity, and growth as emerging from the synthesis of each.

Both synthesis and focus on process were apparent in the way that both administrators and faculty considered the function of writing in higher education, as well as the development of the writing program and its transitions over time:

And that it [the writing program] supports multiple Englishes and languages and that it doesn't narrow but that it really opens and opens and opens so that the university sees itself very differently than it has seen and sees academic Englishes and modes of representation way beyond the traditional models that it has allowed as excellent or standard. (D. Schnitzer)

To characterize the program as an access program, I think, is a mistake. There's a larger argument to be made here. I'll only try to make the argument in miniature. There's this alleged conflict between access and excellence, which I think mitigates against a program like the teaching of writing. It does. If you see it only as, "Oh let's help those poor souls, who for one reason or another, aren't up to snuff," we're going to open the doors to them but we're going help them by instructing them in writing, then you lose the other side of the argument which is what I would argue that the access/excellence is a false dichotomy. Why? Because excellent writers in every discipline are always thinking about writing, they're always thinking about how to write or present themselves in writing. For goodness sakes, I do it all the time. Why wouldn't we all? If you characterize the writing program as an access program, you lose—not half—but a major component of its vocation, I think. (N. Besner)

I think access was an important part of that mandate.… In part, to improve access, but right from the beginning he was very clear that access and excellence could go well together. That being explicit about writing standards at university on offering explicit instruction, which certainly wasn't a model that we found in Canadian universities, would be of advantage to all students including those that came from backgrounds that had prepared them less well for university…. So I think if we talk about excellence as striving for excellence as something that everyone, wherever you place yourself on the spectrum, we're all striving for that. That can encourage students all along the way to be taking advantage of every opportunity to strengthen their abilities so that that's really a model—I guess that's just what I'm talking about, is always looking and strengthening and enhancing what's there as opposed to a kind of deficit model. (J. Kearns)

Well, I saw the Writing Program as being absolutely committed to the twin goals of access and excellence and I saw those as being dependent on each other and nourishing each other… that improving genuine access as opposed to revolving door access for students through the Writing Program would lead to academic excellence and a real enrichment of the dynamic intellectual diversity of the institution. (C. Taylor)

That means the original mandate has been carried forward. That, in fact, the ability to deal more with the, whatever the word is, higher level issues—the writing as a discipline, writing in the disciplines, writing as a discipline—those higher level things haven't actually robbed the original mandate to act as a writing resource for needy students. It's just been built on top. (B. Rannie)

[W]hen I think about access and excellence, I see the people who came in as access students having become excellent students and excellent professionals beyond. (S. Page)

This clarity [field-specific writing research] is a plan isn't it? …maybe a focus in on what does it mean for access to be meaningful? And I think the whole notion of writing as something that energizes education and discipline. (M. McIntyre)

In these excerpts, writing itself is what allows these discursive middle positions of access and excellence because it is a mode of learning that requires development over time—no one is born writing—and never tries to represent mastery (as even the most prolific and eminent writers will acknowledge). Further, the emphases on process, opportunity to develop, and enrichment are those that impact students entering at all levels, allowing range for both individual potential (the "access student" who becomes an "excellent professional") as well as expertise as supporting surprising innovation (the nourishment of all students by campus inclusivity; the ability of writing research at upper levels to benefit what is known about writing at lower levels; writing as "something that energizes education and discipline"). Unlike discourses of higher education that promote a universal definition of excellence as selective exception, discourses of writing expertise note that *writing excellence* is ongoing, contextual, supported by serendipity, and eludes attempts at mastery. Such a position undergirds a synergy between access and excellence that sees each supporting the other as developmental processes located in both time and experience.

Access and Excellence: Imagining Futures

While access and excellence are surely considered buzzwords of higher education in the current moment, it's central to note that these buzzwords represent discourses of higher education that contain in them tensions, pressures, and anxieties about who should or should not be in university, as well as how universities-as-businesses will fare in a market-driven economy of education that posits students as consumers and student bodies as provincial funds. The Writing Program at the UW remains a distinct case for revealing some of these tensions, as well as suggesting ways that access and excellence can work synergistically to recognize that the energy of writing is not containable to a particular type of student, a particular course, a particular major, or a particular job future.

The flexibility of writing as a subject allows for all students to commit to developing mastery at all levels and to imagine excellence on the horizon, rather than a given of elite admissions. It also allows for a focus on this developing mastery to affect the first-year writing class as well as the third-year discipline-specific Communications class, the second-year Chemistry lab, the Honours Sociology seminar. A synthetic balance between access and excellence as a future move of the Writing Program might take any number of possible approaches; a few that have emerged as promising areas of attention throughout the interviews are as follows:

- movement to reinvigorate a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) approach, connecting out to other departments and investigating what writing needs their students experience, as well as consulting

with disciplinary faculty to help them include writing-based assignments and assessments in their curricula;

- the recent development of the Certificate in Writing, which pairs expertise in writing as something existing alongside other major fields of study in the BA;

- fostering connections between the Writing Centre and other parts of the university, pairing excellent student writers with writers in other classrooms and university programs;

- highlighting the work of first-year writers in the university by department-based publications, such as the newly formed *Rooted in Rhetoric* undergraduate journal

These are but a few directions such an equilibrium between access and excellence might take. An intermediate position that engages both access and excellence allows for the possibility of including a multitude of voices to strengthen research and to think innovatively about job futures—as we are told, millennials who work now will collaborate more, engage themselves in community missions, and disavow hierarchies more than any other generation in history (Schawbel, 2013). As Canada invites disciplinary professionals into the writing and rhetoric curriculum, such expertise allows for writing to emerge not just as a basic "skill" for a university education, but a vertical path through the intellectual core of a liberal arts mission informed by both research and best practices (see Jamieson, 2009). Enlarging the discourse of access to include excellence—and vice-versa—as many did from the first despite structural and cultural obstacles to doing so, works against the polarizing forces contained in these discourses that pits openness against selectivity. Imagining the conditions in which access and excellence can complement one another is perhaps one of the best ways to imagine both a less stratified and a more prepared university to tackle the challenges of higher education in the twenty-first century.

References

Allan, K. (2007). Excellence: A new keyword for education? *Critical Quarterly, 49*(1), 54–78.

Bravenboer, D. (2012). The official discourse of fair access to higher education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 14*(3), 120–140.

Brusoni, M., et al. (2014). *The concept of excellence in higher education*. Brussels: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

Clary-Lemon, J. (2017). A case-study approach to examining cross-border networks. In D. Mueller, A. Williams, L. W. Phelps, & J. Clary-Lemon, *Cross-border networks in writing studies* (pp. 123–147). Anderson, SC: Parlor/Inkshed.

Connors, R. (2003). The abolition debate in composition: A short history. In L. Ede & A. Lunsford (Eds.), *Selected essays of Robert J. Connors* (pp. 279–294). Boston: Bedford/St. Martins.

Davies, S., & Guppy, N. (2010). *The schooled society* (second edition). Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Davies, S., & Zarifa, D. (2012). The stratification of universities: Structural inequality in Canada and the United States*. Research in Social Stratification and Mobility, 30*, 143–158.

Foucault, M. (1969). *The archeology of knowledge*. Trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Routledge.

Gee, J. P. (2011). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. New York: Routledge.

Gentz, J. (2009). *Keywords re-oriented*. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen.

Gold, D. (2008). Will the circle be broken: The rhetoric of complaint against student writing. *Profession, 2008*, 83–93.

Jamieson, S. (2009). The vertical writing curriculum: The necessary core of liberal arts education. In J. Castner Post & J. A. Inman (Eds.), *Composition(s) in the new liberal arts* (pp. 159–184). Creskill: Hampton Press.

Kearns, J., & Turner, B. (1997). Negotiated independence: How a Canadian writing program became a centre. *WPA: Writing Program Administration, 21*, 31–43.

Kearns, J., & Turner, B. (2002). No longer discourse technicians: Redefining place and purpose in an independent Canadian writing program. In P. O' Neill, A. Crow, & L. Burton (Eds.), *A field of dreams:*

Independent writing programs and the future of composition studies (pp. 90–103). Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Kearns, J., & Turner, B. (2016). An outsider's perspective: Curriculum design and strategies for sustainability in a Canadian IWP. In J. Everett & C. Hanganu-Bresch (Eds.), *A minefield of dreams: Triumphs and travails of independent writing programs* (pp. 43–62). Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse.

Phelps, L. W. (2011). *Liminal practice in a maturing writing department*. (Unpublished Fulbright Project Report).

Powell, P. R. (2014). *Retention and resistance: Writing instruction and students who leave*. Logan: Utah State University Press.

Russell, D. (2002). *Writing in the academic disciplines: A curricular history*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Schawbel, D. (2013, December 16). 10 ways millennials are creating the future of work. *Forbes*. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2013/12/16/10-ways-millennials-are-creating-the-future-of-work/#7dec2a23105b

Turner, B., & Kearns, J. (2006). Into the future: A prairie writing program extends its traditions. In R. Graves & H. Graves (Eds.), *Writing centres, writing seminars, writing culture: Writing instruction in Anglo-Canadian universities* (pp. 273–296). Winnipeg, MB: Inkshed Publications.

Turner, B., & Kearns, J. (2012). Department of rhetoric, writing and communications at the university of Winnipeg. In C. Thaiss, G. Bräuer, P. Carlino, L. Ganobcsik-Williams, & A. Sinha (Eds.), *Writing programs worldwide: Profiles of academic writing in many places* (pp. 129–138). Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse.

Vaira, M. (2009). Toward unified and stratified systems of higher education? Systems convergence and organizational stratified differentiation in Europe. In B. Khem & B. Stensaker (Eds.), *University rankings, diversity, and the new landscape of higher education* (pp. 135–154). Rotterdam: Sense Publisher.

Williams, J. (1997). The discourse of access: The legitimation of selectivity. In J. Williams (Ed.), *Negotiating access to higher education: The discourse of selectivity and equity* (pp. 24–46). Bristol, PA: Open University Press.

Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. London: Fontana.