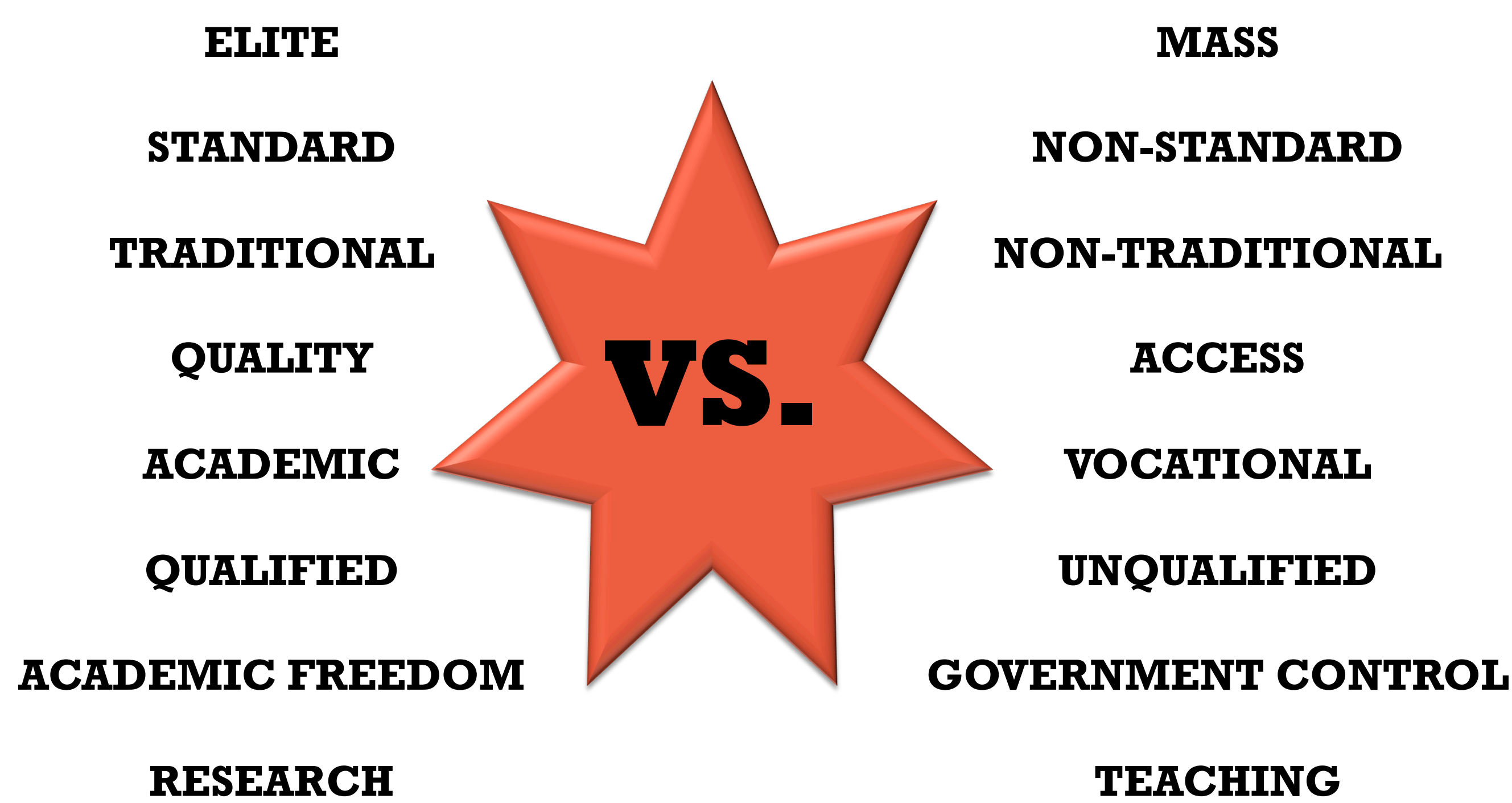# access & excellence
the writing program then & now

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abstract

This study interviewed ten teachers and administrators who were fundamental to the establishment of the University of Winnipeg's Writing Program. It examines the discourses of **access** and **excellence** that emerged in discussions of the Writing Program's establishment and over time. Such discourses set up common arguments about the function of **higher education**, its purpose, and who it should serve. The terminology associated with both access and excellence implies a view of education dependent on academic standards and quality control. A discourse analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in **five themes** that showed varied approaches to conceptualizing **access** and **excellence** throughout the Writing Program's 30+ year history.

icon words

ELITE — MASS

STANDARD — NON-STANDARD

TRADITIONAL — NON-TRADITIONAL

QUALITY — ACCESS

VS.

ACADEMIC — VOCATIONAL

QUALIFIED — UNQUALIFIED

ACADEMIC FREEDOM — GOVERNMENT CONTROL

RESEARCH — TEACHING

1 Access as Unqualified/Underprepared

Negative statements about unprepared student populations, a lack of professional training in the discipline, or institutional resentment around resources.

2 Access as Social Justice/Inclusion

Statements that suggested underrepresented students' contributions to university life help to remedy the structural inequities that plague higher education in its focus on credentialing dependent on stratification, hierarchy, and prestige.

> "Access 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

3 Excellence as a Standard/Exclusion

Statements noting pressure of an academic standard that places expectations on outcomes, measures, and an academic "core."
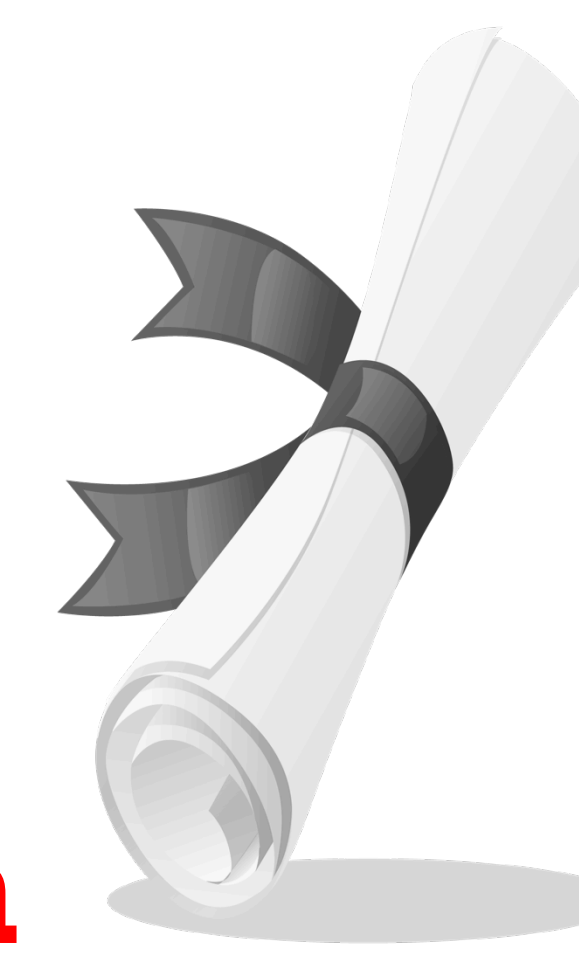
4 Excellence as Research

Statements distilling excellence as associated with the professoriate, upper levels of teaching, and discipline-oriented theoretical content above the first year.

> "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 with a focus of excellence."
> —M. McIntyre

5 Access & Excellence as Developmental Processes

Statements that avoided totalizing moves of access/excellence, instead focusing on processes, potential, innovation, creativity, and growth.

> "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."
> —N. Besner

conclusions & recommendations
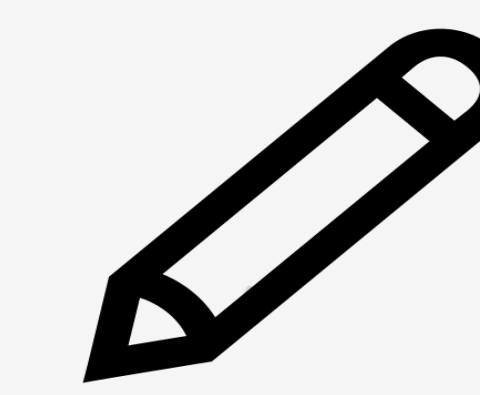
Reinvigorate a Writing in the Disciplines (WID) approach by:
- connecting with other departments to investigate what writing needs their students experience
- consulting with disciplinary faculty to help them include writing-based assignments & assessments in their curricula

Promote development of the Certificate in Writing, which pairs expertise in writing as something existing alongside other major fields of study in the Bachelor's degree.

Foster connections between the Writing Centre and other parts of the university, pairing excellent student writers with writers in other classrooms and university programs.

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

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