

I can't say that issues of assessment and social justice were on my mind when Mitch Daniels first walked into my life, but they eventually ended up at the forefront of my attention.

Daniels, the former governor of Indiana and a prominent Republican politician, was selected for the presidency of Purdue University in June 2012. I had just completed my first year in the doctoral program in Rhetoric & Composition at Purdue. Rumors of Daniels's selection had been in the wind for some time, but I was clueless; I had dug into a comfortable routine of teaching and coursework. I remember feeling a bit blindsided, fearful for a future that included a man who was a notorious supporter of the education reform movement, a movement I rejected then and still reject now. Many critics pointed out various absurdities of Daniels's selection. A man with no academic credentials to speak of, he had as governor signed several budget bills that cut funding to Indiana's state universities, including Purdue. Some pointed out that Daniels had appointed or re-appointed all ten of the trustees who had selected him, a clear conflict of interest. When controversy erupted over comments Daniels made regarding the late radical historian Howard Zinn, it seemed to confirm fears that he would lead Purdue as a partisan, not as an educator.

Yet for all of our disagreements, I found myself in agreement with many of Daniels's initial reforms. His administration instituted a tuition freeze, halted new construction projects, and consolidated redundant administrative functions. These actions spoke to a pressing moral issue for the contemporary university: the spiraling growth of tuition and student loan debt. Combined with the weak labor market that has plagued young workers since the recession of 2009, many students were graduating into harsh economic conditions, particularly the most vulnerable, such as students of color. Under such conditions, the fiscal conservatism of a politician like Daniels led to some positive outcomes, however ugly their origins. While I noted the irony of a man who had cut funding for public universities lamenting tuition growth, I could not deny that his efforts to halt that growth had a positive impact on the lives of Purdue's graduates.

The issue of assessment would soon take center stage in Daniels's reform project, and would lead to a controversy that threatened to engulf his presidency.

In his second year as president, Daniels appointed a task force to institute a continuing assessment program, designed to demonstrate that Purdue's undergraduate education was producing learning gains. Typical of his rhetorical style, Daniels repeatedly used terminology from the world of business to justify this initiative, making repeated references to "value" and casting university education as similar to any other commodity. Central to the administration's plan was the Collegiate Learning Assessment+, a standardized test of college learning. Concerned with the validity, reliability, and practicality of the test, and eager to defend faculty control of curriculum and assessment, Purdue's faculty loudly resisted the assessment plan. But while the faculty senate was able to buy time and influence the exact dynamics of the assessment program, in broad strokes the Daniels administration is getting its way. The CLA+ and its controversial implementation at Purdue were the subject of my doctoral dissertation.

This controversy did not occur in a vacuum. The Obama administration has proposed the creation of rankings of colleges and universities based on "value," with standardized tests a key element of these rankings. In this proposal, the Obama administration has demonstrated remarkable continuity with the George W. Bush administration that preceded it. The Bush White House's Spellings commission, a blue-ribbon panel, advocated in its report for a new focus on rigorous, interoperable tests of college student

learning. With both Republican and Democratic presidents alike calling for these standardized tests, it's no surprise that the issue has taken center stage.

For many, these changes represent the worst of the contemporary university. Standardized tests are perceived as reductive and inauthentic. (My own dissertation research revealed abundant empirical, theoretical, and political problems with these instruments.) Faculty fear that these tests will be used punitively against college instructors, or as a means to wrest control of curriculum and place it in the hands of administrators. Because many of the developers of these tests are for-profit companies, widespread adoption would involve funneling significant public money into the hands of private enterprise. Perhaps worst of all, such efforts seem to port the testing mania of today's K-12 education into the higher education system.

It would be easy, given these issues, for compositionists and others in English studies to take a stance of pure resistance. Considering how many writing instructors and researchers would likely oppose these developments, responding to them with blanket refusals would perhaps be natural. But consider the cost: if we adopt such a stance, we write ourselves out of many important subsidiary issues that come with standardized tests of college learning. What tests or types of tests are best? How should they direct pedagogy and administration? Who should be in charge of interpreting results? How do we protect academic freedom and instructor autonomy under such a system? If our position is merely to obstruct tests altogether, we will have no voice in answering these questions. This was one of the most frustrating aspects of my dissertation research, finding that scholars in the humanities have essentially abdicated their role in influencing administrative decisions out of a principled but self-defeating posture of total resistance.

If assessment is to function as a tool for social justice, then yes, we must recognize the perils of linguistic hegemony that are inherent to tests of language and learning. Yes, we must understand the ways in which this assessment effort is part of a privatization movement that seeks to push public money into private hands. Yes, we must place these changes into a context of a broader neoliberal turn in the university, one which threatens our traditional ideals. And we must look for sites of resistance to those practices that most conflict with those ideals.

But we must also tell the truth, most importantly to ourselves. The truth for many writing instructors and administrators is that standardized assessments of some kind are coming. Given the Obama administration's proposals and others like them, many institutions will feel compelled to participate, particularly public institutions. Consistent chatter about tying the availability of federal aid to assessment outcomes raise the stakes even higher. With these kinds of institutional and political pressures mounting, and with a majority of college writing classes now taught by at-risk instructors such as graduate students and adjuncts, our capacity as a field to simply say no to any kind of testing is limited. Sticking our heads in the sand and refusing to contemplate the problems at our doorstep leaves us without a voice, subject to further casualization and exclusion from the power centers of the university.

Since composition's "social turn" in the 1990s, a great deal of our scholarship has been defined by what we can't and shouldn't do. Scholars like James Berlin, Elizabeth Flynn, and Carl Herndl made passionate, often compelling arguments about the perils of educational hegemony that are common to the corporate university. Advocates of critical pedagogy have produced a large corpus of articles that meticulously lay out the potential for traditionalist pedagogy to silence, marginalize, and exclude

minority voices. I celebrate the power and clarity of these arguments. But more and more, I see a field of composition that has become, in effect, an anti-field, with endless arguments for what we as ethical teachers and researchers shouldn't do but far less consideration for what we should. Our major journals and our major conferences house many arguments that question the value or ethics of common pedagogical techniques and assumptions, but few that articulate what we should do instead to satisfy institutional expectations. Particularly lacking are arguments that take a hard, unflinching look at the space outside of our small discipline and acknowledge that the contemporary university has expectations that are unlikely to change in the near future. You could hardly blame a young compositionist for feeling lost: how can one stay a member of the field in good standing while still doing the work our institutions, and our governments, demand?

There are ways forward. We can build a future that is at once ethical and pragmatic, which recognizes the inevitability of assessment while maintaining our commitments to skepticism and critique. I am not advocating capitulation. I am advocating for prioritization and strategic response. If we acknowledge that assessment is likely coming to many contexts, we can begin to develop a research literature that articulates our perspective on how best to interpret assessment results and how to direct administrative decisions in light of them, without accepting these tests uncritically. There is ample space between pure acceptance and pure resistance, and it is in this space that we can build our future. We need only be willing to refuse to make the perfect the enemy of the good, and to get to work.