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Introduction

WRITING A NEW IDEA OF THE UNIVERSITY

This book, about the power of ordinary, collective composition practices, took shape in a place of unparalleled isolation and under extraordinary circumstances. The global Covid-19 pandemic was still ravaging New York City when I rode an empty city bus four miles from home to my college campus. I went to revisit data from a research project completed a few years earlier. Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols forbade me from removing the “human subject” material—hundreds of pages of student writing produced in two composition classes—locked in a file cabinet in the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) office at Lehman College, one of the City University of New York (CUNY) schools and where I teach. The freewrites and letters I had collated and coded in 2012 and 2013 are part of an archive used to assess the efficacy of what had been an historic new curriculum at my institution. “Pathways,” the first general education reform at CUNY in half a century, was also the first curriculum to institute university-wide standards for composition courses. The new courses were mandated in 2011 and piloted in 2012. We were coming close to its tenth anniversary. I figured I’d spend the lockdown doing a follow-up report.

It was a gray day at the end of October of 2020. The local Bronx bus made one stop, in front of my son’s high school, which had become the site of an Army Corps of Engineers Covid-19 testing center. The driver looked askance when I motioned through the plastic barrier that I needed to go two more blocks, to the college. I got off the bus and found the gates boarded up and blocked by a tarp tent, where a public safety officer sat. He checked my one-day pass through a window the size of my faculty ID. I made it across the campus and to the English department on the third floor of Carman Hall without passing a single person. When I unlocked the door to the WAC office, I found six chairs pulled out inches from the seminar table, as if its occupants had stepped out for a moment and not seven months. I avoided the chairs and settled for the floor. My posture was the same as sitting Shiva, a ritual I know too

well. In Jewish practice, the mourner lowers herself to receive visitors, a reminder that loss reorients everything.

Of course no one was coming to visit Lehman, or the several high schools within a few blocks of campus. We were nearly a year into the pandemic and without a clear plan for teaching the city's students. New York City has the largest public school system in the nation, and CUNY is the country's largest urban public university. The relationship between the two is intimate. Most CUNY students attended a city high school, undergraduates are often caregivers for school-aged kids, and graduate students work as staff or faculty in the districts. Among those in the field of composition and rhetoric, the connection between K–12 and CUNY goes back decades, to the days of open admissions, Basic Writing, and the birth of the New York City Writing Project. In the summer of 2020, many of us with ties to both systems joined leaders in advocacy groups to support students and staff working in the most challenging of situations. We organized book swaps and drop-off sites for free lunch access, delivered computers and set up Wi-Fi for families in shelters and other compromised housing situations, connected tutors to kids with learning differences, and created caregiver support networks.

But by late September, with no definitive word about reopening or improved remote options, we started to lose hope. Every week, more students stopped attending classes. The Covid cases would go up in the schools, the buildings would close, and the supply chain for resources stalled. The frustration and injustice of it all motivated us one week and left us listless the next. For many, distance learning just wasn't going to work. For many community organizers, remote advocacy barely scratched the surface of need.

Exasperation and exhaustion summed up my home situation too. My family felt crowded yet deeply alone in the private ways we were falling apart. For five years, my husband had lived with a complicated but manageable disease. Now we were paralyzed with fear about his "underlying condition." That led to draconian rules for our three kids. The oldest rebelled, contracted the virus, then retreated completely. Our middle child lost the majority of services he received for a language disability, and with them, much of his enthusiasm for learning. The youngest went into school, but Covid outbreaks sent kids home for weeks at a time. Each quarantine period convinced her that it was best to stay put. She'd join me most afternoons in the bedroom, lying under the covers and out of view of the laptop camera while I taught. We'd wait out the days like this, autumn's diminishing light daring us to do it again tomorrow.

Still we were doing better than many. By spring of 2020 the Bronx had become what the *New York Times* called a “virus hotspot.”¹ In this poorest borough of New York City, Lehman is the only public four-year college. We knew then, and now have data proving, that working-class communities and people of color have been the hardest hit from the pandemic. A Hispanic Serving Institution, Lehman’s population is around 80 percent Latinx or Black, majority women, and more than half the students come from homes making under \$30,000 a year.² Scholars have predicted that when the final tallies come in, CUNY students, staff, and faculty will have suffered the most sickness and death of any university in the country.³

A snapshot of my 2020–2021 courses provides some specifics. Of the eighty-five undergraduates in my classes, all said they wanted to be back on campus and all agreed this would “never or not for a long time” happen. Twenty-six had dropped one or more of their classes since March 2020. This included a nurse who was in her last year of school, having returned at age forty-three to become an English teacher. Two mothers around my age had waited a combined nineteen years to enroll in college. They didn’t return in September. More than half of my students logged on to borrowed computers from apartment hallways, parked cars, or a semiprivate place in the following workspaces: Starbucks, hospitals, nursing homes, daycare centers, UPS trucks, restaurant kitchens, and subway stations. Thirty-seven students said they shared a room with family members who were also learning remotely. Some days just a handful of students showed up to our Zoom meetings, apologizing because they couldn’t stay for the entire class. A few would message me during class to describe a dangerous job or a death in the family. I tried to manage the private chat, filled with personal despair, while maintaining morale. I’d revamp lessons, reach out to individual students, rally the group with a playlist, a podcast, or just a video of strangers jostling for seats on crowded subway cars. Sometimes this fell flat and I sounded like the ringleader in some ridiculous ruse. Other times, everyone got in on the act, sharing photos or posting poignant passages from assigned reading. These days lifted spirits, but never for long.

Longing and an urgency to connect: that’s how I felt but not what I told the dean when I sought special permission to be on campus. “Return to research” was the subject heading of a desperate email sent to senior administration. The college could use an updated analysis of general education and a retrospective look at outcomes for composition, my email stated. If I could just get to those old files, I explained, I’d reevaluate the data, check it against new research and disciplinary-specific reforms, and write a new curricular report.

The report never happened. Instead I spent the rest of that October and then the next three years rereading the artifacts from these Lehman College English 111 courses and from student writing produced in classrooms just like them. Reading the texts in relationship to each other revealed this material resonating with a rapidly changed context, the one we live in now. The samples spoke to me and to the way classroom writing pursues a shared space of collective practice and connected learning. I call that space the composition commons.

Engaging in archives from two pivotal moments in history—the late 1930s, at the start of the general education movement, and the early 2000s, when a diverse, nontraditional student demographic demands that we reconsider common learning—*The Composition Commons* traces the epistemological properties and social powers of informal classroom writing, tracks how it creates a new idea of the university, and argues that we center this idea in the academy.

METHODOLOGY, 2012–2018: RESEARCHING REFORM

I did not set out to write a book about an idea of the university. My research began, like many writing studies projects do, with an attempt to understand and reform classroom outcomes, curricular goals, and pedagogy. In 2012 and 2013, I was one of the writing program administrators charged with enacting Pathways, the new general education curriculum, for the first-year writing classes at Lehman. The primary purpose of Pathways was to ease the transfer process so students could more seamlessly go from two-year to four-year schools and streamline their time earning a degree. This local goal, particular to the demographics at CUNY, was described as part of a national agenda to transform higher education. Administrators pointed to places “like Harvard” that had initiated general education reforms of their own to ready students for what the board of trustees called the “knowledge needed . . . in a new century.”⁴ That phrase, and the reference to elite institutions, came up in glossy brochures and a promotional blitz sent to faculty, students, and the media. The materials described why a bold, standardized new “common core” would “update” CUNY for a new era.⁵

As college writing programs adopted this new general education curriculum, many also sought new assessments. In 2012, several Lehman composition courses became part of a pilot project study that would lead to adopting the Written Communication VALUES Rubric of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). About a dozen sections of English 111, the first of our two required writing courses,

would measure one central competency listed among the Pathways composition outcomes: the ability to compose “well-constructed essays that develop clearly defined aims, that are supported by close, textual reading.”⁶ The AAC&U rubric would evaluate this skill using three high-stakes student essays: a narrative and two academic arguments.

Lehman’s WAC program had used the AAC&U rubric before, and I knew it wouldn’t capture the many discourses of the composition course.⁷ So as part of a sabbatical research project, I secured IRB permission to investigate the range of writing happening in the new curriculum. I enrolled in two semesters of English 111, did the work, got a grade, and gathered hundreds of artifacts.⁸ My central research question was simple: how do students talk about the writing they’re asked to do in the new curriculum?⁹

Over two years, I collected 232 writing samples from forty-five students enrolled in English 111. My methodology drew from autoethnographic classroom studies and case study research. Suresh A. Canagarajah suggests that autoethnography enables knowledge to develop “without depending on researchers from the center” (2012, 117). Multilingual students and scholars and others from the margins of the academy can find this type of research “friendly,” he argues, because lived literacy experiences of all kinds, and not only those that echo existing literature, are relevant. Guided by Canagarajah’s literacy studies, I took a reflective stance to the data, focusing on formal and informal writing and listening and recording classroom interactions. I chose two sections taught by “Prof D,” as she preferred to be called. I knew the instructor professionally but not very well. She was experienced, recently tenured as a full-time lecturer, and one of the instructors piloting the AAC&U rubric to evaluate student writing.

Between 2014 and 2015, a year after I completed the classroom research, I used the AAC&U Rubric as a model to code the writing produced in two English 111 sections. My research assistants and I recorded each time students named the genres required or the five learning outcomes provided in the rubric.¹⁰

The study revealed that students rarely referred to the genres required for the formal essays, though these were described in the Pathways outcomes, in the course syllabus, and in the particular assignment prompts. Even when students were asked to write a letter or compose a freewrite specifically about their arguments and narratives, their texts seldom mentioned these assignments as such. The learning outcomes were sometimes touched on, but not often. On the other hand, students named the work they saw happening in freewrites and letters. There could be many reasons why students refrained from discussing

certain assignments. My colleagues and I decided to avoid conjecture and focus on what the freewriting and letters didn't do: reveal much about genre and outcomes in general education composition courses.

After months of coding, WAC coordinators and I drew on this data to create a new professional development agenda for general education and composition. We determined that the curriculum should focus more on how students "transfer" their writing knowledge from course to course and school to school. Transfer, an important "threshold concept" in the field of writing studies, seemed critical to the success of Pathways. We used the informal texts in the archive, combined with the data collected in the rubrics, to track "background knowledge"—information, knowledge, skills, and content students possess when they come to college. This helped us understand what students might need in composition and beyond. We agreed with writing scholars who found that when students learn for transfer, they "draw upon, use, and repurpose" prior writing skills and knowledge and achieve success in "new settings" (Robertson, Taczak, and Yancey 2012). Over the next few years, we revamped WAC workshops, and in 2018, my college revised assessment guidelines for first-year composition, published collaborative studies on pedagogy, and developed curricular guides for departments.¹¹

METHODOLOGY, 2020–2022: FROM RESEARCHING REFORM TO RENDERING A COMMONS

The original purpose of my study was to investigate how student writing realizes the aims of a curricular reform. But when I encountered the archive again, in a city shut down by a pandemic and a campus silenced by the absence of students, that curriculum faded into the background. In this altered reality, I discovered other patterns in the language, other knowledge forms.

Most noticeably, the freewriting and letters no longer represented something that might "transfer" from one situation to another. Rather the artifacts were tethering me to this place, this moment, telling me about ways that classroom writing brings people and ideas together, whether physically with each other or not. I heard conversations between student and student and between student and the academy that pulsed with presence, purpose, and sustained spirit. Instead of certainties about reform, these artifacts spoke to how ordinary students make connections in and across time, write to belong somewhere, and render knowledge in the common pursuit of practice. By the end of 2021, a new question about composition was starting to form. How does

knowledge formed in one time and in another place transfer to a world in the process of becoming something else?

This question guided another kind of archival analysis. Anthropologist Elizabeth Chin's 2016 *My Life with Things* offered a model for rethinking artifacts over time and in time. Chin's unusual ethnography is part diary of personal consumer habits, part reflections on those habits, and part ideological critique of mass consumerism in late capitalism. Over many years, she wrote field notes of her consumption habits and also watched how those notes read differently as the objects she purchased served different uses. After data collection, she deviated from the more systematic ethnographic recordkeeping and wrote self-contained essays, in a single setting, in an attempt to perform some rigorous work of memory.

My approach to collecting and analyzing the data from English 111 was similar. As an enrolled student, I took field notes from the two English 111 classes, reflected on classroom practices as I participated, and recorded student observations and my own, but did not look at the student writing until the semester concluded. Only months and years after that, when I was trying to do one thing—describe a curriculum—did I end up doing something else: describing an idea of the university.

For this next round of artifact coding, I relied on an approach to literacy research adopted from Deborah Brandt. Brandt explains how everyday informal accounts matter to how we track large-scale literacy developments. Her research documents one major literacy change in the twenty-first century, that we are “becoming a nation of authors” (qtd. in Plante 2018). These new authors are “witnesses to socio-historical processes, witnesses who can report out from their particular locations in place and time and social structure” (Brandt 2021, 263). During 2020 and 2021, I analyzed the student samples and considered these writers as witnesses and authors. I adopted a “grounded theory” methodology, noting what Brandt calls “mentions,” or “discrete verbal references to events, processes, actions, facts, presumptions that pertain to the phenomena of interest” (2021, 268).¹²

Over a year's time, I observed when “mentions” did not resonate with the curricular outcomes, but did with each other. I started listing the phrases repeated over and over, coming from a time and place of the past but also speaking to me and to each other in the present. I followed Brandt's lead in presenting the accounts of everyday persons as critical matter for literacy and cultural studies. Attending to the writing of “non-elite people whose voices are usually absent from official representations,” my analysis of individual student artifacts is not meant to be representative of particular identity groups but instead illuminate

systemic patterns in collections of discourse (Brandt 2021, 263). I checked the patterns that I found with other educators and spent a year doing “wide background reading” or “sensitizing” (Brandt 2021, 266). My reading stretched back a century. I found the contents of that one file cabinet resonating with the contents of dozens of other file cabinets of classroom material, and with a dynamic story about student writing and higher education in America. The artifacts came together to form a tradition that transcends curricular reforms and even global pandemics. This is a tradition of students composing an academic commons.

HISTORY AND IDEA OF THE ACADEMIC COMMONS

The *academic commons* as I define it is a social collective generated by writing practices that happen in the classrooms of public, nonprestigious colleges and universities. This material does not invent the commons. Rather the commons is enacted, again and again, *by* the artifacts, as they are made, classroom by classroom, practice by writing practice.

Although this project focuses on writing practices and classrooms, *the commons* is not a term I take from the field of composition studies. *Commons* is a term that resists ownership. It means the collectives that form in a particular time and place, and among persons working together, but it does not belong to a single period, region, or intellectual tradition. A commons is a living entity, contingent on the material contributions and gathering of human endeavors. One cannot define *commons* without calling attention to activities making those things.

The historical definition of the commons goes back to medieval Europe, where a commons referred to particular land farmed on by commoners, or people without power in the aristocracy, church, or related hierarchies. Today, we think of the commons as anything we do as a group, in an enclosed area of collective engagement. For example, Lehman College has a dining commons, a coffee shop and food court where students and faculty meet and eat together. I am one of the many bloggers published on a digital commons, a shared space for CUNY-affiliated students and teachers. Several colleagues helped create a green space commons at Lehman and in nearby areas of the Bronx, an edible garden cultivated for campus members and surrounding communities.¹³

As these examples illustrate, my university has adopted the term *commons* to describe communal social justice projects. But the commons has not always been conjured for the benefit of members of the public whose work I study here, students and teachers who are mostly women of color, work full- or nearly full-time, commute, and have significant caretaking

responsibilities. Indeed, we cannot separate “commons” from its counterpart, “enclosure,” a strategy whereby the powerful determine the value of the resources and activities of those without power or status (Kamola and Meyerhoff 2009). Enclosure policies have their roots in settler colonialism and policies that restricted, suppressed, or violently eradicated the lives, lands, literacies, and institutions of many of the educators and students discussed in the chapters that follow. For example, Craig Steven Wilder’s *Ebony and Ivy* details how the first colleges in this country, constructed to benefit democracy and promote enlightened politics, were built using enslaved labor and on Indigenous land. The Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1862 also sought a shared good through education. This act can be traced to increased access to schooling for poor and rural areas of America. Yet it also enabled the federal government to occupy land and then create institutions where the original inhabitants of that land would be excluded from admissions (Stein 2018). Closer to home, it’s easy to document examples of educational policies and curricular reforms directed at the general public that end up restricting or policing freedoms for specific groups. In the late 1990s, my university’s board of trustees began a campaign that would “return” CUNY to its history of “excellence” so that it could be a resource for the good of the city. By 2000, a set of austerity measures and new admissions procedures effectively closed what was left of open-admissions programming at CUNY’s four-year schools. In the early 2000s, literacy initiatives, like SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), so critical to innovative research and teaching in composition, and so important to my own pedagogical growth, were moved out of colleges like my own. SEEK served English Language Learners and poor students who needed support to start their degrees. In this case, what was called a “public good” became more exclusionary, limiting learning options for the increasingly multilingual and Black and Brown population attending CUNY in the twenty-first century.¹⁴

Given this history and the often corrupt use of the commons, it’s no wonder that many books like mine, about literacy and public education, avoid abstract ideas and stick to concrete concerns of persons and institutions. Ideas take us into metaphysics and spirituality. Classroom writing practices confront the here and now. There are tensions that rise to the surface whenever we situate local, specific literacy practices alongside abstract concepts. Throughout this book we explore these tensions. In fact we celebrate them as critical to building a new idea of a university in the practices of a public academy.

This is a different idea of a university than Cardinal John Henry Newman posited when he coined the phrase in 1852. When he first

delivered his famous book *The Idea of a University* as a series of lectures, Newman was on a mission to make the academy a sacred space, to sanctify it with higher concerns. College should take students away from the tensions of the day, giving them a home to seek communion with a higher purpose. Knowledge is bigger than the self, and the self has a soul connected to a pure intellectual spirit. A “gentleman” forms when released from the confines of the day-to-day, when he learns transcendent, timeless truths; this enables him to join a “civilization” of intellects. And for Newman, intellect and civilization emerge in harmony with literature and great humanistic works. Through engagement with the liberal arts, an “ideal” is realized: universal knowledge formed in “mutual dependence” (Newman 1996, 221, 99).

Mutual dependence laced with individual liberation: this is an idea with lasting appeal. Indeed, *The Idea of a University* has been traced to major educational movements of the last century (Turner 1996). General education curricula, ubiquitous in American colleges and universities, is one place where we can see the influence. Historians talk about this American invention as the twentieth-century enactment of Newman’s nineteenth-century vision. Credit for remaking this ideal into curriculum goes to a few descendants of Newman’s, humanists who created the liberal education requirement at elite institutions like the University of Chicago, Columbia, and Harvard. Out of these early-twentieth-century “common learnings” programs came a post–World War II commitment to reform, next an investment in literary studies as a core subject, and finally the adoption of general education curricula as the nation’s conduit to the commons. The goal of this kind of commons education was to release students from what one postwar manifesto called the “the stranglehold of the present” (Harvard Committee 1945, 70).

Of course the present found its way into Harvard’s curriculum and into all of academia, including core courses. The concerns of the present prompted dissent, critique, and continued revision of common learnings. Yet even as we alter what liberal education means and which books count as great, a reading-centered idea of the university maintains a hold on the national conversation, even in this post-pandemic era of change. The continued influence of an idea of the university generated at these prestige places carries on because, as Louis Menand writes, “historically, the elites have had the resources to innovate and the visibility to set standards for the system as a whole” (2010, 18).

My book, written from the perspective of a compositionist at a nonprestige public college, presents a rebuttal to the belief that selective universities are the sole engines of innovation in the academy. I join with others

who argue that if “historically” elite institutions get the resources, then we need to uncover undervalued contributions of marginalized institutions and fight for reallocation of funding.¹⁶ Yet here I make an additional claim. We need to define resources differently, not in terms of artifacts of the elite or abstract reforms detached from the lives of students and destined to become commodities, but as composing practices. The university can still be a liberating space. Yet it does not liberate *from* but *in* the confrontation and connection of the here and now. *The Composition Commons* conjures this idea of liberal education by telling the story of how students author a new kind of academic commons for this changing world.

AUTHORS AND MATERIALS OF THE ACADEMIC COMMONS

We are not accustomed to thinking of undergraduates as authoring an idea of the university because we are not accustomed to seeing student writing as cultural material. Yet investigating neglected places and practices leads us to some inventive epistemologies. That is an idea of the university I take from public commons advocates who animate this book. The first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Economics, Elinor Ostrom, is one pioneer of a practice-based commons. Ostrom articulates the commons as a big concept often enacted in small activities and overlooked areas. Her work refuted an earlier understanding of the commons, ecologist Garrett Hardin’s 1968 conclusion that the “tragedy of the commons” is society’s inability to manage resources. Hardin’s essay argued that land must be owned and enclosed, monitored from above and privatized, to avoid overuse and unequal distribution. Ostrom’s 1990 counterthesis, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, documented economic and environmentally sustainable possibilities in farming collectives. Later in her career, Ostrom extended her study of commoning beyond agricultural communities and joined with international scholars to define the “knowledge commons.” Along with Charlotte Hess, Ostrom defined the knowledge commons as an ongoing, ecological process that expands access by always requiring the search for new sources and new archives (Hess and Ostrom 2006). These approaches to research also broaden our notion of what and who makes knowledge and shapes social life.

The classroom activities that I count as part of the knowledge commons have been described as “vernacular” communicative practices. In her *Commons Democracy*, Dana D. Nelson (2015) uses the term *vernacular* to describe “immediate, informal, and non-delegable” practices depicted in pre-Revolutionary War novels of early America (7). Because we rely on

official documents created by the leading figures of history, our conception of shared governance is bound up with the legacy of war and the theories of representative politics that became national lore. Nelson invokes commoning literary practices as articulating additional and alternative values of democracy. Carmen Kynard's *Vernacular Insurrections*, about the literacy interventions of the Black Freedom movement, broadens the meaning of vernacular beyond "local" uses of a community's everyday language. Her study reveals the critical contribution Black literacy activists have made to American history and to writing studies. These vernacular practices don't just chip away at the dominant culture but remake it (2014, 11).

Critics Kandice Chuh and Roderick A. Ferguson also turn to alternative "humanisms and humanities" for claiming a commons (Chuh 2019, 24). These humanisms locate "roots" of culture that are "undisciplined" and invent new "modes of intellection and institutionality" (Ferguson 2021, 76). Their studies of African American and Asian American literatures show how our understanding of history, politics, culture, and aesthetics changes when we encounter texts different from the Eurocentric norm of Western culture. Drawing on philosopher Pierre Dardot and sociologist Christian Laval, as well as evidence on rising global inequities, compositionist James Rushing Daniel's 2022 *Toward an Anti-Capitalist Composition* offers examples of affirmative, justice-oriented "common" pedagogies that resist "the divisive and destructive project of capitalist accumulation" (25).

Resisting accumulation as an ethos defines the project of many new histories of the academy, including la paperson's 2017 *A Third University Is Possible*. This polemic turns back to pivotal moments in higher education, and specifically to the origin of land-grant colleges in America created after the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. Indigenous Americans and Black Americans were displaced by these policies and communities continue to live with the consequences. Yet there is energy, activism, intellectual innovation, and camaraderie happening here. La paperson draws from third-world feminists who recognize where transformation in community and politics occurs, even in colonizing spaces. A third-world university commits to this kind of transformation as it happens in local movements and in "scrap material" made in parts, over time; this is an idea of the university already underway, it "already exists" (la paperson 2017, 43, 52). Liberation through learning is an aspiration and an urgent reality of spaces ignored or injured by official policy.

Like Chuh, Ferguson, Daniel, and la paperson, this book looks for "modes of intellect and institution" in scrap parts and local movements, in roots and forms of resistance ignored or hidden in plain sight. But unlike the literary texts, political papers, or public pedagogies centered

in their projects, my book focuses on informal texts composed by individual students writing together in classrooms. We don't always define this material by its change-making features. By "we" I mean those of us in writing studies, who spend a lot of time with undergraduate composition, but not usually to mine ideas on transforming the academy. I also mean historians of higher education and cultural critics who care deeply about the university but rarely see low-stakes writing produced in introductory courses as resources for research. I argue that we must look again at these practices and their authors as forming a new academic commons.

The particular materials centered here are freewriting and reflective letters. They will be familiar to many, but I aim to defamiliarize them. Freewriting is known as the practice of writing about anything, nonstop, for a certain amount of time. Peter Elbow (2012), the scholar most associated with freewriting, calls it a heuristic to use our "vernacular" or to speak "on the page" (395). Reflective letters or "cover letters" are often what Kathleen Blake Yancey (1998) calls "first-person" accounts composed after finishing an assignment (26).

One way to see these practices anew is to treat them as genres or "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (Miller 1984, 159). Carolyn Miller claims genres as "cultural artifacts." I take Miller's "invitation" to focus on student writing as "an anthropologist sees a material artifact" with "patterns" that are "interrelated" (Miller 1994, 69). To trace the interrelated patterns in the informal student writing of classroom artifacts across time and space, I rely on an extensive body of research in rhetorical genre studies and critical pedagogy. I pay attention to what students said about the freewriting and letters to consider the features of genres "hidden" from the public because they are considered private or confidential (Devitt 2016, 14). Neither public nor private, freewriting and letter writing are "complex performances that take place in-between and around" recognizable discourses (Reiff and Bawarshi 2016, 188). They provide insight that official genres of the university—curricular reforms, disciplinary paradigms, scholarly manifestos—often obscure.

Three features of these genres guided my decision to center these practices. First, they are prevalent practices in classrooms and can be taken up today, and indeed, they were the most common writing activities observed in all the archives I studied. Second, these writing practices have a unique place in the history of general education in America. Most writing scholars trace these genres to the 1970s-era pioneering research of process paradigm compositionists; however, I uncover an earlier and more commons-oriented use of these practices. Third, of all the informal writing I studied, these were the two genres that prompted shared learning.

Freewriting and reflective letters are widely known but by no means universally used in college courses. Some access these activities as writers and teachers but wouldn't consider them suitable for creating an academic commons. Others might find these practices, especially their print-based forms, irrelevant to communication and knowledge-making in the digital age. In my own writing classes, I encourage public-facing genres, such as podcasts, blogs, and zines. Certainly these forms of writing can contribute to a commons. However, my research discovered that freewriting and reflective letters have a unique role to play in crafting shared knowledge. Freewriting and reflective letters straddle the line between home and school, job and course, campus and street, and reveal tensions and explore the invention of knowledges that happen on the border of our composing worlds. They highlight individual background knowledges and situate these knowledges in the content of the course. They direct readers to attend to students as authors. And they reflect on the state of the university and on the place of students in composing content for the academic commons.

OVERVIEW OF *THE COMPOSITION COMMONS*

That the university can be a commons is an old idea. That ordinary composition practices produced in nonelitist public college classrooms can create a commons is an idea to embrace now, as we face a new era in higher education. When ordinary persons go to college, they are labeled "nontraditional" and the schools they attend "nonselective." The nontraditional are older than twenty, working, have dependents or substantial family responsibilities, take "uneven" paths to degrees, often are first-generation, and commute. Increasingly, these students are also recent immigrants, speakers of more than one language, people of color, and women. For most of American history, this demographic was the minority enrolled in higher education. Today the nontraditional is the typical student who attends Lehman college. And they are the typical undergraduates in this country, making up the new academic majority.¹⁷

These students, and all Americans who have attended postsecondary schools over the last half-century, have two experiences in common: taking a required composition course and completing some form of general education requirement, both mandatory at over 80 percent of American colleges and universities.¹⁸ Debate about the value of these courses is as ubiquitous now as it was in the 1870s and 1880s, when composition was invented, and in the 1940s, when general education programs became commonplace. But there is little debate that writing occupies much of

our time and energy. Like all of us, these undergraduates are writing more than ever, composing in multiple, informal ways as part of class and while in classrooms, in a variety of contexts and in combinations of modalities, moving from screen to scrap of paper to social media countless times. What do we know about how this new academic majority gathers in writing and how their practices might transform higher learning in America? By the end of this book, I aim to answer this question.

The first half of *The Composition Commons* uses historical research to uncover the origins of the composition commons as an idea of the university. I track this idea to a forgotten nationwide writing-based general education project, the Stanford Language Arts Investigation (SLAI). From 1937 to 1940, this three-year integrated language arts experiment piloted courses for ten thousand public school and college students, with the goal of centering informal student writing, especially freewriting and reflective letters, what the SLAI called “contact” composition and “reconstructive” genres. Chapter 1 explores four monographs and thousands of pages of student writing and teacher ethnographies culled from the archives of the SLAI. I detail the practices of the two hundred language arts classes taught in what were then “new” public schools built for workers, adults, recent immigrants, and the poor.

This history revisits well-known architects of general education like philosopher John Dewey and literary critic I. A. Richards. I contrast their views with lesser-known public school and college educators. We meet Louise Noyes and Alvina Treut Burrows, compositionists who forwarded “contact composition” as a genre of the commons, and Charlemae Hill Rollins, editor of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) inaugural anthology of African American writings, who championed reflective writing or “lived-in” letters. Such practices contributed to a public school-centered, anti-racist, “reconstructive” vision for education, a radical alternative to the top-down liberal arts agenda of the day. That alternative vision erodes in the post-war years, as general education becomes a national agenda and the composition commons idea of the university is deserted. As chapter 2 explains, Harvard’s influential 1945 report *General Education in a Free Society* codified the commons as the “close” study of “heritage texts” for the purpose of national “cultural literacy.” The chapter describes the long shadow cast by cultural literacy, influencing the late-twentieth-century culture wars, the adoption of the Common Core State Standards in the early twenty-first century, and the post-Covid-19 calls to reinstate “liberal education” as a solution to global crisis.

The differences between general education, with its reading commons idea of the university, and the SLAI with its composition commons idea

of the university, are stark. General education asserts reading as the tool for, and representation of, shared background knowledge. The SLAI positioned composition practices as a source for creating shared knowledge. Liberal education emerged in great books courses at elite universities, and the SLAI took place in public high schools and public colleges and forwarded nontraditional students as authors of cultural material. The SLAI, disqualified from general education curricula and erased from history, is the model I draw from to revive the composition commons today.

The second half of the book offers two case studies of contact and reconstructive practices as they unfold in today's college courses. Attention to these practices reorients what we think the American academy was, where its innovations happen, and who can be the authors we turn to for a new idea of the university. Here we meet students in contemporary composition classes at Lehman College, CUNY, who carry on the tradition of the Stanford Language Arts Investigation. In chapter 3, we are introduced to Xavier, an adult student in English 111 who invented a new vocabulary for freewriting. His work, along with the other student artifacts, casts a different light on course content, liberal education, and intellectual history. Their contact compositions challenge commonplace understanding of what background knowledge is and how it's used in the "transfer" of knowledge and skills. Chapter 4 begins with a letter written by the Latinx Student Alliance at Lehman College about the need for diversity in English courses and explores the role of letters in challenging curricular updates. Inspired by SLAI teacher-researchers, who argued that student correspondences are investments in "reconstructive" communication, the chapter describes features of student letters that redefine diversity, equity, and inclusion. These letters echo the arguments of mobility and genre scholars, feminist rhetors, and critical pedagogues, who articulate the limitations of reform. In reading the correspondence of student writers we find actualization of these arguments. They are in the lived epistemological practices that matter in the academy.

Not all informal writing can produce a commons. And not everyone will agree that shared knowledge is possible or that college classrooms are the places to go looking for it. There is ample cause for cynicism about writing programs and for the future of public higher education. But this book is not primarily a critique. A substantial scholarly canon already exists to chronicle crisis. What we need now are new forms of contact and belonging, new approaches to reconstruct the academy. It is to these forms and approaches we turn now, as we recover and reclaim the composition commons for the university.