

# Underlife and the Emergence of a Two-Year College Writing Program

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While Robert Brooke's discussion of underlife focused on the autonomy of students, in this article I apply his conclusions to the behaviors performed and desires expressed by faculty members, specifically six tenured, two-year college English faculty members who conceptualize their work teaching writing in relation to both individual writing courses and one or more aspects of a writing program.

Where enthusiasm is expected, there will be apathy; where loyalty, there will be disaffection; where attendance, absenteeism . . . where deeds are to be done, varieties of inactivity. We find a multitude of homely little histories, each in its own way a movement of liberty. Whenever worlds are laid on, underlives develop.

—Erving Goffman, *Asylums*

## Introduction: *Disruption*

In the 1960s Canadian American sociologist Erving Goffman studied how patients in a mental hospital operated within assigned institutional roles. He noted that in an “everyday” sense institutions could be defined as any contained room or building where a particular type of activity regularly happens (3). When acclimating to an institution, individuals become “co-operators” through a series of what Goffman called *primary adjustments*: when a member of the organization “contributes required activity to the organization and under required conditions [. . .] he gives and gets in an appropriate spirit what has been systematically planned for, whether this entails much or little of himself” (188–89). The member of the institution “drinks the Kool-Aid,” as the phrase goes, taking along with it both the potential personal benefits and drawbacks that might accompany his participation. On the other hand, through *secondary adjustments*, a member of an organization may also resist full integration by “employ[ing] unauthorized means, or obtain[ing] unauthorized ends, or both, thus getting around the organization’s assumptions as to what he should do and get and hence what he should be. [. . .] Secondary adjustments represent ways in which the individual stands apart from the role and the self that were taken for granted for him by the institution” (189). The need to challenge an assigned social role is what Goffman called *underlife*. Underlife behavior does

not arise from defensiveness or as a reaction to a kind of imprisonment; rather, the pull of belonging and the push to detach are interconnected parts of the fabric of our social lives.

In 1987, Robert Brooke, then a new assistant professor at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, applied Goffman’s concept of *underlife* to what he observed during a semester he spent as a participant–observer in a first–year college writing class. He noticed students withdrawing from full class participation to have side conversations about the class material, commenting on what was expected of them and then brainstorming how to achieve it with classmates, judging their own performance, and multitasking by engaging in tasks that fell outside of assigned activities. All of these behaviors allowed them to “develo[p] their individual stances towards classroom experience” (144). Yet the forms of underlife students employed, while significant, were also “naïve, contained” (151). Writing teachers, Brooke insisted, want even more to unfold. To write requires disrupting one’s sense of what it means to be a student; to write is to question what is being presented to you, potentially to take an unexpected stance, or to examine one’s own position in the world, revealing possible conflicts that might arise with designated social roles. In what became the Braddock Prize–winning article “Underlife and Writing Instruction,” Brooke reflected,

[W]e’re asking [students] to take on a disruptive form—a whole stance toward their social world that questions it, explores it, writes about it. . . They *are* different from these roles. But they aren’t conscious of how they are different, and how they work to maintain their difference. Writing, finally, asks individuals to accept their own underlife, to accept the fact that they are never completely subsumed by their roles and can stand apart from them and contemplate. . . . It is in this desire to shift roles, from student to writer, from teacher–pleaser to original thinker, that writing instruction comes into conflict with the existing educational system, and also has the most to offer it. (151–52)

Brooke observes how teachers stand apart from traditional roles in the classroom as well as make identity shifts possible. They encourage small group work, create a workshop environment, and assign student–centered writing projects. In an ideal scenario, classes are small; students are always in conversation about their work; there is time for one–on–one conferences between teacher and student, which are increasingly guided by the student; revision is central to the course; and the writing teacher is actively engaged in writing projects, “[writing] often and in many modes” (150). We would be hard–pressed to find college writing teachers who would not want to live out this scenario, if they had their way.

And yet, as many readers of *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* already know, there are various impediments to implementing this vision at most of the nation’s community colleges, often due to factors beyond the writing teacher’s control. At my own college, a large, urban two–year college that is part of a sprawling urban university system, my colleagues and I are invested in helping students write successfully. Yet as an English department with over seventy full–time faculty

members and often nearly as many part-time members, each teaching multiple writing courses with class caps of up to twenty-eight students while also fulfilling demanding service expectations, we struggle to make time and space for collective conversations about what good writing looks like and how to support and assess it consistently. Some challenges, such as the unpredictability of enrollment, changing placement measures, and class size, are ones that extend beyond our department to college and university-wide administrators. Simultaneously, administrators at our two-year college, like many others, face pressure to raise completion rates, increase “workforce readiness,” and justify the institution’s public funding by showcasing how the college turns students who might otherwise rely on government support into productive members of the middle class.

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Christie Toth, Brett Griffiths, and Kathryn Thirolf, through interviews with two dozen full-time two-year college English faculty, have illustrated how competing local and national demands can create tensions and conflicts within a faculty member’s sense of professional identity and relationship to departmental policy. When criteria for tenure evaluation lags behind current pedagogical research or tested practice, instructors “f[i]nd ways to ‘get around’ constraining departmental guidelines by resisting the philosophy of the guidelines at the level of the classroom” (104). In their study, one instructor’s approach to the departmental requirement that at least one hour of a four-hour per week composition course be devoted to grammar instruction was not to include students’ scores on grammar quizzes when calculating course grades. Another teacher described how she navigated the same requirement pre-tenure while being observed regularly: “I do have fake grammar tests that I give out on the days that I was observed to take home and bring back. And then my observing committee gets one too. Okay. Is that dishonest? You bet it is. And I’d do it again” (104).

In this article, I discuss faculty underlives—the behaviors faculty engage in to distance themselves from the social roles and identities the institution has assigned to them—specifically, what underlife behaviors reveal about faculty members’ assumptions, conflicts, and desires as teachers of writing. I am not documenting behavior such as active participation in protests or coordinated petitions for systemic change that would be seen as more openly resistant, but rather what Goffman and Brooks would identify as “contained” forms of underlife: the ways we work *within* the existing structure while also separating ourselves from it. This article attempts to illustrate patterns of behavior that exist not only at my institution but at educational institutions across the country. Such behaviors are especially worth documenting at community colleges, which are often invisible in the broader landscape of higher education and where departments are large, reliance on adjunct labor is significant, and a considerable portion of incoming students arrive underprepared. At the same

time, as recent research demonstrates, many two-year college English departments are undergoing moments of increased desire for professionalization and increased attention to composition pedagogy. This makes for increasingly complex relationships between two-year college faculty members and their institutions.

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to individual writing courses and to an emerging writing program. As we begin to recognize ourselves as teaching within a writing “program,” we necessarily add more layers to the role-playing we do as faculty and to the information games we negotiate, not only in a classroom with students but in department meetings, committee meetings, and more informal interactions and conversations with our colleagues and administrators. I am proposing that when writing program administrators acknowledge and engage

with the underlives of their faculty members, they have the potential to shift the culture of writing and thus the experiences of students more broadly and deeply than when they focus on curricular changes in isolation—or rather, the extent that curricular change can be successfully sustained is tied up with developing a deeper understanding of faculty underlives.

Finally, this article seeks to demonstrate faculty members' enduring commitment to finding pedagogical strategies that work for students, while managing their own roles within an English department and emerging writing program. “Writing teachers want to produce writers, not students, and consequently we seek to change our pedagogy to allow the possibility of the writer's identity,” Brooke asserts (151). While this in itself is a complicated assumption that needs to be explored in more detail in community college settings, I am asking a different but related question: *What kinds of teachers do two-year college writing programs want to produce?* Faculty members who are rule followers? (Perhaps reflectively and selectively so?) Who are transparent about what happens in their classrooms? Who aim to align their curriculum with those of their colleagues? Who respect authorities (which may, especially in two-year college settings, include students with ample life experience)? Who are in touch with their own writing lives? My aim in the pages that follow is to incorporate fuller identities into our work as teachers of writing within college writing programs, acknowledging differences from the roles our institutions dictate, in the same way that Brooke's article prompted us to make more space for our students' identities in the classroom.

## Teacher Autonomy and Programmatic Thinking at the Two-Year College

My institution is an urban, open access college within an urban, public university system made up of seven community colleges, eleven four-year or “senior” colleges, and seven graduate, honors, or professional schools. Our college, which opened in 1971 as “Community College #9,” is designated as a Hispanic-serving institution and serves approximately twenty thousand degree students from 148 different countries, reflecting the makeup of the borough of New York City where it is situated, one of the most diverse areas of the United States. The college is committed to offering a liberal arts education alongside intensive vocational training and preparation for transfer to four-year colleges and universities. In 2018, 25 percent of students were pursuing an associate of arts degree (A.A.), 47 percent were pursuing an associate of science degree (A.S.), 27 percent were pursuing an associate of applied science (A.A.S.) degree, 1 percent were enrolled in certificate programs, and 19 percent were nondegree students (LaGuardia, “Institutional Profile”).

At the end of the 2017–2018 academic year, when I conducted my interviews, the English Department consisted of seventy-one full-time faculty

members; sixty-eight were tenure-track or tenured, and sixty-four had PhDs. The percentage of faculty with doctorates in the English Department and at the college overall (59 percent) is more than twice the national average for community colleges. Nearly all tenure-track faculty members in the English Department hold PhDs in some aspect of literary studies, rather than in composition and rhetoric. Since the majority of tenure-track English faculty are hired with significant experience teaching in public university systems, community literacy programs, and other educational settings, their encounters with composition pedagogy have come primarily through experience in the classroom. In 2017–18, the department relied upon seventy adjunct faculty members, some of whom have taught at the college for decades and a few of whom hold three-year appointments; the majority of contingent faculty are hired semester to semester.

Every semester, English Department faculty teach over three hundred total sections of the college’s two required writing courses: English 101, An Introduction to Expository Writing, and English 102, Writing through Literature. The former is a required course across the college, and the latter is required for all but engineering majors, who take a technical writing course instead. Liberal arts and criminal justice majors also take English 103, The Research Paper. Students who are not placed directly into a credit-bearing writing course may take a variety of remedial courses or corequisites depending on their reading ability and English language

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proficiency, though the university is increasingly pushing all college campuses away from stand-alone remediation and toward corequisite models.

When I joined the college in the fall of 2014, the English Department did not seem to understand itself as having a formalized Writing Program but rather a series of courses administered by three course coordinators for English 101, English 102, and basic writing. In 2016, the faculty members who led a Periodic Program Review (PPR) of our composition program framed the description of their assessment approach in their final report in terms that echo Brooke's insistence on the deeper dynamism of writing instruction:

The rubrics and other assessment tools that we have generated are designed to assess this complex relationship that the writer has with language as a whole . . . so as not only to reproduce knowledge, and thus the social systems and structures that are its hallmark, but rather, to *produce* knowledge, and as such to reconfigure experience. In conjoining innovation with critical thinking as the most crucial measure by which this inquiry analyzes student writing, we take our stand against the "inertia" as Pierre Bourdieu calls it, that leads to the meaningless, and repressive, repetition of social structures, and we take our stand on the side of *possibility*, which is indeed the possibility that our social and cultural institutions will not simply be reproduced, but rather, be re-created, re-composed. (LaGuardia, Composition 3, italics in original)

English faculty are well aware that what students have learned about writing started long before they stepped foot in a classroom and will unfold not in a single semester but through many classrooms over many semesters. When my colleagues reflect on how students may perceive this fuller experience, some have expressed fear that students' experiences with varying approaches to and expectations around writing may be inconsistent or, worse, demoralizing and counterproductive. The 2016 PPR led to a more serious effort to align our learning objectives and assignments across our writing sequence, from basic writing to English 103. It also led us to draft a Composition Program Vision Statement, which was developed by a committee of full-time faculty members, shared at a department meeting so that all department members could offer feedback, and then approved by our English Department Leadership Team.<sup>1</sup> The vision statement reads,

The Writing Program fosters a journey of transformation for all student levels, aiming to support the college's mission to educate and graduate one of the most diverse student populations in the country to become critical thinkers and socially responsible citizens who help to shape a rapidly evolving society. Writing is a foundation for students' intellectual engagement in the humanities and their participation in a democratic society. To strengthen this foundation, faculty employ inclusive pedagogies that address the diversity of our student population. Our writing courses focus on the integration of reading and writing, using culturally diverse texts to connect critical close reading practices with interpretive claims. Students gain a deeper understanding of the writing process by exploring the relationship between rhetoric and genre, in addition to interrogating digital/multimodal writing practices and contexts. Courses pay significant attention to revision and collaborative student learning.

I see this statement as both a summary and a roadmap that tries to foster conversations about deeper coherence and consistency in our practices across the department. As Victoria Holmstein, Tim Taylor, and Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt have all noted, community college English departments do not have writing programs so much as they *are* writing programs. Due to the sheer size of the college and its place in the university system, faculty members have sometimes found ourselves wondering whether our vision for our own courses aligns with that of our colleagues, with programmatic and departmental curricula, with expectations for student writing levied by other departments, with the college's mission, four-year college expectations, and national standards, and with our own views about social justice and what it means to teach at the college level.

Over the last thirty years, then, scholars such as Holmstein, Taylor, and Calhoun-Dillahunt, as well as Helon Howell Raines, Joe Janangelo, Jeffrey Klausman, Christina M. Toth, Brett Griffiths, and Kathryn Thirolf, have been tracking the professional identities of writing instructors and the existence, characteristics, and sustainability of writing programs at two-year colleges. Brooke's perspective teaching at a public flagship four-year university campus assumes that instructors are themselves able to maintain a sense of autonomy within their institution that, in turn, frees them to validate, support, and guide the autonomy of their students. Yet Brett Griffiths has studied the ways faculty at two-year colleges have not been trained to claim pedagogical expertise and demonstrate the value of their professional knowledge outside the narrow confines of their individual classrooms. As a result, some "opt out" of professional autonomy to maintain their own independence and avoid confrontations around pedagogical disagreements. Griffiths found that the two-year college instructors in her study "unwittingly undermined their own positioning within institutions due to a reluctance to engage and critique conversations in their departments, to use those conversations to develop and reinforce departmental control over scope of service, and to advocate for improved writing instruction at their institutions based on that engagement" (49). Professional autonomy, Griffiths wrote, is "achieved and maintained through the evolution and regulation of knowledge—in our case pedagogical knowledge—and the ability to communicate the value of that knowledge to a broader community—our institutions and the voting public" (49). Moreover, with Toth and Thirolf, Griffiths has observed that "two-year college faculty experience unique challenges when enacting their professional identities in both disciplinary and institutional contexts." For instance, an institution's push for degree completion and workforce preparation "can position two-year college English faculty at cross-purposes with the goals of administrators, thereby limiting their autonomy as writing pedagogy experts" (Toth et al. 91). Yet there is still a need to study the ways two-year faculty members engage with others in their institution and in their field, interactions that can look more broad and varied than what might be typical at a four-year college.

Many scholars tracking the emergence of two-year college writing programs describe programs that are decentered, which can both extend and impede a sense of autonomy. Calhoun-Dillahunt, Janangelo and Klausman offer accounts of programs

that are flexible, collaborative, and consensus-driven, based around addressing specific needs as they arise “and then dissolving when a task is complete” (Klausman, “Toward” 152). Taylor and later Toth, Griffiths, and Thirolf have argued that the lack of a separate space, a center of authority outside of a literature-focused English department and a lack of opportunities to create a shared, professional identity among two-year college English faculty can undercut a sense of autonomy among faculty members (Taylor; Toth et al.). At the same time, Janangelo and Klausman offer, “Perhaps the notion of autonomy—strong respect for an insistence upon the individual faculty member’s independence in course design, textbook selection, assessment, and so on—is what marks the two-year college writing program as different from vestiges of the old Research I model, which has at its core the preparation of graduate students as teaching assistants and then independent teachers” (Janangelo and Klausman 140). As Toth, Griffiths and Thirolf note, existing literature has described the roles of two-year college English faculty in terms that are vast and hybridized: “teacher-scholars” (Andelora, “Forging”), “knowledge makers” (Reynolds), “expert generalists” (Tinberg, “Teaching English” 93), and “transdisciplinary cosmopolitans” (Toth et al. 94). It is in enacting these hybridized roles that we also have ample opportunities to see underlife behaviors—engagement and detachment, loyalty and subversion—at work.

In 2013 in *TETYC*, Klausman offered readers a heuristic for determining the degree of development of their writing programs, ranging from “undeveloped/inactive” to “highly developed.” He acknowledged that while such a heuristic is “highly subjective and unlikely to stand up against any kind of rigorous critique,” it can foster local conversations that lead to important shifts in local culture (“Toward” 267). So in the fall of 2017, I distributed Klausman’s survey to my English Department colleagues at a department meeting. The thirty-seven responses I received, including four responses from faculty who self-identified as adjuncts, scored our emerging writing program on a 3-point scale across five categories; “0” indicated a feature was inactive throughout the program; “1” indicated it was somewhat developed in part of the program; “2” indicated it was fully developed in part of the program; “3” indicated that it was fully developed/present throughout the program. On the whole, faculty responses placed our program on the low end of the “developed” category (see Table 1). The work of scholars thus far has been largely based on a survey approach, a broad look at the field aimed at describing what types of programs exist and how. But even Klausman, who has organized much of his professional career around surveying the state of writing programs at two-year colleges, admits that we now have a viable working definition (“Toward” 269). More pressing at this moment is the need to use it to invent what a thoughtful writing program would look like on our local campuses through conversations, writing, and decision making.

In what follows, I describe how participating faculty seek to be engaged members of their organizations—the English Department and the college—while also pulling away from it. Speaking to faculty directly allowed me to collect their perceptions of their own experience and look for patterns in that experience that

**TABLE 1.** Responses to Klausman's Degree of Program Development Chart

FACTORS OR SYSTEMS	DEGREE OF DEVELOPMENT
<i>Curriculum development</i>	1.9 (one faculty member wrote "only during PPR & middle states")
<i>Formative program assessment</i>	2.2
<i>Professional development</i>	1.8
<i>Leadership</i>	1.9 (one faculty member gave "Chair & Directors" a 3 and "President/administration" a 1)
<i>Sense of community</i>	1.3 (a self-identified adjunct faculty member said "I do not have consistent access to information & committee work"; another respondent noted "[Writing Center] tutors too excluded")
<i>Overall program development score (out of 15)</i>	9.1 = "developed," "evolving," "partial implementation," "more ad hoc than systemic," "sense of community not shared by all" (Klausman, "Toward" 271). <sup>2</sup>

point to broader institutional processes. I approached my research for this project as a relatively new, untenured faculty member trying to learn about my institution and to preserve existing institutional knowledge. The interviews took place during my third and fourth years as an assistant professor of English. The year before I was hired, the department had elected a new chairperson to a three-year term; the previous chair had held the position for twenty-nine years until her retirement in 2013. From January 2017 through February 2018, I conducted semistructured interviews with twenty participants, which unfolded in one to three sessions.<sup>3</sup> The demographic makeup of this selected pool of interviewees loosely reflects the demographic breakdown of all faculty members in the department, approximately 50 percent of which identify as white females, 25 percent as white males, 12.5 percent as women of color, and 12.5 percent as men of color. Just as significantly, faculty members identify with various ethnic backgrounds, national identities, and global cultures. A significant number of faculty members in our department are multilingual, at least nine having been born and completing stages of their educations outside of the United States, and numerous others having lived outside of the United States for substantial periods of time. In the remainder of this article, I focus on the narratives that emerged from conversations with six full-time, tenured faculty members whose professional roles and experience have connected them to the mission of a writing program.

### **Taking Up the Role of Researcher: The Need for Institutional Ethnography at the Two-Year College**

To recognize the concept of *underlife* at work, it can be helpful to hear people describe the ways they navigate the material and interpersonal conditions of their

work. Institutional ethnography (IE), my guiding methodology for this study, uses traditional ethnographic methods to understand the relationship between individuals and institutions. Michelle LaFrance, building on the work of sociologists Marie Campbell, Frances Gregor, and Dorothy Smith, among others, describes IE as a “methodology [that] asks us . . . to investigate how the individuals within a location co-create the dynamics and processes under investigation.” LaFrance writes, “individual experience, ideals of practice, local materialities, and institutional discourse are mutually constitutive; what individuals do is always rule-governed and textually mediated. Using IE to study the ‘work’ that people carry out allows writing studies researchers to reveal the deep and often hidden investments and experiences of those people, making visible the values, practices, beliefs and belongings that circulate below more visible or dominant discourses” (5). In this sense, IE is a tool for recognizing the presence and power of underlife behaviors on an institutional scale.

My own inquiry was motivated by an attempt to orient myself within the college’s fifty-year history in order to understand how institutional history

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and personal history shape how faculty conceptualize their work day-to-day, and how they understand and execute the stated aims of official college materials, such as instructional guides, catalogs, and course proposals. The concept of *underlife* became more relevant as I began to examine “those institutional processes that [participants] discovered to be shaping [an] experience but that are not wholly known to the original informants” (DeVault and McCoy 20–21). In looking across the teaching and writing lives of multiple faculty members within an institution, it is clear that much of the

work faculty do—the material work of preparation, conducting a class, and grading on the one hand, and the less discernible effort of navigating programmatic and departmental rules and expectations on the other—is rendered invisible. This article is an attempt to shed light on the ways personal, professional, and institutional value systems coalesce and sometimes clash, especially in moments when the culture of a program, department, and institution may be in a period of change.

My interviews with faculty members began with asking them to describe their own literacy histories; we then moved to exploring how their experiences with writing shape the way they teach their courses. I asked them to describe the work done in those courses, moving in and out of categories such as the types of writing they assign, the way they conduct a class and talk with students about rules around writing, the colleagues with whom they collaborate in their teaching, how they divide their time and labor during the semester, and how they would describe themselves as teachers and as writers. I concluded these conversations by asking

faculty members to choose a few adjectives to describe the “culture of writing” at the college and to discuss their choices. On the whole, respondents described a culture that is highly individualistic, at times driven by anxiety or fear, while also being “invested,” “playful,” and “collaborative.”

While I have chosen to focus on responses from tenured faculty members, who felt secure enough to speak freely about their experiences, the narratives of untenured faculty and contingent faculty deserve to be treated fully in a separate manuscript; the institutional and material conditions in which these two groups of faculty work need to be mapped out much more thoroughly than I can do in the space I have here. For this project—which I hope will serve as a foundation for future studies of how faculty members’ positions in their institutions shape their teaching practices and attitudes—I have aimed to focus closely on the responses of faculty members who were more firmly embedded in the structure of the department and were required, as full-time employees, to be more aware of the relationship between policy and practice on their specific campus. Additionally, I chose to focus on responses from faculty members who had been appointed for a sustained period of time (more than ten years) and so had the opportunity to experience various waves of change within the English Department, the college, and the university.

When coding interviews, I read the interview transcriptions and coded them across three categories that emerged from participants’ responses: “personal autonomy,” which I divided into the subcategories “how teacher understands role of teacher” and “how teacher understands role of student”; “professional standards,” which I divided into the subcategories of “perceived standards” and those in which faculty “expressed personal investment”; and “classroom expectations,” which I again divided into the subcategories of “perceived standards” and those in which faculty “expressed personal investment.” While developing these categories, I was reading literature about teacher identity, which led me to Brooke’s article and the possibility of the concept of *underlife* as an organizing phenomenon. Through the categorical breakdowns I used while coding my interviews, I aimed to capture what Goffman called *primary adjustments*—as mentioned earlier, how individuals contribute “required activity to an organization and under required conditions” (188)—and *secondary adjustments*, or how faculty members resist full integration into the organization through “unauthorized ends, means, or both” (189).

### **Expressions of Underlife among English Faculty at a Community College**

In my interviews with colleagues, which were multipart conversations where I asked first about their own backgrounds as writers and teachers and then about their work at the college, I concluded with the same final question: “If you had to use an adjective or a series of adjectives to describe the ‘culture of writing’ at this college, what words would you use? How would you describe the culture?” The responses I received were informed by many different facets of the job: time and perceived support for scholarly writing, possibilities for professional collaboration around scholarship and teaching, freedom to experiment in the classroom,

administrative oversight, and the reputation of the college as a whole. Some of the language was grounded in pedagogical practice—for example, “a culture of thesis-driven writing”—but in other instances the words cut to an emotional experience.

### 1) Expressions of Personal Autonomy

When coding the language faculty used to express a sense of personal autonomy, I divided relevant excerpts into two subcategories: how the teacher understood their role as teacher, and how the teacher understood the role of the student. In the first subcategory, interviewees described teachers as “advocates for students” (Faculty Members 1, 2), “rhetoricians” (Faculty Member 1), mentors for newer colleagues (Faculty Member 4), disciplinarians or authority figures to be pleased (Faculty Member 5), and “performers of selfhood” (Faculty Member 5). In the second subcategory, interviewees described students as “frustrated rule seekers,” participants/doers, permission givers, and “performers of selfhood” (Faculty Member 5). These modes of redefining teacher and student roles allow faculty members to understand their roles in ways that go beyond how the institution has defined them, reconnecting them to their own sense of personal autonomy.

#### “DEFYING THE RULES” IN THE NAME OF ADVOCACY

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was when they spoke about navigating the breach between prescribed rules or curricular mandates and tested classroom practice. Departmental standards are set and circulated through a variety of memos from the provost, chairperson, and program directors, as well as through formal course proposals and less formal “introduction to the course” handouts. Smith (2001) and LaFrance (2019) note that such texts are powerful because they are “replicable,” “mak[ing] possible the

appearance of the same set of words, numbers or images in multiple local sites, however differently they may be read or taken up” (Smith 160; LaFrance 43). In attempting to standardize how individuals behave in an institution or organization, these documents—what institutional ethnographers like Smith and LaFrance call “boss texts”—allow work to be “recognize[ed]” and “co-ordinat[ed] . . . across multiple local settings and times” (LaFrance 43). Boss texts are intended to guide individual faculty members to design and deliver courses that align with programmatic, departmental, and college-wide policies; yet a faculty member’s autonomy (and what we typically refer to as *academic freedom*<sup>4</sup>) lies in his or her interpretation of the documents—or what LaFrance calls the “activation” of the discourse a text presents (44). Faculty who are assigned or elected to administrative roles are perhaps

the most conscious of balancing faculty autonomy with the need for consistency and coherence across courses. Moreover, because they have been directly involved navigating curricular decisions in line with multiple departmental, college and university policies, they tend to sense the malleability and precariousness of certain departmental “rules.”

While the English Department and our emerging writing program are now in a period of transition, the ideas expressed by my interviewees from the 2017–18 academic year reflected a long stretch of relatively unchanged departmental practice. Prior to 2019–20, the three co-directors of composition at the college, elected by their colleagues to three-year terms, each coordinated a single course: Basic Writing (ENG 099), Composition I: An Introduction to Expository Writing (ENG 101), and Composition II: Writing through Literature (ENG 102). They had historically been tasked with reviewing the syllabi of all faculty members who are teaching a composition course only for the first or second time to make sure their courses met the standards indicated on the course proposal, though there was no early semester review of syllabi for the rest of the department. One midcareer faculty member—approaching promotion to full professor at the time of our interview—came to the course coordinator role after already having had experience as a faculty member in another writing program. He discussed how he was highly conscious of the ways some faculty taught the first-semester writing course strictly aligned with departmental guidelines, while others interpreted the guidelines more loosely. He described one incident early in his career at the college in which he challenged the formal requirement that students pass an in-class final exam in order to pass the first-year writing course:

I saw that there were some people who were also against it . . . and I decided that my contribution, as the good rhetoric person, would be to name [the final exam] “sudden death.” So I started using that nomenclature every single chance I got, “the sudden death exam,” “the sudden death exam.” At the end of the year everybody was calling it “the sudden death exam” and everybody was realizing how stupid it [was]. But my main problem with it was exactly that I realized that I had come in [to the college] as an experienced faculty member and I had decided, “ok, I am not going to follow it.” But I remember that I had three other people who came with me that year, for whom it was the first job . . . I remember them saying, “Well, I cannot ignore it.” So the student was penalized based on whether you had a professor who played the system or not. That was for me the biggest problem with it, that it was unfair to the student at that level. Did you get an instructor who is going to defy the rules for you or not? (Faculty Member 1)

This faculty member acknowledged his authority to challenge existing rules, buoyed by his concern for students. Having already experienced what it was like to be part of a community of writing teachers outside of his present job, he was more comfortable managing the constraints of a loosely assembled writing curriculum while not sacrificing his own vision for his course.

This sense of autonomy was also evident in how he approached the five essays students were required to write in Composition I. Though he required extensive

writing in response to a variety of sophisticated assignments, he did not require his own students to complete five separate formal writing assignments in a twelve-week semester.<sup>5</sup> Instead, his students focused more on doing substantial revisions of fewer essays; as a result, when checking the syllabi of all faculty teaching the course for the first or second time, he accepted that while faculty might list “Essay 1... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... 5” in the assignments or grading section of the syllabus, a closer look at the weekly schedule or assignment sheets might show students developing two versions of the same paper (e.g., draft 1 is “Essay 3” and draft 2 is “Essay 4”) to allow the writing to evolve and become more complex. This is, of course, a confusing

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Another faculty member, a full professor, also recognized the slipperiness of upholding department policy when it threatened to contend with practices that have produced better results in the classroom.

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situation for newer, untenured faculty invested in following departmental rules. While they feel pressure to uphold course documents to students, colleagues, and departmental leadership as “boss texts,” consulting with more experienced colleagues may lead them to realize that tested practices that yield stronger writing from students do not align with departmental policies around writing instruction. When these unexamined expectations *are* disrupted, faculty members

experience important realizations about the courses they teach. Yet, based on my interviews, such realizations often seemed to happen in isolation or in conversations behind closed doors while many of us continued to present a separate, public, sanctioned version of the course.

Another faculty member, a full professor, also recognized the slipperiness of upholding department policy when it threatened to contend with practices that have produced better results in the classroom. He described a moment when he became willing to challenge the standing policy around the number of assigned papers in his own section of Composition I:

When I teach 101, I’m teaching that writing is a process, that you don’t just have something from your head and put it on the paper and *voila!* There are missteps. You go in a certain path on one draft, you stop, you start a new draft, and then maybe you go back and fix something from the old draft and you put it in and you blend it and you get a whole new paper. You didn’t think you were going to go in that direction, but it’s truer to what you think about the topic or the issue . . . I emphasized that, but then I feel like a liar because [I am saying] writing is a process *but hurry up and write*. . . We emphasize writing as a process and revision as a process, but when is there time to revise and engage in that process?

When I became a full professor, the first year after I came back from my sabbatical, I said forget it. I’m just going to do three or four papers and one more. . . I’m going to have them write little by little by little. We ended up doing four papers. For the first paper, I took so long to do it. I think overall in terms of the writing, just the writing itself, that was one of the most satisfying semesters because I think fewer students dropped out and their writing got better and they

were more confident, just simply because I said, I'm not going to worry about the five papers. I'm going to go slow. (Faculty Member 2)

This faculty member, who previously coordinated our Composition II course, "Writing through Literature," and is also a published poet, noticed an ongoing tension among department faculty between choosing to teach to one's strengths and prioritizing a consistent experience for students across many sections of a course. "Writing through Literature" (ENG 102) is intended to give students some exposure to three literary genres: poetry, fiction, and drama, while reinforcing their close reading skills and teaching them to write essays that perform textual analyses, all in twelve weeks. It is an unwieldy course with only three credit hours, as opposed to the four teaching-credit and four contact hours for Composition I. As a result, fewer full-time faculty elect to teach it.<sup>6</sup> Students are encouraged, though not mandated, to take the course immediately after English 101. On the one hand, faculty can design a course in which they instruct students using the methods and genres with which they are most familiar (or, for those faculty who are published poets, playwrights, or fiction writers, genres in which they actively write). On the other hand, as with ENG 101, students could potentially have a very different experience in each section of ENG 102. The faculty member described a shift in faculty attitudes, about a decade ago, when it became obvious to him that people were teaching to their strengths and interests rather than following the course guidelines:

There were new faculty coming in, but it was always in this atmosphere of "This is the way we've done things." Then, like 2008, around 2009, the balance tipped and people wanted to change the "how we've done things" . . . I always felt schizophrenic about the issues because I could see both sides. Yeah, it's great to have true academic freedom to do what I wanted to do in the classroom and to adjust what I'm doing in a semester for my students, and to their needs, but I think also [there's] the question of fairness, right?

If you get one professor following what it says on the book that you should do in 102, three text analysis essays and one that includes research, and then you have other professors doing more creative stuff, you know, how do you deal with a sense of fairness with students in those types of classes? That's a big question here. I think the pendulum has swung too much to the other side and is kind of like, "You can do your own thing."

. . . I just assumed that you would do a paper a genre . . . Like drama, to me, is my weakest genre. I have found enough plays by now that I rotate, but if I had my way, I wouldn't teach a paper on that genre. I know people who feel the same way about poetry. I obviously love teaching poetry, but there are people who hate teaching it. They can go without doing a paper. I didn't know that. The assumption was always that you do a paper per genre. (Faculty Member 2)

As with Faculty Member 1, Faculty Member 2 acknowledged that supporting newer colleagues in a highly individualized atmosphere can sometimes mean modeling how to subvert assumed or established departmental expectations while following one's own best instincts about what works in the classroom; it can mean presenting one's course in one way and teaching it in another. While this creates a semblance

of uniformity, the individualized, tested practices that are working in composition classes are not always openly discussed if they might be perceived as undermining curricular expectations. Remarking on this, yet another tenured faculty member added,

In the exact same way that you have a child who has an authoritarian parent who hides things, this to me is the culture of our department . . . To me, part of the problem is, we have these “Intro to [English 101, English 102]” sheets and everyone is like, “yes, this is what we do,” and then you look at their syllabi and [it’s] not what’s on the “Intro to” sheet. It is the culture of the department to lie to your face. Not with bad intention because I believe what’s going on in the classes is deep, rich, meaningful, important . . . But people don’t talk about [it] because there is a culture of being afraid that you are going to get your hand slapped. [The current chair] has in no way continued that but it’s so deeply ingrained that there’s this [feeling that] “I’m going to hide and I don’t want to be controlled any more than all these ways I’m already being controlled.” I think that’s a problem when you’re trying to create a writing program. (Faculty Member 3)

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Resistance to oversight and micromanaging is an expression of underlife that is always present and, as Faculty Member 3 suggests, can spike at moments of transition or program building.

In addition to the number of essays assigned, another point of contention and catalyst of dissent in our English department has been faculty attitudes about teaching with literary texts in the first-semester composition class. While the course proposal does not mandate the types of texts that must be included on a Composition I syllabus in our department, there seems to be a general understanding that writing assignments should not ask students to perform a literary analysis or engage with literary

theory at this level. Yet an established professor, who began working at the college in 1991, resisted the idea that only “nonliterary” texts should be taught English 101. Describing her use of August Wilson’s *Fences* in her composition class she said,

We did a free write on “what are the fences”? What *are they*? So that could range, and if students want to talk about the fences as a symbol, of course I’m open to that, but there are also huge sociological things that come out of how we erect and create fences and why we create them and, so it’s such a wonderful conversation to have that, to me, literature does that so much better than *Fast Food Nation* . . . for some reason I feel like those conversations purely using sociology texts get dry fast . . . the first five years of teaching I tried to do those things and I kept

saying, “Something’s not getting off the ground for me.” . . . The passion I have about literature enables a more flexible conversation, a richer conversation, one that has possibilities. I mean students, first-year students . . . brought up the symbols themselves . . . it’s not like it’s alien to them. (Faculty Member 4)

She also described a comparison and contrast essay that developed out of reading Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and Moustafa Boyoumi’s *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*, which she taught in a learning community, where a group of first-year students take four to five classes together, at least two of which are writing intensive. In fact, this professor had long been one of the leaders of the college’s learning community initiative, in which a team of instructors across disciplines design their syllabi around a chosen theme.<sup>7</sup> “I saw how well they related to *Persepolis* . . . [my colleague] did a beautiful introduction to it about Muslim culture and what was going on in Iran at the time, [about] the revolution and this young woman.” Layering this with other reading and a viewing of the film *Persepolis*, she said “the identity struggles [the students described] were so powerful and they were so well written.” Rather, than scripting writing assignments before the start of the semester, she chose the readings in line with the learning community theme and had consistent conversations with her co-teachers about how the classes were unfolding. Then she crafted writing prompts according to what came up in discussions. “It’s risky and you have support, you know . . . you can call your colleague and say, ‘This worked, this didn’t.’”

Yet despite her own convictions, she added that she would still hesitate to tell new faculty that they should teach with literary texts in English 101, given the general departmental stance on appropriate texts for the course. “I had this conversation with [a colleague] a few weeks ago and he said, ‘[. . .] you have to be careful.’ I was saying, ‘I’ve been telling the new people they should just do that,’ and he said, ‘I don’t know, that may not be such good advice because it depends . . . there’s a trick to [using literature in 101] . . . you don’t want to encourage [new faculty] to do something and not have them not do it well’” (Faculty Member 4). Such side conversations suggest that—in line with Goffman’s conception of *underlife*—the activities that are the least publicly recognized or sanctioned are sometimes the most meaningful for faculty.

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The aim, then, may be to create a sense of safety and curiosity around the expression of personal commitments to various pedagogical practices while also staging open, informed, evidence-based discussions about how students respond to those practices and what will be expected of them after they complete our courses.

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As our department culture continues to shift and a writing program continues to emerge, the ways we respond to pedagogical practices in which faculty are deeply invested need to shift as well. If the anticipated response by department or college leaders is disciplinary and nothing else, we may deprive ourselves of understanding

the deepest points of connection faculty feel to the work they do. The aim, then, may be to create a sense of safety and curiosity around the expression of personal commitments to various pedagogical practices while also staging open, informed, evidence-based discussions about how students respond to those practices and what will be expected of them after they complete our courses.

## 2) Expressions of Professional Standards

When coding faculty responses for references to professional standards, I divided the responses between perceived standards and those in which they expressed personal investment. Faculty Member 2 referred to “rigor” while Faculty Members 2 and 3 made references to professional standards upheld through a “culture of fear”; Faculty Members 3 and 6 described a culture of overwork, especially among female faculty members. When discussing personal investments in professional standards, Faculty Member 5 described the commitment to modeling writing as a “performance of self.”

### THE PRODUCTION OF “RIGOR”

In multiple interviews, faculty described a perception of oversight and surveillance that extended beyond the college to the local press. Faculty who have been at the college since the late 1990s remember the flaying of the university, then the country’s third largest public higher education institution, by local politicians and how the debacle was recounted by major city newspapers. A mayoral task force was created to investigate various colleges after the mayor contended that the university had “unacceptably low standards” (Arneson). The task force’s recommendations included making remedial education solely the responsibility of the system’s seven community colleges. One faculty member, hired in 2001, suggested that shaming by local politicians, who had their own agendas, played a role in faculty’s willingness to accept and anticipate oversight and to shy away from pedagogical choices that might not be perceived by the public as “rigorous.” “I think we’re afraid of getting a lax reputation,” he said. “But the only thing that we should be worried about in terms of getting a reputation for not being academically rigorous is how our students go out into the world once they leave [the college]” (Faculty Member 2). This faculty member recalled a time when the composition faculty would count grammar errors in a basic writing class; the “rule” was that a student who had more than ten grammatical errors should fail an essay, “which is insane,” he added. “But I understand where it comes from, too . . . I wouldn’t grade that way, but I understand sort of this fear of, like okay, we’ve got to make sure the students . . . write at a level that would get us beyond certain criticisms.”

From 2000 to 2010, the university relied on a home-grown standardized test, the College Proficiency Exam (CPE), taken by all rising juniors who had not already demonstrated proficiency through the SAT, ACT, or Regents exams. The test included “sections on reading and interpreting textbooks and other material; organizing and presenting ideas about the readings and connecting them to other

information or concepts; writing clearly and effectively; and interpreting and evaluating material presented in charts and graphs” (“National”). At this point, remedial courses were offered exclusively at the two-year colleges in the university system. “I came in this atmosphere that was a lot of pressure,” Faculty Member 2 said. “You could feel it, from [the university], to sort of tie in the reins, have all these standardized tests.” He recalled how the local press and the mayor’s office initially lauded the exam, publicizing the high pass rate (70 percent). But later, as he saw it, the high pass rate was used to undercut the validity of the exam. The university’s executive vice chancellor argued that the test did not align with national standards; thus, its results could not be used “to join the national conversation on learning outcomes.” As the test was only administered once, it also could not measure gains in learning and because no other university system used it, the costs to develop and administer it could not be shared among multiple institutions. The university chancellor added, “We are now a mature institution given that we have worked so hard, all of us, to bring the academic integrity of the institution up to where it is today.” He urged that the university “not be fearful of looking at a variety of tests that really show . . . that they’re psychometrically pure, that they rise to the standard of reliability, that they actually measure what we expect them to measure” (“National”). Recounting this shift, Faculty Member 2 recalled a memo written by the committee charged with investigating the CPE, which the former English Department chair shared with the English Department: “I remember that phrase: ‘it wasn’t indicative of anything’ . . . the high pass rate was, first, the thing that was laudable about [the university] and the CPE, and then three, four, maybe five years later, it invalidated it” (Faculty Member 2).

Another colleague echoed these recollections and hypothesized about their more sustained impact on the culture of the department: “I think we right now have a series of imposed, not-well-informed practices that come from a place of fear about how our work is going to be understood by the outside world, specifically the New York City press based on bad things that were written about [the university] in the 70s or 80s. [. . .] And that culture of fear has created a restrictive curriculum that is not a conversation with where the field is” (Faculty Member 3). Layering an external set of public expectations on top of departmental standards that were once more rigidly enforced, she claimed, has left a lingering sense that, despite what faculty might discover or attempt in their individual classrooms, they should not outwardly contradict the status quo. “I would argue as the former Writing Director that we don’t actually have any idea what’s going on in the classroom because people are not willing to be transparent and expose what they’re doing because they’re afraid they are going to get in trouble . . . But I do think [the culture is] changing, I think it’s shifting” (Faculty Member 3).

Another way faculty referenced “rigor” was when describing a professional culture of overwork. Faculty Member 6, who previously directed the writing program and cofounded the English Department’s accelerated learning program (ALP), admitted feeling “exhausted” by the promotion process to full professor:

[The culture] told me that I had to do everything, and that made me feel exhausted mainly . . . since getting full, it is just a retreat completely. So all of this institutional knowledge that I have from . . . being a Co-Director of Comp, from working with the accelerated learning program, all of that has just been sucked back up. Not that everyone else is incapable without me . . . everyone is doing a great job without me. There's no need to have me—it's gone because I'm like, teach, teach, teach, teach. Home. [I have] a whole other level to take care of there for at least another eight years. (Faculty Member 6)

Rather than being in a position to share what she learned in her time as a writing program administrator and to provide “context and support, to help create a holistic program,” she recognized that “the college loses my institutional knowledge” (Faculty Member 6, email, 25 Sept. 2019). At large two-year institutions like ours, those who have the most institutional knowledge—especially senior faculty—may find themselves poorly positioned to communicate what they know. During the process of conducting interviews, I heard multiple tenured faculty members point to a few factors that interfered with the circulation of institutional knowledge. First, as with Faculty Member 6 above, there was the sentiment they had “retreated” from active decision making in the department since they became full professors because opportunities for released time from teaching had diminished post-tenure

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Most faculty members with whom I spoke described the ways they worked vigorously in their march to tenure to fulfill the mission of the institution and execute college-wide plans, especially those that impacted the writing curriculum. Yet they noticed that they were investing in the college's agenda more than the college was investing in their professional expertise and experience.

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and their teaching schedules has intensified. Beneath this is also the somewhat demoralized sense that what they know is not recognized or valued and that the department would indeed go on “without them.” Faculty Member 4—an eighteen-year veteran of the department and a nationally recognized scholar in the field of composition studies, who directed the writing program alongside Faculty Member 6—admitted, “I always feel like a failure in my writing classes for my entire career [at the college] because I just feel like the job is too big [. . .] too many students, not enough time, too many outside restrictions on the course. [. . .] So I feel like I'm consistently limited and I know more and know better than I am consistently able to do all the time”

(Faculty Member 3). When there is not enough space for the most experienced faculty members to not only accumulate knowledge but to *reflect on* and *share* what they know, relieving a more isolated sense of responsibility, that knowledge cannot be activated even when it exists.

This points to yet another way in which faculty underlives, when ignored or left unaddressed, can interfere with the effective functioning of an institution.

Reflecting back on our interview over a year later, Faculty Member 6 added that she had watched the college go through cycles of creating “‘new’ programs for retention, assessment, etc. every few years.” This process, she admitted, “leads me to . . . ignor[e] new policies because my experience in 16 years here has told me the ‘new’ policies will be gone in another few years” (Faculty Member 6, email). Most faculty members with whom I spoke described the ways they worked vigorously in their march to tenure to fulfill the mission of the institution and execute college-wide plans, especially those that impacted the writing curriculum. Yet they noticed that they were investing in the college’s agenda more than the college was investing in their professional expertise and experience. When they observed that the college was inconsistent in its willingness to supply faculty with adequate funding and time to build on previous projects, what was framed as a “rigorous” push to progress tended to undermine faculty’s sense that their individual contributions were valued in a sustained way.

### 3) Expressions of Classroom Expectations

As with the other expressions of underlife I have discussed, when reading faculty responses for their comments on classroom expectations, I divided the responses into the way faculty described perceived expectations from students and colleagues and the classroom expectations in which they were personally invested. In the former category, I noted their discussions of “rules” (Faculty Members 1 and 5) and “consistency” (Faculty Members 1 and 3); in the latter category, they discussed “fairness” (Faculty Member 2), the writing process, passion for literature (Faculty Member 4), risk taking (Faculty Member 5), and self-regulation (Faculty Member 5).

#### CREATING SPACE FOR A PERFORMANCE OF SELF

In my conversation with a twelve-year veteran of the English Department—a former co-director of the writing center and an active creative writer—she shared what she learned about her students’ perceived expectations about essay writing from speaking with writing center tutors: “I realized that students are in pain and stressed out and rules are not really helping because we are all giving them different rules,” she said. “There is a sense that we rely on formula . . . the tutors will tell you . . . If it’s this professor then it’s this formula, and if it’s this other professor, then it’s this formula . . . Once you realize you can’t be relying on formula and rules, how are you talking about writing? You have to talk about it in a different way . . . which might be complicated for a student, because it’s comforting [for them to have a formula]” (Faculty Member 5). She empathized that given the huge student population and the inadequate time to work with them, faculty imagine that coming up with a formula will help to “discipline” students or to wrangle a sense of uniformity when faced with a highly diverse group of inexperienced college writers.

She contrasted what she perceived to be the atmosphere in composition classes with her impression of students’ experiences in creative writing classes: “They enjoy the classes, and they’re having fun. And they are writing, they’re writing a lot.

And they're into it. They want to revise even if they've already gotten the grade they need. They want it to be good; they want it to be good for them. There's just this whole other register that the whole thing is happening in." She described her creative writing pedagogy as "process-based" and "performative," based on a commitment to modeling and sharing in a workshop environment. Like Faculty Member 4's careful positioning of literature into the writing curriculum in a learning community, Faculty Member 5 emphasized taking pedagogical risks and perhaps went even further in making risk taking and lack of instructor control an explicit part of her classroom atmosphere. This led her to reframe her role as instructor as the person who decides not what a student's writing is worth or what the student's native abilities are but whether the student "tried":

[W]hat we learn in creative writing regularly is that students are coming out of comp classes feeling really beaten up. It's a negative experience for the most part . . . People mostly feel like it's very top-down, rule-oriented obedience training. There's a lot of getting it wrong, having to fix things, getting negative feedback and it's a stressful constant struggle . . . something about the way we formulated [creative writing] ends up being a little more bottom-up, I'm giving you the assignment and I'm still deciding if I think you tried. Other than that, it's up to you. You make a lot of decisions, you get to try stuff out. (Faculty Member 5)

In her composition courses, she often asked students to produce writing based on what they saw authors doing in the readings and through listening carefully to when their classmates' work seemed to get the class's attention. This also led her to further disrupt the teacher-student relationship and the students' relationships with each other. Through exerting effort and sharing what they produced, students became the "permission givers" for other students in the classroom:

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In a workshop environment, peer feedback is not isolated to peer review but becomes a consistent part of the environment and ethos of the classroom.

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on what they saw authors doing in the readings and through listening carefully to when their classmates' work seemed to get the class's attention. This also led her to further disrupt the teacher-student relationship and the students' relationships with each other. Through exerting effort and sharing what they produced, students became the "permission givers"

Hearing other people can sometimes help you more than being told what you did wrong. Hearing somebody have success. I'm a big fan of go[ing] around the room and everybody say[s] five images they remember from today's reading because that tells you a lot. If everybody's five images include three images from Sally, Sally nailed it. It's all about reading, making some decisions about what we're taking from the reading, trying stuff out, and there's no penalty for getting it wrong. There's only a penalty for not trying. So creative writing is graded a little different, [not] 'this is a B-description,' 'this is an A-description,' but 'did you put the effort in, did you participate?'

. . . I have students write paragraphs in class and read them out loud. Tell me back, how did that paragraph work? There's something about hearing someone else nail something, just hearing somebody else's words and just "Ah, that is very satisfying" that you're like, *I want to do that*. Hearing someone else do it, that's the permission. There's something about knowing on any given day you're going to

share out loud what you wrote, there's just a different level of pride, it's a performance of self thing. (Faculty Member 5)

In a workshop environment, peer feedback is not isolated to peer review but becomes a consistent part of the environment and ethos of the classroom: "You're never not engaging. Once that becomes a regular part of class, the idea of process becomes more normalized. We're always working on stuff, we're always trying stuff out, someone is always sharing what they are working on, someone is walking away knowing what they want to do now that they've shared it. That's all we ever do." She added that she looked for the "elegance" of the students' thinking rather than surface-level correctness: "If this beautiful writer doesn't figure out the definition of this word it's not the end of the world. This is the beginning of the world. [. . .] I worry that people feel like . . . I have to get them to be . . . good . . . by the end of this class" (Faculty Member 5). Rather than creating imagined ideal products, she insisted, she wanted to foster a sense of accomplishment in her students and treat the classroom as a space where students have to "self-check and self-reflect and self-invest." "The stakes are a little bit more about your own satisfaction and your own ego because you're reading out loud to your peers, and the stakes are not about the letter grade," she said. Further modifying her sense of her own role as a female authority figure, she noted that this frees her from drowning in the amount of grading she sees some of her colleagues struggling with in their composition classes:

I mostly teach ENA these days [the ALP version of the college's Composition I course, which includes twelve ENG 101 students and ten students who have not yet passed the placement exam] and I've been trying to do that with the ENAs. It's all about sharing out loud, or sharing and projecting stuff, discussing pretty openly what we're working on and then sending people away to use that discussion. It also helps me grade less. We're using things as exemplars, we're all learning from it, and everyone goes away with that lesson. I am not the Mommy. I am not always going to be there for you. The last thing I want is for you to need my feedback . . . You can cut grading in half. Workshopping [is not] peer review [but] a community of learning . . . for people to self regulate.

Faculty Member 5 also noted that students struggle to authorize their own ideas; or, in other words, they struggled to give themselves the authority to write down an attitude, reaction, or idea they may not have even realized they had:

The most basic thing that I think students have trouble with, especially in comp, [is when] they have to have a response or an opinion or a position on it . . . there's seems to be a very deep, deep disconnect with students on just realizing how they feel, what their response is, and making it legal for yourself to utter it and put it on paper. Even talking it sometimes is okay. I have [this experience] all the time where the conversation is great, they all seem to be on the right page and then when they write, [I read it and say], 'You didn't even say that in class; your opinion seems the opposite of what you wrote.'

This faculty member also resisted an idea, often taken for granted, that "thesis-driven" writing led to better thinking and greater success across varied writing experiences.

[I]f you do a lot of . . . pre-writing and process . . . sometimes the argument reveals itself and then you have to type it out, instead of begin[ning] by thinking in my head, “What is my thesis?” and hav[ing] it all worked out with no pre-work, as if it’s filling out a form at the doctor’s office. And it never works out. Unless you’re already pretty advanced, and I’m not worried about those people. I’m worried about the people who we lose . . . I’m convinced that we have students who can meet one professor’s needs and get an A and then go to [ENG] 102 and it’s like they’re starting over. They haven’t really learned how to write. They’ve just revised their way into pleasing the one authority.

Faculty Member 5 demonstrates how the ways we define ourselves as teachers and perhaps challenge institutional roles is interwoven with the ways we understand our students in the classroom. When we start to question our own roles and our own authority, we make room for other possibilities. “The need for writers to develop their own voices is the central place where writing pedagogy comes into conflict with itself,” Brooke wrote in 1987 (150). He adds, “Neither writing teacher nor student is content to rely on the expected roles of teacher and student. . . . Both want there to be more to the self, and both show this desire—the student by distancing herself from classroom expectations, the teacher by structuring the course so that normal classroom expectations are only partly in effect” (151). The classroom works best, Faculty Member 5 suggested, when we recognize and discuss the ways we are contained by it and the ways we resist it side by side.

### **Conclusion: Is There a Community in This Community College?**

In Brooke’s updated afterword to “Underlife and Writing Instruction,” printed in 1999, he recalled, “Goffman’s concept helped me articulate something I was feeling: skepticism about the coercive forces of power that pushed all of us (students, teachers, and administrators) into institutional roles” (241). This same feeling is part of what led me to revisit his work and to apply it to a community college context. But by

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shifting the educational context, some new questions arise: Is a community college English department, and more specifically a community college writing program, a *community*? Is an institution, especially an open access institution, a *community*? Who must writing faculty be if we agree that we are all supporting one community of writers?

In any institution, where underlives are as much a part of daily operations as order and rule following, conflict exists. But when we take away the push for enforced consensus, what we get are spaces where people have to think for

themselves, lay out arguments, and keep conversations going if the institution is going to persist. Similarly, when teaching writing and developing a writing program, especially at a two-year college, perhaps what we need is to acknowledge that, as Joseph Harris reminds us, we are doing work in a *public space*. This may not be as immutable and immediate a truth for people working in small departments with more uniform populations, but for a 150-person department in a college with 1,200 faculty who work in an urban university system attempting to educate 274,000 people, there is no escaping that a community of agreement is impossible and maybe not always even desirable.

Twenty years ago, writing about teaching composition in open admissions institutions, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jeff Sommers called for a “counter-discourse” on writing. They urged their colleagues, at CUNY and across the country, to translate the work of teaching to those outside our discipline in a way that moved beyond “grammar skills, deficits, and remediation. Being trapped in such a discourse also takes a toll on the self-image of the professoriate, especially those who work with the most students in the least stable conditions. They warned that “[w]hile composition has been busy institutionalizing itself with the university, outside its walls, rhetoric has been used against itself to shape a new policy of closing off access and limiting opportunities” (459). Yet confronting the persistence of underlife behaviors reminds us, as Brooke wanted us to remind our students, that we are “never completely subsumed” by our roles as teachers; when we “stand apart from them and contemplate,” we recognize the greater flexibility, power, and humanity of our work and make room for conversations that communicate the nature of that public work to a host of other publics.

## Notes

1. The “Leadership Team” includes the department chair, associate chair, three co-directors of composition, the co-director of the college’s writing center, directors of each of our major academic concentrations—Writing & Literature, Journalism, and Creative Writing—and the course scheduler. These leadership positions are a combination of elected and appointed roles; all come with some reassigned time from teaching, though in the face of budget cuts that reassigned time has decreased since this article was first written.

2. These results were shared as part of a presentation titled “Towards a Shared Vision: Growing a Writing Program,” delivered with two other co-directors of composition at the 2018 Northeast Regional Conference of the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA-NE).

3. My original pool of interviewees consisted of twenty subjects: nine were full-time faculty members who previously or currently held an administrative position in relation to our writing curriculum—either as director of the writing center, coordinators of WAC initiatives, or co-directors of composition—and frequently had various investments in writing at the college that extended

beyond teaching formal courses; six were writing center tutors, most of whom were former students and some of whom are now adjunct faculty members in the English Department; and five were students who were at varying stages of their academic careers, some just emerging from a basic writing course and others preparing to graduate. In total, the interviews yielded over thirty-six hours of recorded material. The college's Institutional Review Board approved the study after an expedited review; in accordance with IRB standards, all participants signed consent forms agreeing to allow their remarks to be published.

4. Citing Mary Boland's "Academic Freedom and the Stakes of Not Staking Our Claim" (*College English*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2007), Jeffrey Klausman explains that the protections of academic freedom come with working within or on the border of a cohesive academic community. Yet teachers of composition, especially in two-year college English departments, have often been trained in varied academic fields, including but not limited to literature, cultural studies, comparative literature, creative writing, film, or theater. His survey of nine full-time and part-time faculty members suggests that two-year college writing programs do not have a "coherent theoretical frame" and are largely staffed by adjuncts without consistent access to professional development, which makes it difficult to vet knowledge and engage with disciplinary boundaries to decide what does or does not warrant protection based on "academic freedom." Moreover, Klausman contends that only after we have defined academic freedom in terms of management and labor at the two-year college can we have a local conversation about what this phrase means in terms of scholarly communities.

5. The college offers classes year round. The twelve-week "Fall I" semester runs September through December; a six-week "Fall II" session runs in January and February; "Spring I" is a twelve-week session from March through June; "Spring II" runs for six weeks in July and August.

6. During the 2017–18 academic year, the English Department ran 215 sections of ENG 102; 146 of those sections were taught by adjunct faculty members.

7. Learning communities began soon after the college opened in the mid-1970s. Originally known as "The Freedom Clusters," they were required for all liberal arts and science majors. Since then, the college has offered paired and clustered courses for all day-time liberal arts students and pairs that link humanities courses with STEM courses. It has also offered learning communities for liberal arts students with developmental or ESL needs, enabling them to complete developmental coursework while enrolling in credit-bearing courses, with notable success. "Consistently, students taking college-level courses in these learning communities outperform those who take the same courses in stand-alone sections" (Van Slyck 169).

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