Activist WPA, The

Adler-Kassner, Linda

Published by Utah State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9844
FRAMING THE PUBLIC IMAGINATION

In Arizona, some amazingly persistent and mostly liberal people are demonstrating the tenacity with which some interests fight to prevent parents of modest means from having education choices like those available to most Americans. In 1999, Arizona’s Supreme Court upheld a program whereby individuals receive tax credits for donations they make to organizations that provide scholarships to enable children to attend private schools, religious and secular. . . . Thousands of families are on waiting lists for scholarships.

In 2000, Arizona opponents of school choice, in a suit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, attacked the program in federal court. They failed again. . . . Now, Arizona opponents of school choice, thirsting for a third defeat, are challenging what Arizona’s legislature enacted last year. Noting the success of the individual tax credit for scholarship contributions, the Legislature has authorized corporate donors a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions to private, nonprofit school tuition organizations. Opponents of school choice are trudging back to court where they will recycle twice-rejected arguments.

That is about the control of schools by bureaucrats, about work rules negotiated by unions and, not least, about money—not allowing any to flow away from . . . [the public school lobby].

George Will

STORIES TOLD ABOUT SCHOOL: THE FAILURE OF OPPORTUNITY

The column from which this excerpt is drawn illustrates the ways that elements of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad
contribute to a frame surrounding discussions of education (and writing) in widely read documents, like news stories and policy reports (which are often cited in news stories). In that jeremiad, the purpose of education is to cultivate individuals’ critical intelligence so that they can contribute to the development of methods and processes used to overcome obstacles, which will in turn ensure the continued progress of the nation toward the achievement of a virtuous democracy. Code words in this column, though—“[parents of] modest means, education choices, [school] choice, control [of schools by] bureaucrats”—point to a story about how schools (and teachers) are failing in their mission to cultivate or impose this intelligence and the skills that accompany it. Wealthy parents can send their children to other (private) schools that do a better job, but “parents of modest means” are denied choice. Choice is but one element of liberty and liberty, the ability to control one’s own destiny, is a key feature of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad (because it is necessary for the development and unprovoked application of critical intelligence) (see Hanson 62–63).

Will’s column is but one example of the ways that conservatives have used the progressive pragmatic jeremiad in recent years. Since the Progressive Era, education has been identified as a key site for the cultivation of critical intelligence that would enable citizens to locate their place in the jeremiad and thus contribute to the nation’s progress toward the virtuous democracy. But as chapter 2 suggests, the emphasis on the development of individual creative intelligence and individually derived processes have made it available for a variety of purposes. Especially as it was developed in the early part of the twentieth century, this narrative was often not situated in specific, material considerations, an elision that led critics like C. Wright Mills to charge that the progressive pragmatic jeremiad separated action from “any realities of modern social structure that might serve as the means for [their] realization” (quoted in West 1989, 127).

In this chapter, I examine how the progressive pragmatic jeremiad has been incorporated into different frames surrounding
stories about the purposes of education, and educators’ role within those purposes. First, I focus on *A Test of Leadership* and *Ready or Not*, two influential policy reports that frame educators and the educational system as out-of-touch and powerless. Both infer that teachers have no sense of the purpose of their mission or of their roles in executing that mission, and suggest that outside experts must intervene with methods that teachers can use to develop students’ critical intelligence. I then briefly examine documents from one of the outside experts to whom these documents allude, ACT. Then I examine news stories about the SAT writing exam that frame educators differently, as knowledgeable and informed professionals. These later news items suggest that teachers not only understand the complexities of twenty-first-century culture, but also understand the complexities of cultivating the multiple critical intelligences that students will need to participate in this culture. Finally, I consider questions about the ways that teachers—WPAs and writing instructors—might define our roles in relation to these frames if we want to engage in the work of changing stories.

FAILING SCHOOLS, FAILING STUDENTS: A TEST OF LEADERSHIP

This idea that education is faltering significantly in its central charge is one of the frames surrounding discussions of teaching that take place in mainstream media (and other sites outside of academe), as many have noted (e.g., Harris 1997; Mortensen 1998; Ohanian). The primary argument embedded in this charge is that schools (and teachers) do not understand the nature of twenty-first-century democracy; this failure of understanding then contributes to the lack of alignment among curriculum and a lack of preparation among students. Within the progressive pragmatic frame, then, it is the state’s responsibility to step in and ensure that the system is maintained, or otherwise to find other experts who can do so. This conceptualization of teachers and education is readily apparent in *A Test of Leadership*, the final report of the Spellings Commission.
on Higher Education. The report illustrates how the Bush administration has faulted education for failing to fulfill the vision of education stemming from the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, at the same time employing elements of that narrative to “reform” the system.

The story of A Test of Leadership is woven through a tapestry that pulls together several key elements of the progressive narrative. Its warp is the idea that America is progressing toward the achievement of a virtuous democracy; the weft is a story about how American higher education has failed to appropriately recast this narrative for the twenty-first century and has thus fallen into declension from the promise embedded in it.

The opening of Test of Leadership invokes one of America’s most familiar archetypes, the frontier, to root the document in the familiar context of American history and the American jeremiad (cf. Kolodny 1975; Slotkin 1985). In the first paragraph, the report argues that “higher education in the United States has become one of our greatest success stories.” Colleges and universities, the report says, have helped to “advanc[e] the frontiers of knowledge,” are “the envy of the world,” and have “educated more people to higher levels than any other nation” (Miller 2006, vi). But American higher education has fallen away from this superior position, it says. From the viewpoint of the idea that the educational system has an obligation enable America’s students to become participants in the democracy of opportunity, it is failing. “[A] lot of other countries have followed our lead,” it claims, “and they are educating more of their citizens to more advanced levels than we are (vii, emphasis in original). This is problematic because “postsecondary instruction is increasingly vital to the nation’s economic security[, y]et too many Americans just aren’t getting the education that they need—and that they deserve” (vii).

The point made in the report’s preface is reiterated throughout: threats to achievement of the promise—and the betrayal of education’s fundamental mission—come from inside. High schools don’t see “preparing all pupils for postsecondary
education and training as their responsibility”; a “troubling number” of students who go on to college “waste time—and taxpayer dollars—mastering English and math skills that they should have learned in high school” (Miller 2006, vii). Colleges and universities “don’t accept responsibility for making sure that those they admit actually do succeed,” and there “is a lack of clear, reliable information about the cost and quality of postsecondary institutions, along with a remarkable absence of accountability mechanisms to ensure that colleges succeed in educating students” (vii). Institutions, it says, need to “do a better job . . . of teaching [students] what they need to learn” (vii). The “new landscape,” it claims, “demands innovation and flexibility” because “[students] care—as we do—about results” (viii).

Following the establishment of this internal declension, two paragraphs in A Test of Leadership signal the application of principles emanating from the progressive pragmatic jeremiad. The first anchors the report squarely in the jeremiad’s narrative:

To reach these objectives, we believe that U.S. higher education institutions must recommit themselves to their core public purposes. For close to a century now, access to higher education has been a principle—some would say the principle—means of achieving social mobility. Much of our nation’s inventiveness has been centered in colleges and universities, as has our commitment to a kind of democracy that only an educated and informed citizenry makes possible. It is not surprising that American institutions of higher education have become a magnet for attracting people of talent and ambition from throughout the world. (ix)

The code words here—core public purposes, access to higher education, achievement of social mobility, commitment to . . . democracy, educated and informed citizenry—all emphasize that achievement of a virtuous democracy relies upon the development of critical intelligence through education.

But the paragraph immediately following represents a pivotal moment in the report. It indicates that the educational system itself has fallen into declension and poses an obstacle
to the achievement of the democracy at the jeremiad’s end. Additionally, it intimates that educators, experts charged with the authority to direct this cultivation, no longer understand the nature of the virtuous democracy.

But today that world is becoming tougher, more competitive, less forgiving of wasted resources and squandered opportunities. In tomorrow’s world a nation’s wealth will derive from its capacity to educate, attract, and retain citizens who are able to work smarter and learn faster—making educational achievement ever more important both for individuals and society writ large. (ix)

Today, this paragraph says, the world is different. For American students to achieve twenty-first-century democracy, steps toward that goal must be recast. Both of these paragraphs, then, represent versions of the progressive pragmatic narrative: both emphasize the crucial nature of the development of individual creative intelligence to the pursuit of the virtuous democracy, and both frame education as the means by which that end is achieved. The consequences of allegiance to the “old” ways are made clear—it will pull the democracy into declension. In fact, the report relies upon a vision of Progressive Era industry to make the point: “History is littered with industries that, at their peril, failed to respond to . . . changes in the world around them, from railroads to steel manufacturers” (ix). Then, in a masterful demonstration of the power of language, A Test of Leadership forges an iron frame around its argument. “Already,” it claims, “troubling signs are abundant” (ix), and turns to reports about the United States’ “ranking among major industrialized countries in higher education attainment” (ix). While it’s possible to make a case that educational success could or should be defined differently, it becomes increasingly difficult in the tidal wave of economic and achievement data included in Test of Leadership to advance the case.1

Following this preamble, Test of Leadership continues to invoke the progressive pragmatic jeremiad to extend its analysis. “Colleges and universities,” it says, “must continue to be
the major route for new generations of Americans to achieve social mobility. And for the country as a whole, future economic growth will depend on our ability to sustain excellence, innovation, and leadership in higher education” (1). The “transformation of the world economy increasingly demands a more highly educated workforce with postsecondary skills and credentials,” the report explains, and that is where the current system of higher education has begun to falter (6). The report goes on to outline areas in which these problems are most evident: access, alignment, affordability, and accountability (also known as the four “A”s). The problems begin before students enter college, when they encounter a financial aid system that is referred to in different places in the report as “confusing, complex, inefficient, duplicative” (3), “a maze” (3), and “dysfunctional” (9). Once admitted, students encounter an “alignment gap” between what they learn in high school and what is expected in college:

High school faculty and administrators are unaware of the standards and assessments being used by their counterparts in the other sector. . . . Consequences of substandard prep and poor alignment between high schools and colleges persist in college. Remediation has become far too common an experience for American postsecondary students. Some 40 percent of all college students end up taking at least one remedial course—at an estimated cost to the taxpayers of $1 billion. (8)

The problems don’t stop in college, though: “additionally, industry spends significant financial aid resources on remediation and retraining” (8). The “product,” the report says, “is increasingly expensive, but not necessarily value-added” (2). It explains, later, that the results violate postsecondary education’s commitment to mobility, and that postsecondary institutions (along with “national and state politicians”) have perpetuated this denial because they refuse to make adjustments to their ossified structures:
According to the most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy . . . the percentage of college graduates deemed proficient in prose literacy has actually declined from 40 to 31 percent in the past decade. These shortcomings have real-world consequences. Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplaces. In addition, business and government leaders have repeatedly and urgently called for workers at all stages of life to continually upgrade their academic and practical skills. But both national and state politicians and the practices of postsecondary institutions have not always made this easy, by failing to provide financial and logistical support for lifelong learning and by failing to craft flexible credit-transfer systems that allow students to move easily between different kinds of institutions. (3–4)

Further, postsecondary education reneges on its commitment to mobility because it does not provide an assessment of the effectiveness of its product. The “large and complex public-private system of federal, state, and private regulators has significant shortcomings,” the report says. “Accreditation reviews are typically kept private, and those that are made public still focus on process reviews more than bottom-line results for learning or costs” (14). What is necessary, instead, is a system that is

more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes. Student achievement, which is inextricably connected to institutional success, must be measured by institutions on a “value added” basis that takes into account students’ academic baseline when assessing their results. This information should be made available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities. (4)

Although the report claims that “we recognize that some who care deeply about higher education—and whose partnership we value in the new endeavors we propose—may not easily accept
either our diagnosis or our prescriptions” (x), the challenges laid out in the report are clear.

As a case study of a report that might outline future policy, *A Test of Leadership* captures the formidable challenge facing contemporary educators. Employing a revision of Lippmann’s technocratic contention that the sheer variety of symbols available to Americans will result in too many diverse interpretations and that this diversity will lead to failure to come to consensus around the appropriate interpretation, it suggests that educators have no sense of the direction of America’s progress and cannot come to agreement even about what the virtuous democracy looks like. Lacking this big picture, strategic vision, they are unable to develop educational processes through which students can develop the critical intelligence necessary to participate in this democracy. This lack of understanding leads to the development of multiple, nonaligned processes. To straighten out the situation, then, it suggests that intervention from outside experts who have this vision and can develop an aligned curriculum around it is necessary.

**READY AND WILLING: EXPERTS IN THE WINGS**

The recommendations in *A Test of Leadership*—especially those connected to alignment and accountability—reflect what NCTE higher education policy liaison Paul Bodmer refers to as “the beltway consensus” about higher education. That is, the report distills a sense circulating in higher education policy circles that higher education is going its own way, ignorant of the (new) shape of the virtuous democracy, and not deliberately preparing students for participation in it (Bodmer 2007). This consensus reflects and has been perpetuated by a dizzying array of organizations and groups positioning themselves as possessing the kind of expertise required to reshape learning, cognizant both of the new version of democracy at the end of the jeremiad and of the means required to help the nation achieve that democracy.

Among the most influential of these organizations is Achieve, Inc. (which incorporates an element of the jeremiad in its very
name). Created as a partnership with the National Association of Governors and business leaders, Achieve says that it “helps states raise academic standards and achievement so that all students graduate ready for college, work, and citizenship” (Achieve.org). Achieve, Inc., parent organization of Achieve.org, is also one of three partners—the Education Trust and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation are the other two—in the American Diploma Project (ADP); ADP is one of the most influential outside groups attempting to assert their expertise in discussions about education by actively pressing for national alignment of secondary content and outcomes. Currently, ADP is working to reshape secondary curriculum in 30 states (Achieve.org). Because ADP is also pressing for alignment between high school outcomes and college expectations, their recommendations also de facto extend to postsecondary education as well.

ADP’s recommendations are contained in another report, this one called *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma That Counts*. Like the Spellings Report, this document also opens by explaining that educators no longer understand the shape of the virtuous democracy at the end of the jeremiad:

For too many graduates, the American high school diploma signifies only a broken promise. While students and their parents may still believe that the diploma reflects adequate preparation for the intellectual demands of adult life, in reality it falls far short of this common sense goal. . . . The diploma has lost its value because what it takes to earn one is disconnected from what it takes for graduates to compete successfully beyond high school. . . . (ADP 1)

*Ready or Not* goes on to explain that “experts” (in English and mathematics, the specific foci of ADP’s efforts) do not understand “real-world demands” and therefore craft curriculum that reflects “what is desirable for students to learn, but not necessarily what is essential for them to be prepared for further learning, work or citizenship after completing high school” (ADP 7–8).
Ready or Not then suggests that, to restore the nation’s course, it is necessary for students to understand and be educated for participation in a different kind of democracy, one that is driven by the “requirements . . . of employees and students” (21). Although postsecondary educators are included as part of the group who should establish those requirements, they also are mentioned as some “experts” crafting curriculum around what is “desirable,” but not “essential.” Thus it is primarily employers whose requirements must be met to propel the nation forward—but not just any employers. ADP looks specifically to a narrow range of “fast-growing occupations . . . identified in the ADP workplace study,” including “plant, production and construction managers, marketing and events managers, engineers and engineering technicians, . . . medical professionals and health technicians, . . . foresters, . . . computer programmers and IT workers, . . . and teachers” (23). The report suggests that to move the nation toward the achievement of democracy, students (employees) must be trained to meet the needs of these workplaces.

Because, Ready or Not says, secondary and postsecondary teachers neither understand nor are educating students for these professions, ADP is ready to step in. The report offers a set of benchmarks and curricular frameworks that are based on interactions with postsecondary faculty and business leaders that will fill the need identified by ADP. These include prescriptive (and narrowly constructed) reading lists (of the 47 texts listed under “Fiction: Classic and Contemporary,” for example, the newest is Gish Jen’s Typical American; only 15 are written by women; and only 12 by nonwhite authors) and sample tasks like writing letters requesting fiduciary credit or inviting people to participate in panel presentations (38–40, 83–85).

Framing and Methodology: ADP and Beyond

The methodology used for the conversations that resulted in ADP’s lists and sample tasks also indicate just how powerful the frame surrounding current discussions of education—especially
the influence of outside expertise—is. For the ADP’s postsecondary meetings, representatives examined a number of tests—“high school graduation tests, national college admissions and placement tests, a sampling of post-secondary tests; and the GED”—“to codify what the *de facto* standards are for students by evaluating the content of the various assessments they are asked to take” (ADP 107). This methodology necessarily assumes that these exams also correctly incorporate and represent the critical intelligence that educators seek to develop in high school and college.

Of course, this assumption is enormously complicated. The pressures on educators—from NCLB, budget cuts, and schools and districts—have never been greater. One consequence of these pressures has been for institutions to turn toward standardized assessments such as the ones described by ADP. At the same time, however, many teachers also recognize that these tests are highly flawed and do not in fact represent what they would like to teach or have their students learn—see, for instance, the testimonials included on sites like educational critic Susan Ohanian’s Web site (Ohanian). ADP—and maybe even the teachers gathered by ADP—may assume that teachers endorse the “*de facto* standards” that they presume these tests represent, but the teachers writing to Ohanian’s site—along with research by educators like Alfie Kohn, Denny Taylor, Richard Allington, and many others—makes a very different case. These tests are used because they are expedient, they are relatively inexpensive for districts to administer, and they *are* widely used. Developers of many of these tests also assert that their instruments—that is, the tests themselves—are among the methods and devices that are critical for propelling the nation forward toward the achievement of the virtuous democracy. In a letter included in ACT’s 2006 annual report, for instance, CEO Richard Ferguson suggests that ACT has and will continue to develop products that teachers can use to achieve the new shape of the virtuous democracy. He writes that
there is now growing concern...that, in general, the courses offered in the nation’s high schools are not sufficiently rigorous. ...

To help address this challenging reality, we will soon be launching *QualityCore™*, an assessment system based on a new model for raising the rigor of high school courses. *QualityCore* is intended both to increase student achievement in core courses and to improve the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in these courses. ... (Ferguson 2006, 3)

As a major marketer of tests and curriculums, ACT also asserts that it regularly seeks input from stakeholders, including educators, to design the tests and curriculum that they market. This is the purpose, for instance, of the ACT National Curriculum Survey (NCS), administered to high school and college instructors on a regular basis. That survey provides the evidence for an assertion made by ACT in a press release following data analysis of the study (and repeated in news stories around the country in publications from *USA Today* to the *Daily Oklahoman*): that there is a gap between what students learn in high school and what college instructors expect; that “colleges generally want all incoming students to attain in-depth understanding of a selected number of fundamental skills and knowledge in their high school courses, while high schools tend to provide less in-depth instruction of a broader range of skills and topics” (ACT 2007b; Markelein 2007; Simpson 2007).

But an analysis of the most recent version of this survey, administered in 2005–2006, reveals that it is also highly problematic. The NCS purports to address broad questions about college readiness, but it primarily seems intended to inform the development and marketing of the Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS), which includes EXPLORE (administered in sixth grade), PLAN (administered in tenth grade), ACT (their college entrance exam), WorkKeys (a work preparation assessment), and curricular products designed to support the development of skills assessed by the exams. An analysis of the survey results in the report appendix suggests that the survey questionnaire itself contains questions framed by ACT’s
understanding of writing skills as associated with “readiness,” rather than a frame that might make it possible for respondents to contribute their own ideas about a concept.3

The NCS report also seems to overgeneralize the survey’s results based on an ill-defined sample of respondents (e.g., Rea and Parker 1992, 118–31). It asserts that its claims are based on a “nationally representative” sample (ACT 2007a 2, 3), but no information is provided in it about what makes the sample receiving or responding to it “representative.” A graphic included in appendix A breaks down the surveys sent by subject matter. 1,600 “English/Writing” surveys were distributed to middle/junior high school teachers of “English/Language Arts”; 2,000 to high school teachers of “Writing/Composition”; 1,097 to entry-level college course instructors of “Composition”; 403 to entry-level college teachers of “Freshman English,” and 800 to entry-level instructors of “Survey of American Literature.” An additional 1,246 surveys were sent to “Developmental Writing” instructors (ACT 2007a, 36). But the report includes no definitions of these courses (e.g., it does not define the difference between “Composition” and “Freshman English”) or a description of the faculty to whom these surveys were sent (e.g., whether they were sent to full-time lecturers, faculty, or part-time instructors; what training these respondents had with regard to the subjects that they were teaching; and so on). And although these different areas of “English” are broken out in a description of survey recipients, the same breakouts do not appear in the information about survey respondents. Table A.2 of appendix A, “English/Writing Survey Response Rate,” indicates the number of surveys returned by middle/junior high teachers, high school teachers, postsecondary instructors, and “remedial course” instructors. Additionally, the response rates among these groups were quite low—not more than 18 percent (or 363 of 2,000 distributed) of the surveys distributed to any group were returned (this highest percentage coming from high school teachers) (ACT 2007a, 36). Thus any assertion that the ACT (or any other part of the EPAS) is representative of a
valid or reliable survey of instructors of writing (or any of the
other delineations identified within the survey) is circumspect
at best, and certainly must be placed within the broader context
of ACT’s interests.4

Despite these methodological issues, ACT has used the
results of the NCS to construct a narrative that reflects the same
use of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad in documents like A
Test of Leadership and Ready or Not. This story has been circulated
in a press release from ACT and repeated (sometimes verbatim)
in other news stories as evidence of the inference that teachers
and the educational system do not understand the nature of
twenty-first-century democracy, that they are not preparing stu-
dents to participate in it, and that outside intervention (in the
form of the ACT EPAS) is required to restore the educational
system to its rightful course. ACT then proposes a solution to
this problem: use of its own expertise. This solution is outlined
in ACT’s marketing materials (the NCS report, ACT’s annual
report, and so on). In the letter included in the 2006 annual
report, for instance, CEO Ferguson notes that ACT is

also committed to supporting educators and policymakers as they
work to enhance the quality of high school courses and remove bar-
rriers to student achievement, state by state. With support through
the National Governors Association [NGA] Center for Best Practices
grants, three states . . . are now working with ACT and the NGA on a
pilot project designed to improve the rigor of high school courses.
The project includes professional development workshops for
teachers and administrators to evaluate course quality and improve
instruction. . . . (Ferguson 2006, 3–4)

Perhaps not surprisingly, ACT cites research by the Thomas
B. Fordham Foundation (one of the three partners in the ADP)
to support their claim that high school teachers are asked to
teach too many things (NCS Report, 5); as above, Ferguson’s
letter notes that the organization is working with educators in
Oklahoma, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania—all ADP states—on
a pilot project (ACT annual report 4). ACT tests (including the
ACT and WorkKeys exams) are also administered to all high school juniors in six states (ACT annual report 4).

WEAVING AN ALTERNATIVE: NCTE AND COVERAGE OF THE SAT WRITING EXAM

As this analysis of *A Test of Leadership, Ready or Not*, and the ACT NCS illustrates, a technocratic, interventionist version of the pragmatic progressive jeremiad can support a frame in which stories suggest that educators have lost their ability to outline a process (or a related set of processes) for students to develop the critical intelligence necessary to participate in twenty-first-century democracy. This frame also justifies intervention from outside experts—ADP, ACT, and others—to offer alternative means for moving the nation toward the achievement of this democracy. But the progressive pragmatic jeremiad also contains the possibility for alternative frames as well; these frames contain other possibilities for action.

An analysis of the NCTE’s actions surrounding coverage of the rolling out of the SAT writing exam in 2005 illustrates how strategies and narratives that are also rooted in this jeremiad can be used to construct alternative frames for stories about teachers and education. Initially, news coverage of this new exam reflected the same narratives as those in reports like those discussed earlier. That is, they were framed by a narrative that schools are not adequately preparing students for this life; students’ writing abilities, especially, are in decline; educational institutions (teachers, students) have not been able to stop the slide; outside agents (such as the College Board) can provide necessary leverage (in the best case scenario) or interventions (in the worst) to restore students’ abilities and, therefore, ensure that they are developing (writing) skills necessary for their success as future citizens. This argument is evident, for instance, in a *New York Times Magazine* feature story, “Writing to the Test”:

Changes like the new writing test amount to a kind of arm-twisting. The College Board is adding an essay in part to force schools to
pay more attention to the teaching of writing, which Mr. [Gaston] Caperton [head of the College Board and the former governor of West Virginia] believes is being shamefully neglected. He’s not the only one who thinks so. In 2003, the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, a study group convened by the College Board, discovered, among other things, that most fourth-grade students spend less than three hours a week writing, or a fraction of the time they spend watching television; that nearly two-thirds of high school seniors do not write a three-page paper as often as once a month for their English classes; and that the long research paper has pretty much become a thing of the past. One result is that by the time they get to college, more than 50 percent of incoming freshmen are unable to produce papers relatively free of language errors and to analyze arguments or synthesize information. (McGrath 2004)

In a separate story, Caperton argued that this new exam would “create a revolution in the schools” because including it in the SAT would require teachers to attend to writing in the classroom (quoted in Franek 2005).

Early news coverage after the exam’s first administration continued to perpetuate these stories. They reported that the exam was aligned with what was taught in high school and students would do well on the test because of that reflection (Holmes 2005; Roebuck 2005; Kollali 2005); that the exam would create a stronger entering class because it reinforced what students learned in high school (Holmes 2005; Woods 2005; Roebuck 2005; Kollali 2005; Feldmeier 2005); and that the exam also reflected what students would learn in college (Holmes 2005; Stephens 2005; Kollali 2005).

But on May 4, 2005, two stories appeared that precipitated a significant shift in the coverage of the SAT writing exam: one in the Washington Post and one in the New York Times. The lead in the Post story illustrates this shift:

A professional organization representing 60,000 teachers of English criticized the new essay portion of the SAT as a poor predictor of
how well students will perform in college and expressed concern that it could encourage mediocre, formulaic writing.

The report by the National Council of Teachers of English comes as half a million students prepare to take the SAT this weekend. . . .

The skills that are needed to do well on this test represent a very narrow range of the skills that students will need to do well in the marketplace,” said Robert Yagelski, a professor of English education at the State University of New York at Albany and chairman of the task force that drew up the report. (Dobbs 2005)

This lead reflects a different story, one that is rooted in a different version of the progressive pragmatic narrative. Here the lead makes the case that the College Board and the SAT, not teachers, do not understand the nature of twenty-first-century democracy and that the exam (as one method by which students’ critical intelligence might be cultivated or demonstrated) will not contribute to what students need to have for success. The narratives appearing in the Washington Post story—that the new SAT writing exam would encourage formulaic writing used only in testing situations, that it was a poor predictor of success, and that it might lead to a narrowing of writing instruction—were also repeated in a New York Times news item about an analysis of the correlation between exam length and exam score conducted by MIT faculty member Les Perelman. The first paragraph of the Times story repeats the claim in the Post that the exam is developing “poor” writing skills, then quotes Perelman as an expert to identify the problem. “‘It appeared to me that regardless of what a student wrote, the longer the essay, the higher the score,’ Dr. Perelman said. . . . In the next weeks, Dr. Perelman studied every graded sample SAT that the College Board made public. . . . He was stunned by how complete the correlation was between length and score” (Winerip 2005). These two stories signaled a significant shift. Between March 13 and May 4, 27 of 29 articles (included in a content analysis) were framed by the technocratic, interventionist narrative described earlier. After their publication, 15 stories published
about the SAT writing exam between May 5 and August 15 (in the same analysis) were dominated by the frame represented in the Post and Times stories (Adler-Kassner, “Framing”).

Even in 2007, the SAT writing exam is often covered as controversial. A story in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, for example, noted that “the National Council of Teachers of English two years ago said the writing test was ‘unlikely to improve college writing instruction,’” and included a quote from then-President-Elect Kathleen Blake Yancey of NCTE about the exam (Chute 2007). Another story in the Record (Bergen County, New Jersey) cited a “wait and see approach [to the SAT exam that] seems prevalent among a generation of admissions officers who have expressed growing dissatisfaction with the SAT” (Alex 2007). Following Les Perelman’s presentation at the 2007 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), where he reported the results of an experiment to game the SAT by training a subject (over 18 and with consent) to produce a lengthy but error-riddled essay that then received the highest possible score from SAT raters, coverage of the SAT that reflected perspectives advanced by NCTE was back in the news. A story in Inside Higher Education appeared only days after Perleman’s presentation; shortly afterward it was circulating among blogs and listservs and had appeared on University Wire, a news service for college and university newspapers. And while many colleges and universities continue to use the SAT and the writing exam, over 350 colleges have made the SAT optional for admission. While some of these institutions did not require the exam before this controversy, a number have made the decision since (e.g., College of the Holy Cross, Mount Holyoke, and Spellman) (Glod and Matthews 2006; FairTest).

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS: NCTE AND FRAMING THE SAT WRITING EXAM STORY

This shift in frames around coverage of the NCTE writing exam did not happen accidentally. To help effect it, NCTE drew on strategies that also seem to draw (at least in part) from the pragmatic
progressive jeremiad. Ultimately, these strategies resulted in three clear messages: “That good writing instruction as described in NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing is the best preparation for success in writing; that the test may take away from good writing instruction; and about the test as a test of writing and the issues of validity, equity, and other uses” (Davis 2005, 3). But NCTE worked through a dialogic, methodical process designed to gather input from and build on the critical intelligences of their membership in order to craft this message in such a way as to represent the interests of that group. This process was enacted through NCTE’s strategic governance model. Through it, NCTE regularly surveys its membership, asking what Executive Director Kent Williamson describes as two simple questions: “What do you see as the most influential issues shaping your professional practice in the year ahead?” and “What is most essential to you?” (Williamson 1996). These open-ended questions are quite different than the directive ones sent to an ambiguously identified sample receiving the ACT National Curriculum Survey; they are also circulated to an identified group of NCTE’s membership. They represent an effort on NCTE’s behalf to work systematically, methodically, and through a process to gather input that can be used to contribute to (and shape) the creative intelligence of NCTE members.

This process also continues beyond the survey. Results are relayed to the elected NCTE presidential team, who then identifies between one and three issues of focus for the following year. Next the organization (and its members) identify trends likely to influence those issues in the next three to five years and surveys the resources available on these issues within the organization (e.g., research, position statements, etc.). NCTE then explores what possible partnerships might be forced to “fill in gaps” or proceed to action on identified issues. Finally the organization investigates the “ethical dimensions” of its choices—what they might mean for others and what the consequences of taking a particular action might be for members and students (Williamson 1996).

Two of the issues identified in the 2004 survey of members tied into concerns with the new SAT writing exam (Davis 2005).
Additionally, NCTE leadership drew on the existing *Framing Statements on Assessment* and created the *NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing*, both of which represented best practice (research and experience) in the field and reflected input from members. Following these actions, NCTE President Randy Bomer convened a task force of members to study the SAT and ACT writing exams. That group agreed to focus their work on four areas of research related to the exams: validity and reliability; the “unintended use” of the exams; “the impact of the tests on curriculum and classroom instruction;” and “the impact of the tests on attitudes toward writing and writing instruction” (Davis 2005). They then engaged in another systematic, methodical process of research, collaboration, and drafting that took into account the interests and ideals of NCTE members (as represented in professional documents and discussions) to craft a report that served as the basis for NCTE’s framing of the SAT and ACT writing exams.

As a case study, then, NCTE’s work on reframing coverage of these writing exams offers some useful lessons. First, reframing doesn’t happen quickly, and it doesn’t just happen in published news stories. Instead it starts by laying groundwork that involves discovering and identifying principles and considering how those principles extend to specific elements of practice, among the key strategies described more fully in chapter 4. In this case, NCTE’s strategic governance model helped to lay the groundwork that underscored the task force’s work, and therefore the position adopted by NCTE.

Second, it involves working with and involving lots of people, not just the position of one person (or of a small group). Again, NCTE’s strategic governance model is important here—the *NCTE Beliefs on the Teaching of Writing* that are reflected in the task force’s positions were developed before this report was written—and not necessarily as a response to a particular threat to those beliefs, but as a foundation for the organization’s work.

The beliefs of that group then serve as a basis from which to develop alliances with other individuals and groups who hold
related positions and who can also support the frame-changing—in this case, NCTE reached out to the National Writing Project, FairTest, and even to the College Board (who received an embargoed draft of NCTE’s report before it appeared). Fourth, frame-changing work is focused. NCTE identified three positions that they would take with regard to this exam. They then trained spokespeople, who advanced these positions both as responses to specific questions and as hooks for compelling news stories. NCTE also released the report strategically—first in InBox (“so that we could make our own news with our own news vehicle,” according to Davis [2005, 2]), then to previously made contacts at major newspapers, National Public Radio (NPR), and smaller news media (3). These strategies, too, are important parts of the story-changing strategic work described in chapter 4.

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONING: PUBLIC/ACTIVIST INTELLECTUALISM

NCTE’s work shifting frames around the SAT writing exam raises one final question that is embedded in Joseph Harris’s oft-quoted statement about compositionists’ “inability” to effectively express our positions among wider audiences: how should we position ourselves and our work with regard to our constituents, our potential allies, and the broader issues that are addressed in and through our work? As Peter Mortensen asserted in “Going Public,” this issue should be at the core of what we do:

In our journals and at our conferences, one finds repeated again and again the assertion that our work—our teaching, researching, and theorizing—can clarify and even improve the prospects of literacy in democratic culture. If we really believe this, we must then acknowledge our obligation to air that work in the most expansive, inclusive forums imaginable. (182)

Christian Weisser offers two possible roles for academics to occupy in these “expansive, inclusive forums.” One is what Weisser calls the “public intellectual,” defined by Stanley Fish
as “someone who takes as his or her subject matters of public concern and has the public’s attention” (quoted in Weisser 2002, 118). This public intellectual plays a central role in the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, of course. She is the person who connects the values of the broader culture to the classroom and cultivates students’ critical intelligences so that they can do the same, either through cultivation or imposition. But as Ellen Cushman notes, this conception of teaching is shot through with a paternalism that also is included in pragmatic progressivism. Cushman points to an example from Michael Berube’s work to illustrate the point. Berube writes that

the future of our ability to produce new knowledges for and about ordinary people—and the availability of education to ordinary people—may well depend on how effectively [academics] can . . . make our work intelligible to nonacademics—who then, we hope, will be able to recognize far-right rant about academe for what it is. (quoted in Cushman 1999, 329)

In this conception, “we” produce knowledge for and about ordinary people. This conception of academic work echoes David J. Rothman’s description of progressives, whom he says were:

so attached to a paternalistic model that they never considered the potential of their programs to be as coercive as they were liberating. In their eagerness to play parent to the child, they did not pause to ask whether the dependent had to be protected against their [Progressives’] own well-meaning interventions. (72)

“Public intellectualism” also lies at the base of what Eli Goldblatt calls the “throughput model,” the idea that students move through the university “with the occasional field trip or lab to indicate that the learning they do has application in a world outside of school” (Goldblatt 2005, 276). Paula Mathieu argues that this notion of the academic also underscores seeing community-university partnerships as “strategic”—controlled by the university and ultimately furthering its interests, rather than those of the community. The “academic as public intellectual”
also underscores the “charity-oriented” service-learning models described in chapter 2 of this book (Mathieu 2005).

The other potential role available to academics, Weisser suggests, is that of an “activist intellectual,” one who strives to build connections between her intellectual work and specific work in specific sites among particular audiences (Weisser 2002, 118). Mathieu refers to this work as “tactical” because it is site, time, and project-specific and is grounded in the interests of the partnering organization and the collaborating instructor, rather than the long-term interests of the institution (Mathieu 2005, xiv). Goldblatt draws on the work of Saul Alinsky to make a case for this model, one of “long-term investment in the neighborhoods where we work and centers with which we form partnerships . . . a model of community-based learning and research in which students and their teachers are not so much providing services as participating in a collective effort defined by academics and local citizens alike” (Goldblatt 2005, 283). The idea of activist intellectualism is at the core of efforts like those described by Cushman, Goldblatt, Linda Flower and her colleagues at the Pittsburgh Literacy Center, and others who focus on developing long-term relationships that reflect the interests of community and campus, and where university partners “show a consistent presence in the community and an investment in creating knowledge with and for community members” (Cushman 2002, 58). This model takes into consideration the issues of context, material culture, and everyday living, working, and other conditions that are not explicitly included in the conception of progressive pragmatism that has often fueled the educational project.

Acting as activist intellectuals—that is, enacting a more carefully articulated, materially based notion of progressive pragmatism—is also crucial if educators (including WPAs and writing instructors) are to shift the frames surrounding documents like A Test of Leadership, Ready or Not, and other that assert the authority of “experts” over educators. This activism can begin with critique as a necessary part of the application of
critical intelligence, but then it must build upon that critique to develop, with interested stakeholders, a different narrative that reflects the interests and passions of those involved. It is possible, for instance, that Brian Huot’s critique of the Spellings Report, published in the May 2007 *College English*, is the kind of response that is now required. But that piece (and others) will serve as this kind of foundation only if their critiques are one of many elements included in a story-changing process. The problem, communication theorist James Carey asserts, is that the technocratic mode of progressivism discussed in the previous chapter has reduced “the public . . . to a phantom” and “citizens . . . [to] objects rather than the subjects of politics” (Carey 1997a, 247). That is, if all educators do is critique, we position ourselves as agents who can only refute analyses that lead to this “reduction,” not as ones who can also take actions reflecting our interests and those of others.

In this sense, activist intellectualism requires engaging in the dialectical, dialogic process that is a central component of progressive pragmatism, updated to the twenty-first century. Through this dialectic, individuals and groups bring their own cultures and experiences to the development of methods for developing critical intelligence; the cultures, experiences, and values reflected in these methods is then *also* analyzed and critiqued so that it is as representative of those cultures and experiences (and not just of the individuals who have contributed to them) as possible. The construction of knowledge is a collective, not an individual, activity; the development of tropes, narratives, code words, and frames emanating from those tropes also becomes a collaborative activity. The question becomes not whose views are represented, but what roles might be available for people to play within these processes of construction and dissemination. This perspective, then, stands in direct opposition to the logical evolution of technocratic, interventionist instantiations of the progressive pragmatic jeremiad, where individuals are dragged along within frames because those frames echo a kind of groupthink created for and spoon-fed to
the populous by experts. At the same time, however, it also augmented the humanitarian, stewardly conception of that jeremiad, attempting to address the issues of paternalism embedded in its evasion of materiality by explicitly taking into consideration issues of power, context, and culture not originally included in the narrative extending from it.

Through this revision of the progressive pragmatic model, reframing becomes more than just an attempt to, say, shift the focus of coverage of a news subject—for example, students in college-level writing courses or the work that is completed in those courses. In fact, it is an attempt to create a different kind of public sphere, a republican (small “r”) one requiring “often cacophonous conversation” (Carey 1997b, 219). These models for intellectual work, like the models for action based on that work presented by the NCTE’s success with reframing coverage of the SAT writing exam, rest on making connections between what compositionists (and WPAs) value, what is important to us in and about our work, and then proceeding from that point to build alliances with others that provide benefits for us and for them. These points are reiterated by the community organizers whose work is used as the basis for developing strategies for WPAs and writing instructors to use in our reframing work described in the next two chapters.