

Getting Thorny: Elisabeth McPherson and the Activist Tradition of Two-Year College English

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This essay contributes to the emerging conversation about two-year college teacher-scholar-activism by revisiting the work of Elisabeth McPherson, the first community college faculty member to chair CCCC. Arguing that McPherson's fade from disciplinary memory reflects the marginalization of two-year college faculty that coincided with the rise of neoliberalism, this essay traces three key themes in McPherson's published work: advocating for two-year colleges and the professionalization of their faculty; subverting institutional labeling of two-year college students; and challenging racism, classism, and sexism through pedagogy and policy. While her published work is not beyond critique, McPherson's career offers historical precedent for a two-year college English professional identity that integrates critical teaching, scholarly and organizational engagement, and activism for social justice at multiple scales.

In his influential 2015 article, “The Two-Year College Teacher-Scholar-Activist,” Patrick Sullivan calls on two-year college colleagues to “deliberately frame our professional identity, in part, as activists—accepting and embracing the revolutionary and inescapably political nature of our work” (“Teacher-Scholar-Activist” 327). Since their inception in the early twentieth century, two-year colleges have been shaped by competing ideological forces. These forces include a hierarchical drive to “sort” students in the interests of “social efficiency”: tempering working-class ambitions, maintaining research universities’ elite status, deflecting public dissatisfaction with neoliberalism and economic globalization, and, in the process, reproducing class- and race-based inequalities (see Brint and Karabel; Shor; Dougherty; Levin; DeGenaro, “Social”; “Class”; Harbour). On the other hand, many involved in establishing and teaching at community colleges have been motivated by visions of local educational access that challenge academic elitism, provide opportunities for lifelong learning, and broaden democratic participation (e.g., Frye;

Dougherty; Beach; Harbour; Sullivan, Economic). These contradictory ideologies remain in circulation at two-year colleges, which makes teaching in them an unavoidably political undertaking.

Sullivan suggests that embracing the inescapably political nature of the profession “might require some front-line, in-your-face political work as we seek to create positive change in our communities and on our campuses” (“Teacher-Scholar-Activist” 327–28). Fortunately, he asserts, there is precedent: two-year college English faculty “are heirs to a robust activist tradition” (“Teacher-Scholar-Activist” 327). Sullivan names several leaders he considers exemplars of this activist tradition, including the late Mina Shaughnessy, the (more or less) retired Nell Ann Pickett and Mark Reynolds, and still-active members of the profession like Howard Tinberg, Jody Millward, Carolyn Calhoun-Dillahunt, Holly Hassel, Joanne Baird Giordano, and Jeff Sommers. Collectively, their work represents a multigenerational effort to influence knowledge-making, professional organizations, and policy at state, regional, and national levels to gain visibility and resources for two-year college composition. Locally, these figures have sought to develop curricula and change institutional structures to expand learning opportunities for their students. In this article, I aim to deepen our critical understanding of this activist tradition through a reexamination of the writings of a two-year college leader Sullivan doesn’t name: Elisabeth McPherson. McPherson was a white woman whose teacher-scholar-activism was grounded in a counterhegemonic, explicitly anti-racist social justice vision of community college English teaching. She was, in many ways, a more “in your face” activist than her better-remembered contemporary Shaughnessy, whose hard work and commitment to open admissions education are widely recognized but whose language politics and distaste for student activism have been rightly critiqued (e.g., Lu; Kynard).

McPherson emerged on the national scene in the mid-1960s, amid the community college boom years, the Civil Rights Movement, growing anti-war activism, and the rising Women's Movement. A line from her final *College Composition and Communication (CCC)* essay, published in 1990, captures her ideological orientation: "Teaching English is an unavoidably political undertaking; to pretend otherwise is in itself a political statement" ("Remembering" 146–47). Throughout her career, McPherson worked on many levels—the classroom, her department, her college, the professional organizations, and in the public arena—to challenge racism, classism, and sexism in literacy instruction. She became a vocal critic of what Ira Shor calls the "Conservative Restoration": the reactionary discourses that emerged in the 1970s and ushered in our current era of neoliberalism (see also Sullivan, *Economic*). In Geneva Smitherman's history of the struggle for language rights in the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), she foregrounds the racial dimension of that backlash, calling the 1980s and early 1990s the "Second Reconstruction": a climate of social, political, and educational conservatism in reaction to the Black Freedom Struggle (27). Today, as we labor under conditions of neoliberal austerity (see Scott; Welch and Scott) and cultural-political conflict fueled by white supremacy and patriarchy, we might look to McPherson as an imperfect but instructive exemplar of two-year college teacher-scholar-activism that attempts to confront these forces directly.

Restoring an Activist Tradition

When McPherson entered the two-year college English profession, she was already middle-aged. She was born in 1914 in Vancouver, Washington, graduated from Washington State University in 1938, and spent her early adulthood in San Francisco, where she held a number of positions, including a job with the young United Nations. She returned to Vancouver

with her family in 1951 and earned her Master of Arts in Teaching at Portland's Reed College. In 1955, at the age of 41, she began teaching at Clark College in Vancouver, and in 1967, she accepted a position at Forest Park Community College in St. Louis, where she taught until her retirement a decade later (Friedrich). During her years at Forest Park, McPherson became a prominent player in the composition community. She was involved in the establishment of the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) regional organizations and the formation of the National Junior College Committee (NJCC), the precursor to national TYCA (Pickett; Andelora, "Professionalization"; McPherson, "Remembering"; "Where Were We"). In 1972, she became the first two-year college faculty member to chair CCCC. In the latter half of the 1970s, at the height of the reactionary "back-to-basics" movement, she led efforts within the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) to influence public discourse about language and literacy learning.

In addition to being an advocate within and on behalf of the profession, McPherson was also a prolific writer. With her long-time departmental colleague and collaborator Gregory Cowan, she co-authored five editions of *Plain English Please*, the first composition textbook written by two-year college faculty to be picked up by a major publishing house. When she passed away in 1997—the same year national TYCA was established—she left a body of single-authored and collaborative scholarship composed over nearly three decades that includes journal articles, chapters in edited collections, book reviews, archived conference papers, and organizational position statements.



Figure 1: Photograph of McPherson from Spring 1989 issue of Southeastern Conference on English in the Two-Year College newsletter highlighting her keynote address at that year's TYCA-Southeast conference in Mobile, Alabama.

In the early 1970s, McPherson was operating at the heart of the profession, and Smitherman, who worked with her on the committee that produced the 1974 Statement on Students' Right to Their Own Language (SRTOL), refers to McPherson's writing as "brilliant" (16). Since the late 1970s, however, Smitherman has been one of only a handful university-based scholars to mention McPherson in print (see also Lloyd-Jones, "Doing"; Gilyard, "Holdin It Down"; Wible; Mitchell and Hill; Durst), and one of very few to actually cite her scholarship (along with Fearing; Parks). By the turn of the century, most print references to McPherson were by TYCA leaders reflecting on their own professional histories (Pickett; Friedrich; Friedrich and Harris; Reynolds and Holladay-Hicks), and such references have disappeared almost entirely as the generation of two-year college professionals who knew McPherson have retired or passed away. In recent decades, she has received attention from a few disciplinary historiographers (Smitherman; Jackson et al.; Parks; Andelora, "Teacher/Scholar"; "Professionalization"; Jensen and Toth), but today, even many long-time TYCA members know little about her contributions.

I read McPherson's fade from memory not as a reflection of her actual influence during her most professionally active years, but rather as a function of the persistent marginalization of two-year colleges in composition's often "four-year-centric" scholarship (Toth, Griffiths, et al. 91; see also Lovas; Hassel and Giordano; Rodrigo and Miller-Cochran). That marginalization was not inevitable: while two-year colleges had to push for resources during CCCC's first decades, by the early 1970s, it looked as though they might come to play a central role in composition's politics and knowledge-making (Wilson; Parks; Toth, Transfer). However, the Conservative Restoration and the rise of neoliberalism resulted in reduced state funding for higher education, increased reliance on part-time faculty labor, and greater influence among politicians, business leaders, and testing companies over community college programs (McPherson, "Remembering"). These reactionary forces also shaped composition's bid for disciplinary respectability in more conservative—i.e., university-centric—terms (Parks; Trimbur; Faigley). Such material and ideological shifts undercut opportunities for professional engagement for many two-year college English faculty, as well as their visibility in the wider composition community (Jensen and Toth). As these shifts set in, the discipline's recollection of McPherson's intellectual and organizational contributions appears to have waned.

In attempting to restore memory of those contributions, my goal is not to produce hagiography or "great (wo)man" history. Rather, I examine McPherson's work as a case study of how one influential figure enacted a critical and distinctively two-year college professional identity that integrated teaching, scholarship, and activism at multiple scales. She was certainly not the only community college teacher-scholar-activist during this period. White men like Cowan, Richard Worthen, Richard Friedrich, and Lionel Sharp were also involved in two-year college advocacy as well as anti-war and/or racial justice efforts (Worthen; Davis; Parks). In

Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies, Carmen Kynard provides an extended discussion of the work of Ernece Kelly, a deeply engaged Black teacher, scholar, and activist who taught at Chicago City College's Loop Campus in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Kelly famously called CCCC to a recognition of its pervasive racism in her 1968 response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, "Murder of the American Dream," and she actively worked to create alternative conference spaces for Black educators (Kynard). Indicting the lack of Black student voices at CCCC (Kelly, "Murder"), she also wrote and published with her students (Gabbin et al.; Kynard). Kelly directed the NCTE Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English, which authored the 1970 NCTE policy statement, "Criteria for Teaching Materials in Reading and Literature," and she led the Textbook Review Committee, which produced *Searching for America*, a 1972 landmark collection of essays by scholars of color that challenges white supremacy in widely-used college textbooks on American literature. By focusing on McPherson, I do not mean to suggest that she was the only—or, for that matter, the most radical—exemplar of two-year college teacher-scholar-activism during this period.

Indeed, there are many indications that McPherson and her department at Forest Park were profoundly influenced by the work of Kelly, Smitherman, and other "scholar-activists" (Jackson et al. 118) of color engaged in community-based social justice movements during the 1960s and 1970s (see my discussions below of Friedrich and McPherson, "English"). And McPherson appears to have been recognized by at least some of those scholar-activists as a "positive influence" (Davis 24) and "strategic partner" (Mitchell and Hill 53) in NCTE and CCCC. In oral history interviews (Blackmon et al.), Smitherman and Black Caucus co-founder James Hill repeatedly mention McPherson as a supporter of racial justice efforts during the

1970s (Mitchell and Hill; Jackson et al.; see also Davis; Smitherman), and Kelly selected McPherson as one of two “consultant readers” (along with Edward Corbett) for *Searching for America* (Kelly, *Searching* iv). Although McPherson was clearly learning a great deal from these colleagues, as well as from Black students, faculty, and staff at Forest Park (e.g., McPherson, “Hats Off”; Friedrich and McPherson, “English”), she rarely references their work explicitly in her writing—like much composition scholarship during this period (Lloyd-Jones, “Who”), her essays often include few or no citations. While my reading of McPherson’s work is, by and large, sympathetic, I do not want to lose sight of the fact that she seldom acknowledges Black intellectual contributions directly. Such erasures are, as Kynard and others have observed, endemic in composition scholarship and a manifestation of white hegemony.

With full acknowledgement of McPherson’s shortcomings in this regard—and humility about my own limited perspective as a white woman currently employed at a university—I suggest that her work still possesses a critical edge that can inform our current conceptualizations of teacher-scholar-activism. McPherson consistently challenged social injustices in political discourse, organizational and institutional policy, and classroom practice, and she wanted her students to do the same. She was unwavering in her calls for community-relevant pedagogies aimed at strengthening students’ capacity to “recognize the way language can be used to distort and manipulate” (McPherson et al. 10) and encouraging them to use language ethically, which is not to say unconfessionally, to pursue their political goals. While I don’t agree with every word she wrote, her work offers a glimpse of what composition might have become if, as Parks suggests, we understood our “professional responsibilities” to include prioritizing “student interests over disciplinary status” (xix–xx). Half a century later, I believe her scholarship can

inform efforts to make positive change on our campuses and in the community—sometimes, as she suggests, by being “a thorn in its side” (McPherson, “Hats Off” 316).

In this essay, I trace McPherson’s activities across three major themes in her published work: advocating for two-year colleges and the professionalization of their faculty; subverting institutional labeling of students; and challenging racism, classism, and sexism through pedagogy and policy. In each thematic section, I examine her organizational activities, her written scholarship, and what the published record suggests about efforts in her local institutional context. McPherson’s body of work illustrates the persistent challenges two-year college English faculty face in their efforts to further a social justice-oriented vision for open admissions education. It also reminds us how one engaged, committed two-year college teacher-scholar-activist—in collaboration with many colleagues—confronted those challenges in ways that continue to influence our professional lives.

Advocating for Two-Year Colleges and Their Faculty

Beginning in the mid-1960s, McPherson was a key player in efforts to raise the visibility of two-year colleges within NCTE and CCCC. In 1966, Clark College was the Pacific Northwest host for the first of the CCCC-sponsored conferences that became the TYCA regionals. That same year, McPherson was the region’s representative at the three-day planning meeting that established the NJCC (Andelora, “Professionalization”); she went on to chair the committee (McPherson, “Remembering”). McPherson served on the advisory board for the landmark 1970 National Study of English in the Junior College, edited the NJCC newsletter from 1970 to 1973, and would later serve on the editorial board for *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, or *TETYC* (Friedrich), a peer-reviewed NCTE journal established in 1974. During the early decades of two-year college English professionalization, McPherson was one of the most engaged and

well-known community college faculty in the field (Bird; Friedrich; Pickett; Reynolds and Holladay-Hicks; Andelora, “Professionalization”).

From the outset, McPherson’s efforts to gain recognition for two-year colleges were motivated by a belief that their faculty could make needed change in the nation’s hierarchical postsecondary system. As she would recall in 1990,

In those early days most of us thought that if we couldn’t completely reform the educational world, we could certainly identify some of the problems and suggest some of the remedies...From our point of view one symptom of what was wrong was the way we thought the rest of the higher education establishment looked at junior college English teachers: second rate at best. (“Where Were We” 93)

In challenging these perceptions, McPherson and her colleagues found they had something unique to offer composition. Unlike most university English professors, “We knew, most of us, that we were probably going to teach some kind of composition, and very little but composition, for most of our professional lives...[We] made a virtue of it” (“Where Were We” 93). As long-time TYCA leader and 2002 CCCC chair John Lovas would later argue, full-time two-year college English faculty are far more experienced teachers of composition—working with much more diverse populations of students—than most of the university professors theorizing about the subject. Two-year college faculty brought important experiential knowledge to an emerging field.

Although she consistently advocated for the access mission of two-year colleges and the importance of their faculty within the professional organizations, McPherson was no cheerleader. Much of her work was dedicated to pushing for improved labor conditions, faculty self-governance, and opportunities for professional engagement that would make literacy instruction

at open admissions institutions more socially just. She served on the committee that produced the 1968 statement on “The Workload of a College English Teacher” (National Council of Teachers of English). This statement outlines in specific detail the labor demands of teaching college writing, which includes preparing lessons and responding to student compositions while adapting instruction to “reassure [the student] that he counts as a person” (268). It also highlights the necessity of time for ongoing professional development. The committee asserts that “English is not a static field; it demands constant professional growth...And it is not enough to keep up with developments—teachers must, indeed will want to, make their own scholarly and professional contributions” (268). This statement was published in CCC, and the facing page featured an NJCC policy statement titled “The Workload of the Two-Year College English Teacher,” which affirmed the relevance of the “Workload” document for two-year college faculty (National Junior College Committee; Bird). Before TYCA began advancing the teacher-scholar professional identity (see Andelora, “Teacher/Scholar”; “Forging”; Two-Year College English Association), McPherson and the NJCC were positioning two-year college English faculty as “knowledge makers” (Reynolds 1).¹

By the early 1970s, the NJCC was asserting a more radical articulation of the work of two-year college English faculty that integrated teaching, scholarship, and activism: the 1971 “Guidelines for Junior College English Teacher Training Programs.” The committee that composed this document was chaired by Cowan and included McPherson and several other two-year college leaders (plus Corbett). The document lists twenty-one “competencies” that “[s]uccessful junior college teachers” should possess, several of which are distinctly counterhegemonic with regard to dominant institutional hierarchies, pedagogical practices, and language and literacy ideologies.

1. recognize and respect the *wide range of backgrounds, abilities, interests, and career goals* of junior college students;
2. understand and empathize with the *diverse value systems* of the students [one] teaches;
3. understand the nature of language and be aware of the ways in which all human beings use language to order their vision of themselves and the world, *to manipulate others and allow themselves to be manipulated*;
4. recognize that all levels of language and *all dialects are equally valuable and that academic insistence on a so-called 'standard' English for all situations is an unrealistic political and social shibboleth based on unsound linguistic information...*
9. recognize that, since the skills and achievements of their students will vary widely, [teachers'] task in teaching writing is to *help as many students as possible achieve success rather than to establish certain cutoff points below which a student will fail...*
10. present significant abstract ideas and concepts, without distortion or oversimplification, so that they will be *accessible to a diverse group of students...*
12. make assignments and develop course goals *cooperatively with students ...*
14. comment on student papers in such a way that the comments indicate receptivity to what the student has produced, acknowledge that any honest communication is worthy of respect, and help the student write more successfully next time...
18. understand how to work within the academic system *in order to change the system*, recognizing that worthwhile developments result...from a process of mutual development undertaken cooperatively with students and colleagues. (Cowan 306–07, emphasis mine)

Echoing the work of Kelly’s Task Force on Racism and Bias, the document states that faculty should be prepared to include “minority” literatures in both specialized and survey courses, on the argument that courses in American and world literatures would be otherwise be “slanted, unrepresentative, and incomplete” (Cowan 306). Clearly, McPherson and her colleagues envision a very different kind of English department—indeed, a very different kind of literacy education—than the prevailing university model.

The year the “Guidelines” were released, McPherson informed attendees at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association (MLA) that the document “demanded revolutionary changes in four-year and graduate schools, as well as in junior colleges” by taking direct aim at the “racism and bias built into our training programs” (*Exploding* 9). The “Guidelines” establish a construct of two-year college professionalism grounded in academic knowledge about language and learning; rooted in the critical teaching of rhetoric and composition rather than preservation of a literary canon; respectful of students’ languages, cultures, motivations, and intellectual capacities; and committed to making change within, through, and beyond the academy. As Parks observes, the “Guidelines”—particularly their callout of the “academic insistence on a so-called ‘standard’ English for all situations” as “an unrealistic political and social shibboleth based on unsound linguistic information” (305)—were an important organizational antecedent to the SRTOL statement (see below). Although the “Guidelines” document faded from disciplinary memory when the demand for full-time community college faculty declined, it has resurfaced in the latest organizational push to reform graduate education to better meet the professional needs of two-year college English faculty (Jensen and Toth; Toth, Jensen, et al.).

McPherson was an advocate for two-year college faculty within the national professional organizations. However, she did much more than craft position statements, sit on advisory boards, and plan conferences: at home, she helped build a department that put those politics into action. In 1974, Friedrich and McPherson published a 38-page article in *College English* profiling the English department at Forest Park. This article is a fascinating portrait of a politically aware and rigorously self-interrogating two-year college department committed to providing access to critical, community-engaged literacies. Friedrich and McPherson open by acknowledging that Forest Park is not a “typical” two-year college but insist that easy generalizations cannot be made about this very “heterogeneous” category of institution (“English” 889). They provide an in-depth description of Forest Park: its size and degree programs; the race, class, and gender demographics of its students; its cost of attendance and funding; the race and gender profile of its faculty as well as their professional activities and political leanings; and discussion of how all of those factors fit into the educational histories and spatialized social inequalities of St. Louis. Friedrich and McPherson are clearly aware of their local context—their institution, their students, and the community in which they are situated—and how that informs a politically-engaged English curriculum.

On a formal level, the article enacts the ethic of faculty self-governance and collaborative decision-making espoused by the authors. As they write,

[T]he department hired people who wanted change, and who knew the direction they wanted those changes to take. The philosophy that evolved has been a mutual philosophy. Somebody makes a suggestion, two or three people take it up, a small committee (whether impromptu or official) plays with it a little more, and then the whole department argues and re-argues it, and polishes it into final form. It isn't always smooth going. In

fact, it seldom is, since most of our staff were chosen for independence, obstinacy, and vocal ability. But they were chosen, too, for some *shared beliefs*: *that tradition doesn't hallow much; that a community college is an exciting place to be; that composition, as we define it, is an exciting subject to teach; and that our students, regardless of where the Scholastic Aptitude Test ranks them, can learn to write not just competently but well.* It's those shared beliefs that enable us to hammer out policies and procedures ("English" 906–07, emphasis mine)

In this spirit, "English at Forest Park Community College" is polyvocal. It includes excerpts from collaboratively developed department documents; short reports or reflections by other faculty colleagues; short student-authored pieces presented in their entirety; and reflective essays by support staff. Two contributors—faculty member Hattie R. Jackson and department secretary Robbie R. Manson—speak from their perspectives as Black women professionals in the department (see below). Through this assemblage of voices and genres, the article presents a portrait of an English department committed to a democratic educational vision.

Creating a department culture where student-centered, counterhegemonic academic values flourish cannot be the work of a single faculty member. It takes a community of teachers, staff, and students operating from the "shared beliefs" Friedrich and McPherson articulate. However, it is clear that McPherson's presence in the department played an important role in sustaining that culture. Twenty-five years after "English at Forest Park Community College" was published, Friedrich and long-time colleague Angela Harris wrote a follow-up article for TETYC called, "Forest Park English Department Revisited." This article is, in some ways, a documentation of professional decline. As Friedrich and Harris report, in 1976, the multi-institutional St. Louis Community College District was reorganized as a single college with

multiple campuses under more centralized administrative control. Cowan had already left for a position at Texas A&M University, and McPherson retired the following year. Over the next two decades, class sizes increased, the college shifted toward greater reliance on part-time instructors, and full-time faculty had less say in departmental hiring, evaluation, and retention. These changes impacted departmental culture. Friedrich and Harris describe the department as going from being “distinguished by agreements born of vigorous discussion about the task of teaching writing, the art of teaching writing, and the purpose of teaching writing” to a climate of isolated “complacency” in which “[w]e have lost a connection to things outside ourselves” (“Forest Park” 38). They see this stagnation as a consequence of disconnection from the national professional community, observing, “Only one department member has remained active in CCCC throughout the years and comments that it’s the only place where he could find the continuing conversation about teaching because it was not available from his colleagues” (“Forest Park” 38). Friedrich and Harris attribute this cultural shift in part to the departure of McPherson:

[T]he loss of professional leadership within the department was perhaps the single most identifiable reason for the changes that occurred. James Harris, who joined the department 25 years ago, mentioned the importance of such people as Elisabeth McPherson and Greg Cowan to the department. ‘After Liz left, we did not have the kind of leadership that encouraged professional growth and development. She inspired us ... Liz was so important.’ (Friedrich and Harris, “Forest Park” 38)

These traces of McPherson’s influence suggest the power of one teacher-scholar-activist, working collaboratively at both local and national levels, to improve conditions for teaching and learning in two-year colleges settings. However, the trajectory of Forest Park demonstrates the vulnerability of those changes in the face of encroaching neoliberalism, which has undercut

community college faculty self-governance, professional engagement, and, perhaps, capacity for political action.

Subverting Institutional Labels

If McPherson was a consistent advocate for the principle of open admissions, and for two-year colleges as vehicles for educational access, she also became an increasingly sharp critic of the role these institutions played in reproducing inequalities. She was deeply concerned with how English courses could function to either perpetuate or challenge social injustice. Over the arc of her career, McPherson's scholarship demonstrates a mounting skepticism about established practices of "tracking" two-year college students based on their career aspirations and language and literacy backgrounds. Her critiques of these practices speak to vexing questions that remain unresolved in basic writing and two-year college composition scholarship today.

These concerns are evident from McPherson's first scholarly publication, a 1964 *Junior College Journal* article titled "Incompetence in Comp: A Realistic Solution," written with Cowan and Richard Hawkins. This essay critically examines English curricula for "terminal" students: that is, students enrolled in vocational rather than transfer programs, many of whom were viewed by traditional-minded two-year college English faculty as "incompetent" writers. Rejecting then-conventional approaches to "remediation" that emphasized drills on parts of speech and exercises in grammar workbooks, the authors call on faculty to "concentrate on the major aim of all writing—communicating meaning—and work on almost exactly the same things we work for in [transfer] composition" (Cowan et al. 25). Rather than the standard non-credit remedial courses, the authors advocate for a credit-bearing non-transfer English sequence that

fulfills communication requirements for an associates degree and aims to foster communication and critical thinking in nonacademic settings.

Their curriculum focuses on practice with reading, developing writing “fluency” through regular in- and out-of-class writing on topics of individual interest, and practicing study strategies. Writing assignments are revised based on instructor feedback but subject to little or no sentence-level marking. The assignments focus on exposition and argument because “the student will need this in his other college classes, on the job he will get, in the union meeting, or on the board of directors” (Cowan et al. 26). The course sequence places increasing emphasis on reasoning and evidencing claims but deemphasizes correctness. As the authors assert, “We cannot disregard spelling, punctuation, and usage entirely, but we certainly play them down. Most of the evaluation is based on whether they have something to say and say it clearly” (Cowan et al. 27). The struggle to find a textbook that aligned with this approach led Cowan and McPherson to write *Plain English Please*.

Cowan and McPherson published the first edition of *Plain English* in 1966, with two-year colleges students who were institutionally classified as “terminal” or “remedial” as its primary audience. From my own twenty-first century perspective, the textbook suffers from the inherent problems of static depictions of writing’s situated complexities that Mike Rose identified in his early 1980s study of composition textbooks (with the second edition of *Plain English* as part of his dataset). However, it was a distinct departure from other authoritative tomes on the market. In an *English Journal* review of the second edition, Peter Sisario of Schenectady Community College objects to the book’s emphasis on writing exercises over lengthy explanation of concepts, its “conspiratorial” tone toward students, and its irreverence regarding the conventions of academic writing (616). However, he does note that the “section on persuasion is especially

strong, not only in its presentation of the nature of argumentation, but also in its special section on ‘Unfair Persuasion,’ which deals with slanted words, propaganda, and unethical juggling of material” (615). As Cowan and McPherson make clear in the 1980 “Preface” to the fourth edition, they choose to prioritize accessibility and relevance for students—and open skepticism about the elitist dimensions of academic discourse—in order to foster the critical literacies they saw as the most important goal of all writing instruction.

When McPherson began writing single-authored articles, she became even more skeptical of practices and structures that positioned two-year college students as anything other than adults capable of politically engaged and socially meaningful literacy practices. That shift is evident in her 1967 *CCC* article, “Will the Real Terminal Student Please Stand Up?” This piece reiterates many of the insights of the *Junior College Journal* essay. However, it also raises critical questions about how the three “tracks” in two-year college English curricula—transfer, terminal, and remedial—limit the kinds of literacies to which students gain access. Anticipating debates that would emerge in basic writing, McPherson insists on distinguishing between institutionally constructed curricular categories and naturalized student “types”: “[W]hat we are saying,” she writes, “is not that one student is terminal and another transfer, but that the English course he begins with is terminal; that is, the course is not intended to transfer to a four-year college” (“Will” 95). She observes that students’ goals often shift in the process of earning their degrees, that the literacy demands of specific vocations change over time, and that some students enrolled in terminal courses will likely return to school later to pursue a transfer degree. Thus, writing students in terminal classes are not categorically different from their peers in college-level composition, and course curricula and pedagogies should reflect that reality.

McPherson argues that “a good terminal program should lift really valuable elements from the regular freshman course and offer them on a simpler level, using language and materials that these students can understand” (“Will” 95–96). With such a program in place, colleges can get rid of non-credit “remedial” courses entirely. McPherson suggests that credit-bearing “terminal” courses should dispense with an overriding obsession with usage in favor of more substantive content. She warns that “the minute the student’s writing is judged primarily on spelling errors and comma splices, the terminal program is in danger of becoming just one more bonehead course” (“Will” 96). Instead, these courses must offer “realistic and meaningful” literacy education in which students “discover that for the first time they are being given a real chance to succeed in an English class” (“Will” 96). Far from relinquishing standards, she asserts, these two-year college courses have “their own integrity” (“Will” 96).

All students, McPherson argues, whether in terminal or transfer English courses, are entitled to “liberalizing and humanizing” literacy education (“Will” 94). For McPherson, these terms have explicitly political meaning:

By liberalizing and humanizing, we mean developing attitudes that, although they may not contribute to an immediate increase in salary, can at least keep the student from being duped now and then and at best can contribute to a richer and fuller life. Terminal students certainly don’t need to gush about sunsets, but they do need to develop habits of clear, orderly expression that will apply equally well to a draftsman’s report or an argument to the planning commission. They have no need for esoteric literary criticism, but they will have a continuing need for some critical ability to help them separate sense from illogical nonsense in union proposals and political campaigns. (“Will” 94)

In other words, English courses should foster the kinds of rhetorical awareness and critical literacies essential for self- and community advocacy, democratic participation, and collective action. In such a “terminal” program, McPherson sees an opportunity for two-year college faculty to develop something different from traditional high school English curricula while also operating outside narrow university expectations. While she would move away from her investment in “terminal” English as a curricular category, McPherson never let go of the importance of two-year college composition having its “own integrity.”

By 1969, McPherson had become openly suspicious of all institutional efforts to label and track students. That year, she gave a regional TYCA keynote address in which she took on the buzzword “innovation” then circulating among two-year college administrators, posing several innovations she thought worth trying (“Where Were We” 98). Chief among these suggestions was dispensing with the many inequitable sorting mechanisms two-year colleges had accumulated:

Let’s throw out the sectioning tests...Let’s throw out all arbitrary tracking based on those discriminatory sectioning tests. We can’t afford damaging assumptions about the relative worth of students. We can continue to offer a variety of courses on a variety of levels, if it turns out we really need them, but let’s make them all elective. If we describe them honestly and clearly, if we’re prepared to offer individual students advice on which courses they would probably get the most out of, we might just be able to depend on students showing that maturity we talk so much about. (“Where Were We” 98)

McPherson’s “innovation” sounds remarkably like the kinds of directed and guided self-placement practices currently gaining traction in two-year colleges reckoning with the profound

social injustices wrought by neoliberal investments in high-stakes, single-score placement exams (Klausman et al.; Toth, “Directed”; “Kairotic”).

As her use of the word “discriminatory” suggests, McPherson’s objections to the labeling and tracking of students were part of an emerging activist agenda that challenged institutional racism. In a 1970 *ADE Bulletin* essay on the qualities of an ideal department chair, she wrote,

I want him to recognize that standardized tests do a great deal of psychological damage—they lead our students to believe that English is purely a question of capitalization and commas, of spelling and special usage. . . . More important, I want him to oppose standardized tests because they are discriminatory; they reward the kids who had the foresight to select white middle-class parents, and they penalize those who had the poor judgment to be born in a lower-class ghetto. (“Chairman” 28)

McPherson had developed an incisive awareness of how race- and class-based inequities were being reproduced through the narrow construct of writing most standardized tests measured. By 1974, her department colleagues appear to have shared her anti-tracking vision. As she and Friedrich wrote in “English at Forest Park Community College,”

Unlike many two-year colleges, we use no tracking system. All courses carry college transfer credit. Until recently we offered three tracks in composition: a developmental or remedial course which we abandoned because it seemed to label rather than develop, a so-called communications course for non-transfer students, and standard English composition. . . . Abandoning that tracking system was one of the first indications that the department could do anything [administrators] couldn’t stop us from doing. It was simple: one semester we just dropped offering anything but ‘composition’—a transfer course. (“English” 885)

Thus, in a bold assertion of professional authority, the English department dismantled its system of remediation and tracking on the grounds that it constituted an inequitable sorting system that did not align with their theories of language.

Their approach may sound like what basic writing scholars would later call “mainstreaming”—that is, eliminating “developmental” courses and admitting all incoming students directly into first-year composition (e.g. Adams; Rodby and Fox; Gleason). The parallels might give some readers pause, given our experiences with neoliberal attacks on developmental education that reduce resources for students from structurally disadvantaged backgrounds. In recent years, two-year colleges seeking to reform developmental education have generally favored concurrent support models like the Accelerated Learning Program (ALP), which enables erstwhile “basic writers” to take first-year composition with additional support through a supplemental linked course (Grego and Thompson; Adams et al.; Hassel et al.). However, it is important to understand Forest Park’s decision to eliminate “developmental” education in the context of broader reforms to their composition curriculum that turned the usual race- and class-based structures of linguistic privilege upside down. In this curriculum, which I discuss in the next section, it was often students with the most uncritical education in “Standard English” who were deemed “underprepared” for college writing.

Challenging Racism, Classism, and Sexism

When McPherson moved from Vancouver to St. Louis in 1967, Forest Park Community College was a relatively new urban institution where eighty percent of students came from low-income households and roughly half were African American (Friedrich and McPherson, “English”). St. Louis, which has a long history of legal racial segregation, was experiencing accelerating white flight to the outer suburbs (Gordon), and Forest Park was known as the city’s

“black school” (Friedrich and McPherson, “English” 883). In 1974, Friedrich and McPherson alluded to recent “publicized struggles over racism” at the college, stating that “after three years of near violence”—i.e., activism on the part of Black students and community members and the response of campus authorities and city officials—Forest Park “finally” had a Black president and a small number of Black and/or female deans and faculty; “not much,” they point out, “for an affirmative action plan that has ostensibly been in place for two years” (“English” 883).

Teaching at Forest Park at the height of the era’s social movements appears to have galvanized McPherson’s commitment to the radical potential of open admissions and to advancing race, class, and gender equity, both at her institution and within the profession.

McPherson’s 1968 CCC essay, “Hat’s Off- Or On- to the Junior College,” is one of her first written efforts to engage directly with the broader social and ideological struggles—and particularly the racial politics—playing out on community colleges campuses. The essay opens with a direct acknowledgement of the gap between the rhetoric of most two-year colleges (“equal educational opportunity for every high school graduate; a chance for every student to realize his fullest potential; a college responsive to the needs of the community”) and a more ambivalent reality (“the discrepancy between the promise and the performance, between the philosophical come-on and the dropout rate”) (“Hats Off” 316). As she writes, when “community needs” are being determined by “advisory committees from business,” some critical perspective is in order (“Hats Off” 316). In light of these dynamics, McPherson poses a series of provocative questions:

How responsive do we need to get? How responsive can we afford to get and keep any educational self-respect? It’s very easy for “responsive to the needs of the community” to become “pandering to the prejudices of the community.” Do junior colleges, because they are junior, have to be meek supporters of the status quo? Do community colleges,

because they are community, have to mirror and reinforce the weaknesses of the community? Can we get the emphasis off the junior and onto the college, and make the school a genuine center of intellectual ferment? *This is the real philosophical question junior colleges face: do we serve the community better by doing what it tells us or by being, at least some of the time, a thorn in its side?* (“Hats Off” 316, emphasis mine).

These questions get to the heart of what we might mean by the term “teacher-scholar-activist,” and it is telling that the issue about which McPherson gets thorniest in this essay is race.

McPherson leads into her argument by recounting the story of “the great hat controversy” (“Hats Off” 317). When a board member at Forest Park complained about male students wearing hats indoors, an administrator announced a college-wide policy banning indoor hat-wearing, and he asked faculty to become enforcers. As McPherson points out, “there was more involved than a possibly out-of-date, middle-class custom. There was a racial issue, too; it was only the Negro students for whom the hats, very narrow-brimmed and often very expensive, were a badge and a symbol” (“Hats Off” 317). This problematic policy became the subject of heated debate in the faculty association. While some members argued that the college had “an obligation to teach [students] manners,” others asserted that “a college could be legitimately concerned only with what went on inside a student’s head, not outside it” (“Hats Off” 317). The controversy also came with the specter of racialized violence: “[a]n overzealous campus cop, trying to enforce what he thought was the rule, almost started a fight,” and students put up a sign in their lounge that said “TAKE YOUR HAT OFF” (“Hats Off” 317). These events troubled McPherson, who writes, “we should be teaching students to examine their values, not accept them blindly; to challenge the values we offer and make us question our own” (“Hats Off” 317). As she observes, however, such questioning does not align with the way “community responsiveness” was being

defined at two-year colleges: “Asking why leads to trouble, and communities don’t like trouble, and administrators don’t like trouble. Administrators especially don’t like unhappy communities” (“Hats Off” 318). For McPherson, it is clear that “the community” that counts to Forest Park administrators is the white establishment, not St. Louis’s large and economically disadvantaged Black community.²

McPherson argues that the English department has a unique role to play in pushing for a more critical approach to two-year college education. She proposes making the ways that language structures our sense of reality and our social standing the subject of inquiry in the English classroom—“for every English student in every course at every level”—arguing, “When we recognize that the dialect we speak has some social and economic advantages, but no real superiority, and when we share this knowledge with students, we’re examining values” (“Hats Off” 319). She draws a direct connection between the stultifying focus on usage conventions in most remedial courses and the policing of Black students’ headwear. “The question of usage,” McPherson writes,

is very much like the question of hats. Which is the more important status symbol for the student: leaving his hat on and keeping his own identity? Taking it off and learning to be an imitation WASP? This is a decision only the student can make... If changing his dialect is not the student’s own idea, however, we have no right to insist on it simply because we prefer the sound of our own. (“Hats Off” 321–22)

This recognition of the social domination and racial injustice inherent in Standard English ideology would lead McPherson to become a significant player in the movement for student language rights.

Over the course of her career, McPherson worked on a number of social justice efforts within the professional organizations. She wrote approvingly of—and likely had some hand in—NCTE and CCCC position statements opposing the Vietnam War, supporting students’ right to dissent, and encouraging passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (McPherson, “Then”). In 1971, she was one of the founding members of NCTE’s Committee on the Role and Image of Women in the Council and the Profession, i.e. the “Women’s Committee” (Nilsen). This committee produced the 1976 “Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications,” which aimed to change sexist language conventions such as the generic use of “man” and of masculine third-person pronouns, as well as the use of terms that reify traditional gender roles and gendered descriptors that stereotype or trivialize women (NCTE).³

In conference papers, McPherson lauded the work of Kelly’s Racism and Bias Committee, which reviewed language arts textbooks for evidence of racial and gender discrimination, sent offending publishers suggestion cards with statements like “unacceptable: no Black writers,” and produced *Searching for America* (edited by Ernece Kelly), which, as McPherson describes it, “insisted texts couldn’t be labeled ‘American’ unless they included the work of all Americans, not just the ones in power” (All 4). In many ways, then, McPherson was a key figure pushing the professional organizations to respond to—and amplify—the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

When the conservative backlash to these movements set in, McPherson pushed NCTE to take a more active role in public policy discussions impacting literacy learning, educational access, and equity. She founded NCTE’s grassroots Support for the Learning and Teaching of English (SLATE), a precursor to NCTE’s current policy advocacy initiatives. SLATE responded to the back-to-basics movement by organizing English teachers across sectors to “lobby state

legislatures, write to the local newspapers, get out short position papers that would educate parents and ourselves about good English teaching, to act instead of reacting” (McPherson, “Where Were We” 96). As she would recall in 1990, two-year college faculty played an important role in these efforts: “A lot of community college English teachers did act. They used the skills they were supposed to be teaching—writing, talking, listening, convincing—in an attempt to change public notions of what English is and how it can be taught” (“Where Were We” 96). SLATE’s efforts are precisely the kind of public-oriented teacher-scholar-activism that Sullivan advocates.

Although her political engagement was wide-ranging, McPherson is most often remembered for her involvement in producing CCCC’s most famous policy statement, SRTOL, which proclaims:

We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language. (“Students Right to Their Own Language” 2-3)

There is a large body of scholarship on SRTOL, including several generations of critical perspectives on its achievements and limitations as well as historiographical work on its

development, reception, and long-term impact. Much of that work has responded to Parks' controversial *Class Politics: The Movement for Students' Right to Their Own Language*, which examines organizational archival materials, including meeting minutes and internal correspondence surrounding the conception, composition, and passage of SRTOL. After Parks' book was released in 2000, members of NCTE's Black Caucus objected to its failure to represent the Caucus's role in developing SRTOL and its longer history of advocacy for student language, as well as the book's characterization of the political engagements of Black contributors like Smitherman (Gilyard, "Holdin It Down"; Parks). Much of the subsequent historiography of SRTOL has focused on deepening the discipline's understanding of the long Black struggle for language rights, both within and beyond CCCC (e.g., Gilyard, "African American"; "Holdin It Down"; Smitherman; Kynard).

Without questioning the vital importance of this historiographical work, which has pushed the field methodologically and challenged systemic erasures of African American contributions to composition, I think it is also worth observing that there has been little discussion of what Parks' study suggests about the roles community college faculty played in challenging Standard English ideologies in composition pedagogy (see also Wible). When McPherson is named in the literature on SRTOL, many scholars fail to note that she taught at a two-year college, and in at least one case (Durst), she is inaccurately identified as university faculty. The major exception is Smitherman's 1999 article "CCCC's Role in the Struggle for Language Rights," reworked a few years later into a book chapter, "The Historical Struggle for Language." In these essays, Smitherman describes McPherson as a "crucial member" of the SRTOL committee (Smitherman 17). She makes a point of crediting McPherson for solving the committee's impasse regarding the pronoun in the statement's title by proposing the gender-

neutral third-person plural, changing “The Student’s Right to His Own Language” to “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” (23). The CCCC Executive Committee passed the SRTOL resolution in 1972, the year McPherson served as chair, and she contributed to the explanatory background document that accompanied the statement. In 1974, she helped usher the resolution through its controversial membership vote at the annual CCCC convention in Anaheim (see also Lloyd-Jones, “Who”; Parks).

McPherson recognized that race and class were intersecting issues when it came to language diversity and educational access (“Chairman”; Exploding; All; “Language: Unites”; Friedrich and McPherson, “English”). In her 1975 CCCC talk, “All God’s Children Don’t Got Shoes...,” she champions SRTOL and contrasts its principles with the resurgence of usage tests on college admissions exams like the SAT:

Usage tests are designed to reward middle class white students and penalize the others...

Usage tests don’t measure the ability to write well, unless our definition of good writing is very superficial indeed; they do measure geography and economic status and ancestry, information we could get very easily by just asking students a few questions. In what neighborhood, in what state did you grow up? What did your parents do for a living? How much money did they make? Usage tests are a measure of whether people grew up wearing shoes or going barefoot, or if, they did have shoes, whether they got them at

Goodwill or at Gimbels, whether they paid \$2.95 or \$29.50. (*All* 4–5)

In correspondence about SRTOL, McPherson resisted arguments about the need to prioritize employers’ preference for standard English: she thought English teachers should be challenging rather than reinforcing standard English ideologies in the workplace (Parks). McPherson also expressed skepticism about claims that mastery of standard English would enable students to

overcome systemic class- and race-based discrimination. In Merrill Sheils' infamous 1975 *Newsweek* article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," McPherson is quoted as observing, "'We tend to exaggerate the need for Standard English... You don't need much standard English skill for most jobs in this country'" (Sheils). While even Sheils concedes that this statement is "[t]rue enough," McPherson was widely vilified for it by organizational opponents of SRTOL.

Indeed, McPherson experienced significant negative blowback, both public and professional, in the aftermath of the 1974 SRTOL vote. Lloyd-Jones recalls that "[s]ome of the four-year college program directors grumbled about being coerced by two-year college people, by radicals" (*Writing* 9). McPherson stood by the resolution. As Friedrich writes in her obituary,

[T]hose who served with her know that, in fact, she was a major intellectual, ethical, and emotional force behind th[e SRTOL] statement. Then, when it became a target from various corners of ignorance inside and outside the profession, she became its most prominent and busiest explicator. She seemed everywhere: conferences, *Newsweek*, service clubs, patiently educating those who needed it, offering strength and support to the rest. When Liz explained it, the statement seemed less a threat, more just a matter of common sense. (105)

While I am inclined to attribute at least some of this reduced "threat" perception to McPherson's whiteness, in intersection, perhaps, with her gender and age, it seems clear that she was willing to put those privileges to work to advance SRTOL through the "manufactured crisis" of the back-to-basics movement (McPherson, *Manufactured*; "Then"; "Remembering"). For a decade and a half after the resolution's passage, she wrote and spoke across a range of publications and professional organizations about the relationships between language diversity, literacy education, and racial and socioeconomic inequality (e.g., Friedrich and McPherson, "English"; McPherson

et al.; Cowan and McPherson; McPherson, *All; Manufactured*; “Then”; “Language Arts”; “Language: Unites”).

By the latter half of the 1970s, however, SRTOL advocates were fighting against a conservative tide. In 1976, McPherson was appointed alongside fellow SRTOL committee members Smitherman and Lloyd-Jones to the Selection and Editorial Committee for Activities Supporting Students’ Right to Their Own Language, which was charged with “assembling, for publication, practical classroom assignments, activities, lectures, and teaching units that show and tell how to apply the philosophy of the ‘Student’ Right’ resolution to the day-to-day experience of teaching and learning” (Smitherman 27). The committee spent four years compiling and editing submissions from K-12 and postsecondary contexts; issues of CCC include calls for materials that list McPherson as the point of contact. In 1978, Parks reports, McPherson informed the CCCC Executive Committee that the publication “must be abandoned” because Smitherman was ill and not enough quality submissions had been received (184). In Smitherman’s recollection, however, she and McPherson never let the project go. They collected ample quality materials, but in 1980, NCTE informed them that it had “reluctantly decided” not to publish the manuscript (27). As Smitherman observes, the Second Reconstruction was underway, and reactionary forces in education made it difficult for *any* scholars to publish materials implementing the principles of SRTOL (see also Wible). In 1981, CCCC formed a new Committee to Study the Advisability of a Language Statement for the 1980s and 1990s, and neither Smitherman nor McPherson or any other two-year college faculty were invited to serve (Parks). By the onset of the Reagan years, it seems, left-leaning figures who had been at the center of the professional community in the early 1970s—including many two-year college faculty—were being boxed out. After basic writing luminary Lynn Troyka served as CCCC chair

in 1981, it would be almost a decade before another two-year college faculty member was elected to that role (Andelora, “Teacher/Scholar”).

For McPherson, however, advocating for student language rights was a lifelong cause. In the 1980s, she continued to frame the last editions of *Plain English Please* in terms of “the spirit of the beliefs expressed by ‘The Students’ Right to Their Own Language’” (Cowan and McPherson vi). In 1987, a decade after her official retirement and well into her seventies, she joined NCTE’s Language Policy Committee, where she served “despite a lingering and debilitating illness” (Smitherman 17). In her final academic publications, which appeared in 1990, student language rights were still among her major themes (“Where Were We”; “Remembering”). And her institutional work gives lie to “the most consistently reached conclusion among compositionists...that the students’ right to their own language is a theory that rarely, if ever, has materialized in the writing classroom” (Wible 443). In the 1970s, the English department at Forest Park enacted a writing curriculum built on a fundamental respect for students’ right to their own language.

I have already described Forest Park’s decision to cease offering “remedial” and “terminal” courses in favor of a single transfer “Freshman Comp I” course. This move was not simply a case of abolishing developmental education and letting students “sink or swim” in a traditional first-year writing course. According to Friedrich and McPherson, Freshman Comp I at Forest Park replaced a conventional emphasis on academic writing and research with a course much more along the lines McPherson envisions in her “Hats Off” essay. The course’s “main stress,” is “on the nature of language—what it is, how it affects our view of ourselves and the world, how we use it to manipulate people and how we are manipulated by it” (Friedrich and McPherson, “English” 886). It interrogates the notion of linguistic “correctness” and encourages

critical literacies. The learning outcomes include an expectation that students “experience, understand, and internalize” the idea that “language is changing” and that “no one dialect is superior to any other,” as well as “some social, political, and economic implications of language, including such issues as racism and sexism” (“English” 886). These course outcomes emphasize developing writers’ confidence and fluency, their ability to support written claims with evidence, and their experience reading and writing expository prose. Freshman Comp II builds on these principles by inviting students to choose three short themed courses from a wide range of options. Some of these courses focus on specific academic or professional capacities like “writing a term paper,” “nursing notes,” and “legal language”; others on language issues like “sentence manipulation” and “dialect shift”; and still others on social topics like “women’s views,” “contemporary black issues,” “black woman,” “rhetoric of politics,” and “police and society” (“English” 893). The Forest Park curriculum thus represents one of the more noteworthy—and least noted—implementations of SRTOL on record.

In practice, this curriculum seems to have turned the tables on dominant forms of linguistic privilege that have long made writing placement so inequitable. In their discussion of what they call “advanced placement”—that is, testing out of the Freshman Comp I and going directly into Comp II—Friedrich and McPherson write,

Although the district as a whole offers CLEP...we don’t use the composition section at Forest Park because it doesn’t measure what we teach, nor does it tell us whether students can write. In our view, it measures whether people can identify superficial lapses in language etiquette, and we’d rather find out whether our students can recognize those aspects of language as superficialities...[W]e have devised our own test...which, we

hope, finds out whether students have some general understanding of the nature of language. (“English” 903)

This exam consists of one hundred agree/disagree questions that test the degree to which a student subscribes to the myth of one static and linguistically superior Standard English. If students do not score at least a 90%—and “it is not impossible to pass; two or three manage it every semester” (“English” 903)—they are required to enroll in Freshman Comp I. In a remark that generated some debate in the next issue of *College English* (Rakauskas; Friedrich and McPherson, “Response”), Friedrich and McPherson observe,

We’ve had some complaints that the test is biased, that it discriminates against students who have had good traditional training in conventional English classes, but we can live with that complaint, since so many of the nationally standardized tests have been so openly biased for so long against so many of our students. Besides, if students’ notions about language are that conventional, they badly need the course we offer. (“English” 903)

This is, perhaps, the ultimate manifestation of what McPherson means when she talks about two-year college composition courses having *their own integrity*.

Forest Park faculty aimed to extend this integrity throughout the English curriculum. In addition to composition courses, the department offered a robust journalism program that included coursework and applied experience writing for the college newspaper, the *People’s Press*. The applied journalism class also launched a magazine of student writing produced in composition courses called *Do You Know Where We’re Coming From—Writing by Students at Forest Park*. The journalism program facilitated internships in which students worked at local publications like “the St. Louis black magazine ‘Proud,’” as well as media outlets like KMOX-

TV; one alumnus went on to become the editor of the *Mill Creek Valley Intelligencer* and hired Forest Park students as interns (Friedrich and McPherson, “English” 900). Thus, in some very material and hands-on ways, the Forest Park English department sought to foster local public engagement and long-term writing careers for its students.

Forest Park also brought the activities of Kelly’s Racism and Bias Committee home, establishing their own parallel departmental committee that reviewed “every prospective textbook for implicit as well as overt racism” (Friedrich and McPherson, “English” 911).

Friedrich and McPherson present the committee’s guidelines in full:

- a. Blacks must be represented in sufficient, not token numbers and
- b. Black writing must not be relegated only to a segregated section of the book.

In addition, we recommend that Black materials other than textbooks selections be included in those courses which use other materials. For example, a...journalism class which reads newspapers should read papers like the St. Louis Argus [a Black-owned weekly] and the Black Panther newspaper as well as white papers. (“English” 911) ⁴

The department articulated a clear commitment to foregrounding Black writing—including local political writing—across the English curriculum. However, Friedrich and McPherson note that “we have a long way to go, and some of us think that what began well has become mostly a paper commitment” (“English” 911).

This critique is developed through department colleague Hattie Jackson’s “A Personal Response.” Jackson reminds readers that the “promise” colleges made to “admit that the society as it is constituted is a multi-ethnic one” was “acquired by violence or some form of insistence by activist students on various college campuses” (“English” 911–12). At both the national and department level, she argues, resolutions are not self-enforcing. “Establishing a committee is

only one step in implementing the legislation,” she writes. That step must be followed by ongoing evaluation and sustained allocation of resources:

The question that we must ask again and again is: has the passing of that resolution really changed what is actually taught in the classroom?... We need workshops, budgeted money to bring in resource persons, bibliographies, and some system of allowing black teachers who have expertise to share it without overburdening their schedules. (Friedrich and McPherson, “English” 912)

Furthermore, Jackson observes, racial bias is not simply a Black/white issue: “white students might accept the need for understanding black culture more readily if we gave more emphasis to all minority cultures: Chicano, American Indian, Asian-American. But almost none of us have training in these areas, and even less material is available” (Friedrich and McPherson, “English” 912). Observing the “tortoise-like” pace of change at Forest Park in the three years since the Racism and Bias Committee was formed, Jackson asserts that the committee “must be furnished with a structure that will enable members of that committee to carry out the decision made by them”—anything less will reduce the Committee’s efforts to “tokenism” (Friedrich and McPherson, “English” 912). Jackson’s critiques speak powerfully to the limits of statements and resolutions. Implementation requires continuous, critical programmatic reflection—which Friedrich and McPherson, at least, seem to have been willing to engage in publicly—as well as material resources to support the labor of making change.

Dishearteningly, Friedrich and Harris’s twenty-five year follow up suggest that neither the self-reflection nor the material resources for change were sustained at Forest Park. In 1999, the student population at the college was 47% white, 42% Black, 5% Asian, and 2% Hispanic. The department had restored two levels of non-credit developmental writing courses to the

curriculum, and the learning outcomes for first-year composition prioritize transfer students' ability to produce "acceptable college-level expository essays"; a "strong base in technical and business writing" for "career" students; "writing skills" valuable to the "everyday experience" of all students; and "some awareness of the way language functions and affects their lives" (36–37). Friedrich and Harris acknowledge that this last objective "contains the merest kernel" of the critical language-centered curriculum of 1974, with its explicit foregrounding of race, class, gender, and politics. They describe using a locally developed, faculty-evaluated essay exam for placement, but indicate that pressures for consistency with other campuses make it likely they will adopt a "standardized computer-scored placement test" in the near future (37). The authors list African American literature as one of the areas of expertise among department faculty, but there is no mention of the Race and Bias Committee or any analogous body. Apparently, the financial austerity, consolidation of administrator authority, and faculty deprofessionalization of neoliberal education policies gutted the departmental social justice initiatives that McPherson and her colleagues undertook in the 1970s.

Heirs Apparent

Since the Conservative Restoration, two-year college composition faculty have sustained a commitment to educational access, although that commitment has not necessarily been explicitly critical or activist. In the midst of broader demographic and economic change, however, we are witnessing a renewed interest in politicized professional engagement. The calls for teacher-scholar-activism by leaders like Keith Kroll, Andelora ("Teacher/Scholar/Activist"), and Sullivan ("Teacher-Scholar-Activist"; *Economic*) have been taken up through increasingly pointed TYCA position statements (Hassel et al.; Klausman et al.; Calhoon-Dillahunt et al.) and a burst in activist scholarship engaging questions of socioeconomic

inequality, race, and language and literacy instruction in two-year colleges (e.g., Hassel and Giordano; Toth, Calhoun-Dillahunt, et al.; Coleman et al.; Jensen and Toth; Jensen; Johnson; Griffiths; Warnke and Higgins; Klausman; Toth, Nastal-Dema, et al.). Much of this scholarship traces the neoliberal ideological and material constraints that shape the conditions in which we labor. Those constraints were not always present. They were neither uncontested nor inevitable. And history is not over yet.

To help us imagine possible futures, I suggest that we need more historiographical work recovering our “robust activist tradition,” particularly the more radical parts of that tradition that neoliberalism has contributed to effacing. I offer this case study of McPherson as an initial effort to restore memory of a critical two-year college predecessor, one whose published archive is large and relatively accessible. Again, however, McPherson is not the only, or the most radical, figure we should be remembering. As Taiyon Coleman and her colleagues describe in their award-winning article, “The Risky Business of Engaging Racial Equity in Writing Instruction: A Tragedy in Five Acts,” the professional community of two-year college English has been dominated by white faculty in ways that reproduce racial inequalities in our classrooms, departmental structures, and conferences spaces. The profession needs to learn from the work of two-year college faculty of color, including those whose activism has been primarily local or community-based rather than organizational or disciplinary. Kynard reminds us that we should be looking to two-year historically and predominantly Black colleges, as well as Hispanic-serving institutions and tribal colleges, for longstanding legacies of teacher-scholar-activism.

McPherson herself did not always acknowledge the intellectual contributions of such scholar-activists in her written work, a failure that the renewed conversation about teacher-scholar-activism should be careful not to reproduce. That said, there are insights to be gained

from the kind of two-year college faculty professional identity she enacted. McPherson was a scholar, but she did not just write critical articles about the race- and class-based inequalities that pervade two-year college English: she also worked through the professional organizations and her department to try to change those structures. McPherson was an organizational leader, but she did more than just write position statements: she led efforts to put those statements into practice at her institution and attempted to explain them to publics beyond the academy. McPherson was a teacher, but she did not hunker down in her classroom (see Kroll; Griffiths): she worked with departmental colleagues to build critical pedagogical consensus grounded in shared knowledge. Together, they asserted their professional authority to make real—if impermanent—institutional change. And they were not, it seems, complacent: they engaged in ongoing self-critique about the persistent gaps between their ideals and practice. Finally, McPherson sought to extend the impact of her department’s efforts by discussing them in conference presentations and journals. In the process, she helped forge a counterhegemonic discourse that has persisted within the TYCA community and, at least to some extent, the larger discipline of composition.

In a brief email exchange about her work with McPherson, Smitherman recalls, “What I do remember, quite fondly, is that Liz McPherson was on the students’ side; she was a strong voice and advocate for students” (personal communication, 5 May 2018). Perhaps this position is what enabled McPherson to sustain her teacher-scholar-activism on so many levels. By siding with students, she could see a bigger picture connecting their lived and languaged experiences, the politics of their teachers, and the purposes of literacy instruction in the context of open admissions. For McPherson, two-year college composition was never just a matter of preparing students for academic transfer or “career readiness,” and neither the profession nor the discipline

were ends in themselves. Rather, composition was about providing students and their communities with access to locally relevant rhetorical education that fostered critical political engagement and encouraged action for social change. In 1970, McPherson wrote:

If we can get beyond the table manners of writing, where too many junior college composition courses have been spending too much of their time, we may be able not only to raise the standards of our composition classes but the chances of our *community survival*. I'm not much concerned over whether my students can spell fascism, but I'd certainly like them to recognize it when they see it and I think they can do that only if they understand the ways in which we use language to trick ourselves and to let ourselves be tricked. ("Chairman" 31, emphasis mine)

As I contemplate McPherson's words in our current cultural-political moment, when so many white Americans pronounce the sanctity of English but seem unable to recognize fascist discourse when they see it, I wish her pedagogical wisdom had prevailed.

Notes

1 The principles of that 1968 statement were rolled into the 1977 "Guidelines for the Workload of the College English Teacher," produced by the Executive Committee of NCTE's College Section, on which McPherson also served. Framed as an explicit response to "an era of increasing public concern over the writing and reading ability of college students" (874)—i.e., the back-to-basics movement—this statement made the point about faculty professional engagement even more forcefully:

Teachers must have the time to read professional journals, examine new textbooks, practice the craft of writing they are professing and find out what is happening in fields which have a bearing on the teaching and learning of English . . . [U]nless teachers have time to make their own scholarly and professional contributions, students are the losers. (875)

We might read the revised workload statement as an attempt to hold the line on the professional gains of the last decade: to establish a clear link between teacher labor conditions, disciplinary and professional engagement, and student learning as the Conservative Restoration set in.

2 By 1971, McPherson was speaking even more directly about how racialized notions of “community” led two-year colleges to make conflicting promises: “[T]he community that 10 years ago enthusiastically voted a big bond issue for the junior college buildings may be out defeating this year’s operating levy because some people think the college didn’t keep its promises People who saw the college as a kind of law and order device, an end to all that trouble young people make, are probably blaming the college for admitting too many Black students; instead of being grateful, ‘they’ are down there picketing the cafeteria and getting TV coverage for overturning the bookstore shelves. People who thought the junior college did indeed promise a new deal for Black students find that the deal isn’t very new. Black students are admitted, all right, those who can scrape up the tuition, but now the cafeteria is charging them an extra 2¢ for mustard on their hot dogs, the bookstore is refusing their checks, and the college itself is keeping them out of the medical programs because their scores on those middle class, white-oriented entrance tests are too low; the college is flunking them out of transfer classes

because they can't write fluent academic jargon. Black students are in, but they're only halfway in" (*Exploding* 2-3).

3 Cowan and McPherson incorporate these principles into later editions of *Plain English Please*, noting in the 1980 edition, "We have also tried to include all students, women as well as men, in everything we say. We have avoided the sexist use of 'he/his' when we mean people, and we hope, through our example, to encourage students to avoid sexism in language as carefully as they would avoid racism" (vi).

4 Elsewhere, McPherson indicates that this department committee also rejected at least one textbook because "it offered a stereotyped and distorted view of women students" (*Exploding* 10).

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