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# "Weaving all of them together": How Writing Majors Talk about Creative Writing

T J. Geiger
*Texas Tech University*, TJ.Geiger@ttu.edu

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# "Weaving all of them together": How Writing Majors Talk about Creative Writing

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**Abstract:** *The labels "creative" and "creative writing" serve several purposes in the discourses of undergraduate writing majors. In a study of students in two writing major programs, students often exerted significant effort to negotiate among diverse writing experiences and to integrate different understandings of writing. Their efforts mirror scholars' conversations about negotiation and integration at the level of curricula and programs. Writing majors in this study raised issues relevant to the well-established curricular domains of theoretical knowledge, professional expertise, and civic action. They explained their insights using a mix of idiosyncratic, institutional, and disciplinary language that frequently relied on forms of "'not' talk" (Reiff and Bawarshi). One term around which much of their blended-language and 'not' talk centered was "creative." Students used the label "creative" to mean writing fiction and poetry, personal expression, creative nonfiction prose, nonacademic discourse, and flexibility in style and genre. Frequently, these uses were mixed together or slipped casually from one to another. These findings suggest that as students engage with disciplinary purposes for writing in the major, they draw from a range of literacy discourses to negotiate among and to integrate diverse forms of knowledge.*

> I was still really interested in creative writing. I care more about actually being able to take what I learn and being able to produce something rather than just researching things. And so I looked into the writing major. Also, the fact that an internship was expected for students was the biggest deciding factor [in choosing writing as a major]. . . . So, again, it was that issue of being able to take your knowledge and use it to do something.
>
> —*Tyler, senior writing major at Private Research University*

"Creative writing" is a label that circulates within academic debates, professional markets, and popular discourse—carrying with it multiple meanings. In a short piece for *Inside Higher Ed*, Cydney Alexis calls for the abolition of the label "creative writing." She argues that to use the phrase mobilizes a binary with imaginative (creative) literature on one side and all other forms of writing (noncreative) on the other side. To circumscribe creativity as the province of fiction writers and poets, Alexis contends, privileges these forms and devalues other genres. Despite the term's slipperiness and its potential for re-inscribing literacy hierarchies, the academic and cultural ubiquity of the term "creative writing" would suggest that it's not going away anytime soon, making it unlikely that Alexis's provocative call will gain much traction. Indeed, "creative writing"—variously defined—played multifaceted roles among participants in my research into the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of undergraduate writing majors in two independent writ-

ing departments. This term frequently emerged in students' survey responses, interview comments, and writing samples as they articulated the interrelationships among academic discourse, fiction writing, nonfiction prose, and professional writing. For example, in the epigraph above, Tyler, a senior majoring in writing and a research participant, expressed an interest in internships and practical knowledge while also linking that interest with a desire to compose fiction. He connected this interest and this desire through a focus on production. This effort to link diverse writing practices and interests surfaced repeatedly among students in his program and in another independent writing program. Students in these writing major programs often worked toward an integrated understanding of writing expertise.

As writing majors undertook these efforts, they employed a mix of expert, institutional, cultural, and idiosyncratic ways of talking about writing, and they didn't always articulate how or why multiple forms of writing relate, or fail to relate, to each other. Much of the students' blended language made use of discourse akin to what Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi call "'not' talk," discussing one form of writing by describing how it's *not* like other forms of writing. One term around which much of this discursively blended 'not' talk centered was "creative." Often this term meant *fiction and/or poetry*, but other times it was a *synonym for personal expression*, a *foil for academic discourse*, and a *flexibility in terms of style and genre*. Students frequently slipped from one apparent meaning to another. This not talk around the label "creative" reveals that the dynamics of negotiation and integration so often described within writing major scholarship at the levels of curricula and programs also operate at the level of student uptake and experience.

Considering what students mean when they employ the term "creative" in reference to writing is a fruitful exercise for developing pedagogical and curricular insights. Others have made similar observations about student use of "creative" and "not creative" labels. For example, Michael-John DePalma and Kara Poe Alexander find an academic versus creative binary at work in students' discussions of multimodal composing, and Tim Mayers asks creative writing students about the view some of them express: that their responses to highly structured prompts are "not 'creative'" ("Notes" 18). Writing majors' discourse around creativity and writing, as explored in the present article, indicates overlaps with, and disconnects from, views about the writing major common within disciplinary scholarship. In what follows, I first briefly describe my research methods. Further details about methods are discussed in a previous publication: "An Intimate Discipline? Writing Studies, Undergraduate Majors, and Relational Labor." I then examine 1) the dynamics of disciplinary and institutional negotiation and integration that exist within writing major scholarship as it relates to curriculum and 2) elements of the historic relationship of writing studies and creative writing. I then examine widely accepted domains for writing major programs and their courses (i.e., theoretical knowledge, professional expertise, and civic action), noting connections between these areas and creative writing. Then, after discussing the methods of research, I analyze accounts from student research participants to demonstrate how writing majors' own words reveal, at the student level, dynamics of negotiation and integration similar to those described within scholarship about curricula and institutions. I focus on student negotiations and integrations within theoretical, professional, and civic domains by

attending to how they leverage "not" talk in relationship to the diverse literacy activities they often labeled "creative." Rather than viewing the slipperiness of student discourse about creative writing as primarily a problem to be solved, I, like DePalma and Alexander and Mayers, view it as a rich site for pedagogical and curricular inquiry.

## Negotiation and Integration in the Writing Major

Designers of writing major curricula, as well as students within these curricula, find important the negotiation and integration of diverse approaches to writing. Programs frequently perform local and disciplinary negotiations to name their object of study (Langstraat, Palmquist, and Kiefer; Peele). Beyond local negotiation, several scholars actively promote an "integrated" writing major—one that unites rhetorical, literary, professional, and creative concerns. Rodney F. Dick claims the writing major as "a disciplinary 'middle ground' of English studies" (101). Randy Brooks, Peiling Zhao, and Carmella Braniger express a similar view when they witness students form attachments to particular writing identities; they encourage students' integrative efforts to bridge perceived divides between creative and professional writing (41). Student authors in the polyvocal narrative by Bradley et al. endorse this perspective as they learn writing studies disciplinary concepts, write across genres for multiple audiences, read literary texts, compose fiction texts, examine design elements, and study cultural rhetorics for civic purposes. Collie Fulford and Aaron Dial note that they have witnessed faculty across specializations achieve productive curriculum developments for their writing concentration. Other work in the collection *Writing Majors: Eighteen Program Profiles* affirms the ongoing importance of negotiations and integrations at the program-level within English departments or independent units (Giberson, Nugent, and Ostergaard). This work to negotiate and integrate different understandings of writing and writerly identity also appears in the responses of students in the present study. Their invocations of *creative* signal their efforts and the potential difficulties that attend such efforts.

Indeed, while faculty and students in writing major programs may affirm the importance of negotiation and integration, this approach brings with it institutional and disciplinary difficulties, such as departmental marginalization and appeals to divergent traditions. Kelly Lowe and William Macauley found writing major faculty, courses, and students marginalized within a small English department (86-92). Like the challenge Lisa Langstraat, Mike Palmquist, and Kate Kiefer experienced when literature scholars initially objected to the value of writing-intensive internships with "no textual center" for students to master (80), Lowe and Macauley recount how literature faculty devalued writing study (89). Linda Shamoon and Celest Martin report faculty strongly resisting the idea of situating creative nonfiction within a "professional writing" curriculum because a conceptual divide in writing studies casts creative nonfiction as an "a-social, a-political, and a-rhetorical" entity (53).

Tensions described above echo those that have traditionally existed between writing studies and creative writing. Creative writing and writing studies have generally chosen divergent paths: different professional organizations, definitions of writing, and relationships to academic professionalization. Writing studies sought legitimacy through established activities for research-based disciplines. In contrast, Kelly Ritter

names an identity-oriented distinction prevalent among creative writers: they are artists rather than academic professionals ("Professional" 208), a distinction that played into the elevation of creative writing and its producers and into the devaluation of rhetorical conceptions of writing, composition teachers, and writing program administers (*To Know* 161). This distinction historically manifested pedagogically, too, as "lore" more than research informed creative writing instruction (Ritter and Vanderslice).[1] Beyond these differences, writing studies scholars often find creative writing suspect because of textual attitudes they perceive among its practitioners. Doug Hesse recounts a history of writing studies practitioners eschewing creative writing because of ideological critiques of imaginative writing, worries over romanticism, and concerns about style as a belletristic, textual, and apolitical domain (37-40). Hesse observes, "When creative writing and composition studies have little to do with one another, the division truncates not only what we teach and research but how writing gets understood (or misunderstood) by our students, our colleagues, and the spheres beyond" (34). My research with writing majors suggests the need to heed Hesse's warning about different directions becoming distorting divisions. Within these different areas, writing studies and creative writing practitioners have articulated shared domains of interest that overlap with goals writing major programs might pursue.

## The Writing Major and Creative Writing: Theory, Professionalism, and Civics

Scholars have articulated purpose-oriented domains for writing major curricula based on disciplinary expertise. Rebecca Moore Howard argues for a three-pronged approach to writing major curricula: theoretical knowledge, professional writing, and civic efforts ("History"). These categories come from the 2000 edited collection *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum*, one of the first books to argue for a coherent curriculum of advanced writing instruction, rather than to amass an array of diverse approaches to an advanced course. Students in the two programs I studied also named these areas through discussions of their writing purposes and courses. I briefly overview scholarship about the value of these various approaches and also highlight how they intersect with conversations about creative writing.

Writing studies scholars have argued for the value of engaging undergraduates with disciplinary concepts, and other scholars argue for the value of research-oriented treatments of creative writing. Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle argue that such

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1. These distinctions may be changing because of the longstanding calls for the development of "creative writing studies" (Mayers "One"; Harper and Kroll). For example, the emergence of certain publication venues, such as *Journal of Creative Writing Studies* and *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, is a promising sign. However, Tim Mayers observed in 2016 that, despite creative writing studies' status as an academic field, the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the Modern Language Association—major disciplinary conferences with broad constituencies—still did not serve as thoroughly welcoming homes for this field ("Creative").

an approach enables students to produce "genuine, contributive research" that adds knowledge to the field ("What" 174). Laurie Grobman connects the writing major to undergraduate research, contending that the former will fuel the latter (W176). Indeed, writing majors find excitement in working with faculty on projects involving rhetorical analysis and research (Toth, Reber, and Clark). These arguments led me to pay attention to participants implicit and explicit use of theoretical or disciplinary concepts. Even though tensions between "technique" and "theory" have often characterized U.S. creative writing instruction (Myers 168), Mayers argues that creative writing "ought not be conceived as a private preserve" and that scholars can interrogate creative writing's "interrelationships" with "other parts of the English curriculum" ("One" 224). Indeed, students may desire this kind of inter-relational approach (McGaughey, Rentz, and Nastal-Dema). Observing such tensions and interrelationships was a recurrent theme in comments from participants in the present research.

In addition to the place of disciplinary participation and research concerns within undergraduate majors, the role of professionalism in both the writing major and creative writing receives much attention and was mentioned repeatedly by the present study's participants. Widely circulated arguments for the writing major connect it to writing for professional purposes (DelliCarpini; Dick; Franke, Reid, and DiRenzo; Mattingly and Harkin; Murray; Weisser and Grobman). Students in writing majors can themselves see value in linking disciplinary knowledge to professional practices (Sylvia and Michaud). Other scholars express caution regarding a professional writing focus that yields only an auxiliary position for the major, servicing other departments (Moriarty and Giberson 215). As Michelle Smith and Michelle Costello observe about writing majors, undergraduate students themselves are aware of practical/humanistic tensions when considering a major. Among creative writers, tensions can arise—with the frames of "theory" and "professional" opposing the label "creative." Historically, U.S. creative writers in the university actively resisted "'theory'" as an activity undertaken by academic professionals (Mayers, "One" 219). Creative writing has been "a *dissent* from professionalization" (Myers 7). Teaching and composing creative writing are not meant to produce academic commodities. Rather, they should promote a mode of life (Myers 12). However, in *A History of Professional Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, Katherine Adams situates creative writing assignments and courses within the history of advanced composition and professional writing instruction in the US; she documents how creative writing occurred with general advanced composition courses and how more specialized creative writing courses emerged with English departments alongside professional and technical options. Writing majors in the present study raise the interrelatedness of concerns about creativity and concerns about writing as a profession.

Just as with professionalism, strong arguments have been made for the writing major and for creative writing to embrace a civic orientation: "Civic rhetoric . . . has the potential to support vibrant" writing majors (Moriarty and Giberson 215). Writing majors prepare students for undertaking civic action (Jackson 185). The "birthright" of rhetoric students is education for civic engagement (Hauser 52). Similarly, creative writing can "promote more active, engaged citizenship among its students" (Mayers, "One" 224). While some contemporary creative writers assert positively the "'uselessness'" (i.e., the primarily aesthetic rather than rhetorical or political nature) of creative texts (Welch

129), creative writing's mid-century expansion aligned such programs with the belief that cultivating individual voices holds the potential to transform the culture (Cain 231). Students in my study also explore this question of the civic dimensions of creative writing, variously defined. The connection between crafting and using one's voice to transform social conditions and writing that students describe as creative surfaces regularly in study participants' accounts. Numerous recent books have pursued creative writing as a decolonial practice and craft as a rhetorical and cultural practice, with attention to the political implications of decentering the normative identity of the creative writer and *his* mystical craft, in what Ritter calls the "pedagogy of emulation" whereby creative writing students learn through "observation, mimicry, repetition" as opposed to "learn[ing] actively by doing (and reading and theorizing what they see)" ("'How'" 81, 83). Such recent approaches are described in *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Writing Classroom* by Felicia Rose Chavez, *A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing* by David Mura, and *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping* by Matthew Salesses.

As students encounter diverse writing orientations across various domains, they negotiate these differences to develop their own understandings and to draw distinctions among kinds of writing work and identities. This negotiation is not an easy or straightforward process. David Franke explains that writing majors in his program "attached themselves with a passion to certain genres and formed . . . an increasingly restricted writing identity" (119). This phenomenon ranged from creative writers desiring character motivation for a technical writing problem, technical writers uncertain about poetry writing, and students unengaged by new media theory (119-20). Brooks, Zhao, and Braniger note that their students invoked a professional/creative binary that worked as a barrier to, or a step toward, their integration of writing knowledge (41). While I did not initially set out to study these specific dynamics, they repeatedly emerged in the context of writing majors' comments about their experiences.

## Study Sites and Methods of Research

For my IRB-approved research project conducted in 2011-2012, I collected data from two institutions I am calling Private Research University (PRU) and Liberal Arts College (LAC). These private, non-religious institutions are in New York state. Both schools' writing programs were independent of English departments, and they had their own undergraduate majors; these programs appeared on the CCCC's list of writing major programs. PRU had a writing major that mostly aligned with what Deborah Balzhiser and Susan McLeod call the professional/rhetorical model: a focus on rhetorical theory, writing practices, and some attention to creative nonfiction and professional writing. The LAC writing major, in contrast to PRU, included creative writing and offered optional concentrations in creative writing, nonfiction, feature writing, and professional writing.

Table 1: Study Participants

|  | Private Research University | Liberal Arts College |
|---|---|---|
| Total Number of Majors | 75 | 150 |
| Survey Respondents | 42 | 44 |
| Interview Participants | 7 | 6 |
| Participants Submitting One Writing Sample | 1 | 3 |
| Participants Submitting Two Writing Samples | 5 | 1 |

The research design for this study employed mixed methods to investigate writing majors' experiences and discourse. As is the case here, researchers may use mixed-methods research when they express the goal of using one kind of data to enhance or complement the other. In this instance a triangulation mixed-methods design was used, in which different forms of data are examined simultaneously and all forms of data are treated as relatively equal in their value. The data collected were survey responses, interviews, and student work. All data were collected in order that they might be considered together and interpreted in concert. Such an approach provides a way to investigate issues of student experience and discourse that one form of research alone might miss. Combining methods allows for the identification of trends between and across data sets and a means for bringing those trends into focus.

The investigation occurred in two phases. In the first phase I administered a cross-sectional survey. As John Creswell reports, cross-sectional survey research solicits information from participants at one particular moment (357). Writing majors responded to mostly closed-ended questions which also had optional comments fields. Survey development began with informal conversations with teachers and students at PRU. Two PRU faculty then provided written feedback on questions. During a pilot period, a small group of PRU students responded to the survey, providing feedback on the questions and design. Finalized questions asked about students' attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and experiences as writing majors. Phase two included contact with students who volunteered for an interview about their undergraduate experiences and/or to submit a sample of their writing that they felt represented their interests and abilities as a writing major. I read all these materials thematically, identifying patterns and anomalies.

At PRU participants were recruited through a listserv for writing majors, and I also visited three upper-division classes in person and distributed paper copies of the survey. Of those forty-two survey respondents, I conducted interviews with the seven students who were willing to be interviewed. At LAC the survey was distributed through a listserv. Three days after that e-mail went out, forty-four responses came in from stu-

dents in that program. I conducted interviews with six of the seven students who volunteered. Scheduling conflicts prevented an interview with the seventh participant.

My approach to interviewing was informed by semi-structured interviewing techniques and feminist methodological principles as articulated by Andrea Fontana and James H. Frey. Interviews were structured through the use of a guide with set questions asked to all participants in an established order. The goals of the interviews were to learn about students' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences related to life and work as writing majors. I asked about their experiences and motivations across several areas: their schools, their major programs, the classes they took, what they had learned from their writing classes, their reasons for majoring in writing, and meaningful writing experiences.

As I read the data, I saw that students used the term "creative" to cover diverse discursive territory. Potentially suggestive of the negotiation and integration occurring at the curricular and program levels, this ubiquity likewise indicates the kinds of integrations students themselves perform. Study participants sought to be "agents of integration," writers who "*perceive* as well as . . . *convey effectively to others* connections between previously distinct contexts" (Nowacek 38). Their integrative efforts often relied on prior knowledge and identity concerns. In their efforts to integrate writing insights and experiences, students also mobilized what Reiff and Bawarshi label "'not' talk," defining a genre or practice by describing how it's *unlike* another genre or practice. Students also employed 'not' talk in terms of identity (e.g., being a fiction writer, not an editor), institutional location (e.g., being a senior, not a first-year student), and program content (e.g., a writing program is not a journalism program) as well as genres. Specifically, the term "creative" served as a catchall term for much of the language that blended students' interests in, and sources of knowledge about, writing.

Three thematic categories from Howard's introduction to *Coming of Age* ("History") organize my examination of writers' purposes and writing's functions: theoretical, professional, and civic. Even as several more recent efforts to classify writing major programs provide productive categories for analysis (Balzhiser and McLeod; Campbell and Jacobs; DelliCarpini), after multiple readings of the student-generated data, Howard's older analytical framework seemed best suited to the ways students talked about writing purposes and writing occasions. In my approach, I hope to honor both institutional concerns as articulated in writing major curricula and individual concerns as named by students within writing major programs. In so doing, I aim to follow the example of Mark McGurl, who insists that to understand the intimate relationship between institutional schooling in creative writing programs and the production of post-World War II US literary culture "need not entail any avoidance of the pleasures of charisma and eccentricity" (xi). If the study of creative writing has, as McGurl suggests, focused more on the individual than the institution, the study of the writing major has largely seen the reverse. Howard's three-part framework provides a way to keep both individual and institutional concerns in view. Understanding the creative-invoking, individuality-exploring, personal-saturated, and integration-seeking discourse of writing majors within a context shaped by longstanding programmatic arguments and concerns is not to lose track of the students' particularity. It is to explore the intersection of individual,

as well as institutional, negotiation and integration. In what follows, I seek to give primacy to students' voices through significant quotation.

## Interests in Writing Theory

Theoretical concerns about how to understand the nature and function of different kinds of writing surfaced repeatedly in participants' accounts. These accounts echo Howard's argument that advanced students should acquire disciplinary knowledge, including "history, theory, research, and practice," so that they "understand the nature of writing" ("History" xvi-xvii). Students also employed this knowledge to articulate "a reflective sense of themselves as writers" (xv). Many of the theoretical discussions about writing among study participants 1) take up Mayers's charge to consider the interrelations of different kinds of writing in connection with creativity and 2) resemble the interrelational approach enacted by faculty and student in work by Barbara Jayne McGaughey, Aleyna Rentz, and Jessica Nastal-Dema.

Students in the present study viewed theoretical concepts as productive frameworks for invention and as aids for thinking about their writing in their courses as well as other contexts. For example, a junior at LAC, Jennifer, said that there were many "chances to practice [her] writing" in workshop courses, but she highlighted the one required course that wasn't focused only on producing creative writing. She desired more chances to learn about "the theory behind writing." Across both sites, writing majors' efforts to integrate writing theories and practices often centered around a strong interest in genre and qualities they termed "creative."

Frequently, "creative" meant a quality of flexibility in genre and style and it was seen in opposition to academic writing. One student tried to determine how two apparently different kinds of writing—poetic, "playful" creative nonfiction and efficient, "serious" academic discourse—interacted. Gina, a PRU junior, discussed a course on the "lyric essay," which she defined as "sort of a blurring of the lines between standard creative nonfiction and a more poetic form of writing. Really playing with all your resources." She shared and discussed her final reflective essay from that course, demonstrating how she engaged with models that put creative nonfiction and academic discourse into dialogue. Gina's final course essay "was about trying to find this balance between academic writing and more poetic writing." In the essay, Gina wrote, "I plan the structure of an academic essay, whereas I feel the structure of a poem. The lyric essay requires a hybrid of these approaches." She consulted other texts while also reflecting on her own composition, a process that was both cognitive and affective (i.e., "plan" and "feel"). While Gina called this process "play," it involved significant work: ongoing reading, practicing a new form, and blending knowledge of different genres.

Gina provides an example of genre-involved 'not' talk providing scaffolding for literacy integrations. In her essay's conclusion, Gina acknowledges how her piece is not what she intended: "I do not believe I have written a lyric essay. I have incorporated both poetry and academic writing, but each style is distinct…. [This piece] is both an explanation and a demonstration of the issues and ambiguities I am working through in my writing." Her piece is not the creative nonfiction form she intended to write. It draws on poetic and academic discourses, which she views as unlike each other. This reflection

about the perceived difference between creative and academic elements, with its author embracing ambiguity and limitations, suggests a writer not content to settle for simple answers to challenging writing problems. Gina is not self-satisfied or even text-satisfied. Rather, a sense of accomplishment follows work on a writing problem.

Other students similarly saw creative nonfiction and academic writing as existing in tension, if not outright opposition, while they also wondered about the possibilities of these domains sharing common ground. Lisa, a first-year writing major at PRU who reflected on her extracurricular experiences writing fiction and on a first-year creative nonfiction course, sought to escape a felt confinement within a creative/academic binary: "If you could see academic writing and creative writing kind of mesh together, I would love to do that.... But right now they're just polar opposites.... But I think you could try to mesh them together." Academic writing, for Lisa, appeared to be a circumscribed set of rhetorical resources for creating polished texts:

> I've been told by teachers, 'Try it again. Look it over. You never know what you missed.' [The writing major] really has helped me look at my own writing. And that's kind of where the academic and, I think, the creative mesh because when I write my own stories, I find myself looking at them to make sure they're grammatically correct, to see if it's cohesive enough. And I feel like that's academic writing in itself.

In this account, "academic" meant practices and knowledge that enabled her to make her scholarly prose "correct" and that serviced her fiction and creative nonfiction work, a perception supported by how she understood previous teachers' feedback. For Lisa, teachers' invitations apparently fed a conception that wed academic issues with mechanical correctness. However, Lisa also attempted to leverage previous knowledge and experience for her own writing purposes. She employs "creative" to indicate fiction writing, lively nonfiction, and nonacademic prose.

Reflecting on class experiences and instructor feedback, Gloria, a graduating senior double-majoring in writing and English, leveraged 'not' talk to link the *creative* with the *personal*. In so doing, she also raises questions of authorship and the interrelationships between academic, nonfiction, and fiction writing. Given a perceived lack of models for integrating writing experiences from creative nonfiction and literature courses with her understanding of academic discourse, she wrestled with how to make use of her senior-year "discovery" that academic writing may incorporate the personal:

> Gloria: In creative nonfiction, we did a lot of creative stuff.... I thought if you added creative elements to your writing it wasn't—it wasn't academic anymore. And even a lot of our academic papers were creative in a sense.
>
> Researcher: What made them creative?
>
> Gloria: I think if I use "I" in an essay, then it's creative.... I think you have to completely remove yourself from your academic papers a lot of the time.... I had an English [literature] professor freshman year—she went through and crossed out all the parts where I put "I" in a paper.... So I never did it again. When I came to write my thesis, my advisor said, "Oh, you can put your point

of view in the introduction and talk about what you think specifically." And it was so difficult doing that I because I'd never had a chance to do that before.... But I realize when you get higher up—as a freshman you're told not to do that because they're trying to get you to write sophisticated and professional, whatever. *But then as a senior* they'll tell you, "Oh, it's fine. Do it sometimes." I don't know why that is.

For Gloria, the "creative" part of creative nonfiction equaled the "personal," understood initially as *nonacademic*. That creative/personal association stemmed from the license to use first-person pronouns in a senior-level creative nonfiction (writing) course and in her English literature undergraduate thesis, an experience starkly contrasted with her first-year literature (English) course. It might be tempting to cast the English instructor from Gloria's first year of college as a current traditionalist guardian of propriety and culture. Such a characterization might make it possible—even predictable—to celebrate this student's recent embrace of the personal in academic writing. However, the issue for Gloria was not manipulating surface textuality or reveling in the previously impolite insertion of a unique personality into academic discourse. The issue was the sense she had of herself as a writer with greater or lesser degrees of institutional authority to make authorial choices and the role of coursework in developing this sense.

Such an account shows how students' prior coursework can haunt later efforts to understand and practice new forms of writing, influencing their sense of writerly identity. At stake for Gloria was the apprehension of an authorial hierarchy in which she gradually acquired greater authority through her institutional identity "*as a senior*" to make composing choices. As a first-year student, a perceived lack of authority led her to excise first-person pronouns from school writing. First-person pronouns were later explicitly allowed by her thesis advisor and a creative nonfiction instructor as graduation neared. With the recognition of this differential treatment (i.e., how a first-year student is not treated like a senior) came an interest in knowledge about writing and how students are prepared to approach barriers that often deny authorship to first-year students.

In short, Gloria discerned an authorial hierarchy (i.e., seniors have options first-year students do not) and a writing binary (i.e., academic-as-objective and creative-as-personal). This discernment occurred as Gloria learned conflicting visions of literacy from, on the one hand, advanced literary and creative nonfiction study and, on the other hand, introductory literary instruction. Her efforts to reconcile insights about language registers, discourse community membership, and situated authorship support the idea, following Grobman, that students should explicitly learn how authority and authorship function as a spectrum rather than discrete states. Such explicit instruction might support students who keenly feel the differences that attend diverse writing situations, but who may not have a framework for mapping how these experiences work together.

Similar to instructor feedback, graded assessment enabled students to explore the differences they perceived between what they called *academic* and *creative* writing. Two first- year students provided two writing samples: Lisa at PRU and Jane at LAC. Each paired an academic essay with, respectively, an imagined college commencement speech and a short story. While they did not view their shared texts as similar to each other, both of these first-year writing majors linked their academic submissions to the grades

they received—that is, they raised the matter of grades unprompted. Lisa wanted to demonstrate that she "got A's on both" fiction and analytical texts. She went on, though, to explain that academic writing is not where she feels most engaged. Jane said, "For Writing about Fiction, . . . that paper was my last effort to do something about my grade." These students viewed more traditionally academic efforts as performances for teachers rather than as satisfying personal goals. At the same time, Jane and Lisa wanted to represent the range of writing they undertook, indicating an appreciation for diverse writing tasks and situations.

## Professional Interests

Howard argues that advanced writing curricula should equip students "with tools for entering the profession of writing" ("History" xv). Study participants likewise expressed an interest in broadly defined professional concerns related to writing. They communicated an interest in being theoretically astute, working writers. One PRU survey respondent made this comment regarding internships and "'hands on'" learning: "There is a breadth of genres we explore. It's very diverse." For this respondent, a connection existed between engaged learning (often associated with "real world" and practical, if not necessarily professional, situations) and theoretical knowledge about—as well as practice with—genre. Tyler, a senior-level student who spoke directly and frequently about his practical orientation and employment concerns, described a sequence of varied writing assignments in one course, his interest in fiction writing, and how genre awareness benefited his job search. Tyler described how he composed definitions, a narrative, and a researched essay. By working across genres to communicate about a range of subjects, Tyler believed he possessed positive resources in his job search. This sequence, its felt benefits, and his linking both fiction writing through an attention to production all pointed to a kind of integrative *phronesis*—that is, Tyler points toward a concern for theoretically informed action, for practical wisdom that moved across life domains (i.e., school and work). In the first epigraph to my article, Tyler's attentiveness to rhetorical theory (i.e., the simultaneously practical and theoretical consideration of what he called "the mechanics of writing") manifested itself in relationship to internships and fiction writing. Tyler brought into focus the intersection of conceptual knowledge about writing, composing practice, and situated rhetorical action.

Students' own writing identities were often at stake in how writing as a profession included—or didn't include—creative, professional, or academic writing. Even as Tyler expressed a concern about employment in the first epigraph to this piece, he also claimed a desire to write creative work. He connected these interests through a focus on production. Mark provided another manifestation of this concern. A LAC junior, Mark spoke of how access to models and curricular opportunities to practice professional writing may not always confirm an interest. Access and opportunity may, in fact, lead students to disavow an interest (and an attendant identity):

> I've always told people I wanted to be a writer...of fiction.... I wanted to work on my creative writing, rather than journalism, which I'd burned out on high school.... Later, I thought I might work in publishing, but an internship at a

university press and my Editing and Publishing class helped me realize that wasn't for me.

In this account, a student's writing education was filled with professional opportunities, and each encounter confirmed a primary identity as a creative writer. While early foreclosure on various lines of writing work might suggest the kind of overinvestment in specific writerly identities that concerns Franke as well as Brooks, Zhao, and Braniger, a sense of writing investments is surely useful and important for students to discern.

## Civic Dimensions

Students demonstrated a concern for writing as a public or civic enterprise. Writing concerned with public purposes appeared in a few written submissions (e.g., a political speech and a position paper) and in students' survey and interview comments about texts and classes that mattered to them. Again, civic writing is a central purpose Howard named for advanced writing curricula ("History"). As indicated earlier, many scholars have considered the connections among rhetorical education, creative writing, and politics (Adams *A Group*; Mattingly; Welch). Undergraduates themselves also take up civic efforts within the writing major and do so in relationship to creative writing.

One student reported how work at the intersection of rhetorical analysis, creative writing, and civic aims promoted an integration of theoretical concepts, goals for written products, and plans for social action. For example, Laura, a PRU sophomore, took a "civic writing" course where students "analyzed a lot of nonprofit organization documents. It was really interesting to try to figure out how they got their message across." According to Laura, analysis of texts from local organizations cultivated students' critical capacities. They also composed digital and non-digital multimodal materials for particular groups with socially conscious missions: "We did one project where we got into groups and were assigned an organization to work with. My group worked with a wildlife rehabilitation center.... My group, we made a Twitter account for them and a children's book. So we talked a lot about how to get their message across to different audiences." In Laura's description, rhetorical analysis and production mutually informed each other. With an attention to varied digital and creative composing tasks (e.g., creating a social media account and a children's book), Laura highlighted how the course created an opportunity to consider how genre, audience, and purpose interrelate in ways that enable purposeful writing.

Jane, a first-year student at LAC, reported an instance where she undertook creative writing for civic purposes and, in so doing, integrated personal and familial connections, essayistic literacy, and the craft of fiction. A sense of creativity as involved with the personal, as expressed below, may well develop from fiction writing exercises that try to capture sensory experience or from creative nonfiction readings that craft a persona. Family history and personal observation informed a short story Jane discussed during her interview, and her comments demonstrate the power in everyday literacies, in the dynamics of family and friends. Jane chose to carry a copy of that story in her backpack for several days after completing it. During her interview, Jane commented on her sense of the creative as connected to the personal. When asked to elaborate, she retrieved that story and said,

> In high school, I did community service for something called Angel Island Immigration Station.... It's a very big deal from where I'm from. But coming to the east coast, seems nobody has heard of it.... I've done interviews with people who have emigrated here from China. My own grandmother came through Angel Island, apparently the West Coast version of Ellis Island. [In this piece,] I've tried to weave in stories of what I've heard.... And there was something called "paper names." People would basically sell their names...and bring other people's children to the U.S. My auntie had a paper name and for the longest time she couldn't be her real name.... The piece has historical essay-like qualities, and I felt it had poetic sentences in it. So it's weaving all of them together. I'm learning how to work with it.

This account exploring perceived connections between creative writing and the personal may not describe how writing studies scholars typically imagine public and civic writing. It did, however, engage with issues of how material access and discursive forces beyond the individual have historically shaped communities' opportunities and their ways of confronting restrictive conditions. Jane spoke of composing creative—i.e., personally expressive and fictional—work that explores a history of resourcefulness in the face of immigration barriers. Moreover, Jane wrote herself into a national narrative and sought to expand the nation's possibilities. For example, Ellis Island is surely a readily accessible image in U.S. cultural memory, but Jane found that none of her college peers knew about an important aspect of Asian American immigration. She used Ellis Island to contextualize the historical weight, cultural importance, and personal significance of Angel Island. Forging these connections created space for Jane to craft new narratives about Americanness and citizenship. Additionally, paper names, the tactic employed by her forebears to facilitate immigration to the U.S., required a complex system of rhetorical, literate, and material practices. Representing this collective experience, Jane sought to write a fictional piece that brought her family into U.S. cultural memory and that responded to her peers' lack of historical awareness.

Comments from Jane and Laura illustrate some of the ways writing majors think about the relationship between writing labeled creative and civic concerns. For Laura the connection emerged in part through the context of production (that is, a course dedicated to civic writing). For Jane, even though she did not use the words *civic*, *public*, or *political*, her fictional piece and her description of how it came about surely point to how one writing major conceived of creative work as drawing on research, experience, and genre awareness to respond to pressing social needs.

## Conclusion

The widespread emergence of *creative* as a ubiquitous and multi-purpose term across both Private Research University and Liberal Arts College surprised me. Even though I certainly anticipated that students might connect creative writing with fiction writing, especially at LAC, I was surprised by the range of territory the label covered overall. Given that Howard describes the function of composition pedagogy as dialogic with regard to its capacity to mediate between disciplinary expertise and lay values ("The

Dialogic"), perhaps it should be expected that the writing major would create space for student discourse that blends expert, institutional, popular, and idiosyncratic elements. These findings point to a few considerations for future research and teaching.

First, studies of instructor feedback and students' use of that feedback hold a valued place within writing studies, and my findings suggest that future researchers might fruitfully investigate how students in the writing major perceive and use the feedback they receive. While teachers might intend for their comments to serve as an invitation to experience revision as a more robust and holistic endeavor, leading to new choices—choices that might produce a new text, choices that ask the writer to follow an intuition about what's possible—students may or may not perceive this invitation. For example, regardless of what teachers meant, Lisa easily placed her experiences within the broad cultural frame that treats writing instruction as functional skills. Gloria's account suggests the forceful ways genre and feedback affect student work and attitudes, leading students to identify and work with genres in ways that are distinct from the ways disciplinary professionals do. She recounts how previous experiences with feedback may have a chilling effect: "no first-person" and slashes through every I—injunctions and marks from prior coursework that haunt the work of undergraduate writers.

Second, participants' comments point to ways metacognitive reflection, especially in regards to identity, might increase the likelihood of writing majors achieving the literacy integrations they seek. Jane addressed family history and Chinese-US immigration in relationship to fiction writing that had personally important and civic exigencies. Gloria raised issues of institutional and school-based identity in relationship to creative nonfiction and academic writing. For some students, these identity matters manifested in *writing identities*: Mark was a fiction writer and Tyler was a marketable writer who saw opportunities for creativity across writing domains. Participants mobilized 'not' talk to establish writerly identities: Mark was *not* an editor or journalist, Jeremiah was *not* a fiction writer, Gail the creative nonfiction writer was *not* primarily an academic writer. Through class discussion and writing exercises, teachers might aid and enrich this kind of reflection.

Even if they are not always certain how to integrate their insights across forms and inquiries, students—through their comments and texts—insist on a capacious understanding of writing. These understandings affirm Howard's claim that a writing major "asserts presence, not absence, for writing pedagogy" because "instruction in writing responds not to the absence of students' skills but to the presence of expertise" ("History" xxii). And attending to their presence, the *students'* presence, helps teachers and researchers better understand how undergraduates craft points of connection with, and divergence from, the way disciplinary professionals perceive writing and writing programs. The prevalence of *creative* as an important term among writing majors is not a distraction from disciplinary conceptions or an enactment of hierarchies that diminish theoretical, professional, civic, or other forms of writing. Indeed, viewing students' discourse as a positive presence led me to observe the multifaceted ways *creative* was leveraged to negotiate and integrate different experiences with purposes and understandings of writing within writing majors.

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