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# Comment on Jeff Smith's 'Students' Goal, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics'

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## COMMENT & RESPONSE

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### FIVE COMMENTS ON "STUDENTS' GOALS, GATEKEEPING, AND SOME QUESTIONS OF ETHICS"

*I* read Jeff Smith's "Students' Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics" (March 1997) with a deep sense of relief. While the wretched business of assigning letter grades to student writing is my least favorite part of my job, along with Professor Smith I try to "work to make the gatekeeping rational and fair" (319). Smith rightly insists that we should somehow keep our instruction from getting "too far removed" from "students' reasons for being in college" (313). I try not to bemoan students' careerism while assiduously cultivating my own career. Still, I would like to raise some questions that I hope might add to Professor Smith's discussion of our predicament.

True, students are legally adults who are not compelled to come to college, but do so mainly to advance their future careers—a choice we should respect. Still,

we should not exaggerate their freedom and agency in making that choice. Many of the students I encounter come mainly at their parents' insistence or because they just don't know what else to do. They may in fact have other options available, but they've been told for years that they can never be successful unless they first earn a bachelor's degree.

When they arrive at college, students have chosen their goals with very incomplete knowledge of the world, and part of our mission as college teachers may be to open their eyes to possibilities they have never considered because they've never heard of them before. For some of us, one such possibility may be the claim that knowledge is not just, as Smith says, instrumental, but that it is good in itself—the possibility of liberal education. Others may want students to consider, however briefly, the possibility that the social system they are so eager to join may be inherently unjust and oppressive. Students may well decide, after hearing about these possibilities, that they still want to pursue professional and managerial careers. But at least they would be

making a more broadly informed choice than they made when they first enrolled in college. And they are more likely to hear and listen to these possibilities in a writing course than in a course on organic chemistry or civil engineering.

Giving students a taste, however slight, of old-fashioned liberal education or new-fangled political liberation may indeed seem too ambitious for a ten- or fifteen-week term supposedly devoted to improving students' writing—a formidable task under any circumstances. Such enterprises may also seem to put us at odds with the values of the larger community that our students will serve when they leave us. In return for the considerable resources that it devotes to education, the rest of society does have a right to expect us to prepare our students for their lives as professionals and citizens. But, paradoxically, we may best perform that function by questioning and resisting some of the values and assumptions of the powers-that-be. To do so isn't necessarily a betrayal of our students or of those who sign the paychecks we cash. Our "ivory tower" has always been a place apart from the "real world" because it cannot perform its function otherwise. In order to educate doctors and engineers, colleges must remain a place where ideas have a wider range and a freer scope than they can ever have in the results-oriented world of surgery and bridge-building. Isn't this another example of how means do not "*always and immediately enact the ends*"? As Professor Smith says, "Not only can we not always match means to ends, but sometimes we positively *mustn't*" (310).

I, for one, find it difficult simultaneously to keep what I teach within shouting distance of students' goals and to admit to students that, as Professor Smith writes, "We cannot deliver to students their longer-term goals" (316). All of us in higher education should be more candid with students about our inability to deliver what they say they want most: interesting, secure, high-paying careers. Along with the pressure to keep "bums on seats," the very practice of "fair and rational" gatekeeping discourages all of us from admitting that careers are often at the mercy of forces that act neither fairly nor rationally. Professor Smith writes that he is not "working at the university under duress," and that "the gates aren't keeping us *in*" (318, 317). But what about those forced under duress *out* of the gates of the academy?

I'm not talking about students who flunk out or who can't make the grade. I'm not talking about the legitimate need to screen out students who aspire to competitive careers for which they are not suited. At my college, in my own program, in the last few years, thanks to downsizing, several valued faculty colleagues have lost their livelihoods. These are people who hold advanced degrees from elite universities, people with years of college teaching experience, people who had earned the respect of their students and colleagues. Given that experience, which is being repeated at other colleges and universities around the country, how can we tacitly lead our students to believe that a bachelor's degree will provide them with financial security? How can we, by accepting our

roles as gatekeepers, let our students believe that the academy—or this country—is a meritocracy that always rewards native intelligence and hard work?

The potential benefits of a college education are many, but the promise of a “good career” is the least certain of them all. We should be asking ourselves how we can best provide our students with the real, though intangible, benefits of education: critical intelligence and knowledge of themselves and the world they live in. Our students need to know that, unlike “good careers,” those benefits are something that colleges might actually be able to deliver.

David Flanagan  
Ithaca College

*J*eff Smith has done us a service by presenting a clear ethical argument against the various efforts to direct the composition classroom toward pedagogical or political agendas which may not be in the overt interests of students, their future employers, or the university. However, two points he makes need to be limited and contextualized.

The first is his argument that we are “ethically bound by students’ own aims, even if those aims seem uncomfortably close to elite values” (317). This basically cuts the academy and faculty out of the discourse about the ends classes and the university serve, submitting to the current socioeconomic trend to treat universities as exclusively a means to a predetermined (by whom?) end of employability. Moreover, if we respect our students’ interests, students also are obliged to recognize

others as moral agents. Such an ethical principle should underlie all curricula. The composition classroom is no exception. This is what is often at issue in much “liberation” or “political” pedagogy: how can the classroom be a site of discourse where even the marginalized are recognized as people? Students can, of course, say they are not interested in treating people well but only in making money. However, on Kantian terms, we would only be treating students as free, moral agents if we argued with them about their obligations; all other options, such as simply giving them what they want, fail to treat their moral agency with respect.

Smith is right that we are responsible to other stakeholders as well. However, he has oversimplified the stakeholders. Of course, employers have interests in the university, as do taxpayers, communities, social action groups, parents, and certain social institutions. These groups have many different and often conflicting interests, which can even include critical, ethical, thoughtful graduates. One could further argue that all these stakeholders have a profound interest in social institutions such as our democracy and the correlated public discourse. It is fair to ask then what kind of discourse and critical awareness are essential to such institutions, and what responsibility the composition classroom has in helping students meet the challenges of such discourse.

Nor should we oversimplify the interests of students themselves. Obviously, given current ideology about education, students are going to indicate careers as their first interest, but that does not mean they don’t also have an interest in self-

fulfillment, happiness, or understanding—and even in being responsible, free human beings. If they are to be respected as moral agents, then, even if they don't overtly express that goal, they need to be understood as interested in inquiry into their ethical obligations and their relationship with others, including issues of diversity. Further, if ethical obligations and critical ideals are to have any weight, then surely we could be said to have an obligation to raise such questions with our students, even if our students are initially resistant. There should be no surprise for students here since general education programs usually proclaim broader goals that the institution has concluded are essential for good citizens and educated graduates. This is part of the contract students enter into in investing in a college education.

Further, universities and their faculty must have a say in the goals of education. The university must be recognized as a site for discourse that is crucial to democracy, where questions of values, societal goals, social injustice can be raised and critically considered. Universities, like the press, have long been both loathed and respected as incubators of ideas that may be critical of the status quo but that are essential to the well-being of a society that remains open only as long as critical discourse is sustained. While faculty are obliged to respect certain parameters of the institution's agenda, that surely does not mean they also cannot be critical or even prompt students to ask questions of the established institutions. After all, the heart of higher education is critical reflection.

The second point I wish to raise has to do with "gatekeeping." Smith wants us to assume the role of more just gatekeepers, without any real questions about how that gatekeeping may perpetuate deeply entrenched social injustices. Some gatekeeping is inevitable and, I would agree, a responsibility of the institution. However, we have another obligation—to make the university inclusive and supportive. The university has increasingly become the dominant avenue for employment for many students. Further, we must recognize the terrible inequalities of schools and backgrounds affecting far too many students. If the university has an obligation as a place of opportunity for students who would otherwise be marginalized, then surely we have a responsibility to recognize the needs, anxieties, and deficiencies of our students and build curriculum and support services that facilitate their opportunity to achieve. The problem with the gatekeeping language is that it is indeed too readily employed to justify barriers such as the premature introduction of an academic discourse that may be unfamiliar to many students. When gatekeeping functions to reinforce already intolerable social inequalities, it must be suspect. Instead, we need to find a way to be accessible while meeting the needs of our many stakeholders for a quality education.

Jeff Smith has raised some important ethical questions. However, I suspect the ethical argument actually supports the struggle for a composition classroom that attempts to provide access to students, including the traditionally marginalized. This is a classroom where,

because we are in a university and because we all are ethical beings, questions of social justice and diversity, and critical questions about why and how we think as we do, are vital parts of our curriculum.

Robert von der Osten  
Ferris State University

Composition's effort to divorce itself from students' goals, even, or perhaps especially, when those goals involve a market-driven professionalizing, is ultimately disastrous for students' and writing teachers' agendas alike. I read Jeff Smith's argument on this issue with a strongly mixed response, which is to say I find it a provocative and useful spur to further work on the question. And while Smith turns his lance on composition instruction, the case perhaps holds for literature teaching as well.

Smith's emphases on respecting students' goals for their educations and on understanding our role as one of pre-professional training both seem crucial to me. They're key because, as Smith insists, we are ethically obligated to recognize students as subjects, not merely as the objects of our desires to transform the world. Approaching them solely as the objects of our—professionalized—desires not only violates the ethics most composition and literary theory articulates but also disables the goal of social transformation. First, it frequently prompts students to treat our courses as peripheral to their goals of developing professional selves, precisely because we've rejected those goals. Second, it destroys the space for substantive

intellectual-practical negotiation between teacher and student in favor of an inherently authoritarian relation in which the teacher mandates which goals and self-understandings are eligible pursuits.

I'm convinced that it is essential to conceive of our teaching as pre-professional training, particularly given the current humanities-slashing climate: we need to articulate just what it is we imagine a liberal, humanist, or posthumanist education doing for college students who understand themselves, and who are understood by parents, legislatures, and university administrators, as professionals-in-training. How we understand "professionalism" will shape our vision of what a (post-)humanities education affords its students.

For these purposes, I see the crux of Smith's piece as his argument that students, seeing college as a means to an end, "may or may not want to write the essay by Thursday, but they want something else toward which the essay is one small step: to be a doctor, lawyer, engineer, journalist; to save lives, fight for justice, build things people need, help citizens be informed" (316). He goes on to say that we (writing teachers, but one could of course insert literature teachers) can't teach the professional skills essential to these goals. True.

But Smith oversimplifies here. Professional life and ethics involve issues much broader than those treated in the skills courses to which he refers (such as organic chemistry). And the last phrase in the sentence quoted above—"to save lives, fight for justice, build things people need, help citizens be informed"—points

up this breadth. None of those activities can be readily defined; the questions of what constitute them and how to go about them are big, slippery questions—questions that humanities courses, conceived as pre-professional training, might effectively help students, as budding professionals, to address. In other words, as literature and writing teachers we can teach students practices that would inflect how, why, and in what terms they pursue those goals.

And here the question of instructional means reasserts itself in terms of what practices we ask students to take up. While I'm all for "being demanding or confrontational . . . setting standards and pointing out when they're not met" when that seems most effective, these practices don't seem to me incompatible with the "nurturing" pedagogy that Smith satirizes (311). The problem is that he tries to divorce learning subject matter from the affective, from the emotional-intellectual investments that ground our and our students' desires to professionalize, which I think is a fundamental misunderstanding of how people learn. Smith develops an extended example of such ostensibly non-affective learning, naming organic chemistry as a course in which students learn subject matter without the aid of such a nurturing pedagogy. He cites the US's supply of "capable organic chemists" as evidence of the success of this, by implication, hardball instruction (308–9). What he doesn't mention is the status and function of organic chem. At my university at least, the course is a notorious weed-out mechanism designed to eliminate all but the top

applicants for the pre-med major. My observation is that students in the course learn organic chemistry despite their instruction, not because of it, and this marks only the beginning of the fraternity-style hazing that intensifies throughout medical school to culminate in the abusive hours and working conditions faced by medical residents. Pursued more fully, Smith's example of "successful" pre-professional training is an encapsulated instance not only of the ethical issues current professional track courses don't engage but, illustrating US society's exclusion of all but the few from desired positions of professionalized socioeconomic privilege, of precisely the questions of social transformation raised by the compositionists whose pedagogy Smith gently mocks. Despite his lack of recognition, it is, in fact, a site that cries out for what he calls "the harder struggle of changing the whole curriculum, perhaps even the whole structure of professional preparation and selection" (316). Students' commitment to professional training, then, is indeed the core issue for us as teachers, both because of our ethical obligations *and* because of our desires for social transformation.

While our students are not objects at our disposal, neither are we objects at theirs, despite Smith's claims for our strictly instrumental role as professionals. We are both professionals and people. Like all professionals and people, we must negotiate our relations with others in terms that are inevitably both subjective and objective, which means that we must negotiate students' goals and our own, despite and through

the power relations that determine our interactions. So while I agree with Smith that reconceiving our teaching as pre-professional training would certainly lead us to emphasize subject matter as well as instructional process and to interweave the two, I think it also brings us squarely back to the questions he wants to dismiss.

Which is why I find absolutely crucial Smith's insistence that we need to take up the project of articulating—in all senses—our instructional work with that of the rest of the curriculum and its shaping of students' (pre-)professional lives. Although it doesn't explicitly address issues of professional training, Phyllis van Slyck's "Repositioning Ourselves in the Contact Zone" (February 1997) describes efforts at LaGuardia Community College to integrate key elements of their humanities core requirements into coherent units. Those descriptions are suggestive of the kind of curricular work writing and literature instructors must begin to undertake, the work of articulating our pedagogical agenda with broader undergraduate education, in order to envision our instructional role in students' pre-professional training.

As we see almost daily, our profession in particular and the university in general are experiencing an agonizing reconstruction that is perhaps only in its early stages. Given this circumstance, we need to undertake such curricular work not only to fulfill our ethical obligations to students and to pursue our own desires for social transformation but to prevent a vocational conception of professional training from engulfing the university

while humanities education slips through fingers rendered nerveless by our having, in Smith's words, "turned inward."

Gwen Gorzelsky  
University of Pittsburgh

**I** came to Jeff Smith's article, "Students' Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics" after having read Jane Maher's recent biography of Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work* (NCTE, 1997), and revisiting some of Shaughnessy's landmark essays on basic writing. I had been moved by the heroic story of a writing teacher who dared to imagine that City College could bestow a future on students "who were taught to fail" (Maher 249). As a teacher at a public, open admissions college myself, I am persuaded that college can bring about the transformation of a life. For these reasons, Jeff Smith's point that we ought to acknowledge once and for all that college does perform a gatekeeping role and that, whether we like it or not, as teachers we are significant players in that process struck a raw nerve with me.

Smith argues that the "Standard Model" of writing instruction these days establishes a "means-end equivalence," that is, puts so much stock in the process—and in a particularly nurturing process—that nothing else seems to matter (310). We are so concerned with "empowering" students that we lose sight of the practical reality that, yes, some will fail in college. Who could argue with the rather obvious points that Smith makes? No teacher that I



know would suggest that the product matters less than the process.

But Smith's agenda has little to do with affirming the commonsense notion that product does matter, the view that our students must leave our classes with the capability to move on through the curriculum and then to a productive life. What he is really promoting is the perception that our discipline has gone soft, that in the name of nurturing students it has forgotten that it is, in fact, a "discipline"—within a system whose very purpose, he feels, is to select the capable from the rest. What he is really articulating is a view of higher education that identifies and trains an educable elite.

The nurturing that Smith sees as evidence of softness in composition I take to be the field's utter humanity, a quality that other segments of English Studies might do well to emulate. What has always struck me about the field of composition—I speak as a PhD trained in literary studies who crossed the line to composition many years ago—was its inclusiveness. Whether at its conventions or in its journals, composition has always, in my view, welcomed a variety of voices. It has given a place at the table even to those who lack the famous name or the important affiliation. Indeed, in our papers and in our research we draw heavily upon, and acknowledge the importance of, student writing. I realize that the "story" of Mina Shaughnessy's work during the Open Admissions experiment at City College is not the simple narrative of good overcoming evil it is sometimes construed to be, nor do I want to deify a teacher whose work relied upon so many

diligent and committed professionals, but it seems to me that Shaughnessy showed us the human face of composition and continues to do so now. Could any of us imagine that Shaughnessy would let go without passionate and thoughtful critique this view of Smith's?

I see what I do as contained within, and constrained by, the university's overall curriculum. While I disagree with many things about that curriculum, I don't think it's fair to students to whipsaw them between the curriculum's values and my own. I want my efforts to converge, in the end, with the university's. (318)

I think not. In fact, the "grand experiment" that was open admissions evolved in large part because the curriculum's values simply weren't compatible with the values of a democratic society.

As a two-year college teacher, I believe that higher education has a truly comprehensive and democratizing mission. Because I teach at an open admissions institution, an institution that daily seems to provide hope for those students who have found so little of it in the past, I found Professor Smith's piece cynical in the extreme. Composition welcomes you to say your piece, Professor Smith. But my allegiance, and my heart, go with the woman who fought splendidly to insure that higher education serve us all.

Howard Tinberg  
Bristol Community College

*I* write this Comment on Jeff Smith's recent article, "Students' Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics,"

because I agree with his central point—we do have deficient ways of coping with our roles as gatekeepers and our pedagogies reflect our limited understanding of gatekeeping. I understand that Smith's goal in this article is to explore problematic assumptions about gatekeeping to reveal “our posture toward students and our ethical obligations to them” (300). But I've grown weary of scholarship that harps on problems without offering very real, everyday, detailed suggestions for addressing these issues. I'm hoping that my letter will prompt Smith to discuss more specifically a theory of gatekeeping and a teaching method that would grow out of such a theory.

With Smith, I believe that “gatekeeping has become something most of those in our field either don't discuss or mention” (299), and I applaud his attempt to highlight this point. Although he may not be aware of research sociolinguists have done on gatekeeping, I wonder how he might reconcile our roles as gatekeepers with this research. Sociolinguists have worked for years to pinpoint the nuances of language patterns and other contextualization cues present in gatekeeping encounters in such institutional borderlands as the job interview (Gumperz 1982; Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992); the courtroom (Philips 1997; Gumperz 1982); and the university (Erickson and Shultz 1983). In fact, most credit Erickson and Shultz's 1983 *The Counselor as Gatekeeper* with first coining the term “gatekeeping” to describe the interviews that young adults had with academic admission counselors.

Erickson and Shultz find that the counselor in the “gatekeeping interview is supposed to be entirely universalistic in his/her higher gatekeeping judgments, yet s/he cannot be, given the practical circumstances of face-to-face interactions by which the gatekeeping decisions must be made and communicated” (40). Thus, the gatekeeper plays both the roles of “judge” and “advocate” simultaneously (40). If we agree that gatekeepers are, at the very least, both judges and advocates, then we've collapsed the dichotomy Smith assumes. He characterizes our roles as *either* the judge who uses the “Standard Model” (307), where “gatekeeping [is] all about imposing requirements” (300), *or* the advocate who uses the “motherheart” model where the aim is for “inclusivity, nurturance, [and] student-centeredness” (307–8). I hoped Smith was going to complicate our roles as gatekeepers, but instead he constructs an artificial dichotomy that moves us no closer to understanding how we might reconstruct these roles. I hope Smith will speculate some on what gatekeeping functions are possible beyond his dichotomy, beyond even Erickson and Shultz's definition.

I think that retooling our gatekeeping roles is crucial precisely for the two reasons Smith points to: (1) we cannot shirk, ignore, or opt out of these roles because we're implicated every time we cash our paychecks; and (2) students will in all likelihood be in gatekeeping professions when they graduate because “students seek not to resist but to *join* an elite” (304). If we had a nuanced theory of our roles as gatekeepers, we might just be in a

position to teach students to be better gatekeepers themselves. Granted, “our means are open to, indeed demand, ethical scrutiny independently of the ends, from which they cannot be *too* different” (309). So what gatekeeping theory and pedagogy might we derive from all this ethical scrutiny? What means for gatekeeping might we aspire to, and what ends come from this theory that can help us teach students as future gatekeepers?

Ellen Cushman

University of California at Berkeley

#### JEFF SMITH RESPONDS

**I** am very pleased to have encouraged such an illuminating discussion. Inasmuch as my aim was not to solve these problems myself but to put them on our agenda, and to steer us away from some rote and simplistic ways of (not) dealing with them, the comments above suggest that the goal has already been partly achieved.

David Flanagan rightly decries the abuse we have all seen visited upon our programs, colleagues, and in some cases ourselves as a result of the appalling market conditions and skewed administrative priorities of recent years. He is also right to note that many students are not settled in their life plans, and that a legitimate part of college’s role is to alert them to possible social critiques that they may not otherwise have heard about (including, I would add, right-conservative as well as left-liberal critiques). I myself value those aspects of my own liberal and very un-

vocational college years; they helped make college a vivid and life-shaping experience, and I have no wish to deny my own students those kinds of enlarging visions.

But in my judgment, compositionists these days are not nearly as likely to lose sight of all this as they are to overlook something else: the legitimacy of students’ professional goals and of society’s need for high skills in some fields. I wish everyone were as clear as David Flanagan about the need to keep different values in balance. But I fear that many of us aren’t, and I wrote to correct what I see as a serious skewing of our collective attention toward higher education’s “liberalizing” functions at the cost of its “professionalizing” ones.

I can’t really argue with Robert von der Osten either. Again, it’s a matter of emphasis: I happen to think the values he articulates—including his well-taken emphasis on “moral agency”—are already better represented in our profession’s discourse. As a teacher myself, I certainly have no interest in denying faculty a voice in society’s ongoing deliberations about the role of universities, and as a onetime journalist I appreciate von der Osten’s comparison of that role with the role of the press. That said, I do think that if we really care about the marginalized we will leave campus and go find them, not simply assume that the small slice that self-selects into college (or is selected by the admissions office) represents them in any comprehensive way. And I hope I made clear that the gatekeeping I spoke of is meant to be rational and fair, not simply a “language” used to