Can the Common Core Argument Standards Close the High School-College Gap?

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THESIS

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PREFACE

In this dissertation, I will support an initiative often scorned by scholars, commentators, and educators: common national content standards. I go on to argue that common content standards figure to solve one of the major problems in American education today, which I describe in Chapter One of this dissertation as the high school – college disjuncture. Incoming college freshmen experience this disjuncture when they feel unprepared for and overwhelmed by the rigors of academic life because their high schools have not prepared them well for post-secondary education. Put another way, what students are taught in high school often has no connection to what colleges want.

Partly in response to this disconnect, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are now being implemented in many American public secondary and primary schools. In my view, the CCSS represent an advance over past standards, and other educators such as Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth and Christopher Lehman agree when they praise the CCSS for emphasizing “much higher-level comprehension skills than previous standards.” (Calkins et al., 2012, p.9) One reason for this much deserved praise of the Common Core is that the standards focus on skills of argument, and argument, according to several scholars quoted in the CCSS, is an essential skill for college success. Appendix A, for example, cites Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnery, who eloquently assert “the unique importance of argument in college and careers.” (CCSS, 2010, p.24).

Yet despite the importance of argument in the culture of the university, the professions and citizenship, skills in argument literacy have failed to be sufficiently emphasized in the K-12 curriculum, and this failure has contributed greatly to the (iii)
disconnect in skills and expectations when high school seniors get to college. In Chapter One, then, I will describe this high school – college gap, as well as the promising solution that the Common Core argument standards offer by encouraging the teaching of argumentation skills all the way down to the early grades. In Chapter Two, I will further describe the virtues of the Common Core argument standards and also show why some of the common objections made to such argument standards are not compelling.

Nevertheless, as I will go on to argue in Chapter Three, argument standards like those of CCSS are not enough to heal the high school – college disjuncture unless they are made more content-specific than they are at present. To be sure, the CCSS do go some way toward identifying the ideal content of the curriculum, drawing praise for doing so from commentators such as E.D. Hirsch, Jr. While acknowledging this point, I go on to argue that the CCSS leave so much discretion to schools, districts and teachers about the specifics of what they should teach that they fail to provide adequate guidance. In Chapters Three and Four, then, I will point out these liabilities of the CCSS.

Though I concede that the CCSS offer descriptions of illustrative content, I argue that in predominantly emphasizing skills such as argument, the CCSS represent the latest in the pendulum shifts between content and skills that have often been repeated throughout our country’s history and help explain its record of educational futility. Too much emphasis on skills fuels “back-to-basics” reactions in which educators stress the memorization of facts, which in turn promotes a counter reaction in which the proponents of those basics are characterized as Gradgrindians who leave no room for creativity. (iv)
Dan Willingham has eloquently described this frustrating alternation between skill and content:

Clarion calls for more attention to 21st-century skills brings to mind a familiar pattern in the history of education: pendulum swings between an emphasis on process (analysis, critical thinking, cooperative learning) which fosters concern that students lack knowledge and generates a back-to-basics movement that emphasizes content, which fosters concern that students are merely parroting facts with no idea of how to use their knowledge, and so on. In calmer moments, everyone agrees that students must have both content knowledge and practice in using it, but one or the other tends to get lost as the emphasis sweeps to the other extreme. (Bauerlein, 2009, p.1)

Such pendulum swings between skills and content began during the first half of the twentieth century, and ever since educators have swung back and forth from one extreme to the other. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of the 1950’s, for example, placed heavy emphasis on content in math and science, to be followed years later by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which focused on basic knowledge in reading and math. Yet despite the good intentions of the architects of these educational movements, American public schools have still not created a clear curricular framework that balances critical thinking skills with appropriate content. Instead, the result has been, in the words of Herbert Kliebard, author of The Struggle For The American Curriculum 1893-1958, “a messy compromise” that ends up leaving all parties unsatisfied. (Kliebard, 1987, p. 269(v)}
My own view is that this unsatisfactory compromise can only be resolved if the American educational pendulum lands in the middle - somewhere between a content-specific set of materials that should be learned and an almost exclusively outcome-based list of skills. And whereas some will object that the CCSS do, in fact, highlight particular subjects and recommended texts, I will argue that these standards do not go far enough in specifying what all students should know in order to be prepared for college and beyond.
SUMMARY

CAN THE COMMON CORE ARGUMENT STANDARDS CLOSE THE HIGH SCHOOL-COLLEGE GAP?

Introduction

This dissertation takes as its point of departure the longstanding gap that exists between American high school and college education. It is increasingly well-documented by researchers that the transition from high school to college is profoundly confusing for many American students. The most comprehensive attempt to date to analyze the causes of this confusion is represented by the 2003 Stanford Bridge Project entitled “Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Post-Secondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations” Many students fail to survive the rigors of college, according to the authors of the report, because college expectations have almost never been aligned with those of the K-12 schools. As the study states, “the current fractured system sends students, their parents, and K-12 educators conflicting and vague messages about what students need to know and be able to do to enter and succeed in college.”

After examining what the report calls “The High School – College Disconnect,” this dissertation will look closely at one prominent current strategy for overcoming it, which is represented by the new Common Core State Standards and particularly by the central emphasis they place on argument and “argument literacy.” In assessing this strategy, I will look at the arguments of some of its critics and will develop my own conclusions about its strengths and liabilities: while the Common Core argument
SUMMARY (continued)

standards succeed in promoting critical thinking skills essential for college, their lack of a clearly articulated body of content leaves teachers wondering not only what to teach, but when it should be taught.

Chapter One: The High School – College Gap

The Bridge Project maintains that the high school – university disjuncture is caused by a lack of clear, logically-sequenced K-16 learning objectives. As the report states, the problem is that “students graduate from high school under one set of standards, and three months later, are required to meet a whole new set of standards in college” (p.2). Freshman students in college soon realize that having met high school standards does not necessarily prepare them for higher education, and they quickly become frustrated when confronted by the large gap that exists between their K-12 schools and universities. The authors of the Bridge Project argue that high schools and colleges must work together to align the standards of both institutions, for only their doing so will reduce the mixed messages that students receive when they transition from high school to college.

The high school – college disconnect that results from unclear expectations is not a new concept to writers on education. In Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose writes about Bobby, the high school star of his history class. Bobby’s success was largely due to the fact that his teachers had expected him mostly to memorize dates and facts without delving into more intellectually challenging activities. As a result, Bobby felt lost during
SUMMARY (continued)

his first year in college, given that a professor expects his students to analyze and debate issues rather than merely regurgitate facts. Through the story of Bobby, Rose illustrates an important characteristic of the high school – college gap, namely that secondary school students are often required only to accumulate and memorize information, whereas college students are expected to analyze it, interpret it, and make arguments about it.

Chapter 2: The Case for Argument

A solution to the problem of the high school – college gap is found in the Common Core State Standards. The authors of the CCSS maintain that K-12 students need certain skills in order to be prepared for higher education and beyond, a very prominent one being argument. Several educators, moreover, have applauded the well-structured CCSS argument-based standards. For example, In Pathways to the Common Core by Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth and Christopher Lehman, the authors praise the standards for the logical and sequential way in which skills in argument build upon each other from one grade to the next, with the ultimate goal of preparing students for higher-level work. One reason that K-12 students should develop argument skills before entering college is that, in the words of scholars such as Mike Schmoker and Gerald Graff, the university is predominantly “an argument culture” – a phrase, by the way, that is quoted in Appendix A of the CCSS. This means that, much like Mike Rose’s Bobby, college students are expected to be able to support their own claims and challenge others instead of merely regurgitating facts. It is my claim, then, that argument is a skill that
must be emphasized at the high school level, so that unlike Bobby, students will not feel lost when they are asked to think critically in college.

Chapter Three: Just How Effective Are the CCSS Argument Standards?

This chapter describes my own critique of the content-free nature of the CCSS argument standards. As I have argued, these standards are valuable, yet I would also claim that their failure to include more clearly-specified content is likely to impair their chances of being applied effectively. Dr. Sandra Stotsky, a professor of education who served on the Common Core Validation Committee, refused to sign off on the LEA standards, stating that they promote an “empty skill set,” and that because of their lack of relevant cultural material, the CCSS fail to provide a “clear guide on curriculum content to teachers.” In other words, simply prescribing argumentation skills without stating what subjects are most worthwhile for students to argue about leaves educators and students confused.

The writers of the CCSS might retort to these critics that the standards do, in fact, highlight the importance of content. First, they would point out that the standards are accompanied by lists of recommended texts. Second, they might refer to the Common Core Reading anchor standard 2, which requires that students be able to determine the “central ideas” of the texts they read and analyze “their development.” But even though the skill described in Standard 2 is crucial, the standard’s failure to specify the text’s literary or historical relevance might leave teachers confused regarding text selection.
SUMMARY (continued)

Third, Appendix A of the standards does cover content in specifying that students should learn to make “sound arguments about substantive issues.”

The problem in my view, however, is that such references to content are likely to be too vague to help incoming freshman with professors who expect their students to have studied a certain body of material before they have entered college. As for the recommended reading lists, Stotsky seems right when she objects that specifying lists of culturally-worthwhile texts in sidebars and appendices without including these works – or ones like them - in the actual standards, seems implicitly to concede that its content-free standards will only be effective if they are accompanied by certain types of texts, leaving one to wonder why such content was omitted from the standards in the first place. The absence of content specifications in the standards, then, figures only to deepen K-12 students’ confusion about what colleges will want rather than help overcome it.

Chapter 4: If Other Countries Have National Content Standards Why Can’t We?

In this chapter, I praise other countries, such as Cuba, Finland and France, for implementing national content standards, and I argue that the USA should do the same. I then conclude with a personal anecdote about teaching *The Little Prince*, wherein I highlight the central role that common content plays in strengthening students’ arguments.
Chapter One: The High School – College Gap

Introduction

This dissertation takes as its point of departure the longstanding gap that exists between American high school and college education. It is increasingly well-documented by researchers that the transition from high school to college is profoundly confusing for many American students. The most comprehensive attempt to date to document this confusion and analyze its causes is the 2003 Stanford Bridge Project Report entitled *Betraying the College Dream: How Disconnected K-12 and Post-Secondary Education Systems Undermine Student Aspirations*. According to the authors of the report, many American high school graduates fail to get into college or survive its rigors if they do get there because university expectations have almost never been aligned with those of the K-12 schools. As the study states, “the current fractured system sends students, their parents, and K-12 educators conflicting and vague messages about what students need to know and be able to do to enter and succeed in college.” (Antonio, Kirst & Venezia, 2003, p.2).

More Students in College and More Confusion

Students applying to or entering college are bound to feel an enormous sense of confusion, and this is a growing concern, given that more students are attending college now than ever before. As the report states, over 85 percent of 8th graders hope to continue their studies after high school, and roughly 70 percent of high school graduates attend college within two years of graduating. This is a noteworthy change, given that in
the earlier part of the twentieth century, roughly 7 percent of citizens of the appropriate age group attended college. (Wood, 2012) This jump in post-secondary enrollment may help to explain the gap that currently exists, for America’s university system was not originally created in order to accommodate most of the population. (Antonio et al., 2003)

This K-12 – college gap’s effects on the economically disadvantaged are particularly disturbing and not as widely recognized as one might think. This gap must be closed, since, according to the report, “A greater percentage of low-income students are marginally qualified or unqualified for admission at four-year institutions.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.7) The effects of this K-12 – college disjuncture are also particularly harmful for minority races, and this problem must be addressed, given that “80 percent of African American and Latino students surveyed plan to attend some form of postsecondary education.”(Antonio et al., 2003, p.2)

The fact that many students in the early 1900’s did not attend college might help to explain the evolving K-12 – university schism. University professors, after all, might not have felt the need to pay close attention to high school curricula, given that only 5 percent of students graduated high school at the turn of the century. (Rose, 1989) High schools and colleges, then, have developed into “two separate systems,” and the result has been a “lack of connection between K-12 and higher education.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p. 3) This curricular schism has created a state of educational confusion, in which “high school teachers and college professors often differ in their views of what students should know in order to go on to, much less succeed in, postsecondary education.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.4) The problem, then, is simple: K-12 students are confused upon
entering college because the two education systems vary greatly in their curricula and expectations.

**Disconnects Resulting From Political Pressures**

Elementary and secondary schools have historically had to respond to political pressures that colleges are free to ignore, and as a result, changes in the K-12 curricula are rarely matched by those of the universities. In *Tinkering toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform*, David Tyack and Larry Cuban point to several instances of such politically induced inconsistencies that affected the K-12 curriculum far more than that of the colleges. (Cuban L., Tyack D., 1995). The progressive Eight-year Study from 1933-1941, for example, encouraged innovative ways to prepare high school students for college, but in ways that left the colleges untouched. (Aikin, 1942) Likewise, political conservatives of the 1980’s – especially those in President Ronald Reagan’s Education Department - focused on America’s lackluster K-12 educational system, which in turn, led to the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, a document which focused mainly on the shortcomings of secondary schools without saying much at all about universities.

Thereafter, the standards movement, and more recent legislation including *Goals 2000*, *NCLB* and *Race to the Top*, all focused on K-12 schools while colleges were mostly left alone. Had these reforms affected universities as well, our schools would have at least benefited from stronger curricular alignment between the two institutions, yet by ignoring college curricula, these political initiatives have done nothing to close the K-12 – college disjuncture.
In addressing this gap, the authors of the Bridge Project report smartly suggest that K-16 rather than K-12 reform is what our schools need. (Antonio et al., 2003) Yet even though the cry for smoother transitions from high school to college has recurred periodically, the disjunction between secondary schools and universities remains as confusingly wide as ever, if not more so. This divide between curricula at the high school and college level, described in the following recent statement from a Georgia middle school teacher quoted in the Bridge Project report, is one of the main causes of teacher frustration. As the teacher said, “I would love to sit down and talk with, or get reports from college professors about what they’re expecting in their English programs for different groups of kids...That’s what I’d like to know. When I was teaching eighth grade I was constantly asked what was going on in the high school level. It’s very necessary to me to have that transitional element and to have that communication. And I don’t right now, but I would like that.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.18)

To make things even more confusing for students, curricular gaps exist not only between K-12 and college, but within both institutions. As an Illinois high school teacher who is quoted by the Bridge Project team put it, “In an ideal world? Come and sit down with us when we plan our curriculum, and we’d plan a coherent K through 16 program that would have the outcomes that we want. I think what happens now is we have a K through 6 program that gets chopped off, and then a 7 through 8 program that gets chopped off, and then a 9 through 12 program that gets chopped off; and then a four-year institutional program, that are totally disconnected.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.18) This curricular gap, then, does not only occur between high school and college; rather, it is a deeper systemic problem that results from a lack of communication between teachers at
virtually all levels. The authors of the Bridge Project report seem to me right, therefore, when they argue for K-16 reform which, if implemented effectively, would require educators from all levels to work together in order to create a more logically sequenced curriculum. (Antonio et al., 2003)

The Mixed-Message Curriculum

As stated before, this curricular “gap bridging” must not only occur from high school to college, but within both institutions as well, for when teachers fail to align their course curricula with those of their colleagues, both students and educators feel confused. Gerald Graff makes this point in his discussion of what he calls the “mixed-message curriculum” in Clueless in Academe: How Schooling Obscures the Life of the Mind, and in many other writings, and I draw heavily on Graff’s argument in what follows here. (Graff, 2003, p.250) Graff argues that in order for standards to be truly effective, a critical mass of educators in a given school must promote them. Otherwise, Graff maintains, some teachers will emphasize skills that completely contradict those emphasized by their colleagues. Furthermore, teachers are often so unaware of what goes on in other classrooms that students encounter confusing inconsistencies about the nature of academic work, and thus are left clueless as to how to succeed in school. Going from class to class, students conclude that each teacher has her own expectations that sometimes have nothing to do with those of her colleagues, as when one focuses on argument, while another concentrates on the accumulation of facts. Similarly, some teachers focus on lively, student-centered classroom debate and democratic learning, while others lecture on the assumption that students are not yet ready to offer their own
points of view. The result of these curricular mixed messages is that K-12 and college
students often finish their studies having no clear idea of their school’s curricular
objectives. (Graff, 2003)

Even worse, this confusion often leads students to see education at best as a sort
of academic game, the goal of which is to placate each of their instructors even when
their lessons contradict one another. As Graff puts it, “Students understandably cope
with this cognitive dissonance by giving each of their teachers in turn whatever he or she
seems to want. Students learn to be free-market capitalists in one course and socialists in
the next, universalists in the morning and relativists after lunch.” (Graff, 2009, p.1)

Graff’s point is not that all teachers should be the same, much less teach the same
beliefs, for a diversity of perspectives between teachers is inevitable and even desirable.
And he concedes that mixed messages are not necessarily detrimental as long as they are
acknowledged in the curriculum and openly discussed. Yet he argues, and I agree, that in
order to reduce the general confusion within and between K-12 and post-secondary
institutions, there should be some minimal curricular correlation and clarification of
common ground, for otherwise, students will continue to be victims of curricular mixed
messages, and the high school –college divide will remain.

Heroic Teachers Alone Cannot Heal the K-12 – College Disjuncture

Many would probably object, however, that the main cause of student confusion
is not a lack of course alignment or of correlation between teachers, but rather the poor
quality of instruction that students receive from individual teachers in K-12 institutions.
In fact, many politicians and the businessmen who support them have retorted that
excellent teachers – not K-16 curricular alignment, as the Bridge Project report suggests - are the answer, and that the main cause of the high school – college gap is simply the lack of a sufficient number of exceptional educators. The Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago’s report on the ineffective education system entitled *Left Behind* is an excellent example of a document whose authors imply that superior teachers alone are the solution to the “too few excellent teachers” that the system currently employs. (2003, p.2)

In my view, this overemphasis on individual teaching is a reason why our nation has not undertaken the type of reform needed to close the gap between high school and college. Bill Ayers implicitly agrees when he criticizes the assumption of popular Hollywood films like *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds* and *Dead Poets Society* that the solution to educational problems lies in “that one teacher who triumphs through sheer determination and grit” (Ayers, 2001, p.49) despite a system that fails to meet the needs of its students. To sum up, then, excellent teachers will not be able to close the gap between high school and college unless there is a clearly articulated K-16 curriculum.

As I have been arguing, to overcome the problems posed by the mixed-message curriculum, educators need to create more uniformity and alignment in educational standards within and between K-12 schools and colleges. Deborah Meier, author of *Will Standards Save Public Education?*, seems to agree, given that her Central Park East Secondary School serves as an exemplary model of an institution whose educators are all on the same page regarding the school’s learning objectives. Though Meier has paradoxically been known a leading opponent of standards-based reform, her locally-developed learning objectives instituted at CPESS would be an excellent model for
national standards. Students in Meier’s school, after all, are expected to graduate with certain common skills, such as the ability to provide evidence for claims and write persuasively. (Meier, 2000) Every student, parent and teacher, in turn, is familiar with the expectations at CPESS, and as a result, everybody feels less confused.

The Assessment Gap

As if the “mixed message curriculum” were not confusing enough, there is also a large testing gap within and between high schools and colleges that causes even more bewilderment. The authors of the Bridge report highlight this point below:

… between high school and college, all students, but particularly college-bound students, face a confusing set of exams. In high school, most students take state-mandated assessments, district tests, and exams in their individual courses. Students preparing for college often take a number of other tests. These include… the SAT I, multiple SAT II tests, the ACT, and tests that help students prepare for those tests, such as the PLAN and the PSAT. (Antonio et al., 2003, p. 22)

As this statement vividly suggests, the sheer number of tests is overwhelming, and the lack of correlation between these exams and the college admission tests significantly adds to the confusion. As the report goes on to state, “While many colleges use the same tests for admission (e.g. SAT or ACT), each may have its own placement test (or series of tests), and there is little uniformity among these tests.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.22) The problem here is that in addition to the numerous tests students must take in high school, college entrance exams are not well aligned with the tests given by university professors,
and this disconnect does nothing but add to students’ feelings of bewilderment and frustration.

Making matters even more confusing, there is also a disconnect between college entrance exams like the ACT and SAT and high school curricula. It is this mismatch between the high school exams and the high school curriculum that has forced families that can afford the expense to pay private college-preparatory companies like Kaplan and the Princeton Review to prepare their sons and daughters for these exams. Obviously, it would be preferable to design curriculum so that K-12 courses thoroughly prepare students for their exams and relieve them of having to seek preparation elsewhere. This coherent curriculum design, in turn, would reassure college professors that the result of a national exam such as the ACT reflects what was actually learned during the K-12 years.

But as the Bridge report notes, the lack of alignment between national exams and high school curricula is echoed by the misalignment between high school examinations and the work that will be required in college, a fact that explains why high school students who perform well on tests are often not ready for college-level work. As the Bridge report states, “high school assessments often stress different knowledge and skills than do college entrance and placement requirements.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.2) The authors of the Bridge Report describe the testing disconnect in California and Oregon, noting that “meeting exit-level standards on tests such as California’s High School Exit Exam or for Oregon’s Certificate of Initial Mastery does not signify that students are prepared for college-level work.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.23)

This testing schism reflects the disparity between the skills that are assessed on K-12 and those assessed by college exams. The authors of the Bridge Report found “several
discrepancies between K-12 and postsecondary assessments. For example, approximately 33 percent of the items on any state high school-level assessment were framed within realistic situations, and as many as 92 percent of the items were contextualized. In contrast, the placement tests and college entrance exams assessed examinees primarily with abstract questions. Also, whereas many states ask for writing samples in their K-12 assessments, the ACT and SAT I use multiple-choice formats to test writing attainment although the College Board has recently added a written component to the SAT I. Other studies have come to similar conclusions. For example, the Education Trust has shown that placement standards in mathematics often include Algebra II, while admission tests rarely exceed Algebra I.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.17) Simply put, high school exams do not focus enough on skills taught in college, and incoming university freshmen are suffering as a result.

To add to this confusion about assessments, many secondary schools do not even administer a high school exit exam, creating a lack of student accountability at the end of senior year. Since many second-semester seniors have already been accepted to college, there is rarely a need for them to take their final exams seriously, and they often take electives that demand little intellectual effort. As the Bridge Project report puts it, “Aside from end-of-course exams, the K-12 accountability movement has no plans for senior year assessments; this can de-emphasize the need to take core courses in the senior year, especially if students have already met high school graduation requirements.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p. 29) The point here is that because they are not held accountable at the end of their K-12 studies, seniors in high are often not motivated to study hard, and this loss of motivation hinders their success in college.
It seems reasonable, then, to emphasize the importance of high school exit exams that reflect college-level work. Moreover, this solution might address the loss of motivation during 12th grade that I described earlier, since an important high school exit exam would hold students accountable until the end of 12th grade. In light of this testing and accountability schism, it is instructive to compare exams in American high schools to those of other countries that students must pass before they are able to graduate high school. Britain’s A-levels, Germany’s Abitur, and France’s Baccalauréat all serve a sort of double function. On the one hand, they signify a certain level of mastery of high school subjects which, in turn, reassures college professors that their incoming freshman will begin their studies with the foundational knowledge necessary for higher-level work.

The problem, in other words, is the disparity between the types of skills that are evaluated in high school and college. As I have noted, whereas high-stakes tests for high schools are predominantly multiple-choice, college tests often emphasize the ability to construct an argument or analyze a problem in writing. Therefore, as I argue at the end of this chapter and in Chapter Two, greater emphasis on argumentation skills in high school is needed to erase the disconnect between the two institutions’ varying assessments.

Clashing Expectations

Ultimately, the confusing disconnect between K-12 schooling and college that I have been describing can be reduced to a significant difference in expectations between the two institutions. Mike Rose offers a typical example of this expectation gap in his book Lives on the Boundary, in the story of Bobby, the star history student in his high
school who subsequently feels lost in college because of the change in expectations. As a high school student, Bobby saw history as nothing more than the memorization of facts and dates. Bobby succeeded in classes with such low-level expectations, but when he enrolled in a college history class that focused on interpreting and debating the significance of historical events rather than merely memorizing facts and dates, he became disengaged. According to Rose, the most glaring symptom of Bobby’s inability even to understand that the rules had changed was that he didn’t even take notes, on the grounds that “the teacher was just talking about people and reading letters and such. She didn’t cover anything important.” (Rose, 1989, p.4) Bobby’s belief that learning entails nothing more than memorization reflects the shortcomings of a high school curriculum devoid of critical thought and the disastrous consequences for many students like him.

I noted earlier that students like Bobby sometimes feel alienated in their college classes because their professors’ expectations differ greatly from those of their high school instructors, and an example of such a sizeable difference in expectations is found in students’ written work. Writing in high schools today, as Graff and Samuel Wineburg note, often amounts to students making reasonably sounding statements that are so uncontroversial that nobody would think to challenge them. When they get to college, on the other hand, students are often encouraged to court controversy by summarizing counterarguments, comparing their claims with alternative ones, and engaging in thoughtful debate. Requiring these advanced skills in Bobby’s high school history class might have prepared him – and those like him - for the argument culture he encountered in college. Currently, though, this K-12 – college schism in written work is so wide that
students like Bobby have no idea what they are up against when they begin post-secondary work.

**Which Classes Should I Take?**

Sources of confusion exist not only in the gap between skills taught in high school and college, but also in the selection of courses that high school students should take to prepare themselves for post-secondary institutions. The authors of the Bridge Project report point to this confusion in their discussion of the “college-prep” curriculum, whose name – “college-prep” – is often misleading. Whereas many students might logically conclude that a course whose title includes the words “college-prep” would prepare them for college, the Bridge Project report indicates that several AP courses provide better preparation for post K-12 study than do “college-prep” classes. (Antonio et al., 2003) These misleading course titles may explain why students who do not enroll in AP courses are shocked to discover that the skills they acquired in their high school courses did not adequately prepare them for further study.

Again the solution seems apparent: course titles should accurately reflect their level of academic difficulty, and courses that claim to prepare students for college must include the higher-level skills of argumentation that I previously noted. The authors of the Bridge report are right, then, to recommend “sequencing undergraduate general education requirements so that appropriate senior-year courses are linked to postsecondary general education courses.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.47) That way, students will know which classes they must pass if they wish to be adequately prepared for post-secondary academic work.
A Gap in Text Complexity and Task

Another instance of the high school – college gap occurs with respect to text complexity, and the authors of the *Common Core State Standards* document this growing lacuna in Appendix A of the CCSS when they show that high school texts have decreased in complexity while college reading has not. (CCSS, 2010) The CCSS authors are right, then, to encourage high schools to provide students with more challenging texts to prepare them better for college. Yet high school teachers cannot simply start assigning more sophisticated texts to close the K-12 – college gap, because in addition to the disparity in text complexity, there is also a significant gap in task difficulty between the two institutions. As the Common Core authors state in Appendix A, “…students in college are expected to read complex texts with substantially greater independence (i.e. much less scaffolding) than are students in typical K-12 programs. College instructors assign readings, not necessarily explicated in class, for which students might be held accountable through exams, papers, presentations, or class discussions. Students in high school, by contrast, are rarely held accountable for what they are able to read independently.” (CCSS, 2010, p.3)

The CCSS authors smartly argue that this disconnect in task difficulty explains why roughly 50 percent of the students who took the ACT in 2005 made the target score in reading, and “why so few students in general are prepared for post-secondary reading.” (CCSS, 2010, p.4) In other words, if secondary school teachers continue to assign simple texts and tasks, then their students will continue to be unprepared for further academic work, and the high school – college divide will remain. Other educators agree that the K-
12 schools do not create curricula challenging enough to heal the schism between high school and college. Tim Shanahan, a professor of literacy at UIC, observes that traditional literacy programs do not adequately prepare students for post K-12 study. Rather, these programs “lead to students completing high school approximately 2-3 reading levels below what is actually needed—that’s why so many students require remediation in college.” (Shanahan, 2013, p.1) It seems, then, that the gap in text difficulty between K-12 and college leads to increased enrollment in remedial education, and this disjuncture is too widespread to ignore, given that roughly 50 percent of incoming freshmen enroll in some type of remedial education program. (Antonio et al., 2003) Yet by offering more challenging texts and assignments that prepare students better for the rigors of higher education, high schools will help to mend the K-12 – college gap, and educators will reduce the number of students who require remedial education.

A Proposed Solution – The Common Core Argument-Based Standards

I have argued in this chapter that educators must provide a smoother transition from high school to college if students’ confusion about university expectations is to be lessened. This point is concisely summed up in the following statement from a community college administrator: “Probably just like everybody else [I believe it should be] a seamless flow for the students. The content, the knowledge they had in high school should be a foundation for them to be successful in college. That transition should be as smooth as possible. They should be able to walk into those [college] classes and feel confident.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.35) Currently, the transition from high school to college is anything but a “seamless flow,” yet it could be significantly smoother if all K-
16 institutions had a curriculum that reinforced itself across grade levels. In order to bridge this K-12 – college schism, secondary schools must stress the importance of advanced academic skills, for as I have shown in this chapter, high school students are currently unprepared for the intellectually demanding work they encounter in college.

In response to this problem, the authors of the Common Core State Standards have offered an ambitious and challenging document which, in the words of the standards themselves, accords “a special place” to argumentation as a skill central to college readiness. (CCSS, 2010, p.24) Argumentation, then, is a skill suggested by the CCSS authors as a way to create the “seamless flow” between K-12 and college curriculums.

By “Common Core argument-based standards,” I mean the substantial number of learning objectives in the Common Core State Standards that underscore the importance of written and oral argumentation in instilling college readiness in high school students. These skills include, but are not limited to, the ability to make a claim, summarize the arguments of a challenging text, anticipate and summarize an opposing point of view or counterargument, recognize and summarize the limitations of one’s own claim as well as opposing ones, offer alternative theories, form successful rebuttals, and integrate original claims with counterarguments with the goal of weighing the pros and cons of each.

Again, it is my view that these argument skills are essential if educators wish to bridge the K-12 – college gap. In support of this claim, I point to a 2002 survey in which professors at various California universities were asked to highlight certain skills “central to writing arguments,” a skill they believed to be valuable for “incoming freshmen.” Specifically, these professors stated that “among the most important expected skills of incoming students were articulating a clear thesis, identifying, evaluating, and using
evidence to support or challenge the thesis, and considering and incorporating counterarguments into their writing.” (CCSS, 2010a, p.25) My view that argument skills can bridge the high school – college disjuncture is also supported by an ACT curriculum survey of professors of composition, freshman English, and American literature who found that being able to “write to argue or persuade readers” was as important for freshman college students as knowing how to “write to convey information”. (CCSS 2010a, p.24)

Additionally, the same ACT national curriculum survey in 2009 reported that “post-secondary faculty gave high ratings to such argument-related skills as ‘develop ideas by using some specific reasons, details and examples,’ ‘take and maintain a position on an issue,’ and ‘support claims with multiple and appropriate sources of evidence.’ (CCSS, 2010, p.25) Many educators agree, then, that in order to close the K-12 – college gap, students must acquire advanced skills in argument, for these skills would prepare them for the previously described rigors of post-secondary work. These skills, in my view, are particularly important for high school students who wish to attend college, given that their professors will most likely expect them to be able to read argumentative texts and write sound arguments.

Simply put, by learning skills in argument in secondary school, students will be better prepared than they currently are for the argument culture of universities. Students like Bobby, for example, will come to appreciate the value of analysis, interpretation and discussion rather than merely focus on facts and dates. And these facts and dates will not simply exist in isolation – they will be seen as valuable pieces of evidence to be used in
support of a claim. This “argument culture,” currently reserved for post-secondary institutions, might then extend to middle schools and high schools, and in addition to lessening the confusion that exists between secondary and post-secondary schools, the feelings of bewilderment that are present within both institutions might dwindle as well. The disconnects between grade levels, the mixed messages one finds from class to class, and the general sense of frustration might all be reduced if educators establish some curricular common ground, and argument standards might be a way to accomplish that objective.

It seems crucial, then, to promote the teaching of argumentation in America’s secondary schools if we hope to mend the high school – college schism. Not everyone agrees, however, so after I begin Chapter 2 by highlighting the advantages of the Common Core argument-based standards and the overall educative value of argument, I will describe some common objections that have been raised about the teaching of argument and show why these objections are not convincing.
Chapter Two: The Case for Argument

Introduction

In my introduction I highlighted the central question posed in this dissertation: to what extent can argument-based standards, most notably those currently advanced by the CCSS, help improve the performance of American schools and students? As I argued in Chapter 1, one of the central reasons for the poor performance of those schools and students is that the overwhelming inconsistencies between the K-12 and college curriculum leaves K-12 students bewildered and unprepared for college. I also discussed the mixed messages that students experience going from class to class within secondary and post-secondary institutions, and I explained that these mixed messages exist because K-12 teachers and professors often fail to articulate their curricula with their colleagues and instead work in isolation. I also mentioned the vast number of tests and exams that are poorly aligned both with the K-12 and college curricula.

In Chapter 1, I provided ample evidence from scholarly works and reports suggesting that counteracting the confusing inconsistencies to which students are exposed will require strong K-16 curricular alignment with a particular emphasis on college preparatory skills. I went on to devote special attention to one of these skills – argumentation – that has been described in studies, books and articles as perhaps the skill most essential to college readiness. Finally, I referred to the most up-to-date, robust example of a document – The Common Core State Standards – that highlights the importance of argument not only in Language Arts, but in other subjects such as History and Math, and that implicitly offers argumentation as the skill that would tie together
otherwise disconnected skills and competencies, thereby providing the long-needed alignment between K-12 and college.

In this chapter, I will assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Common Core argument standards, first by comparing the role of argumentation in prior standards to that of the CCSS. Thereafter, I will point to two studies that highlight the educative value of argument as well as the beneficial role argument plays in preparing students for college. Finally, as part of a philosophical discussion about the nature of argument and the role it plays in learning, I will summarize both past and present objections voiced by certain educators and citizens to the teaching of argument and will end with some of my own conclusions about the extent to which the Common Core argument standards figure to bridge the disabling gap between K-12 and college education.

The CCSS: Overcoming the “Mixed-Message Curriculum”

One major academic obstacle for students in secondary and post-secondary school is the “mixed-message curriculum” described in Chapter 1, which, in my view, can only be alleviated by greater vertical alignment and curricular consistency across the educational system. The strong Common Core argument standards might be able to achieve that aim to some extent, and in doing so, bridge these confusing curricular divides. Specifically, the CCSS could provide the basis for a sort of spiral curriculum, where similar argument-based concepts are reintroduced at a progressively more sophisticated level as students advance in the course sequence. Through argument-based standards, one can see that as the student progresses in his studies, the material might change, yet the key skill – such as argument – remains the same. Jerome Bruner makes a
similar point in *The Process of Education* when he argues that the variance in instruction between low and high-level courses should differ in degree, not in kind.” (Bruner, 1960)

Skills in argument, therefore, should be practiced from an early age so that students are able to use the new information they learn as effectively as possible.

In Appendix A of the CCSS, the authors describe the value of argument in the standards, which “put particular emphasis on students’ abilities to write sound arguments on substantive topics and issues, as this ability is critical to ‘college and career readiness.’” College-bound students must become proficient in argument literacy, the authors argue, quoting Gerald Graff, because the university is “largely an argument culture.” (CCSS, 2010, p. 24) I agree, then, that gradually increasing the difficulty of the standards is an effective method for preparing students for the rigors of this argument culture of the university. The authors of the CCSS are right, for example, when they require 9th and 10th grade students to “develop claims and counterclaims fairly,” while students in 11th and 12th grade are expected to produce more sophisticated written work when asked to “develop claims and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly.” (CCSS, 2010, p.45)

In my view, the *Common Core* argument standards represent a fairly promising means of overcoming the K-12-college gap, because the K-12 students who learn to follow an argument in their reading and construct an argument in their writing will be far better prepared for college than most high school students are now. Appendix A of the *CCSS* goes on to quote Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney (n.d.) of the University of Chicago Writing Program who smartly extol the importance of argument in college writing, noting that argument skills are
an integral part of your education in college. For four years, you are asked to read, do research, gather data, analyze it, think about it, and then communicate it to readers in a form . . . which enables them to assess it and use it. You are asked to do this not because we expect you all to become professional scholars, but because in just about any profession you pursue, you will do research, think about what you find, make decisions about complex matters, and then explain those decisions—usually in writing—to others who have a stake in your decisions being sound ones. (CCSS, 2010, p.4)

Argument, in other words, is a critical skill not only in college, but in the professional world as well, and the CCSS authors’ emphasis on argumentation in a document that promotes college and career readiness is therefore a wise one.

And this emphasis on argumentation runs throughout the standards beginning as early as Kindergarten, where students must “compose opinion pieces in which they tell a reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book.” (CCSS, 2010, p.19) This, of course, is not advanced argument, yet certain argument skills, such as making a claim, are nonetheless introduced. By grade 2, the need for advanced skills is evident: students must “write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section.” (CCSS, 2010, p.19) The transition in the guidelines from Kindergarten to second grade, and thereafter from one grade to the next builds upon previously acquired skills instead of introducing completely new objectives as students move up the grade ladder.

The CCSS’ focus on argumentation is also wise because the Common Core argument standards address skills that many secondary school curricula have ignored.
Take, for example, one of the Common Core Writing Standards, which urges learners to “Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.” (CCSS, 2010, p.45) This standard’s focus on argument is worth highlighting for my purposes, since it represents an admirable departure from prior learning objectives. First, the fact that students are encouraged to make “claims” is significant, for as many educators have argued, it is too often the case that students are simply required to summarize information without weighing it or making their own judgments about it. Second, the emphasis on valid reasoning is crucial for students, since, as I will show later, many people have never learned to form sound arguments, and their faulty arguments are often due to an inability to reason logically. Finally, the standard’s inclusion of “relevant and sufficient evidence” urges students not only to defend their claims with facts, but with relevant facts, meaning that students must be discerning in selecting information they need to defend their claims.

CCSS vs. Previous Illinois Standards

The shift here towards emphasis on the scaffolding of argument skills seems a significant advance over previous standards. For example, one of the Illinois State Standards adopted in 1985 merely requires students to “Produce documents that exhibit a range of writing techniques appropriate to purpose and audience, with clarity of focus, logic of organization, appropriate elaboration and support and overall coherence.” (ISS, 1985, p.1) While this standard demands a fairly well-developed piece of writing, it fails to recognize the importance of evidence, counterarguments and alternate viewpoints. Other state standards are similar to earlier Illinois learning objectives insofar as they lack
emphasis in argument literacy. A Colorado State Standard in writing for high school juniors, for example, states that “Stylistic and thematic elements of literary or narrative texts can be refined to engage or entertain an audience.” (CSS, 2010, p.15) This is not to say that argumentation is completely ignored – after all, the standard goes on to state that “Elements of informational and persuasive texts can be refined to inform or influence an audience-” yet this standard clearly falls short of the focus on argumentation in the CCSS. Compared to past standards, then, the CCSS prepare students better for the arguments they will have to write in college.

In this respect the focus on argumentation of the CCSS is an advance over the traditional five-paragraph persuasive essay. Yet while the CCSS stress on argument seems an obvious advance to many educators including me, it might shock others. After all, many other educators admire the traditional format of the five-paragraph essay, which includes an introduction, a statement of the thesis, three supporting paragraphs and a conclusion. This traditional writing approach, by the way, is implicit in the Illinois State Standards, (ISS, 1985) and since teachers are so used to teaching to standards like these that lack higher-level skills in argumentation, they often fail to realize its major shortcoming, namely that the importance of the author’s position stated in the opening paragraph is never questioned.

Such papers, then, fail to answer a simple yet crucial question: Why should the student bother making this point in the first place? As stated in Chapter One, common approaches to essay writing in high school often encourage papers in which students list several propositions and back them up with evidence without ever bothering to indicate the reason that their claims are worth defending, as they would have to do when asked to
argue with a real opponent with real issues at stake. Writing will become better, then, if students writers are asked to acknowledge and engage with opposing points of view, for doing so will satisfy the conditions of this “So what?” test. Put another way, if the essay makes it clear that another point of view about the subject in question exists, argument against the opposing thesis becomes necessary in order for the reader to accept the paper’s position. (Graff & Birkenstein, 2003, p.156) This dialogical notion of argument is smartly reflected in the CCSS, much more so than in past standards.

Moreover, this move towards a more dialogical concept of argument literacy is not confined to the Common Core Writing Standards. Targeting similar skills, for example, The Common Core Speaking Standards ask that 9th graders “prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively, integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally, and evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.” (CCSS, 2010, p.50) Once again, this is a significant improvement over the Illinois State Speaking Standards, which say nothing about argument, but merely ask students in 9th grade to “Use strategies to manage or overcome communication anxiety and apprehension (e.g., developed outlines, notecards, practice).” (ISS, 1985, p.1) It is clear, then, that the CCSS move well beyond the somewhat mechanical skills articulated in the Illinois State Standards by asking student writers not just to make claims in isolation, but to enter into genuine intellectual discussions with others.
Along the same lines, in Appendix A of the CCSS, the authors convincingly argue that these higher skills – especially those concerning the use of evidence in arguments - must be taught to our students if we want them to be able to succeed in college. (CCSS, 2010) Evidence is a crucial component of any strong argument, and the CCSS authors therefore seem to me right when they describe in great detail the role that evidence plays in argumentation. In the Common Core Reading Standards, for example, the authors maintain that students should be able to “read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.” (CCSS, 2010a, p.35) Previous state standards in reading, by contrast, had focused much less on the importance of evidence, and simply required that students “Analyze, interpret and compare a variety of texts for purpose, structure, content, detail and effect.” (ISS, 1985, p.1) And even though this last standard requires students to “analyze” and “interpret,” the role of evidence is not even mentioned.

The CCSS represent a significant improvement over previous standards, then, in that they address a need for students in K-12 schools to perform higher-level argumentation skills that can result in engaging, student-centered learning. When one considers Bobby, Mike Rose’s disengaged student whom I discussed in Chapter One who equated learning with nothing more than memorizing and regurgitating facts, one could imagine that had his high school teachers encouraged him to engage in more academic debates, he might have felt more engaged in the discussion and analysis that seemed trivial to him in college because he had been led to equate learning with cramming information. The CCSS authors are right, then, to emphasize dialogical argumentation in
the standards as a central aspect of college readiness, a pathway to students engaging in learning, and a key means of creating a continuous curriculum from K-12 to college.

**Argument as a General Trend in K-12 Schools**

The *Common Core’s* focus on a more sophisticated idea of argument literacy than past standards have called for reflects a trend in other current standards, a development that also seems to me a positive shift in K-12 curricula. The new *Advanced Placement (AP)* foreign language curriculum, for example, requires students to form a written argument using different documents, each of which provides evidence that supports or refutes two differing points of view inherent in the prompt. Students are then required to analyze and synthesize the information, making sure to present both points of view. (Ladd, 2012) One sees a similar goal of promoting argument in the reading section of the *Common Core English Standards* for high school: students must “integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words, delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence, and analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.” (CCSS, 2010, p.40) Argument, then, does not simply refer to the stating and restating of the same point of view. Rather, meaningful debate as articulated by the *AP World Language Standards* and the *Common Core* involves the ability to expose counterarguments while referring to sources to justify one’s assertion. (Ladd, 2012)
Just as AP students are required to develop sophisticated arguments, the Common Core requires 9th and 10th grade students to “establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone” throughout the arguments they write. (CCSS, 2010a, p.41) As in the prior AP curriculum, strong skills in grammar are still essential for AP students, yet those skills are now considered to be a tool used to achieve the aforementioned standards which target critical thinking. This move towards argumentation is also apparent in the standards promoted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which describe distinguished-level students as those who can “express a point of view different from their own.” (ACTFL, 2012, p.1) I mention the emphasis on argument in the Advanced Placement curriculum and in the ACTFL language standards in order to show that the Common Core’s model reflects a general trend in secondary education towards emphasis on argumentation as a solution to the high school – college divide.

Debate as a Pathway to Argument

This focus on argument in current educational standards seems to reflect a growing appreciation of what some researchers and educators have been finding, that classrooms organized around student argument and debate tend both to motivate students well and improve their academic performance. Deanna Kuhn’s study of the classroom effect of “dialogic activity,” for example, demonstrates the value of teaching through debate, providing clear evidence that debate-oriented classroom activities teach students effective critical-thinking skills better than others. Kuhn’s study consisted of two groups: an “intervention group” of 6th grade students who studied topics through debate, whose
work she compared with that of a “comparison group” that studied the same topic in a
more traditional lecture-taught class. The results dramatically showed the advantages of
learning through debate. As Kuhn reported, “intervention groups demonstrated transfer
of the dialogic activity to two individual essays on new topics; argument quality for these
groups exceeded that of comparison groups who participated in an intervention involving
the more facevalid activity of extensive essay writing practice, along with whole-class
discussion. The intervention group also demonstrated greater awareness of the relevance
of evidence to argument. The dialogic method thus appears to be a viable one for
developing cognitive skills that the comparison-group data show do not routinely develop
during this age period.” (Kuhn, 2010, p.8) Groups exposed to argument-based learning,
or “dialogic learning,” as Kuhn states, showed greater skills both in critical thinking and
in appreciating the role of evidence in making a claim.

Further evidence that debate sharpens learning lies in the fact that almost every
high school and college in the United States has a debate team. Until recently, however,
educators seemingly have viewed debate as an extra curricular activity set aside for a
minority of advanced students and not as part of the regular curriculum. Rarely, if ever,
have the benefits of debate been infused into the curriculum or directly linked to
education standards or preparing students for further study.

It is interesting to note, then, that in a recent article entitled Debate Skills Help
Students Prepare for Common Core Les Lynn and Edie Canter of the Chicago Debate
League report on the impressive educational gains of inner city high school students who
participate in competitive debate and argue that the benefits of competitive debate can be
integrated into the general curriculum for all students. The article highlights a study by Dr. Brianna Mezuk on the Chicago Debate League, one of the many organizations that promote competitive debate, particularly for troubled urban high school students. Lynn and Canter argue that Mezuk’s study, though conducted and published before the formulation of the CCSS, provides compelling support for the Common Core argument standards, and that a curriculum organized around debate figures to be an effective strategy for preparing at-risk students for college. Canter and Lynn point out that the skills highlighted by debate competitions are those found in the Common Core argument standards, such as “evidence-based argumentation, detailed policy analysis and direct refutation of their opponents’ policy positions.” (Canter and Lynn, 2012, p.1)

As I mentioned earlier, not only are at-risk students in the League engaged in their debate-centered instruction, but they are also better prepared for college. In addition to Mezuk’s research, Lynn and Canter cite other “carefully controlled, peer-reviewed and recently published studies, in the Journal of Negro Education for October 2009 and in Educational Research and Reviews for September 5, 2011,” both finding that “participating in the Chicago Debate League has a measurably substantial impact on students’ ACT scores, grades, and college-readiness.” (Canter & Lynn, 2012, p.1) According to the study, “Debaters were 70% more likely to graduate from high school and 3 times less likely to drop out. Debaters were 50% more likely to reach the ‘college ready’ benchmark on the ACT English test and 70% more likely to reach the ‘college ready’ benchmark on the ACT Reading test.” (Canter & Lynn, 2012, p.2) Many students in the League have minority status and are in low-income families, and as stated in Chapter 1, adolescents belonging to these sectors of society have historically been less
prepared for college than their white, well-off peers. Given the results of the study, then, it is clear that the benefits of argument need to reach populations in need of an easier transition from high school to college.

Yet despite the many benefits of debate-centered classrooms and argument-based standards that I have just described, some might still have objections. Some might contend, for example, that argument is a skill too advanced for young learners. Others might simply question the Common Core’s heavy focus on argument, pointing out that since most people are perfectly capable of making the arguments they need to in “real life,” there is not much of a need for argument instruction in school. Furthermore, the skeptic might point to the historical trend that sophisticated argument is reserved for college, and should therefore not be taught earlier, even in simple form. The following section, therefore, will take up these objections to the teaching of argument.

Can all students learn how to argue? And should they?

Back-to-basics advocates might reject the idea that young students should be expected to argue in English – not to mention in a foreign language - when their skills in grammar and reading fundamentals are lacking. “How should we expect students to argue well,” they might retort, “if they can’t even read or write at grade level?” Argument, in other words, might be valuable, but more so for older students in the advanced stages of cognitive development than for younger ones. Why, then, would the CCSS committee members create such unattainable standards for young students? For example, is it realistic to think, as do the authors of the ELA Writing Anchor Standard #1, that first-graders should be able to “Write opinion pieces in which they introduced the
topic or name the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure?’” (CCSS, 2010a, p.19) #1

Furthermore, some might object that basic skills in reading and grammar are more important for K-12 students than are skills in argument, and that argument instruction in lower grade levels is therefore a premature exercise. CCSS advocates, however, might reply to this criticism as does Mike Rose, who is one apparent advocate of argumentation mentioned in Chapter One. Through the success stories of some of the students with whom he worked in remedial education, Rose challenges this outdated idea that students must fine tune their rudimentary skills such as spelling and punctuation before receiving argument instruction. (Rose, 2009) Rose believes that complex skills such as argumentation can be taught at lower levels, noting that “writing filled with grammatical error does not preclude engagement with sophisticated intellectual material, and that error can be addressed effectively as one is engaging such material.” (Rose, 2009, p.130) The point here is that a student’s written argument, however coarse, reductive and rudimentary it may be, can serve as a wonderful point of departure for the deepening and sophistication of his claim, even if that student does not yet possess the necessary skills in grammar and vocabulary that are essential for academic work. In sum, then, even though some might be hesitant to teach argumentation to young students, the CCSS authors are right to include argument-rich standards beginning in early grades. 

Other faulty arguments

Skeptical critics of the CCSS might offer two further objections: “Since many students will not be required to produce argumentative writing in their careers and
everyday life, then shouldn’t students learn ‘real life’ skills that they will be able to apply in day-to-day life, as opposed to skills in writing persuasive essays?” To this objection, I offer a simple response: as Kuhn points out in her book *The Skills of Argument*, argument is in fact a “real life” skill used every day in a variety of situations. Next, the skeptic might question the need for an entire set of standards devoted to the teaching of argument, given that, as proponents of argument suggest, students already know how to argue and do so frequently outside of school.

The answer to this question is that though students may argue frequently, they often do so in unsophisticated and fallacious ways. Moreover, the fact that these poor argumentation skills continue into adulthood is a problem, and Kuhn takes up this problem in the same book, highlighting a myriad of fallacious arguments that people construct, not only on intellectual topics, but on every-day subjects such as recidivism, drop-out rates and obesity. (Kuhn, 1991) One of the recurring claims Kuhn makes throughout her book, for example, is that when participants were asked to imagine the opposing point of view to their opinion, it was difficult for them to form a true counterargument that negated the original theory. Rather, they came up with alternative theories or assertions that merely offered another explanation of a particular phenomenon while leaving the original theory intact. Kuhn explains that these weak arguments “reflect limitations in people’s abilities to evaluate their own beliefs and, hence, to know that they are justified in holding them.” (Kuhn, 1991, p. 171) The CCSS authors are right, therefore, when they state that 7-th graders should be able to “acknowledge alternate or opposing claims.” (CCSS, 2010, p.42) If students do not possess this skill and others like
it, the number of adults who currently make poor arguments will most likely never diminish.

**But isn’t argument a college thing?**

Some educators’ resistance to increasing the role of debate and argument at the secondary level may stem from the notion that these practices are best postponed till college. College, after all, has historically been viewed as the only appropriate academic setting for the teaching and practice of higher-level skills such as argumentation. Perhaps, then, this longstanding view of colleges has led educators to falsely believe that K-12 students are not yet ready to make academic arguments. The extent to which this view has impacted K-12 schools is unknown, but the evidence does not support it: Kuhn’s research quoted earlier shows that 7th grader are not only capable of engaging in debate with peers and writing argumentative papers about the topics, but that they tend to be more academically motivated and produce better academic writing than classmates in control groups not exposed to debate. Furthermore, postponing students’ exposure to argument and debate till college will clearly widen the high school-college gap and confuse students in the ways described by the Stanford Bridge report. (Antonio et al., 2003) The CCSS authors seem to me right, therefore, when they claim that in order to bridge this high school – college gap, stronger argument-based instruction is needed in K-12 schools to prepare students for the academic rigors of university life.
Conclusion

As I have shown in this chapter, the CCSS argument standards represent a significant advance in the teaching of literacy, for compared to past learning objectives, they thoroughly describe the need for educators to make their instruction more intellectually challenging. But even though few current educators would probably object to the teaching of argument literacy, on the evidence discussed in this chapter there may still be more reluctance to teach these skills than many might think. The CCSS is a timely document, then, in that it seizes upon the need for educators to awaken students’ minds by encouraging them to go beyond the perfunctory acquisition of information.

Yet one question remains: assuming that the CCSS are implemented effectively, will the Common Core argument-based standards be sufficient in preparing high school seniors for the rigors of college, or is something else needed to bridge the widening high school – college gap described in Chapter One? Can these higher-level skills stand on their own, or do they require more clarity and specificity than the CCSS authors provide? In Chapter Two, I examined the strengths of the Common Core argument standards. In Chapters Three and Four, I will describe their liabilities.
Chapter Three: Just How Effective Are the CCSS Argument Standards?

Introduction

I argued in Chapter Two that in highlighting the importance of argumentation skills of college and career readiness, the Common Core State Standards represent a major advance over previous standards, one that promises to help overcome the confusing disconnect between high school and college. In this chapter, however, I raise the question of whether the CCSS’ argument standards are sufficient to accomplish this objective, and my conclusion is that they are not. As I suggested at the end of Chapter Two, though the CCSS do frequently gesture in the direction of content standards as well as argument standards, they ultimately fall short of prescribing a thorough and well-articulated body of content. For this reason, then, though it represents an improvement over prior standards, the CCSS figure to disappoint educators and students in failing to adequately bridge the high school – college gap described in Chapter One.

To be sure, there are those who praise the CCSS because they do offer examples of worthwhile content, and this is true. The problem for me, however, is that this content is suggested only in sidebars and appendices rather than in the standards themselves. In this way, the CCSS stop short of articulating this content clearly and consistently. Thus, though the Common Core argument-based standards are valuable, their failure to mandate any clearly-specified content is likely to impair their chances of being applied effectively.

Ultimately, then, the CCSS authors actually undermine the main goal that they themselves promote: college readiness. If professors expect high school students to begin college with a certain foundational knowledge, then they will be disappointed upon
discovering that some students have not read the books – or the types of books - that they ought to have read. Put another way, if the Common Core truly seeks to be “common,” then the standards need to identify a more specific body of “core” materials rather than merely focus on skill acquisition which, if unaccompanied by the appropriate content, loses much of its academic heft. In this chapter, then, I will offer my own critique of the content-deficient CCSS argument standards.

Neither “Common” nor “Core”

First, it is important to distinguish between standards on the one hand, which define the skills that students are supposed to achieve, and the curriculum schools institute in order to meet those standards. Furthermore, it is crucial to realize that, as their name suggests, the Common Core State Standards describe the former in greater detail than they do the latter. The statement in the introduction to the Common Core ELA standards that the standards “do not describe all that can or should be taught,” and that they leave a great deal to “the discretion of teachers and curriculum developers” highlights this point. (CCSS, 2010, p. 6) The CCSS, then, provide uniform standards – or learning goals - that schools in participating states must reach, yet they go out of their way to make clear that they do not prescribe a specific curriculum, meaning that text selection is left to districts, schools and even individual teachers. Simply put, the Common Core State Standards specify ideal student outcomes, but not the curricula through which schools will try to achieve them. This limitation is a problem, however. Since the Common Core State Standards refuse to articulate a prescribed corpus of
material, schools are therefore free to create divergent curricula in ways that can only further confuse students.

According to CCSS, for example, some English curricula could emphasize classics like *The Catcher in the Rye*, while others could choose more modern works like *The Da Vinci Code*, and as long as students exercise their argument skills successfully upon either of these books, the CCSS would have no objection to high schools using completely different materials just as long as they are appropriately complex. Yet this position alone seems to contradict the CCSS’ claim that “The standards define what all students are *expected to know* and be able to do.” (CCSS, 2010, p.6) While the standards do indeed define what students are able to “do” through the Common Core argument-based skills, the example above clearly shows that the standards do not, in fact, define what students are “expected to know,” since standards, according to Shanahan’s definition, do not describe knowledge of specific content. In reading the CCSS, then, one wonders whether students are supposed to know works like *The Catcher in the Rye*, or texts like *The Da Vinci Code*. It’s unclear.

There are those, however, who disagree with my claim that the CCSS fail to describe a clear, coherent and cumulative body of content. In a recent article, E.D. Hirsch Jr. praises the CCSS for being “the first multi-state plan to give substance and coherence to what is taught in the public schools,” and for encouraging “the systematic development of knowledge in K-5.” Clamoring for a more clearly articulated corpus of material, Hirsch commends the CCSS authors for “breaking the fearful silence about the critical importance of specific content in the early grades.” (Hirsch, 2013, p.1) Hirsch’s argument, in other words, is that compared to any other standards, the CCSS do a far
Hirsch goes on to refer to the introduction of the *CCSS ELA Standards* that explains the importance of cumulative knowledge:

> By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades. (*CCSS, 2010, p.3*)

Hirsch agrees, then, with the CCSS authors’ promotion of a rich, foundational knowledge. Yet Hirsch appears to advance two conflicting ideas: one the one hand, he argues for the importance of specific content in building a foundation of knowledge, yet on the other hand he is not disturbed by the fact that the *Common Core* leaves content selection to the states. Hirsch concedes that the *CCSS* “don't get down to defining the specific historical, scientific, and other knowledge that is required for mature literacy” (Hirsch, 2013, p.1), but argues nevertheless for this “knowledge” that, in his view, should be required, but isn’t!

The problem is this: if the standards do not prescribe a common curriculum, then how are the standards supposed to guarantee the “rich content knowledge within and across grades” that the *Common Core* promotes? (*CCSS, 2010, p.3*) And since the *CCSS* fail to describe a specific body of content, American students must rely, in Hirsch’s words, on “a brave governor or state superintendent” who, by adhering to the *CCSS*, can now “get down to brass tacks” and implement a sound, comprehensive curriculum.
(Hirsch, 2013, p.1) This statement begs some disturbing questions: What if the governor and state superintendent are not brave? Must we now rely on the bravery of our state leaders to implement the “rich content knowledge within and across grades” that both Hirsch and the CCSS in theory promote, a tactic symptomatic of the over-reliance on individual choices to solve our educational problems that I criticized in Chapter One? Hirsch seems confused then, when he argues for common curricular content while praising standards that make the determination of such content “a local prerogative in the U.S.” (Hirsch, 2013, p.1) Simply put, he can’t have it both ways.

Hirsch also appears to overlook the glaring differences between the CCSS and the standards that he himself formulated for his Core Knowledge Sequence. Hirsch describes the Core Knowledge Sequence as a series of content standards that are known for their specificity. In an introductory letter to readers of these standards, he writes: “The effectiveness of the new language-arts standards will depend on the implementation of coherent, cumulative, and content-specific grade-by-grade curricula infused into language arts and the other subjects.” (Hirsch, 1986, p.i) Unlike the CCSS, then, the Core Knowledge Sequence supports this claim, for it requires specific, logically-sequenced texts and topics of study. The Language Arts Standards, for example, require students to read “Mother Goose and Other Traditional Poems” in Kindergarten, followed by “Aesop’s Fables” in Grade One. The History and Geography Standards include topics such as “Native American Peoples: Past and Present,” “The Voyage of Columbus in 1492” and “The Pilgrims” in Kindergarten, and these topics are logically followed by a study of the Conquistadors and the English Settlers in Grade One. (Hirsch, 1986, p. x)

And rather than lump skills from different content areas together, as do the CCSS authors,
the *Core Knowledge Standards* clearly group the standards according to content area. Language Arts and History standards, for example, are separate from one another, and more topics, such as Music and Visual Arts, are included in the standards. (Hirsch, 1986)

To sum up, Hirsch is wrong to liken the *Core Knowledge Standards* to the *CCSS*, given that the former prescribes determinate content areas, whereas the latter does not.

My opponents might argue that, while it is true that the standards do not specify the particular texts students should study, they nevertheless encourage the coverage of deep content by including substantial lists of commonly-used grade level text exemplars. Dr. Tim Shanahan points out, for example, that national survey data show that schools are already using many of the texts suggested by *CCSS*, and that researchers have found repeatedly for more than thirty years that schools use a fairly consistent collection of literary texts and authors. Shanahan and others thus contend that the *CCSS* standards highlight the importance of text in the curriculum, not only in the lists of exemplars, but in the document’s emphasis on close reading and text complexity. (Shanahan, Personal Communication, 2014)

Yet to me, Dr. Shanahan’s point that schools have been using the same texts consistently for thirty years indicates that, among educators, there is not as much of an objection to a “canonical” curriculum as one might think. Put another way, that the texts used over the past three decades are consistent with those in the *CCSS*’ lists of exemplars suggests that the *CCSS* authors are already tacitly promoting a common core of content. Why, then, shouldn’t the *CCSS* go further and mandate that this common content be taught instead of merely tacitly hinting at it? Consistently demanding that schools teach a
common content would make the CCSS a clearer document than it currently is, one that offers teachers better guidance when teaching students what to argue about.

**Empty skills**

Other educators, including Dr. Sandra Stotsky, share my concerns about the CCSS. A professor of education who served on the *Common Core Validation Committee*, Stotsky justifiably refused to sign off on the *Common Core English Standards*, complaining that they promote an “empty skill set,” a view that sums up what I have been arguing here. Stotsky goes on to argue that because of their lack of relevant cultural material, the CCSS fail to provide a “clear guide on curriculum content to teachers.” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1) In other words, simply prescribing argumentation skills without identifying the topics and themes that are most worthwhile for students to argue about leaves educators and students confused. Not only are content-free standards vague, but they are empty as well. Stotsky makes this point when she claims that the CCSS authors fail to align course content from one grade to the next. As a result, she argues, these content-free standards have no academic weight. In her version of this point, “They (the standards) are generic skills--"can do" kinds of statements--which can be applied at any grade level to any text but in themselves entail no body of literary or world knowledge to give them intellectual heft.” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1)

Stotsky seems to me right to criticize the language of the standards as confusing for both teachers and students. Take, for example, the following *Common Core Reading Standard* for sixth-graders that requires students to “analyze how a theme develops over the course of a text.” (CCSS, 2010, p.10) Stotsky correctly points out that because of the
standard’s vague wording, it would be nearly impossible for students to respond to such a request. Furthermore, standards like this one seem to do nothing to counteract one of the central problems described in Chapter One, namely the confusingly mixed messages students receive both in K-12 schools and between those schools and college. After all, under the CCSS, teachers have the freedom to choose whatever “theme” they wish. Once again, the problem, as Stotsky persuasively argues, is that the CCSS lack the specificity needed to make them useful to teachers and students. In the same article, she insists that “Teachers need an example showing exactly what each generic statement means when applied to a specific text at a specific grade level.” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1) A way to improve these murky standards, in my view, would be to describe in greater detail what is now referred to vaguely as a “theme.”

For all their value, then, the CCSS fail to include sufficiently consistent and specific descriptions of content along with its stress on argumentation skills, and I believe that this failure to align content with skill will leave teachers and students confused. Take, for example, one of the fourth-grade writing standards, which states that students are supposed to “Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.” (CCSS, 2010, p.20) This vaguely-worded standard raises some questions: first, do “topics” have the same worth as “texts,” as this standard implies? Second, since the Common Core authors do not prescribe a certain corpus of texts, do teachers choose them? If so, what guarantee is there that all teachers would choose the same types of texts? Would students have a choice as well? This standard seems to suggest, after all, that students could pick a topic that is quite familiar to them, and that the skills involved
in arguing about that student-selected topic would have the same educational merit as an argument made about a novel chosen by a teacher.

This is not to say, however, that the Common Core’s argument-based standards must be completely rewritten. Rather, the CCSS authors should strengthen these standards by consistently including specifically-described content and correlating that content with relevant argumentation skills. To put it another way, the Common Core argument skills are not enough. Students and teachers must also know what they are supposed to argue about, and even though certain topics are mentioned as exemplars and recommendations throughout the document, most of the Common Core argument standards remain content-free. It is not likely, then, that teachers will offer consistent curricula from one school to the next.

In my view, then, the CCSS authors fail to describe the strong foundational knowledge that they themselves promote, offering instead a confusing text complexity formula that teachers must decipher in order to plan curricula. And the problem with this formula, as Stotsky asserts convincingly, is that it does not include a required list of complex texts. As she points out in an article entitled “Common Core State Standards are Pedagogically Useless,” “the huge list of titles in Appendix B is presented as simply “illustrative” of different levels of complexity.” This failure to identify mandatory texts raises many concerns which Stotsky skillfully addresses: “The central problem for an English curriculum remains, however. A complexity formula cannot indicate what makes a text the richest literary or non-literary text to study at a particular grade level or at a particular time in the school year, a text's relationship to other literary and non-literary texts, historical or contemporary, or how to understand a text's historical or cultural
significance (i.e., the issues in developing a coherent curriculum).” Stotsky seems to me right, then, to conclude about CCSS text complexity formula that “What is not at all clear is why this formula was developed and who will use it, given its many limitations.” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1)

Some argue, however, that past standards - including the Massachusetts ELA Standards that Stotsky herself promotes as being superior to the CCSS - also fail to mandate content. My opponents might therefore question how Stotsky’s standards could be considered an advance, given that Massachusetts ELA Standards and the CCSS are quite similar in their flexible conception of content. Guiding principle #3 of the Massachusetts ELA Standards, for example, states that “American students need to become familiar with works that are part of a literary tradition going back thousands of years. Thus, the curriculum should emphasize literature reflecting the literary and civic heritage of the English-speaking world.” (Stotsky, 2013, p.4) This language bears a striking resemblance to the CCSS’ statement about foundational knowledge.

Additionally, the introduction to the Massachusetts Standards states that “Teachers can use a number of factors in judging whether a text is appropriate and merits close study.” (Stotsky, 2013, p.22) Those who object to my argument are right, then, when they point out that other standards deemed superior to the CCSS also allow teachers to choose texts.iii

Yet noteworthy differences exist between the Massachusetts ELA Standards and the CCSS, differences that, in my view, expose the latter’s unclear description of the content about which students must make their arguments. Take, for example, the following CCSS 7th-grade literacy standard, which states the students must “Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in
Once again, the vagueness of the term “text” renders the standard vague and deprives the student of the “foundational knowledge” that the CCSS supposedly promotes. Teachers, after all, could choose from an almost infinitely large selection of texts, with little guarantee of literary quality. On the other hand, the Massachusetts ELA Grade 4 Reading Standard requires students to “Identify culturally significant characters and places in Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology (e.g., Athena, Apollo, Pan, Zeus, Jupiter, Mercury, Hades, Thor, Woton, Mt. Olympus, Valhalla, the river Styx).” And these content-specific standards continue up the grade ladder. A 10th grade reading standard in the same document asks students to “Analyze the characters, structure, and themes of classical Greek plays (e.g., Antigone, The Trojan Women).” (Stotsky, 2013, pp 43-44) The point here is that compared to the CCSS, the Massachusetts ELA Standards offer far more specificity of content, which in turn results in clearer guidance for teachers and students.

Another helpful model that provides more curricular guidance than the CCSS might be the AP French curriculum which outlines six major themes to which students are exposed. When examining, for example, the AP French theme of Global Challenges, students are given an excerpt from Emile Zola’s book The Belly of Paris, his first novel entirely on the working class. (Ladd, 2012). Students would consequently become able to make the connection between Zola’s novel and its overarching theme by focusing on the global challenge of class struggle. This is not to say that every AP French teacher must assign the same excerpt from the same book, but only that the common themes of the course ensure some degree of uniformity in every AP French class in the United
States. The CCSS authors, by contrast, fail to identify any such common theme in the standards themselves, thereby depriving teachers and students of the curricular consistency they need.

The point here is that mandating skills independently of specific content – or themes, at the very least – has little educative value, something that the CCSS authors have apparently failed to realize. As Stotksy claims, “What would give them [the standards] power would be a sequence of specific texts through the grades that show increasingly difficult or complex ideational content and other features specific to non-literary texts, or increasingly complex themes and features specific to literary texts. Moreover, these texts would have to have categorical, formal, and substantive connections to what had previously been read and to what will be read at a later date to provide the basis for an authentic curriculum or course of studies.” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1)

Put another way, the CCSS authors are mistaken in thinking that they can somehow divorce skill from the content that is needed to give those skills meaning. In Stotsky’s words, “The point is that it is not possible for a culture-free and content-empty skill set to generate authentic academic standards across the grades. A content-empty and culture-free skill set cannot serve as a curriculum framework.” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1) In sum, then, Stotsky correctly contends that the CCSS authors are wrong to omit a specific, substantive body of texts from the standards, and that this omission will not help to prepare students for the academic rigors of college life and beyond.

To be sure, defenders of the CCSS praise the standards for the very omission of specific content to which Stotksy objects. They argue that when designing curricula, districts and teachers figure to benefit rather than suffer from the choice that the CCSS
permits with respect to the content being assigned. Rishawn Biddle makes such an
argument in an editorial in a June edition of Dropout Nation, entitled “Sandra Stotsky’s
Baseless Common Core Myth Making.” Biddle praises the curricular flexibility that the
CCSS offer and calls Stotsky’s charge that CCSS fail to adequately specify curricular
content “off-target.” Biddle argues that rather than require teachers to teach specific
texts, the goal of the CCSS should be “to spur the development of a wide array of strong,
comprehensive college-preparatory curricula and in the process, end the longstanding
practice in American public education of allowing teachers, principals and districts to
develop their own curricula without a high-quality North Star to guide them.” In other
words, according to Biddle, the “wide array of strong, comprehensive college-preparatory
curricula” that the CCSS promote through their deliberately open-ended wording on
content will benefit K-12 students, so Stotsky is mistaken in her belief that the CCSS
authors should reduce teachers’ freedom by further specifying the standards’ content.
(Biddle, 2013, p.1)

Furthermore, whereas Stotsky wants to see more specific descriptions of content
in the standards, Biddle thinks that standards such as the CCSS can be more effective by
being paired with different kinds of relevant content rather than by defining the same
content for everyone. He claims that it is “sensible for states to work with districts and
others to ensure that they are developing and selecting curricula that matches up to
Common Core,” but that CCSS is justified in refusing to define common curriculum for
all. (Biddle, 2013, p.1) Biddle’s objection to Stotsky’s argument, then, is that though
she is right to insist upon content being included in the CCSS, this content does not have
to be the same – or even similar – for all schools. And even though the content in the
CCSS is not described as specifically as Stotsky would like, Biddle would contend that in fact, the CCSS are not, in Stotsky’s words, “content free.”

Yet even if Stotsky exaggerates in contending that the CCSS are “content free,” in my view, she is right to argue that good standards need consistency and similarity with respect to content from one grade to the next. To illustrate this point, it is instructive to examine Reading Standards #1 for 10th and 11th graders, the first of which asks students to “Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text,” and the second, which encourages them to “Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.” (CCSS, 2010, p. 40) These two standards describe quite well the skills that students are to develop, yet without mentioning the type of text to be studied - besides the fact that they are “informational” - the skills in these two standards could easily be exercised in very different, disconnected ways. According to these standards, 11th grade teachers would be justified in assigning a reading without having any idea of what was taught the previous year. And if such disconnects are the very problem that educators are currently trying to solve, then clearly there is a need for something else that will bridge the gap more effectively between grades. A simple corrective for the open-ended wording of these standards, then, would be to include the topic to be studied in each of them, perhaps with some idea about how the study of one subject in 10th grade would logically lead to the study of another in 11th grade.

After all, without such consistency, it will be hard to reduce the curricular mixed messages described in Chapter One. This consistency is important, for students who
move from state to state will be reassured that their new course of study will not differ vastly from the one they left behind. And colleges will know that incoming freshman have studied a certain body of content, which will in turn allow professors to elaborate upon arguments already made in college by expanding upon previously-studied material. Stotsky’s strongest claim, then, is that in order to make the “sound arguments on substantive issues” that the CCSS mandate, the content of those issues must not vary greatly from one school to another and must progress sequentially from one grade to the next. (Stotsky, 2010)

Even Biddle unwittingly concedes this point. In response to Stotsky’s argument that the CCSS should serve as a comprehensive curricular framework that includes specific articulation of content, Biddle acknowledges that the CCSS will only be “marginally successful” if they are not supported by curricula. As he puts it, “One of the very things Common Core supporters have made clear is that the standards on their own are meaningless without developing high-quality curricula that aligns with them.” (Biddle, 2013, p.1) Biddle here fails to see that he is agreeing with the main point of Stotsky’s critique of the CCSS, that they will lack sufficient academic heft unless “high-quality curricula” accompany them, from which it follows that those “high-quality curricula” should have been specified by the standards in the first place. In sum, then, Biddle acknowledges that good standards must include content, yet because he is reluctant to say what that content should be, the conception of content that he offers is too weak and variable.

In response to this criticism, Biddle might retort that competent teachers and districts can ensure the necessary quality control when selecting content, yet even if that
were true, the unspecific language of the standards would allow for confusion about what counts as “quality,” with some definitions conflicting with others. Simply put, because the CCSS authors fail to define a “quality” curriculum of their own through more content-specific language, the Common Core argument standards figure to be an ineffective measure of student competence.

To take another example of how the CCSS argument standards are weakened by the absence of content, consider again Appendix A of the standards, in which the authors assert that students should learn to make “sound arguments about substantive issues.” (CCSS, 2010, p.24) Most educators would probably agree with this statement, yet they would also wonder what these vaguely described “substantive issues” are, especially since the word “substantive” is obviously open to variable interpretations. A similar lack of clarity is found in the reading anchor standard 2, which requires that students be able to determine the “central ideas” of the texts they read and analyze “their development.” (CCSS, 2010, p.10) Once again, the problem with such a standard lies in its excessively open-ended wording, and even though the skill described in Standard 2 is crucial, the standard’s failure to specify the text’s literary or historical significance might leave teachers confused regarding text selection.

The CCSS argument standards would be more effective, then, if they offered clearer guidance about the content to be studied in conjunction with the skills they describe, and they almost do. Actually, the CCSS are quite similar to the impressive “college readiness” standards described by David Conly in his report entitled Understanding University Success. Yet Conly’s standards, in my view, are more substantive than the CCSS, because they offer a more comprehensive, content-rich model,
and as such, it is unfortunate that not all of these “college readiness” standards were included in the CCSS. As we have seen, Stotsky laments the omission of these content-rich standards from the CCSS as well, arguing that “the complete list of English standards in his report provides counter-evidence to the use of an exclusive list of culture-free and content-empty skills as the definition of college readiness in English or reading.” In particular, Stotsky points to Conly’s “standard D,” a standard that would have added the much needed content to the Common Core’s exclusively skill-based standards. Standard D states that “Successful students are familiar with a range of world literature.” They “demonstrate familiarity with major literary periods of English and American literature and their characteristic forms, subjects and authors,” they “demonstrate familiarity with authors from literary traditions beyond the English-speaking world,” and they “demonstrate familiarity with major works of literature produced by American and British authors." (Conly, 2003, p.23) Once again, the point here is not that the CCSS are completely ineffective, but rather that they would be more helpful to educators if, like Conly’s standards, they outlined foundational works of literature. This, in turn, would give students a strong foundational knowledge that they could use when writing their arguments.

Ultimately, then, it is not enough for standards to be effective in one class or another if educators wish to address the mixed messages from grade to grade that I described in Chapter One of this dissertation. The real need, in my view, is for standards to foster collective educational growth within and across schools by building upon common bodies of knowledge from one course to the next, and in order to do this, standards need to be more content-specific than are the CCSS. Put another way, to avoid
sending mixed messages to students, teachers must get on the same page, an idea that the CCSS authors implicitly support in mandating universal argumentation skills but do not promote sufficiently by failing to specify content. The problem is that teachers cannot get on the same page if the standards are so open-ended and lacking in specifics that the possibility of significantly divergent curricula still exists. In short, then, the CCSS authors are actually sending a mixed message of their own: Teach the same concepts, but apply them in vastly different ways to different content. In my view, the CCSS authors cannot have it both ways. Either they should mandate skills with appropriately-paired content, or they should not pretend to be setting meaningful standards at all.

Perhaps the CCSS authors believe that naming appropriate texts in the standards would be too confining for teachers, and that the standards’ omission of specific texts and themes is a strength rather than a weakness. Yet if that were their defense, the CCSS authors would be sending another mixed message, for while they claim that teachers should be able to choose their assigned texts, they also provide an extensive list of recommended works in sidebars and appendices. In other words, though the CCSS authors omit specific content from the standards, they nevertheless believe that some texts and subjects are more worthwhile than others, and that these texts and subjects need to be named in order to construct a meaningful curriculum. In Stotsky’s version of this point, “A tacit admission that the CCRS (Common Core Reading Standards) are incapable of generating a substantive curriculum framework is the placement of a sidebar on p. 31, the page where the CCRS are listed, on the importance of reading such high-quality texts as ‘the founding U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare’ and gaining a ‘reservoir of literary and cultural
knowledge.” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1) Simply put, the authors of the Common Core’s content-free argument standards seem implicitly to concede that they will only be effective if they are applied to certain types of texts, leaving one to wonder why more fully-defined content was not provided by the CCSS authors in the first place.

Skills are tied to content

Stotsky is right, then, when she claims that it is crucial to associate skills with relevant content, and that the CCSS often fail to do so. The principle that skills such as argument must be accompanied by appropriate content also underlies the criticism of CCSS made in Pathways to the Common Core by Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth and Christopher Lehman. It is true that Calkins et al. ultimately praise the CCSS as the best standards we have had to date because they focus on “much higher-level comprehension skills than did previous standards” and provide an “urgently-needed wake-up call” that our schools need. (Calkins et al., 2012, p.9) And I do not wish to go as far as Stotsky has in a recent article where she claims that the CCSS are “pedagogically worthless” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1), but I believe Calkins et al. make a valid criticism of the standards, and one that lends support to Stotsky’s complaints about the CCSS’ “content-free” nature, when they argue that mandating certain skills only makes sense if the content to which those skills are applied is identified.

To take one example, these authors bemoan the fact that the CCSS architects lump informational and literary texts together, as if the skills involved in reading and arguing about literature were the same as those necessary for reading and discussing non-fiction. As Calkins et al. state, “Because the information reading and literature standards are both
grounded in the same ten anchor standards and because each grade level’s standard from information reading has a mirror image in a standard for literature reading, every skill that is important to readers of informational texts must also be spotlighted in the literature reading standards.” (Calkins et. al., 2012, p.4) The authors correctly point out that the CCSS authors are mistaken in describing similar expectations for reading literature: “Is it really the case that in real life, fiction readers collect books by a single predetermined theme and then compare and contrast the points of view and craft moves in those books?” (Calkins et al., 2012, p. 5 ) Here, Calkins seems to suggest – and rightly so – that standards describing skill independently of content run the risk of making little sense, given that certain skills – i.e. “collecting books by a single predetermined theme” – cannot be matched to certain genres of text. Therefore, the CCSS authors could serve educators better by articulating a well-designed curriculum, which, as any teacher would argue, must include a specific sequence of certain subjects.

Assessment

Due to their unspecific wording, it is also unlikely that the current Common Core argument standards will prepare students thoroughly for the anticipated Common Core assessments. While the PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams are designed to measure students’ progress regarding the standards, there is no guarantee that that any of the CCSS’ “illustrative” texts will appear on the tests, given that these texts are simply recommended. One wonders, then, how a student would study for such an exam. Stotsky makes this point when she objects that “there is nothing in Common Core’s descriptive or explanatory material to indicate that the grade-level standards or the
illustrative titles provided in Appendix B will serve as the basis for common assessments. So far as we know, the basis for the common assessments will be the CCRS--the content-empty and culture-free skill set governing the grade-level ELA standards.” (Stotsky, 2010, p.1) Which books, then, would a student read in preparing for such an exam? On which literary periods would she focus? Once again, the CCSS authors fail to provide the answers to these questions.

Since the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments were created in isolation from the many different secondary school curricula that the Common Core’s content-free standards will permit, the CCSS and these two exams will probably leave a significant testing gap of their own. This disjunction is disturbing, for tests are not effective if they are completely disconnected from the curricula that they are supposed to evaluate. In examining this testing-curricular schism, it is worthwhile to remember Ralph Tyler’s argument in his book, Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction, in which he argues that one of the main goals of testing is to determine the success of a school’s curriculum. (Tyler, 1949) But if the curriculum of each school is different, which, as I have shown, the open-endedness of the CCSS makes all too likely, then each school will have to design its own exam in order to measure students’ prowess in its particular curriculum. One wonders, then, how the PARCC and Smarter Balanced exams can accurately assess the many different curricula that will potentially proliferate under the Common Core.

To put it simply, tests are only effective if they reflect what is defined in the curriculum and taught in the classroom. Currently, however, as the authors of the Bridge Project report remind us, there is a noticeable schism in secondary schools between tests and course content. (Antonio et al., 2003) Here one sees another reason why culturally-
rich content standards are needed to make the *Common Core* argument-based standards work, especially if educators wish to prepare students thoroughly for the *PARCC* and *Smarter Balanced* assessments. After all, in the absence of sophisticated, universal content standards, the effects of these two new assessments may turn out to be no better than those of the existing low-level content standards in classrooms across America. As the authors of the Bridge report state when referring to these earlier standards, “there is no guarantee that the content of reform will reflect high-quality standards and assessment tools. In a rush to reach consensus, reformers might settle for the lowest common denominator. Simply aligning current standards and assessments, especially if they are of poor quality or are not aligned with what is taught in the classroom, will not solve deeply entrenched problems.” (Antonio et al., 2003, p.46) In other words, students in classes aligned with the *Common Core* may learn skills in argument, yet if they are not familiar with the subject of the assessments they will have little chance of passing them.

Once again, it is essential that tests reflect the curriculum they are supposed to assess. Even self-described opponents of a national curriculum admit that the only way a national test would have any merit is if it were intimately tied to the common content standards. Elliot Eisner, for example, argues against a common national assessment, yet in doing so, he describes the only conditions under which a national exam would make sense. As he argues in *Should America Have a National Curriculum?*, a journal article written largely in response to the national education goals of George H.W. Bush, “the development of the *American Achievement Test* must surely be a forerunner to the creation of a national curriculum, since it seems unlikely that meaningful comparisons of students’ performance could be made if a common curriculum did not prepare youngsters
for such an examination.” (Eisner, 1991, p.1) Eisner seems to concede, then, that a CCSS-style test could only be meaningful if it were accompanied by uniform content standards.

The CCSS and Foundational Knowledge

As I have tried to show, the authors of the Common Core are sending mixed messages when they claim to outline what students should know while avoiding sufficient specificity about the materials that they need to study. Here, the CCSS authors seem conflicted, for while ostensibly arguing solely for skill acquisition, they also seem to prefer certain types of content over others. Throughout the document there are several references to the importance of a “foundational knowledge” that is essential for college and career readiness, but there is also the repeated assertion that teachers are free to choose whatever materials they wish. As mentioned before, however, the authors provide a recommended reading list for different grade levels, thus clearly indicating their preference for certain kinds of texts over others. The authors clearly favor canonical literature, as is made obvious in a footnote in the reading standards that states, “These texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare.” (CCSS, 2010a, p.35) Yet as I asked earlier, if one English department requires The DaVinci Code and another The Catcher in the Rye, will the CCSS authors deem students from both schools be equally prepared for the rigors of a college English class on Western Literature? Assuming that all students have met the CCSS skills in argument, the authors would answer “yes,” even though the CCSS’ recommended reading lists suggest otherwise.
Once again, my point is that the CCSS authors are mistaken to exclude language pertaining to foundational knowledge from the standards, and that this specific language regarding worthwhile materials would be more helpful if it were found in the standards rather than in sidebars and footnotes. This lack of specificity diminishes the standards’ clarity and usefulness to teachers and students. Take, for example, one of the reading standards for informational texts, which states that students must “compare and contrast the most important points presented by two texts on the same topic.” (CCSS, 2010, p.13) Many teachers would probably feel confused when reading this standard. “Which text should they study? Which topic?” they might ask in anguish. Clearly, then, the standards by themselves do not reflect the authors’ preference for canonical literature that is highlighted in the sidebars, and due to its omission of content, this argument standard is unable to offer the effective guidance that it could have otherwise offered had the content been included.

Yet it does not suffice to include content in some of the standards but not in others, and the CCSS authors seem to agree with me when they argue that foundational knowledge must develop logically within and across classes. As stated in one of the footnotes of the reading standards: “Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades.” (CCSS, 2010, p.10) If “rich content knowledge” must be developed throughout the school, then again it seems reasonable to demand that that same rich knowledge should be required from one school to the next, from one district to the next, and from one state to the next. This, in turn, implies that there should be some
uniformity and clear articulation with respect to what teachers should and should not teach.

To illustrate this inconsistency in the Common Core’s specification of content, it is helpful to compare the previously-mentioned vague standard (“compare and contrast the most important points presented by two texts on the same topic”) to the following 12th grade reading standard, which states that students must “demonstrate knowledge of 18th, 19th and early 20th century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.” (CCSS, 2010, p.40) One wonders, then, why the latter standard specifies content and the former one does not. Are students only responsible for “foundational works of American literature” by the time they get to 12th grade? If so, then what should they read beforehand? With the exception of a few detailed standards that accurately describe the “foundational knowledge” to be acquired, these are questions that the CCSS fail to answer, and as a result, neither teachers nor students know exactly what they are supposed to study. To sum up, educators must be bold enough to defend the teaching of certain particular texts across grade levels, something the CCSS authors almost do, but not quite.

In short, then, the fact that the Common Core focuses on argument is a good start, but if these standards are truly going to be effective, then more uniformity and clarity are required. In some standards, the authors of the CCSS describe foundational knowledge in adequate detail, yet in others they do not. Consider, for example, the following vague standards in the Common Core that, while addressing argument skills, fails to provide the necessary clarity to teachers: Under the CCSS, students in 8th grade are supposed to “compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing
structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.” (CCSS, 2010, p.36) This standard, described by Gerald Graff and Mike Schmoker as “bewildering” (Graff & Schmoker, 2011, p.1), is particularly confusing because it fails to mention the literary genre of the texts that should be read. In other words, the standard seems to suggest that any two, appropriately complex texts could be taught in conjunction with one another.

How can one argue without facts?

In response to these criticisms, however, defenders of the CCSS’ argument standards could reply that no real problem exists in standards that do not offer a prescribed list of accompanying texts. CCSS supporters might claim that the argument pedagogy promoted by the CCSS does not require content-rich standards because students themselves can find the content most relevant to the arguments they make. The students in Deanna Kuhn’s previously-mentioned study on dialogic argumentation (see Chapter Two), for example, who were motivated by a desire to win a debate, asked teachers for the further information – that is, the content – they felt they needed in order to prove their points. Furthermore, students were successful in retaining this information, given that a strong knowledge of the facts was essential in order to win the argument. (Kuhn, 2010) In sum, then, Kuhn’s research may suggest to some that since argument cannot exist without content, and that since making a good argument and knowing the information relevant to it are inseparable, a pre-selected corpus of material is therefore not necessary in order to measure students’ academic prowess.
Conclusion

In my view, the main problem with the Common Core State Standards is that they lack the vertical alignment of culturally-rich content that would create a clearer curriculum guide for teachers and students. In other words, the standards are not “standard” enough, and because of their vague wording, it is ironic that a document entitled the Common Core is neither sufficiently “common,” nor does it provide an adequate “core” of overarching texts or themes. Contrary to their aims, then, these standards are likely to cause further confusion.
Chapter Four: If Other Countries Have National Content Standards Why Can’t We?

After reading the last three chapters, my critics might offer the following objection: “What you propose might make sense theoretically, but in reality it can never be done. Teachers will never agree to get on the same page to the extent they would have to in order to conform to the national content standards you propose, especially in a decentralized country like the USA where teacher autonomy and individual freedom are preferred over the ‘one-size-fits-all’ straight jacket that such national content standards would represent. After all, national content standards could not possibly do justice to American students’ many different racial, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, so forcing all of them to study similar texts would be insensitive and disadvantageous. The Common Core, on the other hand, with its limited skill-based argument standards, variable conceptions of content, and respect for teacher freedom is the appropriate response for a pluralist, individualist country like the USA.”

Yet if the ultimate goal of standards is improved education, I would argue that we are not likely to achieve it unless we guarantee a certain amount of curricular uniformity. To gain some perspective on the issue, it would seem reasonable to look to the scholarship on countries whose educational standards have proven to be successful. One such study is Martin Carnoy’s book entitled Cuba’s Academic Advantage, which provides a compelling case for the adoption of national content standards. In his examination of Latin American countries, Carnoy explains why Cuban students outperform their peers from Brazil and Chile, two countries with decentralized, locally-developed curricula. Carnoy, identifying the main reason for the country’s success,
points to Cuba’s strict “implementation of the curriculum” and “teachers” who feel “competent and responsible to deliver a well-defined national curriculum.” (Carnoy, 2007, p.2)

Besides Cuba, several countries whose students outperform American students have national content standards, or at least have content guidelines that teachers are expected to follow. Finland, for example, a country ranked #1 in education in several polls, has a national core curriculum “which includes the identification of the core subjects, curriculum frameworks and a clear definition of how much time each topic should be allocated.” (NCEE, 2013, p.1) South Korea, another highly ranked country, also has a national curriculum that, like Finland, specifies not only the content to be studied, but the amount of time to be spent on each subject per school year. Finally, Australia, a country that is significantly larger and more diverse than both Finland and South Korea, implemented a national curriculum in 2008 and already by 2009, scores in reading, math, and science were all superior to those in the United States. (NCEE, 2013)

Not only are national content standards in these countries helpful to students, but teachers benefit from them as well. In Cuba, for example, teachers are trained to deliver their country’s national curriculum, and as a result, they are not subject to the curricular mixed messages in American schools that I described in Chapter One. Put another way, Cuban teachers know exactly what they are supposed to teach because their country’s national curriculum ensures that they have already learned it. In support of this point, Carnoy argues that in Cuba, “Teachers have greater content knowledge because of the greater amount of content they learned in primary and secondary school.” (Carnoy, 2007, p. 83) Carnoy goes on to praise Cuba’s national curriculum for what he calls the
“virtuous circle” effect: teachers are better prepared to teach content because as students, they receive strong instruction, not just in skills such as argument, but in the content area that they will eventually teach. (Carnoy, 2007, p.83)

“Granted,” some might argue, “uniform content standards might work for a totalitarian state like Cuba, but they would never work in a diverse democracy like the USA.” In response to this objection, I would never argue that America must become a totalitarian state in order to implement national content standards. Rather, I would contend that education policy in the USA would not need to reach totalitarian degrees of uniformity in order to take away valuable lessons from this small country whose national curriculum has proven to be more successful than the decentralized education systems in Brazil and Chile. In Carnoy’s version of this point, "the path to better education in democratic societies need not be a turn to authoritarianism. The lessons we have drawn from the Cuban experience do suggest, however, that the state has to be much more of a guarantor of quality education for all.” (Carnoy, 2007, p.157) Here, Carnoy is simply arguing for quality control which, in my view, need not amount to a national political restructuring. But to improve education significantly, we need to better articulate the content that our students should study.

But still, wouldn’t emulating national content standards in the countries I have mentioned be too confining for teachers in the United States, who are used to a good deal of relative autonomy? The striking thing about countries with national curricula, however, is that their teachers have more autonomy than one might expect. Teachers in Finland, for example, earn a high degree of respect through their rigorous teacher training programs, which, in turn, allows them to retain a great deal of autonomy when designing
their lesson plans, provided that these plans meet the strict criteria outlined in the national curriculum. Furthermore, the French system could not be more centralized, yet French educators are nevertheless able to exercise a great deal of curricular freedom within its constraints. The French minister of education, after all, cannot fully inspect every class of every school to make sure that teachers are using exactly the same materials, so teachers still retain a considerable degree of choice when it comes to text selection even though they are expected to assign some common texts. Looking at the French and Finnish models, then, educators need not worry that a national curriculum will eliminate teacher autonomy; rather, these models guarantee – more so than the “illustrative” texts of the CCSS - that certain subject matter will be taught, thereby reducing curricular mixed messages like those described in Chapter One.

The point here is that teacher freedom is compatible with effective education, but only if it does not come at the expense of a common curricular point of departure. (By "common curricular point of departure," I mean either the same text or the same theme/topic, which could encompass several texts. Every history class, for example, should be expected to cover the topic of the American Revolution, but not every history class should have to read Howard Zinn's interpretation of it). Writing about the French education system, H.D. Lewis notes the happy medium between curricular freedom and commonality that must exist in order to provide meaningful education. Lewis quotes one of the circulars from the Minister of Education, which states that “people misunderstand liberty if, in an effort to foster it, they fail to provide the child with the means to exercise it. Ignorance has nothing to do with originality and it is not liberating.” (Lewis, 1985, p.17) Lewis elaborates on this balance of freedom and accountability when he observes
that middle school students in France retain a small percentage of time for optional courses, even as their nationally required courses help ensure that – unlike the CCSS - “all pupils will be in possession of a culture common to the majority of future… citizens.” (Lewis, 1985, p.62) France’s curriculum, in other words, makes room for academic freedom in its content standards, but in a structured and clear way that makes sense to those involved. If the CCSS authors followed these models in other countries, American colleges would be surer that incoming freshman will have been exposed to both a certain body of knowledge as well as the argument skills necessary to think critically about them, and this will, in turn, help to eliminate the high school – college gap described in Chapter One.

Conclusion

As a former French teacher, I have come to recognize that there are certain “classic” texts that have existed in the curriculum as far back as I can remember. Right now, the one that comes to mind is The Little Prince, by Antoine de St.-Exupéry. For many reasons, I applaud the fact that every student who takes a third year of French at the school where I teach is required to read this book. First of all, the book has received much well-deserved praise and stood the test of time. Additionally, while eight-year-old children are able to appreciate the novel, adults can benefit from it as well. Finally, since the book is mandatory for all students of French 3, teachers of French 4 can reference The Little Prince with the knowledge that every student in their classrooms has already read it and is therefore able to contribute to an argument about the book.
Many students in French 3 who read *The Little Prince* remember it years after. I remember one student of mine in particular, Thomas, who enrolled in *Advanced French Communication*. Even though he had not read the book for two years, Thomas would often refer to it in class, using it as evidence for an assertion about the topic that was currently being discussed. If, for example, we were discussing the theme of appearance versus reality, or the importance that many misguided people place on material objects, Thomas would quote the fox from *The Little Prince*, who says that what is most important is invisible to the eyes. (St. Exupery, 1947) But Thomas wouldn’t stop there – he would impersonate other characters from the book, quote other well-known passages, and draw pictures of various scenes. The point here is that had he not been required to read it, Thomas would never have grown to love it as much as he did. And had his classmates not been required to read this timeless work, they would never have understood what Thomas was talking about. *The Little Prince* helped to enrich debates and arguments in *Advanced French Communication*, not only because Thomas had to read it, but because all students had been exposed to the same text two years before. And the skills that students applied to the arguments made about *The Little Prince* would have never developed into anything of value had they not been fueled by the collective knowledge of St. Exupery’s wonderful novel.

What if, like Thomas and his classmates in *Advanced French Communication*, all students in American schools were exposed to mandated content? Would schools become homogenized institutions of oppression, as many fear they would? Or rather, having a common point of departure, would students still be free to engage in the collective exploration of ideas? Not only would common content standards reduce the confusion
described in Chapter One, but they would also allow students to engage in more meaningful discussions, for those discussions would have common reference points for people who might come from different schools and different states. Imagine that Thomas goes to college and meets somebody else who has studied French. Imagine as well that Thomas’ new friend has not read *The Little Prince*, even though his school has exposed him to the *Common Core* argument standards. Would the two students be able to discuss the book? Absolutely not. All of the argument skills in the world will not make up for a lack of content knowledge.

Ultimately, then, the CCSS’ goal of “college and career readiness” will be better achieved if incoming college freshmen have a common curricular point of departure. The argument standards in the *Common Core* are a good start, for they describe the argumentation skills such as gathering evidence, summing up a claim, and exposing alternate points of view. But unless all students have experience arguing about some of the same topics – topics that are more worthwhile than others – the *Common Core*’s laudable goal of “college and career readiness” cannot be fully reached.

Ultimately, then, the arguments I have been making in this dissertation amount to a case for a national curriculum. Such a common curriculum would be a major improvement over the current *Common Core* argument standards which, while specifying skills that students should acquire by the end of each grade, fail to describe in detail the common texts or topics that students *must* learn. And as I have suggested throughout this dissertation, only by increasing the degree of curricular commonality can educators improve the performance of K-12 students and sufficiently prepare them for college and life beyond.
i I wish to thank Gerald Graff for calling my attention to this report, and I would also like to note that he and Cathy Birkenstein draw on it heavily in their current work.

ii In criticizing this standard, many concerned K-3 educators have pointed out that out of the 135 people on the Common Core panels, not one of them was an early childhood educator. “The people who wrote these standards do not appear to have any background in child development or early childhood education,” wrote Stephanie Feeney of the University of Hawaii, chair of the Advocacy Committee of the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators. (Carlsson-Paige & Miller, 2013)

iii While I largely agree with Stotsky’s claims, I must point out a contradiction in her argument: on one hand, she asserts that the CCSS do not offer enough guidance with respect to content, but on the other, she criticizes the standards’ text complexity formula for precluding teachers from selecting content themselves. Stotsky claims in the following excerpt of an article entitled “The Common Core State Standards are Pedagogically Useless” that such a complexity formula is no replacement for professional judgment, especially because the results of a formula and teachers’ opinions will often contradict one another: “In one of several applications of CM in Appendix A to show its supposed usefulness, readers are given the percentiles for its five factors for an excerpt from The Grapes of Wrath. We are also given the results of applying two well-known formulas (Flesch-Kincaid and Lexile) to the excerpt, both of which place it at grades 2-3 in reading level. After describing the excerpt as "extremely easy" on the basis of most quantitative measures, Common Core correctly notes that "qualitative measures" (i.e., professional judgment) place it appropriately at grades 9-10. Clearly, that is all that was needed to begin with.” Stotsky, then, cannot have it both ways — if she faults the standards for not being sufficiently content-specific, then logically she cannot also fault them for depriving teachers of the freedom to choose texts.
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