AFTERWORD

Countering the Naysayers—Independent Writing Programs as Successful Experiments in American Education

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ONE

We are conditioned by countless negative perspectives on American education, on the corrupt nature of our political institutions, on the bleak future for individual consciousness, on the failed experiment in nation-building that began a relatively brief two hundred years ago. Poets, novelists, historians, philosophers, literary critics, educators, and many others have passed judgment on these situations as if they are permanent facts of existence without the possibility of improving themselves. For these critics, pessimism outweighs optimism. In almost any direction we turn, we hear voices of doom, none more gloomy than Allen Ginsberg's. Writing in 1959, for example, he opens an essay with this assessment:

> Recent history is the record of a vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind and exterminate all manifestations of that unique part of human sentience, identical in all men, which the individual shares with his Creator. The suppression of contemplative life is nearly complete. (3)

For Ginsberg, poetry is not only the refuge for "contemplative life," but it is also a place beckoning "those who've entered the world of the spirit." It is an escape from deadening and corrupting modern life for the artist.

Rather than cite examples of negative perspectives *ad nauseam* on various American institutions, this essay will focus instead on something positive–namely, independent writing programs as successful experiments in higher education. Many readers already know the arguments against these programs, ranging from the position that the costs are prohibitive, that faculty are either untrained or lack appropriate professional credentials, to the position that freestanding departments deprive students of exposure to the liberal arts, most notably to literature. Readers of this book can

see these perspectives at work in Chris Anson's story about the independent program at the University of Minnesota that was dissolved, despite evidence supporting its effectiveness. In Section Two of *A Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies*, Anson speculates that the reasons for this dismantling were not only financial but also something that Barry Maid calls Academic Fundamentalism. As explanation, Anson offers an argument from one of the English professors that quite possibly alarmed university administration into shutting down the writing program.

> The field of composition is likely to lose its heritage in the tradition of rhetorical studies that evolved into literary criticism and to lose touch with the finer workings of our language by which even the earliest groping efforts are tuned. (Do you know what happens to people who spend most of their reading time between the language of "remedial" students and the language of irremediable behavioral scientists?' (Manning, qtd in Anson 165)

Anson reasons that Manning's text was "less a plea for keeping composition allied with literary study than a rejection of the very questions that composition scholars and teachers continue to ask in their professional work, chief among them how to help struggling writers, those 'remedial students' whose writing no good literary specialist wants to read" (165).

Rather than simply go along with the way in which pessimism has answered optimism about this experiment at Minnesota, it seems more useful to lend one's problem-solving abilities to working on our educational institutions, specifically to the universities that are experimenting with independent programs as a way of educating students in the fundamentally important skill of writing. Experiments do not always succeed, nor do they always fail. But what they do is presuppose a critique of the status quo. As I hope to suggest, *A Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies* contributes information, along with vital perspectives toward the experiment in progress in American education, particularly with reference to independent writing programs as a logical home for writing education in postsecondary education today. Both the ongoing development of our political institutions and the fact that several educational institutions have changed their stance on where writing should be taught has emboldened me to ask: "Why not have more and more independent departments and programs of writing in the United States?"

TWO

A Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies is not deliberately controversial. Its purpose is not to plot a course for the development of independent writing programs, nor is it to malign English departments to make ourselves look good in comparison. (What would make this book "upsetting" would be a critique of "dependent" writing programs. Critiques of English studies exist, and one can find them without any trouble in bookstores and libraries.) Our book looks elsewhere. We had a different reason for putting together this book, and we wanted a chance to speak our minds about our freestanding department at Georgia Southern University, where we remain optimistic about the unit's future. Today, as was true five years ago, we are optimistic because the department has the sanction and ongoing support of the university (the university would not have created the department of Writing and Linguistics in order to see it fail), and while the unit was in its early years, it made sense for us to see who else was in our situation. It seemed natural to look outward for signs of similar forms of life. We wondered if we were by ourselves, so to speak.

In short, *A Field of Dreams* is not a book that attacks English departments, communication arts departments, academic success centers, developmental studies departments, or any other sites where students take writing courses. But it is ambitious. This book is about problems that face those of us who belong to independent programs. Even departments that run smoothly had their share of problems along the way, bumps in the road, unforeseen "things," most of which they overcame, worked around or through (e.g., Harvard, Hampden-Sydney, Winnipeg).

More to the point, this book is ambitious because of what it implies about the future. The time may be coming when high school students make their college choices on the basis of the first-year writing program, the usefulness of the writing minor, the attractiveness of courses required for the writing major, the reputations of the writing faculty, the resources for writing students (e.g., "smart" classrooms, laptop access, writing scholarships, internships, opportunities for interdisciplinary concentrations that feature writing courses, to name a few). The time will come when "writing" courses will look completely different from the way that they look today. Independent departments have already given faculty a fresh way of thinking about what it means to teach writing, and they have given students increased opportunities for developing themselves as writers. These are implications that need underscoring. They

constitute perhaps the major argument for supporting independent departments of writing. The goal of producing excellent writers within independent departments means that the department can plan a curriculum that aims at putting students through writing and rhetoric courses that round them out as writers. This goal presupposes a writing curriculum that exists in few, if any, English departments. In addition to rhetorical knowledge and skills courses in professional and technical writing, the courses for writing students include electives from many departments. Writers need the freedom to read what interests them and what serves their desires as emerging intellectuals, whether the reading comes from literature, history, art, art history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, business, or health and professional fields.

THREE

Only because they are in their infancy, independent departments are in the experimental stage at Georgia Southern University, Grand Valley State University, San Diego State University, the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and Arizona State University East. The Ph.D. program in rhetoric and composition at Syracuse University is in its teens. Hampden-Sydney's program is a kid, too, in comparison with Harvard's Expository Writing Program, which is probably the oldest continuing program in the United States. (Harvard's program underwent a significant transformation in the late 1980's, which changed the one-course requirement into a thematic offering that allowed teachers freedom within general constraints. According to Nancy Sommers, the program's director, the changes have met with enthusiasm by all parties, including upper administration.)

Certainly, the mentality in an independent department is different from what one will find in many English departments. One reason for the difference is the make-up of faculty–i.e., independent departments like Grand Valley's or Georgia Southern's have created a community of scholars in writing studies bolstered by hires with Ph.D.'s in rhetoric and composition. In the 1990's, for example, Grand Valley State hired eight tenure-track faculty in rhetoric and composition. Between 1997 and 2002, Georgia Southern University hired thirteen assistant professors, ten of whom hold Ph.D.'s in rhetoric and composition. Syracuse University boasts ten tenure-track faculty in rhetoric and composition.

A second reason for the different mentality has to do with departmental autonomy. Independent writing programs write their own policy

manuals, including tenure and promotion guidelines. They develop curricula, design courses, and build up areas of faculty expertise that most likely would not enjoy support in English departments. The Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University, for example, has hired two faculty in technical and professional writing, one in computers and writing, one in gender studies and identity issues, one in cultural studies, one in minority studies and writing, one in the history of rhetoric and composition, one in assessment, one in creative writing, one in writing center administration, and two in linguistics. What English department would hire in all of these areas? What English department would share the same vision of the future in writing studies or uphold the same values when it comes to putting "writing" on equal footing with "literature"? Following this train of thought, what English department would not perceive itself threatened when it witnessed an independent department of writing growing and garnering support from the university administration? In time, independent departments of writing will declare that their majors and their "writers" are different from majors and "writers" produced within English departments. The time will come when independent departments will assert that their writers are not only different, but that they are "better" than writers produced within English departments. One has only to read Turner and Kearns's article in this collection to understand how independent writing programs could profit from aligning themselves with the concept of the "civic rhetorician," who is not only guided by rhetoric's "internal standards of completion and perfection," but who also "practices his art responsibly, aware that his rhetorical choices will have consequences not only for himself but also for his auditors and for the community they both inhabit" (this volume, 90). In other words, the "experiment" in independent programs might well focus on the public rhetor as its identity for the future.

FOUR

At this moment in the history of American education, it is hard to imagine contributors to this book–at least those who are from independent units—asserting that independent programs produce better writers than English departments. To the best of my knowledge, none of the independent departments represented in *A Field of Dreams* makes this claim to superiority. But perhaps they should. Perhaps the time has come to ask where students should go to reach their potential as writers, and

while we are asking the question of "where" students should go, we should also ask questions about our definition of good writing and good writers.

In separate articles within this volume, Jane Hindman and Angela Crow identify three requirements that must be met before independent departments can focus without distractions on their work as writing teachers in independent departments. The first requirement has to do with labor issues, more specifically with who teaches writing, what their qualifications are for teaching writing, and how these faculty will be held accountable for the writing instruction they have been charged to deliver in different areas of writing, which include creative writing, writing in the workplace, journalism, academic writing, and rhetoric. The second requirement is resources (money for travel, supplies, equipment, books, to name a few) that speak loudly on behalf of a commitment from the institution for instruction in writing. Finally, the third requirement is leadership. Independent departments need visionaries who are willing to call for changes that will improve upon what constitutes a top-notch writing education. When these requirements have been met, independent departments will be able to proclaim that they serve a purpose different from that of English departments. Then independent departments can say that they give students and teachers the freedom needed to foreground writing practices that are either housed in or identified with centers, degree programs, concentrations, clusters, minors, interdisciplinary alliances, teacher development, and classrooms. When all requirements have been met, members of independent departments of writing will have discovered a new mentality–a refreshing mentality—out of which they conduct their professional lives. Who is to say that this new mentality is not already making a positive difference in the lives of students and teachers?