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## THE ORIGINS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ACADEMIC, CREATIVE, AND PROFESSIONAL WRITING AT GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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There has been a great deal of discussion recently about the decline and fall of literature, about the lost agenda and corruption of the humanities, about our embattled profession. Andrew Delbanco opens a November 1999 article in the *New York Review of Books* with a stinging anecdote meant to explain something about how funds are allocated for faculty positions. He tells about a Berkeley provost who warns, “On every campus there is one department whose name need only be mentioned to make people laugh; you don’t want that department to be yours” (32). Delbanco insists that we all know which department that is these days.

What can make one department a laughingstock involves a nest of complexities. As the list of seven books under Delbanco’s review might indicate, the debate is not just about the discipline of English, but about social agendas, the humanities, the unity of a discipline, literature itself, and jobs. The “rise and fall of English,” as Robert Scholes describes it, has occurred over the last century, but of course the antecedents of some of these conflicts are found even among the debates of ancient thinkers. Delbanco’s point, and the point of Scholes and perhaps others whose books he reviews, is that the time has come to restructure a discipline that has for too long taken itself for granted and lost touch with viable purposes and social commitments.

The formation of a separate department of academic, creative, and professional writing at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) reflects much of this current discussion—as well as its history. Our narrative affirms and broadly illuminates many of the general themes present in Scholes and other accounts of the conflicted state of affairs in the humanities and in English. However, our discussion also shines a

directed light on three disciplinary functions that mark off contended boundaries in this ongoing conversation about English studies in general—and the viability of separate departments of writing in particular. These three functions—academic, creative, and professional writing—represent curriculum and activities within a department, but they also stand for larger purposes within the university, disciplinary activities, and social commitments beyond the campus boundaries.

#### ACADEMIC WRITING: SHOULD WE? WOULD WE?

It's largely with issues related to academic writing where the bid for a separate department of writing at GVSU began. First it's important to understand how much things had changed in the English department during the decade leading up to final approval of the new department. Back in 1990, the department, like many other English departments around the country, prepared for its first hire of a rhetoric/composition specialist. Certainly the department had its share of faculty interested in composition; such faculty had created both a writing center and a writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) program in the mid-1970s, and by the late 1980s several faculty regularly attended and presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) and other professional conferences. Everyone in the department taught composition, usually every semester. But the university was growing rapidly; the department began hiring three to five new tenure-track faculty a year; more and more part-timers needed to be hired; and the composition directorship was no longer a simple job that could be passed casually from colleague to colleague. Soon these versatile English faculty—who still considered their main job to be teaching literature—took stock and decided to draw on the emerging pool of new rhetoric/composition Ph.D.'s. As in many English departments around the country, the initial thought was simply to hire one or two composition specialists who could direct the program and keep the other faculty abreast of the latest developments in the field.

The first hire lasted only two years. After being asked to take over the campuswide WAC program during her second semester, she simply burned out—a fate shared by many lone compositionists. Roger was hired in 1992, and he fared better. He became composition director in 1993 and was promptly asked to restructure the program. The administration—does this sound familiar?—had heard too many complaints about low standards and inconsistency across sections of first-year composition.

Over the next two years the first-year composition courses were refocused, and a junior-level writing-in-the-disciplines (WID) course was added. Together with several colleagues, Roger initiated team-graded course portfolios and published a formal student guide, featuring course goals, sample assignments, grading criteria, and student papers. The department faculty started to see that having a “specialist” around meant a couple of things: one, they didn’t really have to think about the composition program much anymore because Roger ran it—which was good; and two, the course wasn’t much fun to teach anymore because now they had portfolio groups and grading guidelines and brown-bag lunches and all sorts of other things they hadn’t had before that seemed to interfere with what they had been doing—which was bad.

Several of the faculty who’d been interested in composition during the 1970s and 80s remained interested and active in the program. But others lost interest; and as the university continued to grow, their teaching load moved more and more toward literature, linguistics, and English education courses anyway. The department continued to hire rapidly, two or three faculty a year, and most years one of those faculty was a rhetoric/composition person. Dan came along in 1995, when the new program that Roger and others had created went into effect. By this time some faculty had become openly resistant to the portfolio groups, and the chair of the department found it much easier simply not to assign such faculty to composition. In fact, in one faculty meeting Roger made his own position clear: he really didn’t want faculty to teach composition who didn’t *want* to teach composition. He’d much rather work with the adjunct faculty who, despite their low wages—or perhaps because of their low wages—seemed perfectly willing to work together as members of a program.

This was an important turning point. Before then, composition was a necessary chore, made more palatable simply by its being a required part of the job. As one literature faculty member later described it, teaching composition was like cleaning the toilet. No one liked doing it, but knowing that everyone in the house had to do it made it seem okay. But surely no one wanted to be the *only* one who had to do it. It had to be everyone—or no one.

Now Roger and Dan were running the composition program and saying they didn’t mind if people chose not to teach it. Portfolio-group grading became a required part of the course, computer classrooms were being used for all three of the composition courses, a new writing center

director had come along, and now writing center tutors were a required part of every class. In 1996, Roger and Dan instituted directed self-placement. That same year the program created a new position, a full-time “composition fellow,” designed more like a postdoctoral program in teaching writing than a dead-end visiting position. By 2000, they had filled nine such positions—and these composition fellows were moving on to solid tenure-track jobs at other institutions. It was a non-tenure-track position that really seemed to work. In the meantime, ever since the 1995 revision of the program, Roger, and later Dan, made it a point to report annually to the university curriculum committee and the vice provost. Things were going well, the reports said. Very well. More rhetoric/composition folks were hired—one each in 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000.

In the ten years since 1990, the look and feel of the composition program had changed utterly. Now there were *eight* rhetoric/composition specialists teaching and working in the program, and there really was something that could rightly be called a *program*. The program offered nearly 150 sections a year, taught almost exclusively by rhetoric/composition faculty, full-time composition fellows, and part-time adjuncts.

That was the upside. The downside was that almost none of the other thirty-five or so English faculty chose to teach composition. Some did, either out of a lingering sense of duty or continued interest—or perhaps simply because of a canceled literature seminar. But from the administration’s point of view, not enough tenure-track faculty were teaching composition to justify the steady stream of hires that had been given to the English department over the years. It appeared that composition was very low on the department’s priority list, and by the spring of 1998 the administration made it clear to the English chair that in order for the department to continue receiving those new positions, the tenure-track faculty had better start teaching more composition.

At this point, the department held two meetings devoted to the twin issues of growth and composition staffing, and these meetings evolved into a summer task force charged with investigating various options for restructuring the English department, which in turn evolved into a proposal to form a separate department of writing. But even at that first meeting, the issues seemed clear enough. There were only three ways to increase the percentage of tenure-track faculty teaching composition: insist that more faculty teach it, hire new faculty to teach it, and/or reduce the number of sections we offer. The first two options meant increasing the size of an already large department—forty tenure-track

faculty, twelve full-time visitors, and twenty-five to thirty part-time adjuncts—so the department also had to discuss ways of administering a department that had grown well beyond what any faculty could have imagined only ten or twelve years earlier.

Most of the literature faculty resisted the first option. They were teaching what they were best at—literature—and, after all, the department now had *specialists* around who could and should teach most of the composition. Best to have the compositionists teach two or even three sections a term and hire a few more to join them. Option three also made sense: perhaps we could eliminate the basic writing class or attach it to the writing center somehow and grant composition waivers to some of our brighter students, and pretty soon we'd have a healthy percentage of first-year composition courses being taught by tenure-track faculty, and we wouldn't even have to add many faculty to the ranks. Smiles and backslapping all around.

Not surprisingly, eliminating courses and granting waivers didn't seem like the best answer to us rhetoric/composition faculty. We resisted the idea of changing the foundation of a program that had actually begun to work. Even at this first meeting, the rhetoric/composition faculty argued from the basis of creating a writing-oriented *community* of teachers, either inside or outside the English department. We could support going back to insisting that all English faculty teach composition, but we'd expect all of the faculty to participate in the program and community that we had begun to build up. Nobody could slip back into the old "Intro to Lit" composition course. Composition—and writing in general—would have to be recentered in a department of faculty who increasingly defined themselves according to specialty area. The department offered more sections of composition than any other kind of course, so in a literal sense composition already was at the center of the department's work. Certainly the administration viewed us that way. But there would have to be a rather radical adjustment in the minds of the majority of English faculty for this recentering to occur.

On the other hand, the rhetoric/composition faculty wouldn't mind teaching more composition ourselves and hiring more new faculty to join us, but we wanted to do so within the context of a whole department that was behind it, in an academic culture that was supportive. If the English department didn't want to make composition a central part of its identity, it would be a never-ending source of tension, and it would be difficult to develop writing as a central, departmental focus. We knew

that composition deserved to be at the center of some department on campus; if not English, then perhaps a new department—a department of writing.

It is important to keep in mind that after our programmatic successes of the 1990s, the rhetoric/composition faculty felt very good about our relationship with the rest of the campus community, particularly the administration. Our association with the composition program benefited us in that larger community. The English chair understood this, and during this first season of departmental discussions she discouraged the notion of dividing the department. Much of the department's budget, and many of the new faculty positions, could be traced to the composition program, which was the economic center, if not the curricular center, of the department. English was one of the two or three largest departments on campus, in large part due to the 150 sections of composition printed in the schedule book every year; and though the size of the department made it increasingly difficult to manage, the chair understood that removing composition from the department would dramatically reduce the department's overall presence on campus.

Despite her resistance to the idea of splitting the department, the English chair did want everyone to understand the implications of whatever decisions were made; and at the end of the 1997–98 academic year she circulated a document that ended up turning the tide toward the formation of a separate department. In order to highlight the implications of sharing the responsibility for composition instruction, she reworked the fall 1998 schedule, for illustration only, with everyone in the department teaching at least one composition course. What would a schedule look like where everyone taught one section? But this was after the fall 1998 faculty schedule had been fully arranged and printed, so to virtually all of the faculty the mock schedule represented a loss of some plum class, or at least a class in their specialty area. The faculty were horrified. Since we normally don't offer contracts to adjuncts until shortly before each term, the fall schedule gets printed with "Staff" typed in next to most of the composition classes. Now, in this illustration schedule, "Staff" had been typed in next to British literature surveys and linguistics classes—even modernism seminars and the capstone course! The faculty were aghast.

The talk turned to faculty specialties and the principle of staffing classes with the most qualified people. Clearly, argued the British literature, linguistics, modernism, and capstone faculty, we best serve our students by staffing classes with faculty with the most training in the course

material. And surely we owe it to our English majors to staff our own English *electives* with tenure-track faculty, not adjuncts.

Nearly everyone agreed that in this age of increasing specialization, the sensible thing to do was to staff classes according to specialty. Someone asked the chair if she'd really make us follow this revised schedule. No, she assured us, it was just an illustration. Relief spread through the room like a cool breeze. In that one moment, as faculty members relaxed their shoulders for the first time in days, the main issue was clearly settled: the majority of the English faculty would *not* support any plan requiring the universal teaching of composition.

#### WHAT IS THE JOB OF A RHETORIC/COMPOSITION PH.D.?

But then the department returned to the issue of composition staffing. On the same principle of staffing courses by specialty, was it not best to staff composition classes with compositionists? If we had unstaffed sections of Shakespeare, surely we'd hire more Shakespearians. So since we had unstaffed sections of composition, the argument went, we should obviously hire more compositionists. This line of reasoning held some appeal to us all, and we compositionists could well imagine a much different department of the near future, one with fifteen or twenty rhetoric/composition specialists in a department grown to fifty-five or sixty tenure-track faculty. Given the administrative mandate for more tenure-track faculty in composition classes and the generally favorable regard in which we were held around the campus, moving toward such an English department certainly seemed a possibility.

As unexpected and tantalizing as this possibility was, we weren't sure that it was exactly what we wanted. Really we thought of ourselves as *writing* specialists, or rhetoric and composition specialists, as opposed simply to *composition* specialists. First-year composition was a part of what we did and was a central part of our identity, but it was not *all* that we did. Indeed, many of us had extensive graduate preparation in creative writing, business writing, and technical writing, as well as in the history and theory of rhetoric. To define our hiring so narrowly around composition seemed somehow to play too neatly into the needs and desires of those faculty who had already washed their hands of the work we hoped to elevate into something more than a mere chore.

We also believed, just as we would have a hard time drawing top job candidates to teach exclusively "Intro to Shakespeare," we would likely have a hard time drawing top candidates to teach exclusively first-year

composition. And we wondered if such candidates would be eager to join a department that so clearly cordoned off the “chore” of composition teaching and left it to the minority of faculty willing to teach it. Would such a department be a healthy one? Even comprising a third of the department, would the rhetoric/composition faculty play a prominent role in the academic and intellectual life of the department, or would we form a kind of large ghetto at the center of a happily thriving suburban literary landscape? Would it be too easy at some point to simply section us off and staff us as a service unit?

It was not an easy issue to resolve. On the one hand we wanted to embrace the teaching of composition as the center of our work, but we still wanted more than anything to place it at the center of our *department's* work—not just at the center of *some* of the faculty's work. Even if we did find tenure-track faculty to teach almost exclusively composition and even if we agreed to do so ourselves, we finally decided we weren't much interested in doing it within a department that had so clearly rejected the teaching of composition. At one point Dan said to the department that if everyone agreed to teach one composition section a year—which would have doubled our overall tenure-track presence in the composition classroom and pleased the administration—he'd be delighted. But as a member of that community of faculty, he'd want to teach only one section a year as well. At the same time, he said, he'd be perfectly willing to teach two or even three composition sections a *semester* in a separate department—as long as the community in such a department supported doing the same. The point was about the value of composition within the academic unit. If the department reluctantly valued composition at the rate of one course a year, then to teach three or four courses a year would be a way of devaluing oneself and one's work vis-à-vis what the departmental community claims, in practice, is important.

“But wait,” protested the mythology teacher. “I often teach two or three sections of mythology a term, and I don't feel devalued!” That's because mythology is not a devalued course, we explained, and no one argues in meetings about how many sections a term of mythology everyone *has* to teach. And of course we were not proposing to hire faculty for the express purpose of teaching mythology for two or three sections a term.

Indeed, the issue of teaching first-year composition is very much a cultural value, as commentary in the field has been claiming since composition's reemergence in the 1960s. The confidence we had developed by making our work and program more visible to the university community,

more responsible to the values of that community, gave us much psychological and practical leverage as we discussed these matters within the smaller community of our department. By the late 1990s there was a core of composition specialists at GVSU that was developing a clear sense of community, value, and voice. It had become obvious that our literature colleagues valued first-year writing much less than we felt was needed to make it the centerpiece of a scholarly community, even less than many of our colleagues outside of the department. We wanted to find our own voice and work within the larger academic community and not be marginalized within our own departmental structure.

We needed to define, for ourselves, what our advanced degrees in rhetoric and composition prepared us to do. A Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition prepares a faculty member to teach first-year writing *and* many other courses. If we agreed to teach, say, half our annual load in composition—which, as teachers, we were certainly willing to do—would it mean the beginning of a two-tier English faculty: those who teach university service courses and those who teach literature? We responded in two ways. One, we began working on building our professional writing major and developing a minor in writing so that we would have enough upper-level courses to justify new rhetoric/composition hires beyond the need of first-year writing. This, we felt, was consistent with the model for hiring practiced by most other departments—hiring faculty to teach a balance of courses, both general-education and majors courses, both lower-and upper-division. We were clear that we would hire composition faculty only as we had need within the major—and we worked to create that need. And two, we took a public position on the importance of working among faculty where everyone taught first-year writing. We wanted to create a new kind of department identity, with a new kind of culture. This resolve was our first step toward independent departmental status in writing.

#### EXEGETES AND SERVANTS

How an academic community values composition is one of the pressing issues that departments of English must respond to. Scholes blames much in the kind of situation described above on the historical developments that established departments of literature in the first place and then collared literature professors in their “role as exegetes of quasi-religious texts.” He continues, further explaining the problems with the development of English: “The glamour that has attended the notion of ‘literature’ itself for the past two centuries is just one of the things we

must renounce. The glamour of ‘theory’ another. Which doesn’t mean we should forget what we have learned—but we must put our learning to use, for instance, by beginning to deconstruct the opposition between the ‘English’ courses and the ‘services’ courses taught by English departments” (85). Whereas literature—which at the end of the nineteenth century was not considered a serious enough subject to have a place within departments—eventually established disciplinary status for itself by supplanting Latin and Greek, it made this move by shifting “the balance of emphasis from the production of texts to their reception” (75).

The result, as we are now well aware, instilled the notion of the “service course” with pejorative feeling and the activity of textual production (unless it be the production of more sacred texts or commentary on these texts) with mercantile status—even “pre-academic.” Sadly, this is a received value not often challenged by the field of composition studies. Instead, we resist the notion of service as beneath our dignity as well—hire adjuncts and second-tier faculty to teach these courses for us—and look for ways to elevate our own growing theoretical field to front-door status. As James Sledd (1991) warns, we become boss compositionists.

The rejection of this value allowed us to obtain a different vision of writing as liberal learning. In our own situation at GVSU, the vicious loop, wherein literature teachers find that the only real value is in teaching those who would, like themselves, become literature teachers, would not be changed by *making* people teach freshman composition. One of the staunch opponents of the suggestion that we form an independent writing department tried to make a case that first-year composition was “pre-academic.” Throughout these discussions, the high rhetoric that entrenches the study of art and literature was invoked over and against the practical value of service courses—even against our professional writing courses that are akin to the course work of a century earlier when oratory and rhetoric prepared preachers, legislators, and lawyers for the practical demands of a life steeped in the powers and pleasures of language.

Finally, our chair addressed the unresolved matters of department growth and composition staffing by appointing a task force to develop models for restructuring the department in a way that satisfied the conflicting demands of specialists and first-year writing needs. The models that emerged included positions we had already rejected in practice (everyone teaches composition), but also the more radical proposal to create a separate department of academic, creative, and professional writing. Out of the five models presented to the department, the main

issue that divided faculty was whether a separate department of writing was the answer or not. Clearly, most of the non-composition faculty preferred not to teach composition, but neither were they eager to see writing faculty take the program and build a new department, especially with the creative writing majors in tow.

#### CREATIVE WRITING: IS IT ABOUT LITERATURE OR WRITING?

Since initiatives are open in a system of faculty governance, nothing prevented the writing faculty from proposing a separate department of writing that included creative writing, which we felt we could persuade the department and faculty governance to adopt. The discussion now heated up. Nobody in the department seemed to care if professional writing was in or out of the department. And many would be glad to have another unit take care of all the first-year writing staffing. But creative writing was perceived by many to belong with literature and the reception of texts. Oddly, some found the notion that creative writers were about the *production* of texts too much like, well, like what is done in professional writing. If professors of literature were comfortable in their “role as exegetes of quasi-religious texts,” some also seemed to value creative writing more for its devotion to keeping the idea of aesthetic production alive and in its place as foil to the interpretive offices. Perhaps on a more practical level, the literature faculty also coveted the seventy-five or so creative-writing majors that, together with the sixty-five or so traditional literature majors in the English department, would help maintain literature’s prominence in relation to yet another curricular threat—English education and its over seven hundred majors—which over the years had, like composition, moved further away from its traditional focus on literature as such and more toward a concern with methodology, literacy in general, and the realities of the larger community.

As support in the English department for a separate writing department extended to more of the literature faculty, the issue of creative writing became the most contentious issue. Those literature faculty who supported a separate writing unit did so on grounds that they liked our proposed curriculum and felt it would give the literature faculty clearer focus and purpose. With first-year writing out of the way, literature faculty could pursue their mission unimpeded—and without the perennial annoyance surrounding the issue of who should be teaching composition. In addition, they knew that most of the hires over the past half-decade had gone to English education and rhetoric/composition; perhaps without

composition in the department, the literature folks would themselves gain some visibility in the eyes of administration.

But those who opposed moving creative writing out of English did so with claims that a principal goal of creative writing was to introduce students to great literature. Furthermore, creative writing had the look and feel of the liberal arts, while professional writing (to some) did not, and first-year composition was even described, as we said above, with terms like “pre-art” and “pre-academic.”

The need to defend academic writing and professional writing as “liberal arts” surprised us, for those of us in rhetoric and composition, from our earliest training in the field, have understood the continuity academic, public, and workplace discourse has with the oldest of the ancient liberal arts. For twenty-five hundred years, nobody would have thought to consider rhetoric and writing as anything but rooted in the liberal arts tradition. This contrary position among several literature faculty (who, in self-contradiction, apparently had no reservations about the place of communications studies in the liberal arts or a theater program separate from English) revealed their deep biases against any education with practical dimensions and worldly affections. Our proposal, they feared, would soil the purity of creative writing and cause these students to stray too far from the ethereal calling of literature.

Since the program we proposed for an undergraduate major in writing would offer creative writing students twice as many writing courses without reducing the number of literature courses, some shifted their argument to the actual sequence of literature courses and the way those courses would be taught out of the context of the whole English curriculum. Without a historical pattern in the literature training, without the pattern of coverage currently offered by the English major’s course of study, creative writing students would still suffer a loss, they argued. But this niggling response gives up the high doctrine that only the study of literature can transcend to liberal arts (claiming now that these courses have to be taught in a particular sequence), and thus it lost nearly all of its rhetorical power outside the purist flock in the English department itself.

Although the place of academic writing in the liberal arts and the view that creative writing *needs* to be taught within the context of an English department of literature has remained an issue for some with traditional viewpoints, these issues were not difficult to address, and we responded to the task force charge of producing an outline of courses to demonstrate just what a course of study in writing would look like. As

a practical matter, our planned course of study for the creative-writing track within our writing major satisfied most people.

The creative-writing track will require eighteen credits of literature (the same as was required in English). The theoretical justification for these credits has more to do with studying literature as *genre* than with studying literature as history, so while we do require one American literature course, students will choose how to focus the other fifteen credits. Students are also asked to take twenty-four credits of writing (compared to just twelve credits taken as an English major). That is, this curriculum, while not reducing the number of literature courses, doubles the number of writing courses. This sort of curriculum model resembles that of art and design, where studio courses outnumber content courses—but where “content” naturally informs each and every studio course.

By allowing for the possibility for creative-writing students to take nine credits toward the English minor as part of their major curriculum, we want to encourage them to minor in English. Indeed, we anticipate that many students will complete what amounts to a fifty-four-credit program in writing and English. For creative-writing students, this could mean a total of twenty-four credits in writing, twenty-four credits in literature, and six credits in linguistics—compared to the old program as English majors of eighteen to twenty-one credits in literature, twelve credits in writing, and three to six credits in linguistics. This, we argued, would be a very strong curriculum.

PROFESSIONAL WRITING: “BUT HIS FATHER, YOU KNOW,  
WAS IN TRADE”

Finally, the professional writing component became the last curricular matter to develop in the public forum that had grown up around the proposal. Our primary goal had to do with defining the purposes of such a program against the existing curriculum in communication studies. Regardless of the fact that we had a growing group of professional-writing majors within English already, communication studies wanted to know how our proposed major would distinguish our students from their own majors, who studied rhetoric and forms of writing for such purposes as news, journalism, and public relations.

A writing major, we explained, would not aim to prepare students for any *particular* occupation such as journalism or public relations. Because our program emphasized writing and rhetorical facility, our students would identify more closely with the historical, rhetorical, and liberal

tradition of writerly craft and would minor in areas like public relations, journalism, art and design, or English in order to sharpen their practical focus or prepare them for further academic study.

In fact, our forty-two-credit writing major is designed to accommodate a number of different minors based on a concept we presented as “triplets.” Nine credits of the professional writing track ask students to commit to a writing-related academic or professional area in either the School of Communications or the English department. These sets of three courses not only channel students’ writing into particular areas, but also encourage students to pursue a minor in communications or English—and perhaps someday philosophy, business, computer science, or any number of other academic areas. That is, with nine credits in one of these academic units already counting toward the writing major, students will be only twelve credits short of a full minor, and we would encourage students to take advantage of that opportunity.

Communication studies was supportive. Our university was founded in the 1960s when curricular integration and innovation ruled the day, especially among what were now the older faculty in communication studies. As a practical matter, the professional writing major would transcend the limitations of the English curriculum, but it would not adopt any radically new purposes as a course of study. As a philosophic matter, however, it had another battle to engage. Part of what was not sitting well with a few in English was the taint of worldly purposes associated with the professional writing program. Recurring to the discussion above, one faculty member argued that one could not possibly speak about a business memo and a short story in the same breath without wincing. *Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis*—“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” asked Tertullian.

The analysis of this concern could run deep, but at the least what we might see going on here is a view of writing that radically separates kinds of writing as so essentially different that they have nothing to do with each other. When viewed from an essentialist perspective, the content of writing subsumes the writing itself. Writing as an activity, writing as a verb rather than a noun, is hard for the essentialist to imagine. On the other hand, an interest in the *production* of texts has been the lynchpin of writing studies for many years. The phenomenology of writing experience has been the elusive aim of a whole generation of scholars in writing studies. And such concerns are predicated on the idea that the question “what happens when we write” is worth investigating. Furthermore, writing as an activity with social (rhetorical) consequences brings under one

pedagogical banner everything from the sonnet to the sales report. Failing to understand the rhetorical tradition, failing to understand the pragmatic character of a liberal education, failing to see that teaching both the sonnet and sales report draws on a pedagogy and a tradition in liberal education is to shroud reality in a metaphysical dualism that marks off the modern world, much more so the twenty-first century.

But perhaps there is a simpler explanation. After some of these arguments that objected to mixing Athens and Jerusalem were offered through department email, one literary bystander rejoined:

I found the latest round of arguments niggling, . . . and appealing to the kind of snobbery I thought had died along with the last person who said, "But his father, you know, was in trade" and meant it to sting.

#### BUT WHAT CONTENT WILL YOU TEACH?

This question still lingers outside of English. Our colleagues in philosophy, biology, music, and theater may still imagine that freshman composition is an introduction to literature (as it was when they were undergraduates, the last time they had direct contact with the course). Most within English know better, even if they don't agree. Many outside of our own program do not realize that business and technical writing, genre studies, and rhetorical theory and history are a central part of what defines the content of the discipline of writing studies. And though they readily accept theater, art, and music (to name but a few examples) as practical arts, disciplines that focus primarily on how to do something with the historical, theoretical, literary, and cultural knowledge we obtain, writing is often thought of as relying inextricably on the content areas of English literature. Postmodern understanding of what counts as "text" broadens the outlook of many within English departments, but outsiders are often shocked to learn what is being taught in literature classes also.

Scholes's solution is not to set up separate departments of writing. He wants us to reimagine English studies, weave the disparate threads back into one strong cord. This may well be a possibility in Grand Valley's future. We can imagine, for example, the department of literature one day being reintegrated into the department of rhetoric and writing, not as the queen of "content," but as a branch of rhetorical study and as a research area of written artifacts of the literary tradition.

For now, however, we have imagined a department of writing in ways that gather in a great array of what concerns us all. Academic writing is

everybody's business in the university, and it's the principal business of a department of writing. We have, as a group, committed to teaching half our annual load in composition—or, as we are now calling it, academic writing. One of our many short-term goals is to better publicize what our first-year courses do, so as to clear up some of the misunderstandings that lead colleagues in other disciplines to continue to associate composition so closely with literature. Creative and professional writing, as major and minor courses of study, provide students the opportunity to develop knowledge and skill in rhetorical and artistic production of texts. We intend to continue emphasizing the study of literature as a part of a writer's education, but now we can open up for further study the current and historical written artifacts related to business, technical, and professional writing.

#### WRITING AS PART OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

One of the first reactions of many of our colleagues, both inside and outside the English department, has to do with the seeming inseparability of writing and reading, of composition and literature. But we have pointed out that writing and reading exist in every discipline, not just in English studies, and that academic fields that once seemed inseparably tied to others have often moved on to become viable independent units within the academy. English itself is one such field, having arisen from departments of philology and rhetoric in the nineteenth century. But there are many others: statistics, computer science, anthropology, linguistics, biochemistry, and on and on. The effect of these "divisions" is, as much as anything, to enlarge our sense of what constitutes liberal learning. And perhaps most importantly for the new fields themselves, independence allows for new and equally profitable connections with other fields: separate from English, for example, linguistics can build new connections with the social sciences; and, as an independent academic unit, writing can build new connections with communications, history, philosophy, business, computer science, and more. Indeed, separate from English, writing can finally begin to see itself once again within the context of the liberal arts most generally—rather than as a "basic skill" relegated to preliberal education. It can now exist *alongside* other parts of the liberal-arts whole, rather than beneath them, servicing them, holding them up.

In that sense, "English Studies" remains alive at our institution—not only in English and writing, but also in communications, philosophy, history, and other departments. We look forward to maintaining close

ties with our English colleagues, some of whom will no doubt continue teaching “Writing” in our new department along with the “writing” they always have and always will teach in their own classes. We look forward to jointly sponsoring poetry readings and literary festivals and other writing and reading related activities. But we also look forward to sponsoring new events and activities with other departments—departments we’d previously communicated with only *through* the English department. New, more direct lines of communication have opened up.

Our experience confirms that the independent department was best for us, in our situation at Grand Valley State University. Other English departments might have rallied around the first-year course, choosing to recommit to it as a regular part of the job. With a genuine commitment, such an arrangement would likely succeed. But we invited our colleagues to choose their own commitments, and they chose to remain committed to teaching literature, linguistics, and English education—which they are trained to do and which they do very well. Their renewed focus on these three areas mirror our own renewed focus on our three areas—academic, creative, and professional writing. We are confident that in both departments better teaching, and better learning, will result.