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### INTERNAL FRICTION IN A NEW INDEPENDENT DEPARTMENT OF WRITING

*And What the External Conflict Resolution Consultants  
Recommended*

Eleanor Agnew  
Phyllis Surrency Dallas

In fall 1997, the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University was formed when the Department of English and Philosophy was reorganized into two separate units. We, as tenured faculty who witnessed this reorganization, saw our new department of sixty full-time faculty embark upon a honeymoon period. With high morale, most of the faculty were energized to work on new projects and to create a distinctive identity for the department. The new acting chair, Dr. Larry Burton, envisaged a strong writing program with a major and a renovated first-year writing sequence. His vision also included the expectation of more research and scholarship in writing studies from faculty who had focused on teaching for most of their careers. The sense of harmony within the department seemed palpable as we got along well. At the annual Christmas party, we sang Christmas carols together around the piano. At the spring picnic, we played baseball and volleyball, drank beer, and laughed. Because of our respect for the acting chair, we faculty petitioned the administration, requesting that Larry be made chair. When this appointment became official in the spring of 1999, most of us came to his celebration party and congratulated him. The new Department of Writing and Linguistics was now launched with a permanent leader.

However, by the fall of 1999, the honeymoon ended abruptly, as buried feelings exploded. No longer could we maintain the appearance of departmental harmony, which often disguises an ugly undercurrent, according to William Massy, Andrea Wilger, and Carol Colbeck, researchers at the Stanford Institute for Higher Education, who studied three hundred faculty across twenty universities. This veneer “pervades faculty institutions. Faculty often appear unwilling to pursue issues that may be divisive or provoke debate. Unpleasantness is avoided at all costs”

(12). As the number of composition/rhetoric specialists grew in our department and discussions about our new mission evolved, this veneer quickly evaporated, as shock waves of discord rippled through the department. One cause for resentment stemmed from the fact that the creation of the new department was driven by senior administration rather than by faculty. Furthermore, faculty with training in literary studies harbored mixed feelings about having been assigned to the new department of writing. To complicate the situation further, the new department existed without a major. In the end, external conflict resolution consultants were hired to analyze the problems within the department and to offer recommendations about how the chair and the department should proceed.

#### THE PROBLEMS

In fact, the state of our department during this 1999–2000 academic year was described as a “crisis” in February 2000 by the conflict resolution consultants who were called in by the chair and dean (Consortium 12). They noted that faculty had a right to feel anxiety. Besides the usual factor of a heavy workload, the consultants pointed out that an administration with a number of acting rather than permanent positions can increase faculty insecurity and tension. We had this factor—an acting president, acting provost, and acting dean—and others. As their report put it in polite terms, “Manifested behaviors resulting from this crisis include multi-layered conflict, problematic communication styles and methods, significant divisiveness, [and] escalated tensions. . . . Behaviors such as stereotyping, scapegoating, suspicion and attribution of negative intentions to others are exhibited by some faculty” (11). Let us describe it more bluntly.

Morale in the department plummeted. The department had broken into factions. The groups, who, as the consultants delicately put it, had “differences regarding the vision of the department,” also had differences about how writing should be taught and about whether faculty members’ “contribution” and “importance” should be based on degree and background (12). In other words, should Ph.D.’s in composition and rhetoric be called upon to make a larger contribution to the chair’s goals merely because of their degrees and backgrounds?

#### BACKGROUND OF THE SPLIT

The top-down origin of the split may have contributed to the dissension. The first inklings of the split came in October 1996, when the vice president for Academic Affairs (VPAA), Dr. Harry Carter, and the dean of

the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS), Dr. Roosevelt Newson, addressed the faculty of what was then the Department of English and Philosophy. They believed that an opportunity existed for the department to examine its structure. The current chair had announced his plans to step down from his administrative position. In addition, the Georgia governor and legislature had ordered a 5 percent redirection of state money to fund new programs; and CLASS, alone among Georgia Southern's colleges, had so far not redirected any of its appropriations. The money was there. Besides, according to Drs. Carter and Newson, the department had become "unwieldy" because of its size (seventy-seven faculty members—a number that made Georgia Southern's English department the largest on campus and larger than the one at the flagship institution of the state). As a solution, the VPAA and the dean tentatively proposed three possibilities for the department's future: (1) retaining the same management structure (one chair with responsibility for budgetary matters and personnel decisions regarding hiring, tenure, promotion, and annual evaluations with merit raises); (2) keeping the same management structure but creating two additional administrative positions (associate or assistant chairs responsible for programs); or (3) dividing English and philosophy into two separate departments. The administrators wanted faculty to examine the possibilities and a new committee to "discuss these (and perhaps other) options" (Department of English and Philosophy Minutes, 4 Oct 1996).

Although the VPAA and the dean saw the issue in terms of management and budgets, the faculty began discussing the proposal in terms of philosophical differences, professional issues, course assignments, and privileges. Promotion, tenure, and hiring decisions had been complicated in the past. The department housed disparate segments: a graduate and major literature program with a traditional emphasis on Anglo-American historical periods, as well as creative writing, a few upper-level and graduate composition and linguistics courses, first-year composition, English as a second language, and a philosophy minor. The faculty were diverse in background, degree, and rank. It was composed of tenured and tenure-track Ph.D.'s in literature, composition and rhetoric, philosophy, and linguistics. To complicate matters further, a large number of tenure-track and non-tenure-track M.A.'s in literature taught both in the English department and the learning support department as joint appointees. We also had some temporary faculty, both full- and part-time, with M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s in literature and composition/rhetoric. During

that initial meeting, some faculty expressed anxiety about what a restructuring would mean for literature faculty: Would they face lay-offs if in the future they taught only literature?—a legitimate question in light of declining numbers of English majors. Would their release times, which had been mainly supported by first-year comp, be reduced or eliminated? Would individuals lose tenure—a question obviously related to shrinking enrollments in specialty courses. Philosophy faculty wondered how their program would fit into two separate departments. A straw ballot was held. Even though this vote would eventually reveal that an overwhelming majority of the faculty wanted to remain as one department, the redirection committee was appointed the following week, charged with envisioning possible scenarios. By November the redirection committee had devised three models for consideration, two of which followed the senior administration's tentative proposal. These models are described below.

#### Model I: Chair and Three Program Directors

In Model I, the English department would remain united. The chair would be aided by an assistant or assistants and by three program directors, one for writing, one for literature, and one for graduate studies. Under this model, all three directors would participate in personnel decisions, which would have been one of the advantages. The programs would now be closely connected, giving graduate students the opportunity to train in composition. However, the major disadvantages, according to the committee, were that the chair's responsibility wasn't significantly reduced, the roles of the directors weren't clearly delineated, and the size of the department wasn't affected.

#### Model II: Two Separate Departments

In Model II, the English department would be split into two departments—one, literature and philosophy and the other, writing, rhetoric, and linguistics—with an assistant for each chair and a division of the existing committees as appropriate. The advantages of this model were perceived as the chance for both departments to grow and govern their own programs. But the redirection committee foresaw the loss of unity between the two departments and “potential problems . . . through the coordination of interdepartmental programs” (Department Minutes, 5 Nov 1996). The committee also acknowledged that the chairs of the separated departments would retain entire responsibility for personnel matters.

### Model III: A School

In Model III, the English department would be split into two departments within a new school. Again, the chairs would remain responsible for all personnel decisions, while the assistants would handle nonpersonnel matters. The committee saw this model as ensuring the opportunity for both departments to grow and have “added clout” because they would be part of a school. In addition, this plan would help to preserve “unity of programs” (Department Minutes, 5 Nov 1996). But it would add a position—administrator of the new school—for which the duties and responsibilities were not yet defined. The committee listed several provisos for Model III: (1) The philosophy program would eventually join with religious studies to form a new department; (2) regardless of the final outcome of the restructuring efforts, composition and literature would work closely together; (3) The division of the faculty would be based on “current classification and teaching specialties”; and (4) “the division must not exploit or attempt to marginalize any of our faculty or programs and [f]unding . . . for any new department or division should be commensurate with that of literature, and neither group should suffer any loss as a result of a division” (Department Minutes, 12 Nov 1996).

Despite assurances of budgetary and programmatic support from the administration, faculty felt uncertain. While the VPAA and the dean may have seen the question of restructuring as fairly simple, that first faculty meeting and subsequent ones raised fundamental questions. Both composition professors and literature specialists (as reported in the minutes of department’s meeting, 12 Nov 1996) believed that the new Department of Writing and Linguistics would be marginalized as “a service department” because the literature and philosophy department would house the English major. Some faculty members believed the language of the committee’s document reinforced this distinction and suggested “demotion” (Department Minutes 12 Nov 1996) for some. Demotion was associated with the document’s provision involving cross-teaching. “[B]ased on need, experience, and expertise,” faculty from the two departments could teach upper-level courses in the other unit. Although the document outlined this cross-teaching, the reality was that only a few upper-level courses in writing and linguistics existed, most of which the literature specialists would not be teaching. The literature faculty were guaranteed that they would “regularly teach in the freshman writing programs,” to be housed in the Department of Writing and Linguistics, while no such guarantee about sophomore or upper-level

literature courses from the new Department of Literature and Philosophy was offered to faculty who would go into the new writing unit, even if they had degrees in literature and even if they had already taught these upper-division courses, according to the Redirection Committee's recommendation document. This guarantee of security for literature faculty is nothing new to people in composition studies; after all, the hierarchical, class structures of English departments and the positioning of composition and writing faculty as "other" has been amply discussed by people like Donald McQuade and Robert Scholes. The question also arose whether the literature department would be marginalized by future writing programs. As one literature professor stated, writing programs would be "sexier" (Department Minutes, 12 Nov 1996). The groundwork for friction between the literature and composition specialists within the new Department of Writing and Linguistics was laid even before the split took place because of "issues . . . [of] insecurity, multiple identities, authority, and self-determination, as well as . . . similar Nietzschean acts of self-assertion and ongoing struggles for intellectual and cultural substantiation" (McQuade 483).

The departmental deliberations never considered severing literature and composition entirely, even though Model II called for two separate departments. All of the proposed models kept the link between literature and composition, which would come back to haunt us later. Many prominent historians and scholars like John Trimbur and Maxine Hairston have questioned the assumptions linking these fields. Trimbur sees the link as "accidental and overdetermined," a result of "a particular historical conjuncture when written composition replaced rhetoric just as English departments were taking shape in the modern university" (27), while Hairston more than fifteen years ago called for the realignment of composition studies with communications and journalism (1985).

Although in the original straw ballot, the majority of the faculty supported remaining united in one department, by the time they voted on the models, their will had changed. Most of the faculty recognized that writing and its pedagogy and research needed more attention; the department had heard from area high school teachers clamoring for more help with teaching students how to write and from area businesses seeking employees with finer writing skills. The rationale for a separate writing program was there because, as Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky have phrased it, "a need [exists] that originates beyond the boundaries of the specialist community" (626). As the year wore on, then, faculty

who initially could not imagine existence except in an English department began to see Model III as the most viable proposal to meet the administration's concerns, to address faculty issues, and to satisfy the academic and professional needs of students. During the vote on the models, Model I (with program directors) garnered twenty votes; Model II (two different departments) received fifteen; and Model III (one school overseeing two related departments) got twenty-one. When faculty were asked their preference about their second choice, Model I had thirty votes; Model II, twenty-seven; and Model III, forty. Model III won because most of the faculty had selected it as their first or second choice; the clear loser involved the creation of two independent units that weren't linked under one school.

Model III, then, was the choice. However, something happened to the proposal on the way to the board of regents, the governing body for the university system of Georgia. The deans' council voted against the school model. After this vote, the academic vice president created the new position of associate dean, whose job would be to supervise both departments and coordinate interaction between them. The position, however, was not clearly defined, even, apparently, to the associate dean himself.

The Department of English and Philosophy was officially disbanded. As our new independent department of writing was about to learn, academic units, like companies that reorganize, may "forfeit the advantages" of the reorganization if employees "are shaken [and] demoralized" (Tudor and Sleeth 87).

#### NEW FACULTY DISTRIBUTION

Assignments for the majority of the faculty were clear cut: Ph.D.'s in composition and linguistics and M.A.'s in English went into writing and linguistics; most Ph.D.'s in literature went to literature and philosophy. However, the senior administration had to consider some faculty members whose degrees and primary teaching responsibilities did not meet the reassignment guidelines exactly and to decide what to do with faculty on leave getting their Ph.D.'s. The administration assigned all of these individuals to writing and linguistics. When the dust settled, the new Department of Writing and Linguistics inherited a faculty whose backgrounds were almost entirely in literature, the six Ph.D. faculty with degrees in composition or linguistics being among the exceptions. Of the rest, there were seven Ph.D.'s in literature, thirty-eight M.A.'s in literature, three ABDs in literature, and three M.A.'s in literature who were

seeking the Ed.D. Between 1997 and 1999, we hired seven new Ph.D.'s in composition and rhetoric, unlike the independent writing department at Metropolitan State University (described in this book), which had "little luck in obtaining new tenure-track positions" (Aronson and Hansen, this volume, 52). After the postsplit honeymoon period, the resentment boiled over. Although many faculty tried to adjust to their new situation, some who had ended up in the Department of Writing felt displaced, "betrayed" by the administration, as some put it. Many had not wanted the split in the first place, but it had been inflicted upon them from above. Second, the agreed-upon model, Model III, was modified without any input from faculty. Finally, if a split had to take place, they would have at least rather been assigned to the Department of Literature. Clearly, the top-down nature of the split fostered negative feelings. In fact, David Russell indicates in "American Origins of the Writing Across the Curriculum Movement" that a bottom-up model is preferable (34).

As the consultants described our internal problems, there was "a substantial degree of miscommunication[,] . . . malicious and false gossip, bitter and defensive arguments, and destructive criticism[,] . . . yelling, accusing, gossiping, personal attacks and finger-pointing" (Consortium 8). There were some attempts to sabotage the chair's leadership in moving the department ahead—the consultants referred to it as "a crisis in confidence at this time" (12). Passionate postings appeared on the department listserv, as colleagues confronted one other about the proper way to teach composition.

## TWO POINTS OF VIEW

The faculty with master's degrees in literature, who had been teaching writing for many years in what was once a literature-privileged department, were understandably nervous. Where would they fit in? Would they now have to alter the teaching methods that they had been employing for many years? Would they be expected to publish in composition and rhetoric? They were in the majority in our department but felt demoted by the changes that had taken place and by the new departmental vision. They feared landing at the bottom of a different type of two-tier arrangement. Massy, Wilger, and Colbek's study of twenty institutions revealed how universal these feelings are. The "senior faculty" (as they defined those who had been working at institutions for the longest time) "believe that administrators eager to reward publication treat [new hires] with greater 'privilege'. [They] feel that their stature has been

diminished and that they often are viewed as teaching fodder. . . . in addition [they] claim [the new hires] lack historical perspective and push too vigorously for immediate change” (12).

Consider the other point of view. The new hires with Ph.D.’s in composition and rhetoric were culture shocked to come into a freestanding department of writing and linguistics and discover that their more traditional colleagues were not familiar with theory and would question pedagogical practices that have been supported in the field for thirty years. They never expected to have to explain or justify their theoretically based practices to the majority of their colleagues.

Massy, Wilger, and Colbek found this, too, was commonplace in the institutions they studied:

Another complaint frequently mentioned by [new hires] is that their senior colleagues refuse to recognize disciplinary changes. They cling to traditional theories, sabotage attempts to update curricula, and resist recruiting new scholars in “cutting edge” areas. One junior English professor explained that the split in her department was not over workload but theory. Senior members “don’t recognize as valuable” much of what younger members do. The result is a “remarkable abyss” between senior and junior faculty in terms of how they relate to the discipline (12).

While Massy, Wilger and Colbek defined “senior” faculty as those who had been working at institutions for the longest time, in most university systems, the label “senior” also implies tenure, a terminal degree, and an associate or full professorial rank. In our department, however, only six “senior” faculty fit this traditional profile. The rest included faculty who had attained tenure but did not have terminal degrees or associate or full ranks. Therefore, at our institution, the “senior” and “junior” designations cut across the usual degree and rank boundaries, perhaps adding to the discomposure.

#### ANALYSIS

Of course, problems among university colleagues occur everywhere. In an August 1, 1997, article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Gary S. Krabenbuhl, dean of the liberal arts college at Arizona State University, is quoted as saying that every university has “dysfunctional departments where emotional energy is lost in nonproductive ways, factions don’t trust one another, and they have a hard time doing their work. Instead, they are places of gossip and distrust.” In Arizona’s case, the division was

between “those who earned their degrees from elite private institutions and those who did not” (quoted in Wilson A10). In the end, the friction became so intense that the dean sent department members to a psychologist for counseling.

Unlike Arizona, the faculty in our department were polarized based largely on degree and background—Ph.D.’s versus master’s, composition-rhetoric background versus literature background, new hires versus veterans. But we wonder if it is possible that the fighting and one-upping were exacerbated because of the low status, low salaries, and perception as a service department, which *both* groups have in the whole academic system. As Turner and Kearns point out, “We are often seen as marginal members of the academy, neophytes who must justify our place and demonstrate our expertise” (this volume, 95). Aronson and Hansen (this volume) agree with Sharon Crowley’s point that “even if composition were to achieve a disciplinary status that is recognized beyond its own borders, its image might not alter appreciably within the academy” (Crowley 254).

In 1996, James Stewart and Rhonda Spence reported in the *Educational Research Quarterly* that “Salary differentials have widened considerably in the past decade between faculty in the arts and sciences and those faculty in business and engineering.” They propose that higher levels of dissatisfaction are found in faculty whose salaries are at the lower end of the academic scale (31). Joyce Scott and Nancy Bereman also confirm what we all know. In their 1992 article in the *Journal of Higher Education*, they state, “There is a notable relative decline in the salaries for faculty in the arts and sciences as compared to professional and technical fields, confirming differential treatment of disciplines in the salary allocation process. Whereas average salaries in business, computer science, and engineering more than doubled, those in education, fine arts, foreign languages and letters did not” (688).

Where, within the College of Arts and Sciences, which appears to be at the bottom of the hierarchy itself, does writing fall, at least in the eyes of the rest of the academic community? Clearly, not at the top.

In his 1991 article “Depoliticizing and Politicizing Composition Studies,” James Slevin decries the exploitation of composition teachers and notes that “such views ultimately constitute *all* composition faculty, even those with full-time, tenure-track appointments, as something of an underclass. And so they get *treated* as an underclass, through an elaborately detailed set of norms that gives insufficient credit to, indeed discredits and

therefore marginalizes, what they do. . . . [T]his . . . is a political, social and economic fact of our professional life" (7).

Similarly, Susan Miller suggests that the nature of the work writing teachers do symbolically renders them as "maid-figures" to the rest of the academic community. As Turner and Kearns state, "It did not take us long after separation from the English department to discover just how vulnerable a new academic unit can be, especially when it lacks the prestige of a strong and *known* disciplinary tradition" (this volume, 93).

This may be one of the significant triggers of contention in our department. Senior or junior, Ph.D. or master's, faculty in a department of writing—and in the profession as a whole—do not get the recognition they deserve from their intradepartmental university colleagues, their administration, or the public at large—many of whom perceive them as Miller's "maid-figures," responsible for the quality of writing produced for the rest of their writing lives by all students who enter the system. What do writing faculty hear frequently from other members of the university community? "What are you people doing over there? The students who come to our courses, our graduate schools, our workplaces . . . can't write!" The larger academic perception of what it means "to be able to write" may be as wrongheaded as the writing context that they provide for students. However, educating the world about the fluidity of anyone's writing ability may be too great a task to take on, especially for "maid-figures" who are already swamped with papers. Perhaps tackling the real adversaries of our profession, the persistent stereotypes, is too daunting a task. Instead, we have fought among ourselves.

The conflict resolution consultants who were called in to our department interviewed all faculty and administrators and held small focus group sessions for several days. They came back with their report, describing our department as "in its infant stage of development" but "broaching adolescence." They recommended, among other things, that the chair should restructure the department to include two associate chairs, should "implement a conflict management system for the department," such as a mediation panel, should "intervene early in conflict," should "work more towards building consensus around directions for the department," and should fight to convince upper administration to lower class sizes and no longer guarantee all incoming students a seat in freshman composition (11–15).

Right now, despite this history of conflict, the possibilities for our program seem great. The creation of the new department with the chair's

vision to promote writing has given the impetus to new initiatives, which the upper administration has supported. A proposal for a B.A. in writing and linguistics has started its way through the academic channels. The first-year composition sequence has been revamped. For the last four years, the department has sponsored the Student Success in First-Year Composition Conference, which has attracted participants from public and private high schools, colleges, universities, and technical schools from Georgia and South Carolina. The Georgia Southern Writing Project, a site of the National Writing Project, has hosted three summer programs and in the summer of 2000 held its first Youth Writing Project. The department has also succeeded in transforming a departmental tutorial center into the University Writing Center, which has, in order to infuse life into the university's languishing writing-across-the-curriculum commitment, offered presentations to more than twenty-five hundred students in seventy-five classes across campus. To expand teaching repertoires and to enhance professional development, thirteen faculty members participated in the Portfolio Pilot Project in 1999. And the opportunities for change are not confined to the department. With a new president, provost, and CLASS dean, as well as a new strategic plan, Georgia Southern is embarking on an era of self-examination and redirection. In one of his first acts, the president eliminated Learning Support, thereby doing away with credit-bearing remedial courses in English, reading, and math. As a consequence, an ad hoc committee in the department is considering how to address the needs of basic writers. We can only hope that our efforts to build a strong department and academic programs will not be sapped by further infighting. Indeed, have we stopped fighting?

Despite the internal tensions, no longer do we in writing and linguistics accept labels that, to use McQuade's words, designate "composition [as] commonplace and déclassé" (491). No longer do we want to expend energy thinking about the dynamics of the relationship with literary studies, in which the teachers of literature are, to quote Scholes, "the priests and theologians of English," who have power, prestige, privilege, while, again quoting Scholes, "teachers of composition [are] the nuns, barred from the priesthood, doing the shitwork of the field" (36). Instead, we want to direct, as Gottschalk writes, our "mind, energy, and resources on . . . the teaching of writing" (1995, 2).