

## 9

### WHO WANTS COMPOSITION?

#### *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of an Independent Program*

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In the summer of 1996, while at a conference in Europe, I was removed as director of one of the largest independent composition programs in the country—the Program in Composition and Communication at the University of Minnesota—by a temporary dean.<sup>1</sup> I returned to find that my administrative position had been given to a specialist in eighteenth-century literature, who had no scholarly background or training in the field of composition and who had expressed little interest in its work. As I withdrew to my regular status as full professor, the program was soon merged back into the English department from which it had been administratively dissociated fifteen years earlier. No satisfactory explanation was ever proffered to me or my colleagues for this sudden action—not by the dean who did it, not by the English department leaders who accepted it, not by the new director who welcomed it, not by colleagues in other departments who were surprised and shocked by it. To this day, the action remains shrouded in mystery, the subject of national outrage and intense investigations and analysis (see Boland; Shor 1997).

The unexpected takeover of composition raised many questions about motive. Nothing about the Program was a source of embarrassment or major concern: it boasted a first-rate training and development program; a strong team of teachers; a solid, nationally recognized curriculum informed by current work in the field and keeping pace with university-wide liberal education initiatives; productive faculty; and a consensus-based management system that helped to prepare graduate students in composition for possible roles as writing program administrators (WPAs) (see Anson and Rutz). A lean, fiscally responsible unit, the Program generated over a million dollars in revenues for the College of Liberal Arts after expenses. Composition teachers felt professionalized and respected, and placement into good tenure-track jobs was higher for graduate students in composition than for any other

English concentration. Data from student surveys showed a high level of satisfaction with the curriculum and instruction; only a handful of complaints (mostly about grades) came each year from over eight thousand students who took courses in the Program. We listened to suggestions, and we acted on the concerns of chairs and deans. We entertained and experimented with new ideas in faculty development and composition curricula: teaching portfolios and reflective practice, service learning and diversity-based courses, cross-observation programs, mentoring teams for first-year instructors. Like any program, we faced challenges and occasional setbacks. But we worked openly in a spirit of collaboration and a desire to solve problems. We had no scandals to hide.

Nor did the action seem targeted at me individually, the consequence of some unstated shortcomings in my capacity as director or as a member of the faculty. I had worked my way through the ranks to full professor very quickly. I had received a College of Liberal Arts Distinguished Teaching Award in 1992 and, in 1995, the Morse-Alumni Award for Outstanding Contributions to Undergraduate Education, which gave me a distinguished title. Just a few months before my removal as WPA, I had been the sole recipient (among several thousand faculty in the University of Minnesota system) of the State of Minnesota Higher Education Teaching Excellence Award, which was granted to me by legislative order of the Minnesota State House of Representatives on March 22, 1996. I had received a Governor's Certificate of Commendation in 1995 for my service-learning initiatives. My teaching evaluations were consistently among the highest in the English department, and I had accumulated so many merit points for publications, national service, and strong teaching and administration that the department couldn't pay for them all in my annual raises. My three-year reappointment reviews as director were highly supportive and filled with praise, even from leaders in the English department. I was well known across campus for my writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) workshops and by all accounts was considered a highly productive member of the faculty.

Under the circumstances, it is not without cause to ask why a well-run, independent program was taken from the control of successful composition experts and reunited with a department that didn't really want it and had no other specialists to run it. The most plausible explanation concerns power and money, a subject I will turn to later in this essay. But the specifics of the case—already a subject of extensive research and analysis (see Boland)—are not as important for our purposes as is the

broader issue of affiliation and control. The Minnesota case allows us to reflect again on the relationship between English and composition as disciplinary and administrative sites, because the differences between the two disciplines can—and, in the Minnesota case, did—reflect utterly different values and methods for the teaching of college composition.

#### A BRIEF HISTORY

The Program in Composition and Communication was formed in the early 1980s. After broad consultation, administrative leaders at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities created a new, interdisciplinary composition program designed to offer writing courses for the entire campus. The move followed months of discussions in the English department (where writing courses were previously taught) and in various colleges of the university. The plan was strongly supported by the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and was endorsed by the university senate, which voted it into being.

Two English department faculty who created the plan, Professors Robert L. Brown Jr. and Donald Ross, were the first codirectors of the new program. Most of the courses were taught by teaching assistants (TAs), but they were now hired from different departments as well as from English. While this took away from English the control of TA appointments in composition, it had the effect of building a truly interdisciplinary program that helped to train future faculty to incorporate writing into their own courses and disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

The Program in Composition and Communication, named after the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC, which was seen as the national organization providing disciplinary leadership in composition) had no majors and was not a tenure home for faculty. Brown and Ross were both faculty members in English; the next two hires, one position in 1982 and then mine in 1984, also opted for English as our tenure homes, but the Program was designed to allow the transfer of effort from any other unit, including psychology, linguistics, cultural studies, education, or speech communication. In 1981, such a vision of a writing program was years ahead of its time.

While a few faculty members in the English department were opposed to the new program, saying that students were best served by writing in a literary tradition, most were, according to one source, “happy to see it go” so they would never have to teach freshman composition again. The literature faculty had little interest in composition

teaching or scholarship (which some of them found “laughable”) and preferred to focus on upper-level and graduate courses in literature.

In January of 1984, just as I was finishing my Ph.D. at Indiana University with a specialization in composition theory and research, I was offered a position at Minnesota as an assistant professor of English with a fifty percent appointment in the Program. Nationally, the Program was already known as a place on the cutting edge of the discipline. A growing graduate concentration in composition, supported by the Program’s faculty and curriculum, had already produced some fine new Ph.D.’s—among them Robert Brooke, Marilyn Cooper, Michael Kline, and Dene and Gordon Thomas—and they’d been snapped up quickly by good universities. My position included opportunities to teach graduate courses for the likes of these students.

The Program’s design reflected the brilliance of its founder, Robert (“Robin”) Brown. Robin understood the need for students to learn about writing in different communities, even before the term “discourse community” had entered the composition lexicon or writing-across-the-curriculum programs had found much support nationally. There was still considerable respect for belles lettres and the literary traditions of composition; the Program even created a course for English majors that was designed to focus on writing in and about literary genres. But in keeping with its interdisciplinary goals, the Program did not limit its conception of writing, eventually offering upper-level composition courses in the arts, the general sciences, the health sciences, business, management, engineering, and the social sciences. Its curriculum served the needs of the entire campus; its scholarship looked outward to writing as a socially and contextually determined process.

The first-year composition course, required of most entering students, provided a solid if brief introduction to the process of writing and one’s subject position as writer; to the concepts of audience, purpose, collaborative writing, revision, and peer response; and to some of the critical and textual skills necessary for students to do well in college, including attention to style and mechanics. Although some people have speculated that the coup had its genesis in a group of high-ranking, highly conservative university faculty and administrators with strong connections to right-wing organizations, little of what went on in the Program could have been construed as other than educationally well-informed and relatively apolitical instruction by well-trained, hard-working teachers.

The community that Robin had created was highly supportive and collaborative. New instructors took a ten-day pre-fall preparation seminar, where everyone wrote, talked about writing, considered research and theory in the field, and designed their own courses and syllabi in a structured setting rich in response and revision. We formed small teams of four or five new TAs and one faculty or a senior graduate student specializing in composition. Meetings continued throughout the year, and the most experienced graduate students in composition participated in some of the administrative work of the Program. The curriculum and its supervision were an enactment of the most promising and productive approaches informing the field of composition studies: an emphasis on collaboration, trust, seeing teaching as work in progress, seeing students as developing individuals who brought knowledge and experience into the classroom, thinking reflectively about instruction.

Soon after I received tenure and promotion to associate professor in 1988, I took over the directorship of the program. That role lasted for eight years, through two positive administrative appointment renewals, until the summer of 1996 and the subsequent death of the Program in Composition and Communication. During my directorship, two external reviewers in our field, David Jolliffe and David Schwalm, visited Minnesota by invitation of the provost's office to study and report on the various composition programs. Neither consultant wrote anything remotely recommending a merger of the Program into the English department, and both praised the excellence of the Program relative to the faculty resources the college had provided to it over the years.

#### POWER, MONEY, AND DISCIPLINARY CONTROL

Early in the development of the field of composition studies, conference rooms and journal pages were often filled with speculations about the future of the discipline relative to its historical association with English studies and its typical administrative location in departments of English. Important critiques of composition's growing independence appeared in issues of journals such as *College Composition and Communication* and *ADE Bulletin* and in collections of essays. One of the most vociferous calls for the intellectual autonomy of composition was Maxine Hairston's keynote address at the 1985 CCCC convention in Minneapolis (Hairston 1985). In that rallying cry, Hairston argued that the time had come for composition to formally separate from English literary studies and become an independent, freestanding discipline.

I think that, as rhetoricians and writing teachers, we will come of age and become autonomous professionals with a discipline of our own only if we can make a psychological break with the literary critics who today dominate the profession of English studies. I agree that logically we shouldn't have to face this choice—after all, what could be more central to English studies than teaching people to write? But logic has long ceased to be a consideration in this dispute. I think for the literary establishment the issue is power; I think for us it is survival. (273)

While no national exodus from English departments ensued, the historical tensions between the two areas continued to grow as composition became an increasingly independent and interdisciplinary field. The development of cultural studies and postmodern theory appears to have created some renewed connections between the scholarly interests of composition and literary studies, but the motivation, if not the exact reasons, for responding to Hairston's concerns is as justified today as it was almost two decades ago.

In this political context, we must ask whether the events at Minnesota could have been prompted by the desire of the English department to regain control of composition in a symbolic gesture of disciplinary reunification. Was English so emboldened by its conviction that composition should be taught by literary scholars that it schemed to take over an independent program run by composition experts? After all, concern about composition's "losses" if removed from the Burkean parlor of literary scholarship were expressed throughout the years of the Program's independence. Shulz and Holzman, for example, created an artificial bifurcation between a series of disconnected but technical-sounding composition "terms" and the "humanistic embrace" that characterizes the study of literature:

As for the theory and practice of writing instruction, its fascination today with the paraphernalia of diagnostic testing, lab modules, primary trait scoring, rule-based systems, competency-based placement, composing and editing processes, and computer reinforcement indicates that it would suffer a different but no less harmful degree of anemia by its separation from the study of literature. Divorced from the humanistic embrace of English, freshman writing is susceptible to domination by formalistic concerns. (28)

The speciousness of this argument is readily apparent. No one in composition studies denies the importance of humanism or the need for at least some literary study in all undergraduates' experience. But

the goals of most composition programs, as established and endorsed by the universities that have helped to formulate them, are not myopically limited to literary interpretation and criticism. Rather, composition courses help students to become effective, flexible writers who can analyze the way that writing works in a range of different disciplines and settings and who can critically interpret different kinds of evidence rendered in a variety of different modes of discourse. (See the Council of Writing Program Administrators' Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition Courses.)

As more writing programs considered independence in the mid-1980s, the concern that composition was losing its connection with literary study was somewhat more condescendingly put in an essay by Sylvia Manning:

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?—Exit, pursued by a bear.) (25)

Not so subtly, Manning's point here is 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.

As the independent Program in Composition flourished, echoes of these authors' sentiments could be heard now and then among the literature faculty in the halls of the English department. But concerns about the consequences of independence were never particularly strong. In fact, there is almost no evidence that English plotted to take over the Program for purposes of disciplinary reunification. Had the English department believed it could provide better instruction in composition or improve its leadership, we might have expected to see some significant gains over the past few years. Yet since 1996, not a single composition expert has been hired among, at this writing, the ten new tenure-track positions filled in the English department; two of the four original faculty who ran the Program (Brown and I) have left the department, and a third (Ross) is on the cusp of retirement. Without a base of composition scholars to lead, inform, and innovate, it is not difficult to

understand why there has been so little nationally visible activity in the composition wing of the English department.

Instead, more non-tenure-track and part-time instructors have been hired (and fired) than at any time in the Program's history (see Anson and Jewell); a nationally recognized teacher-development program (Lambert and Tice) is perceived to have fallen into mediocrity (Flash 1999); the teaching of composition has lost much of its interdisciplinarity; and there no longer exists a nationally competitive specialization in composition within the English graduate program.<sup>3</sup> The first new director has moved on, replaced by an excellent scholar of Victorian literature, who nevertheless lacks formal training or experience in the field of composition and who credits himself with teaching a composition course only once in the past decade ("Writing About Literature" in 1998).

For the leadership of the English department during the time of these events, controlling composition seems to have meant something other than a passion for the work of composition or the administration of a large writing program, which should have assumed the need for expertise. In the months and years that followed the takeover, investigations have concluded that the English department, in search of tuition revenues that would provide it with profit in a new university funding system known as "Responsibility Center Management" (RCM), wished to regain control of the independent program. RCM is based on the principle that every unit is responsible for generating its revenues and deciding how to spend them. Subsequent annual funding comes back more directly to each department, in proportion to the revenue it generates. Departments that teach many students at low cost, therefore, soon find themselves with increased funding. Those with a handful of highly paid faculty and few students are in trouble.<sup>4</sup>

Before the implementation of RCM, some departments were nervous that their funding would be reduced because they spent more than they garnered in revenues. English was not in serious danger under this financial scheme, but the faculty had already experienced some belt-tightening as its executive committee considered what to do about graduate seminars enrolling two or three students. A department that could generate large "profits" from student tuition could not only justify small graduate seminars but could use that profit as it wished—for example, to hire more faculty, bring in more guest speakers, get a bigger photocopying machine, carpet a main office, or put on catered receptions.

To many, the timing of RCM and the Program's demise appear somewhat more than coincidental. Ira Shor, reporting on his own independent investigation during a site visit,

saw an apparent deprofessionalization of composition/rhetoric at Minnesota through the absorption of writing instruction into an English Dept. oriented to literature. This deprofessionalization seems connected to larger budget and policy issues . . . which have consequences for composition/rhetoric in general. (1996)

Sources explained to Shor that English was a "weak academic unit which needed to boost its courses and student contact hours," a matter of some urgency because of a "new cost-effective budgeting system imposed by the Univ. (a part of the 'U2000 Plan' known as 'responsibility-centered management' . . .)." Taking over an inexpensive program that delivered instruction to thousands of students a year could provide, according to one source Shor cites, a budgetary "shot-in-the-arm for the English Department" (Shor 1996).

#### WHY NOT ENGLISH? A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

In the many discussions prompted by the Minnesota case, some have asked why it was not possible for the Program to operate virtually unchanged within the English department, which was, after all, our tenure home and represented the mother-discipline that fed and nurtured the field of composition in its infancy. The revenues could have strengthened the entire department, whose status in the college could have protected the Program and even helped it to develop.

Clearly, the question of "why not in English" must always remain local, answered in the context of how receptive literary specialists may be to the principles of contemporary composition theory and instruction or how freely and equitably composition leaders feel they can work within a department populated by colleagues who do not share their expertise or particular values. Every composition leader making such a judgment brings to the task not only an analysis of the local political scene but a rich assortment of prior experiences that help to inform that analysis. Has the composition leader, one might ask, earned the right to judge whether a particular disciplinary location would be good for a writing program? In my opposition to an English-controlled composition program at Minnesota, I am answerable to this question.

In my role as a faculty member in the English department, I taught courses in literature, creative writing, linguistics, and literacy theory, as well as graduate and undergraduate courses in composition. I also routinely taught courses in writing about literature. I fully participated in the workings of the department, serving on committees and engaging in all the usual activities of a busy academic unit. While I didn't always agree with the faculty about some issues, I understood them because I am and always have been a member of the English profession.

My childhood and adolescence were marked by a passion for literature. I read everything I could get my hands on and wrote stories in imitation of great writers. By twelve, I imagined authorship: a hoped-for publication of the first pet-store pamphlet on how to care for gerbils (Anson and Beach 1999). I typed long letters to relatives on onionskin typewriter paper, crafted dozens of short stories and poems, memorized lines of literature and plays, went through a phase voraciously reading French writers (some even in French, which I had learned during my childhood years living near Paris). By high school almost all I cared about academically was connected in some way to literature and creative writing. As an English major in college I took every course I could in literature and audited or sat in on others. I felt no boundaries between creative writing, literature, linguistics, composition, and film studies. I sent essays to literary magazines, kept extensive journals, continued to write fiction. At Syracuse I completed my first M.A. in English literature and creative writing, became fiction editor of the *Syracuse Review*, read essays for *Thoth* (a journal of literary criticism), participated in an informal reading circle by invitation of some literature faculty, wrote a novel, and won the Alssid Prize for the best graduate paper ("Goddess Sage and Holy or *Balneum Diaboli?* An Anatomy of Milton's Melancholy"). I studied literary theory and continued to sit in on extra courses. I read Pope until I heard heroic couplets in my sleep.

Amidst this *mélange* of literate activities, I discovered a nascent field that was focusing on the ways that young people learn to write and how people write in different situations. As a teaching assistant at Syracuse, I was fascinated. Teaching was such a difficult and wonderful activity, and here was an area of study preoccupied with learning. Even the formative works emerging at the time seemed to reveal a possible bridge between English studies and the learning of language and literacy. But as I read Janet Emig and Peter Elbow, James Britton and Mina Shaughnessy, and as I reflected on my own education, I kept thinking

about another experience I was having in a dusty classroom in an old Victorian building. Twice a week I would sit and listen to a freshly minted professor with a Ph.D. from one of the most prestigious institutions in the country. He would stand at the lectern and read his prepared text to us for fifty minutes at a stretch with five minutes at the end for controlled questions—read to us about literature, to all *five* of us enrolled in the course; read to us about his own reading; read to us as if to a huge audience of literary scholars in the only mode he knew, in the only venue for learning he could imagine. On those occasions a gap opened, then other gaps appeared, a long series of gaps stretching back into the recesses of my academic memory. I had done well in my schooling, but it was because I brought the disposition of an English major to it. Now as I struggled to help my classrooms of first-year students, I realized that very little of my college experience in English, not from the discipline or from the teachers, not from the hours of classroom instruction or from the communities of scholars I had tried to join, had shown real passion for understanding how people learn to become literate and thrive with their literacies. I had been blessed with some terrific teachers and scholars of literature, of course. But theirs was a passion for the arcane, a passion for sharing high-mindedness with high minds, not getting down close to the ground with young people who needed someone to help them discover literacy for themselves.

As I became more drawn to this new field, the distance between the interests and values of composition and the study of literature was becoming much clearer. When I began the Ph.D. program in English language at Indiana University, I still tried to make bridges between composition and literary studies. Yet in the late 1970s, most of the literature professors there seemed to look down on composition as an enterprise unworthy of their time. They talked with scorn or suspicion about both composition research and teaching, especially scholarship on teaching of any kind. I saw only scattered interest among them in pedagogy as an object of serious reflection or research. It became harder to find connections with them beyond the most erudite considerations of literary scholarship. I soon realized I had joined a kind of academic subculture, a community of compositionists and language scholars, who began introducing me to people in other buildings—people in education who were talking about issues of language and literacy development, theories of learning, research on reading, ethnography. It was easier to connect with cognitive scientists, who in spite of their empiricism really wanted to talk

about learning. It was easier to connect with psycholinguists, who in spite of their behaviorism really wanted to talk about language and development. It was even easier to connect with linguists, who in spite of their formalisms really could talk about models of language behavior. Although the “comp” and “lit” people were all working in the same building, participating in the same departmental culture, we were asking entirely different questions. We were in different worlds.

When I accepted the position at Minnesota, the culture of the English department was very similar to Indiana’s. Scorn abounded for the field of composition; many faculty didn’t want to talk about teaching because they already knew how to teach; students got “dumber every year.” But there was one important difference: the responsibility for teaching composition was no longer a source of tension, perhaps with the exception of control over TA appointments, and my colleagues and I could design and oversee a curriculum that was fully and freely informed by the developing field of our expertise.

Over the years, we tried (mostly in vain) to enlist some members of the English department to work with us on committees, in our teacher-development program, and in the teaching of our courses. We had greatest success recruiting faculty for our complicated and time-consuming TA hiring committees. But interest remained scattered. Eventually, I lost faith that my English colleagues could find even a fraction of the interest in and passion for composition that I had, and still have, for literature. Under those circumstances, independence seemed like a good thing.

My answer to “why not in English?” was not, then, uninformed or without experience and deliberation. Our predictions about the English department’s lack of a collaborative spirit or interest in composition were soon confirmed. Once it had regained control of composition, only a handful of English faculty were willing to become involved in the enterprise. One person who taught a section of first-year composition ended up wondering “how on earth the instructors could survive” their multiple-section appointments. A glance at almost any small piece of composition administration often showed dramatic differences in approach. For example, in the old program, one of the faculty members would visit each new TA’s class in the role of a mentor, discuss the class with the TA, and write up a descriptive, formative evaluation. More experienced TAs engaged in a program of peer cross-observations. Under the new leadership, the latter program was dropped, and the new director went to TAs’ classes to write summative assessments. Several TAs, dumbfounded by the change

in purpose, direction, and tone of the reports, shared them with me. The new reports were clearly designed to evaluate, the old to teach and coach. The new reports saw the classroom from the perspective of a Freirean banking metaphor; the old, as a contact zone. The new were preoccupied with demeanor and speaking angle; the old, with complex social relationships and pedagogical turns in the classroom. The new were brief, perfunctory, judgmental; the old were long, informal, and advisory.

Such differences, of course, can arise from simple nescience: perhaps the new administration was stumbling in the dark. But when the department might then have held out an olive branch and allowed us to help them reorient the Program, both Brown and I were kept at a distance from all composition-related work, and Ross's involvement was relegated to "computer consultant." The new director informed me personally that he "could not compete with me" for the allegiance of all the instructors and suggested that I "go off and write some more articles." From the fall of 1996 to my eventual departure in 1999, I was invited to run dozens of WAC and other workshops across the university campus and received a provostial invitation to be inducted into the Academy of Distinguished Teachers; but not one request for help or involvement in composition-related matters came from the administrators of my own department.

#### THE FUTURE OF DISCIPLINARY INTEGRATION

Across the United States, many outstanding composition programs operate smoothly and equitably within English departments. During my visits to dozens of these campuses, I have heard three refrains from the WPAs and other specialists in composition who are in charge of administering programs:

- they feel that the role and legitimacy of their discipline are respected and honored by their colleagues and by their administration;
- they are granted intellectual authority for making or helping to make decisions about the nature and delivery of instruction in composition; and,
- they are allowed some degree of administrative autonomy.

Ironically, the stronger these three principles are enacted, the less insular are the compositionists. Composition has always acted on its own beliefs in the power of collaboration and collective wisdom. Autonomy, therefore, may be desired only in proportion to the hostility or indifference shown by those who might otherwise be welcomed in.

These principles become all the more important given the present state of the English profession. Threatened by a sour job market for graduates, a declining interest in literary research, a growing skepticism by a public that equates literature with great books and is baffled by what now counts as literary scholarship, English departments are rediscovering composition as a neglected resource. The conservative public eases its criticisms if the department can “also” claim to be teaching undergraduates how to read and write. The discipline no longer appears to be in a state of decline if its productivity includes the work of composition. Graduate programs can thrive if there are teaching jobs for English students, jobs controlled, often as fellowships, by departments whose faculty rely on steady enrollments for their own specialized seminars.

But if the Minnesota case leaves us with an object lesson, it is for English departments to consider whether they accord their composition leaders the principles that characterize successful departmentally housed writing programs. Some English scholars have long argued that changes in the nature of English studies call for a new attitude toward composition. Laurence Poston, in a forward-looking essay with none of the condescending tone of Manning or Schulz and Holzman, suggests that English studies needs to begin accommodating new work in composition, widening its own scholarly horizons, and embracing literacy as a subject relevant to its work. In support of his claims, Poston quotes Jay Robinson of the University of Michigan, who wrote that “what is needed is not talk about bridging from literature to composition, but more serious talk about the human uses of language—the uses diverse humans make of language. We need not talk about ‘composition’ and ‘literature,’ but about talking and listening and reading and writing as centrally human and humanizing activities” (qtd. in Poston, 17). In its sustained focus on these activities, composition has branched outward to the point where it no longer is subsumed by literary scholarship but makes that scholarship the object of its own study, insofar as that study focuses on texts and contexts in all disciplines. Where once it was possible to have a marginal interest in the questions of composition and still know something about it, today composition includes subfields such as writing assessment that demand large investments of professional time and energy. It is no longer possible to run a writing program as a hobby, to be set aside whenever the stacks of nineteenth-century literary criticism or the latest *PMLA* beckon. Composition is embracing new, burgeoning areas strongly connected to learning and literacy: innovations in technology, service learning, and

multifaceted forms of assessment; advances in faculty development, such as reflective practice and the scholarship of teaching; analyses of increasingly diverse writing communities; college/high school articulation. To be a WPA means to be passionate about and devote time to these interconnected areas. The maturing of our field, as Lee Odell has put it, has presupposed “the best efforts of each member of the discipline. Each of us has a responsibility to contribute to our individual and collective understanding of how people use language to communicate” (401). Those efforts cannot become newly mired in literary erudition.

Regardless of where composition is ultimately located administratively, its continued success will require that faculty and administrators across our institutions begin to think about it in new ways. No other discipline suffers the powerlessness, the deliberate divesting of authority and respect, that besieges compositionists. Members of departments of history, psychology, economics, nuclear engineering, food science, nursing—none endure arbitrary manipulation and control on the scale of composition. As composition leaders, we must develop principles and practices that insist on the scholarly, administrative, pedagogical, and professional status of our field. In so doing, we must think of ways to protect our pedagogies and administrative practices while continuing to invite others to share in the responsible management of our teaching and learning communities, just as we offer our own time and services to others. For their part, superordinate departments and administrative units must more often allow composition experts the administrative, curricular, and pedagogical freedom to make critical decisions about the nature and delivery of their instruction. In so doing, they will find themselves welcomed into the collective work of composition, listened to, and respected for their views.

#### CODA: DOING SOME GOOD IN THE WORLD

It is tempting to see the end of the Program as a symbolic loss to the discipline of composition studies, a subversion of our collective work. A few months after the dissolution of the Program in Composition, I wrote as much in a reflective post to the WPA-L (the national listserv of the Council of Writing Program Administrators), lamenting the way in which years of administrative work can be so easily erased. Part of my post read as follows:

What strikes me . . . is how easily all the things that have taken so much negotiation, planning, and hard work are dismantled. Perhaps that’s one of the

differences between administrative effort and scholarly work; one has the impression that one's administrative work is moving the world forward, at least locally and institutionally, but it can be undone in a matter of months. What's left is the *experience* of administration, but the "product," unlike scholarship, is gone. . . . A great writing curriculum can be "revised" into lectures on grammar. Or a really good teacher-development program can turn into the old 1950's practice of handing out a sample syllabus and the keys to a shared office. In the scholarly world, one of the criteria for the acceptance of new work is how and whether it builds on previous work. We don't have such criteria in administrative replacements—administration isn't necessarily intellectual as much as it is political. Regressive political agendas can land you right back to where you were ten, twenty, or thirty years ago—and then what? What has "moved forward?" Where has your work as an administrator gone?

Not long after this post appeared, Bob Connors, whose contributions to the list were always elegantly written and artfully reasoned, sent a rejoinder. In Bob's characteristic style, it was both abstractly intellectual and personally responsive. Much of his post focused on the "heart-break" of administration represented by Fred Newton Scott, who was a great scholar but watched everything he had done to build an independent department of rhetoric at the University of Michigan fade into oblivion soon after his retirement. "And when he left in 1927," Bob wrote, "his department was within two years dissolved, the teachers and students folded back into the powerful and secure Department of English Language and Literature."

After Bob's tragic death in June of 2000, I retrieved his post and have reread it many times, in part because of what it says about our purposes. It reminds us that in spite of the politics and hierarchies in which we work as administrators of writing programs, it is the human moments, the connections we make and the lives we touch and improve, the ways we live and work *in* and *through* our places in higher education, that really matter. For Bob, administration was finally about people, not programs.

But are we to say that Fred Newton Scott wrote his name in water? Or that Chris Anson's effects on students and teachers at Minnesota are nugatory? We have gotten so used to the unilateral power over meaning that single-author writing and publishing provide that it can seem maddening to watch the way our influence diffuses throughout the social world of shared power (and enforced subordination) that administration is and creates. But though my individual writ may run forever unchanged in the dusty and uncracked pages

of old journals, I hope my administrative efforts—minor, partial, imperfect, compromised though they are, and subject to partial erasure though they will be—may do someone some good in the world, too. (6 Nov 1996)

## NOTES

This essay is loosely based on “(Re)locating Literacy: Reflections on the Place of Writing Programs in Higher Education,” an invited plenary address I gave at the Annual Summer Conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, Houghton, Michigan, July 19, 1997. Many thanks to Carol Rutz for her helpful comments on earlier versions of the essay.

1. The composition program referred to in this essay has no administrative connection with two other writing programs at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, both of which are models of excellence and operate independently within their colleges. These are the writing programs in the General College, located on the Minneapolis campus, and in the Department of Rhetoric, located on the St. Paul campus. While there was and is articulation among the programs, neither of these other two units participated in the events described here.
2. About 70–80 percent of TAs continued to come from English, but rigorous hiring criteria made it possible for a promising scholar of literature to be denied an appointment on the basis of attitudes toward students, limited experience with undergraduates, or lack of promise in the classroom. Some of the very finest TAs ever appointed in the Program came from departments such as musicology, history, and comparative literature.
3. Instead, the English department offers an interdisciplinary minor in rhetoric, literacy, and language, presumably to help doctoral students in literature to prepare for the poor job market in their areas, but the department is not included in one of the major national lists of graduate programs in rhetoric and composition (Brown, Jackson, and Enos).
4. For a helpful introduction to the principles of RCM, see <http://weathertop.bry.indiana.edu/mas/rcm/>. For more on the effects of RCM in composition programs, see Anson, 2002.