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The Quick Rise and Untimely Fall of "Writing Your Way into Graduate School": A Dramatic Dialogue, a Discarded Memo, and a Course Epitaph

As the title suggests, this story doesn't have a happy ending.

I offer this tale as a kind of allegory—a parable, if you will—that demonstrates both the struggles writing studies professionals face and the missteps they may take, particularly when designing courses to support first-generation college students. It is a situation that might arise on any campus, public or private, open access or highly selective. But this tale happens to take place on a campus that serves a resolutely diverse student body: 38% are students of color; 36% speak a home language other than English; 30% are first-generation college students. Perhaps like your own institution, many faculty are concerned with the quality of their students' writing, but they aren't quite sure what to do about it. The institution hires a writing program administrator to build a New Writing Program. They choose a junior faculty member, who joins a department full of faculty who don't share her scholarly background, nor necessarily understand the values her field embraces. Some colleagues are supportive, some indifferent. Faculty outside her department are perhaps even more perplexed by her field, and they are at odds with the upper-level writing-in-the-disciplines general education courses offered in their own departments.

There are some early successes. Transformation of the first-year writing program for students. Professional development and teacher preparation for graduate assistants. Higher per-course salaries for adjuncts. Full-time hires with specializations in writing studies for the New Writing Program. But the tale I wish to tell isn't about first-year writing, it's about the design of an upper-level, general education composition course. What Our University calls a "C" course.

Some of the dialogue I'll offer to construct this allegory will sound forced. Blame it on lack of practice in creative non-fiction. I don't intend to represent all sides of the tale, nor the intentions or motivations of all of its characters. I don't want to construct a fiction that would give depth to some of the characters I portray. Rather, I want to emphasize the points of contention that arose around the course the New Writing Program designed, and the battles it faced and finally lost.

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More than anything, I want this story to sound to readers as it sounded to me, to experience the situation from my perspective: an authority in writing studies whose authority was undermined. I also want to describe what students lost in the process.

The tale begins late during a fall semester, on a campus not unlike your own, with an impromptu visit from the Academic Affairs Representative. He steps into the Writing Program Administrator's office, a yellow course advertisement flapping in his hand. The flyer describes an online course the New Writing Program planned to offer for the first time during the upcoming winter session, "WRIT 381: Writing Your Way Into Graduate School." Small talk ensues. Recent conference presentations. The weather. Hiring. Then he gets down to business.

A Dramatic Dialogue

AAR: Concerns have been raised over this flyer. There are questions about the course's rigor. Why should the New Writing Program give students credit for writing graduate school application materials? For revising writing samples and application documents they've already written? For researching graduate program websites? And you call attention to the abbreviated winter session timeline, and to the course carrying general education credit? Students are going to take this course because they think it's easy. And several Important Faculty have complained. Why should we give students credit for writing something that they would write anyway, and for researching schools that they would research on their own?

WPA: Hold on. Let me see the flyer.

Well, sure, we make mention of the general education "C" credit, and the abbreviated winter session timeline. But this course satisfies the general education composition course guidelines. And yes, it is being taught over the winter session, but so are many other "C" courses. And well, all "C" courses are required to focus on revision. That is the defining characteristic of a "C" course.

AAR: But you can't let students rewrite things and give them credit. The faculty have concerns about that. Where is the rigor? Where is the subject matter? Do you define reading as looking at graduate program websites? Do you define writing as revising papers and documents they've already written? It's just not done. You've got to pull the flyers. And you've got to change these assignments. The reputation of the New Writing Program is at stake.

WPA: Listen, the New Writing Program faculty committee really came together in developing this course. We're using a solid textbook that focuses on expectations across the disciplines, and we've developed assignments based on principles of genre theory and professional writing. We spent a lot of time thinking about what students on this campus

need and want from an upper-division "C" course. Given the fact that many of our students are first-generation college students *and* have intentions of applying to graduate school, and that the institution is pushing us to offer more online versions of "C" courses over abbreviated sessions, well, we believe this course fits both the student demographic and the pedagogical scope of the shortened winter session. We have developed excellent assignments and there are many other good reasons to offer this course. Specialists in writing studies designed it—it calls on our experiences teaching writing-across-the curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines courses, and professional writing courses, and online writing courses, not just on this campus, but on other campuses where we've worked, institutions that have national reputations in writing studies.

But if the flyers are causing undue commotion, we can take them down. Let me talk with the New Writing Program faculty committee and see if we can adjust the assignments to accommodate some of the concerns. Maybe we can rethink the writing sample assignment—we've gotten emails from students saying they want to take the course, but haven't written a substantial paper in their major. Maybe we can kill two birds by revamping that assignment. But you've got to understand, we're not scrapping the emphasis on revision or the analysis of graduate program websites. These kinds of activities are perfectly legitimate for a course that places writing and revision at the center of its curriculum.

AAR: Yes, thanks, do take down the flyers. We're going to let the course stay on the books because too many students have already signed up. But the online instruction committee will continue to watch this class and other winter and summer "C" courses. We will be watching all the online courses using Blackboard. The reputation of the New Writing Program is at stake.

WPA: Look, I hear you, but I want to say out loud that I'm leaving this conversation disturbed, and that if an instructional review committee is already taking aim at our course, the New Writing Program has got to be given a forum to discuss its merits, to defend the course from our perspective as experts in writing studies.

AAR: Of course. You will be hearing from us.

And behold, the Writing Program Administrator did hear from the Academic Affairs Representative that following spring, just as students were signing up for summer session sections of WRIT 381. As all had predicted, the winter session offerings were popular, and Important Faculty voiced concerns that the trend would continue in summer session. Indeed, rather than viewing the course's popularity as indicative of WRIT 381's value to students, Important Faculty viewed it as proof that the course lacked rigor, or so the Academic Affairs Representative described. What's more, it didn't help that the New Writing Program made nearly as much revenue on WRIT 381 as fully-fledged Old Academic Departments made on their winter and

summer session "C" courses.

The Writing Program Administrator was given a week to assemble a defense of the course, to submit the syllabus, assignments, and volumes of samples of student writing. But there would be no forum for open discussion. So she decided to write a memo.

A Discarded Memo

DATE: Spring Semester

TO: Online Composition Instruction Committee

FROM: Writing Program Administrator, New Writing Program, Our University

After a conversation with the Academic Affairs Representative, I write to offer evidence of rigor in the distance learning course WRIT 381: Writing Your Way into Grad School, which the New Writing Program offered for the first time in winter session. Because I suspect some misunderstanding over the course grows out of a lack of familiarity with writing studies, this memo offers an overview of the learning goals and educational values the field promotes, explains the theories that inform WRIT 381 and other WRIT courses, and examines the merits and pitfalls of offering general education composition—or "C" courses—during abbreviated winter and summer sessions.

What Is Writing Studies, and What Educational Values Does It Promote?

As Derek Owens and other leaders in the discipline make clear, writing studies has its origins in the field traditionally referred to as "composition and rhetoric," or simply "composition." In an effort to expand conceptions of the field beyond the teaching of "first-year composition," however, many programs are embracing the name "writing studies." Specialists in the field study a wide range of interdisciplinary subjects beyond first-year writing, including art and craft pedagogies, critical race theory, digital rhetoric, gender studies, genre theory, multi-lingual writing, online writing pedagogies, professional writing, working class studies, writing-in-the-disciplines, writing program administration, and many other areas of interest. Programs in writing studies embrace the new name not only to suggest the field's expansiveness, but also to distinguish themselves from English departments, which are typically dominated by scholars who privilege reading and the consumption of literary texts over writing and the production of student texts. In writing studies courses, student writing takes center stage: the primary reading material is not a canon of work—or, for that matter, another facet of knowledge from a particular discipline—but students'

texts themselves, as well as sample models of those texts, including publications from scholarly and professional discourse communities. Put another way, many writing studies courses do not ask students to focus on a discrete body of knowledge and, in turn, demonstrate their mastery of that material in their writing; instead, they ask students to study the rhetorical moves and written conventions of particular fields or larger civic communities, and demonstrate their mastery of those moves and conventions within their writing. This may seem like a subtle distinction, but it is eminently important, as it points to the educational values writing studies promotes.

Since a reconfigured focus on the teaching of writing emerged in the 1970s, the field has worked to cultivate institutional and classroom atmospheres that promote democratic education. In fact, if one thing ties together the disparate and interdisciplinary work currently being done in writing studies, it is the field's commitment to helping all students reach their potential as literate members of a larger society, no matter their race or gender, no matter their economic, linguistic, or educational background. Prior to the passing of the GI Bill and the large numbers of working- and middle-class students entering universities after World War II and the Vietnam War, however, courses that required students to write too often did not make transparent the disciplinary, cultural, or class-based conventions honored by instructors or their disciplinary communities: instead, such courses assumed prior knowledge of conventions, or worse yet, assumed that there is only one way to write well, and that everyone who is in college should already know how to do it. As social theorist Michel Foucault teaches, it's not a stretch to suggest that such assumptions put students from disadvantaged backgrounds at a further disadvantage, and reproduce systems of advantage for students born into privileged, highly literate households.

"such assumptions put students from disadvantaged backgrounds at a further disadvantage"

To be sure, as fifty years of research on college writers reveals, many poor, working class, minority, or otherwise disenfranchised students begin their college careers as inexperienced writers. As they progress through college, they do not elicit the kind of mentoring privileged students of a bygone era received—as writing studies scholar John Warnock makes clear, they don't have access to the class-biased support network common in higher education prior to the GI Bill, or its predecessor, the Morrill Act. Indeed today many college students, regardless of educational or class background, are not good at finding a mentor willing to coach them in productively using writing as a tool for self-promotion. This kind of mentoring—particularly one-on-one feedback on writing—is absolutely necessary for student success in graduate school. All students—but especially first-generation college students, minorities, and second language writers—benefit from someone making visible the conventions that privileged students and well-intentioned faculty sometimes

take for granted. Because programs in writing studies establish their raison d'être in helping writers achieve their potential as active agents in their personal, professional, and civic spheres, we see it as our mission to design courses that help students succeed, especially those students who might not consider themselves "graduate school material."

In short, WRIT 381 advances writing studies' commitment to democratic education. It is particularly well suited for the Our University student demographic, which has a significant percentage of first-generation college students, second-language writers, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students. Rather than replicating the elitist educational conditions of past generations—that is, when faculty expected the teaching of writing to be done off the grid—we argue to keep the kind of literate activity WRIT 381 embodies fully visible, and fully credit bearing.

What Pedagogies Inform WRIT 381, and What Projects Are Assigned in the Course?
Our commitment to democratic education clear, let me also make clear that the New Writing Program's commitment to disenfranchised students does not preclude the development of rigorous courses. Notably, while the New Writing Program is only in its fourth year of operation, it serves as an international model of excellence for any writing program, but particularly those seeking to fundamentally restructure the teaching of writing on their campuses. Since its inception, the mission of the New Writing Program has been to foster the academic and civic literacies essential for success in the university and beyond, and our work has been honored by the oldest and most prestigious professional organization in our field, the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Said another way, it is clear to our national scholarly community that our focus on writing has not simply been an attempt to help students acquire rudimentary skills, but to prepare them to articulate complex positions in a variety of genres and contexts. Grounded in genre theory, our courses promote writing as a way of learning and seek to help students examine assignments, analyze genres, practice writing processes, and determine what kinds of conventions are appropriate for different contexts, audiences, and disciplines. Specifically, WRIT 381 is a critical analysis of genre sets applied to a particular task—applying to graduate school. Students research and write a twenty-to-twenty-five page guide on graduate schools and writing conventions in their disciplines, and this research influences the development of two documents submitted in their final portfolios, the curriculum vitae and personal statement (for students applying for entry into advanced scholarly degree programs) or the cover letter and résumé (for students applying for entry into advanced professional degree programs). As our Associate Director argued in a private correspondence with me (and I thank her for bringing this to my attention), some instructors even push students to go a step further, asking them to perform rhetorical analyses of research in their discipline, particularly research written by faculty members who teach in the graduate programs

students are interested in. As we continue to strengthen and modify the course for the upcoming summer session, we are making such rhetorical analyses a required segment of the research guide.

We think of the research guide as what members of professional writing communities call a "usability report": it is written for classmates and future students who need to learn more about the conventions and guidelines for applying to graduate programs in particular disciplines, and some students even go so far as to offer advice in the guide about applying to particular programs in particular institutions. But the research guide is more than a report; it is a meta-cognitive activity fashioned in the spirit of writing studies scholar Edward M. White's "Phase 2" portfolio. I invite you to take a closer look at the syllabus, assignments, and sample student writing attached, both to get a better sense of how the guide functions in the portfolio and to see how the guide influences student revision of graduate school application documents. In short, the guide serves as a tool to teach potential student readers about the field, but it also serves as a frontispiece directed at the instructor, justifying the rhetorical decisions the writer has made in the application documents. In this way the faculty member teaching the course—and by extension of her expertise, the entire writing studies discourse community—serves as an important scholarly audience for both the research guide and the portfolio as a whole. The course assignments are much more than merely practical. They are scholarly and professional.

As I understand it, one criticism of the course stemmed from an early flyer the New Writing Program distributed, a flyer that suggested students would be working with documents they had already drafted. Our assumption was that most students with junior standing (a requirement for the course) would have already developed some form of a résumé, if not a formal personal statement. Early on, we also planned to invite students to bring in a research paper previously written for a course in their major, one that they could use as a writing sample in their application. The idea was that part of the work in the course would be to revise that piece to meet the scholarly or professional expectations of a particular graduate program or programs. As I came to understand, some members of the campus community objected to our emphasis on revision—arguing that the course should focus on the creation of entirely new documents—and thus I made the executive decision to scrap the writing sample portion of the course portfolio. In hindsight, we were glad to have made this decision, not because we agreed that an emphasis on revising previously written work was inappropriate—that claim does not hold weight for experts in writing studies—but because many students emailed us prior to the beginning of the course, explaining that they had not written a substantial research paper in their major. While responding to this last point is beyond the scope of this memo, these emails suggest a need for more upper-division general education "C" courses, particularly those that require students to seriously investigate, practice, and produce *writing conventions in their fields.*

This is all to say that rather than viewing "Writing Your Way into Graduate School" as lacking rigor,

the campus community might think of it as complementary to courses offered within the major, a kind of capstone, if you will, where students synthesize and reflect on their learning, as well as extend their understanding of the way writing gets done in their fields.

Who Teaches WRIT 381, and Why Should Specialists Teach Online "C" Courses?

As you read between the lines of this too-long document, I'm sure you can sense my frustration. With that acknowledged, let me emphasize that I offer these words not in an effort to offend or annoy an important committee with the legitimate task of reviewing on-line course instruction. As a specialist in writing studies, I am acutely aware of the problems that surface when graduate students or other inexperienced instructional faculty are offered online courses without the training or mentoring it takes to develop them legitimately. In fact, the lack of mentoring of graduate students teaching "C" courses throughout the calendar year was one of the factors that allowed me to support the establishment of the New Writing Program at Our University, a program that places great care in preparing graduate students to teach "C" courses. I appreciate the time and care the committee is taking to take online instruction seriously, and invite you to contact me and other faculty specialists in the New Writing Program as you make decisions about online "C" offerings.

But unlike the instructor pool many departments draw from to staff online "C" courses, "Writing Your Way Into Graduate School" was not the creation of an under-compensated graduate student with little experience in the teaching of writing or online instruction. Last fall, I asked our faculty specialists to come together, to examine why our winter and summer courses were not making capacity, and to devise a new course that would not only be of high quality, but fit the very specific needs of the Our University upper-division undergraduate student body.

The development of the course was a distinctly collaborative faculty effort. I drew on my many years of experience teaching not just professional writing, but writing-in-the-disciplines courses in one of the most well-regarded independent departments of writing in the nation. Another faculty specialist in our New Writing Program likewise drew on his experiences and training, not just as a graduate of a Top-Five PhD program in writing studies, but through his current affiliation with the Our University Career Development Center, as well as his work teaching professional writing at a number of institutions across the region. Drawing on his research expertise in digital writing and online pedagogies—and holding a PhD from another well-regarded program in writing studies—another of our faculty specialists also offered invaluable insights on the creation of the course, insights that are enhanced by his work with English language learners as a Peace Corps writing instructor, as well as his work with inexperienced writers who enroll in our first-year writing course designed to support Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students. Similarly our Associate Director also brings to the table her many years of experience working with EOP, McNair Scholars, and other programs designed to support disenfranchised student populations,

and she too has been a driving force behind the EOP effort. What's more, she draws on a PhD in English with a secondary concentration in writing program administration, as well as a Master's degree with emphases in composition and rhetoric and small press publishing. Finally, the New Writing Program's former graduate student Assistant Director, a soon-to-be graduate of the Our University PhD program in English with a concentration in writing studies, helped us design the course given his experience teaching professional writing in the Department of Writing at Acclaimed Research University—a department that has an undergraduate major in writing studies. This former Assistant Director took a leave of absence from Our University last year to pursue this distinguished opportunity; will defend his dissertation in late April (I am his dissertation chair); and is the only Our University English PhD student in recent memory to have secured an Assistant Professor position during the same year he completes his degree. He will be joining the Department of Writing at Prestigious Humanities College this fall.

I appreciate the time and expertise that these writing studies specialists devoted to developing WRIT 381. And for fear of any suspicion to the contrary, let me also emphasize that as Director of the New Writing Program, I would never authorize the mounting of winter or summer courses by anyone without scholarly expertise in and demonstrated commitment to online writing instruction. Although I have no doubt that we could fill more sections of WRIT 381 if our only goal was to expand (admittedly quite modest) New Writing Program coffers, I share the concerns of many faculty at Our University about offering winter and summer courses for the sake of profit.

A Closing Comment

As I understand it, a second objection to the early flyer advertising WRIT 381 was that it explicitly stated that students who enroll would earn general education "C" credit over the abbreviated winter session. I had little quarrel with pulling the ad given concerns that it might lead students and faculty to presume the course lacked rigor, but it strikes me that the real issue is not WRIT 381's academic integrity, but the institution's insecurity about offering "C" courses during winter and summer sessions. While I vehemently object to the conception that WRIT 381 is "popular because it is easy"—how could anyone make such a claim before they had a chance to examine the writing produced by students—I am sympathetic to the idea of restricting "C" courses to fall and spring semesters. But if you share assumptions about lack of rigor in our course, I urge you to reexamine these assumptions in light of evidence offered in this memo, to consider the possibility that our course is popular because it offers students something of value, and to recognize WRIT 381 as a rigorous course opportunity previously unavailable to Our University students.

It takes a specialized understanding of the teaching of writing to create a compactly designed course that legitimately fulfills the general education "Composition" requirement, including an emphasis on revision. Given the lack of expertise of the vast majority of the winter and summer "C" instructorate—that is, graduate students who may be skilled in their academic fields but who

have little and sometimes no training in teaching writing, teaching writing-across-the-disciplines, or online instruction—I would endorse the elimination of "C" courses in the abbreviated winter and summer sessions. Without a uniform policy, however, it would be patently undemocratic to cancel WRIT 381, to change its full credit-bearing status, or to remove its general education "C" designation. The course is grounded in the theories and values of writing studies, and has demonstrated value for Our University students.

Attachments:

WRIT 381 Syllabus

WRIT 381 Assignments

WRIT 381 Sample Student Portfolios

Note: As I have referenced throughout, I draw heavily from ideas offered by WRIT 381 faculty in the construction of this memo, but also from members of the writing studies community, particularly members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) who answered my call to help defend the course. I wish to thank the following members of the WPA-listserv whose ideas I use and whose language I modify in this document:

Beth Daniel, Kennesaw State University

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Kate Sullivan, Lance Community College

Edward M. White, California State University San Bernadino

Maja Wilson, University of New Hampshire

An Epitaph for WRIT 381

Through collaboration born,
high hopes we had for you:

educational democracy and
Mentoring student writers was at your core.
our students valued you, and our faculty specialists argued that you were
rigorous,
egalitarian, and
Theory-driven, that you
honored writing studies' commitment to talented and disenfranchised students. But our
independent and New Writing Program's dream course is
no more.
gone is our
students' opportunity to examine genre conventions in their discipline, and
Changed is our faculty's optimism for the New Writing Program.
how will the Academic Affairs Representative respond to other new courses
and will Important Faculty continue to dismiss us in the future?
no tellin'. After all, reading Great Books and instructing the finer points of High
grammar are still
everything. Perhaps the only thing Our University ever wanted.

Coda: On Parables and Unanswered Questions

Mixed-genre parables about life in the academy aren't exactly common, and my attempt at offering one here speaks as much about the adversity writing programs and student writers face in the academy as it does about how junior faculty learn to navigate institutions. Admittedly, my representation of characters is flat. As with most parables, there are good guys and bad guys in this story, and a less experimental piece would have painted a more complex representation of both the Academic Affairs Representative and the Writing Program Administrator, and responded to unanswered questions. What pressures did the Academic Affairs Representative face that led to the formation of the online instructional committee and, ultimately, the university administration's decision to prohibit future offerings of WRIT 381? Did the WPA's memo insult the committee? The AAR? Did readers roll their eyes when they read references to Foucault and "Phase 2" portfolios? Who discarded the memo, the instructional committee or the WPA herself?

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettleheim suggests that most parables leave some mystery to be solved by the reader and, in as much, have a therapeutic function: in such genres readers find their "own solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about [readers] and [their] inner conflicts at this moment in [their] life" (25). So, I end with some unanswered questions, in part to keep within the genre. And in part because I still don't have all the answers.

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