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## Reframing the Great Debate on First-Year Writing

When composition began to be taught in American colleges and universities in the 19th century, the first-year course was so central to the field one could almost say it was the field. Over the past 50 years, since *CCC* first appeared, what we understand to constitute our field has changed dramatically into something more closely resembling other academic disciplines. Yet the first-year course which was our beginning has maintained its position at the center of our enterprise: most of our teachers teach it, most of our students study it, most of our textbook writers write for it, and most of our theoreticians theorize it. In addition, it is what we argue about most.

A central argument in the field has revolved around the requirement of first-year writing. In several CCC panels, journal articles, and an edited collection, such respected figures as Lil Brannon, Robert Connors, Sharon Crowley, and Charles Schuster have spoken against requiring first-year students to study composition. The course requirement, these scholars argue, frequently results in an oppressive arrangement in which grudging, uninterested students struggle through a curriculum focused on low-level skills in classes taught by poorly-supported faculty, typically adjuncts and graduate students. This arrangement, they suggest, helps perpetuate the demoted status of the composition course as a service activity rather than as part of a *bona fide* academic discipline.

The three authors of this essay have all been directors of the Composition Program at the University of Cincinnati at some time in the last 13 years. *Marjorie Roemer* now directs both the Writing Program at Rhode Island College and the RI Consortium on Writing. *Lucille M. Schultz* teaches writing at the University of Cincinnati; she is particularly interested in writing courses that build bridges between the academy and the larger community. Her forthcoming book in the CCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series is *The Young Composers: Composition's Beginnings in 19th Century Schools*. And *Russel K. Durst* is currently Acting Head of the UC English Department. His forthcoming book from NCTE is *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in First-Year College Composition*.

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In the following essay, we explore how this debate over the first-year writing course focuses the tensions within the field and enables us to see more clearly where we are as an emerging discipline in a postmodern world. While acknowledging problems with the course as presently constituted, we put forward our views in support of maintaining the first-year requirement. We argue for the value of the course as a pedagogical site with the potential to influence very large numbers of students, and for its importance as a site of struggle and change within the institutional hierarchy of academia. But first, we re-visit the historical contours of the debate and argue for a re-examination of some of the key terms on which the current debate rests—terms like “service,” “gatekeeping,” and “professionalism.”

### The History of the Debate

Current proposals to do away with the required course have a long history—described by the author of one such proposal as “the tradition of complaint” (Greenbaum 174). The history goes back more than 100 years to the last decade of the nineteenth century, not long after the founding of the course at Harvard in the 1880’s. While the specific complaints and suggested alternatives vary considerably, along with the historical contexts in which these proposals appear, most of the critiques of first-year writing, including the most recent manifestations, share a number of qualities. These qualities include an expressed desire *not* to work with beginning college students on composition-related matters, particularly given the perceived lack of interest of this group in improving their writing and thinking; a corresponding preference to teach more advanced, engaged students on subjects more compatible with the interests and abilities of college English faculty; and an evisceratingly negative depiction of the first-year course, its students, its teachers, and its defenders. With a pro-abolitionist spin, Robert Connors provides a useful historical summary of debates concerning the existence of the first-year requirements in the 1995 edited collection *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction* (Petraglia). In contrast to Connors, we believe that, more than any other feature, what unites attempts to abolish the required first-year writing course across disparate historical periods is a fundamentally elitist view of the English department mission and its move toward full disciplinarity, a view which we find in many ways quite disagreeable and contrary to the purposes driving composition studies. A review of abolitionist arguments may help to clarify our position.

The earliest published attacks on the course assert that college is no place to teach students basic literacy skills which they should already have mastered in secondary school (Hurlbut 1896; Sampson 1895). These pieces

also argue that the course implemented at Harvard and widely adopted elsewhere was never intended to be a permanent addition to the college curriculum; rather, it was designed as a temporary stopgap until the schools strengthened their composition instruction and colleges could go back to what they did best: the teaching of literature.

The first extended and widely publicized argument for abolishing first-year writing was Yale professor Thomas Lounsbury's 1911 article "Compulsory Composition in Colleges," published in *Harper's*. In articulating a vision of English studies emphasizing "cultivated taste begotten of familiarity with the great masterpieces of our literature" (876), Lounsbury ridicules the very possibility that most college students could learn to write well or that students might actually have something interesting or important to say. At various points in his essay, he describes students as "crude," "thoughtless and indifferent," and "immature." Connors refers to Lounsbury's "thinly concealed opinion that undergraduate students were ignorant barbarians" (7). But in addition to deriding students, Lounsbury shows almost as little respect for those who teach the course, arguing that most are "incompetent to do anything much better." In part, Lounsbury is providing a justification for Yale's decision not to require a first-year composition course and to concentrate its undergraduate curriculum on liberal humanist offerings.

His broadside attack on the course was followed by a spirited debate on the subject in the journal *Educational Review* in 1913, then by a 1915 article in *English Journal* by Charles Osgood of Princeton, arguing that literature, rather than composition, should be the subject of the first-year course. However, Osgood acknowledges that his abolitionist view of composition instruction "is not a popular opinion, and that in holding it I am one of a small minority" (231). Accordingly, the World War I era and the 1920's saw no published efforts to do away with first-year college writing, despite or perhaps because of a proliferation of attempts to improve, diversify, and deepen the course content.

Not until 1932 does another abolitionist argument appear, in Alvin Eurich's *English Journal* article, "Should Freshman Composition Be Abolished?" Basing his argument on a comparison-groups study of first-year students in his English department at the University of Minnesota, Eurich found no statistically significant pattern of improvement in students' writing after three months of composition instruction. As a long-term alternative, Eurich recommends the establishment of a writing across the curriculum program in which faculty from English work with colleagues throughout the university on issues of writing throughout the undergraduate years. Warner Taylor of the University of Delaware responds in the same issue of *English Journal* with a defense of the first-year course,

accompanied by Taylor's worry that English faculty assigned to work with colleagues in other disciplines would find themselves in a subordinate position as graders with little authority to shape instruction. This debate prefigures similar discussions which have taken place in the past decade concerning the role of English faculty in disciplinary writing.

The 1930s were filled with controversy and debate in college English studies (and in U.S. society as a whole as it wrestled with dislocations caused by the Great Depression). The profession saw a proliferation of debates which Connors describes as "almost incredibly contemporary" (13), concerning not only writing across the curriculum and the first-year writing course but also such issues as working conditions for teachers, ideology in the classroom, and the relationship between composition and literature. In the late 1930s, given strong divisions among college English instructors regarding a panoply of important issues, the National Council of Teachers of English formed a committee to study and issue a report on the state of college English. Oscar Campbell of Columbia University chaired that committee, and in official reports of the committee, he argued strongly against the first-year course in a way that is very consistent with previous abolitionist arguments. In an *English Journal* article entitled "The Failure of Freshman English" (1939), Campbell asserts that

A student comes to college with a pitifully meager intellectual equipment. He has almost no knowledge and very few ideas. And what happens? He is given a course in speech or public speaking before he has anything to talk about, and a course in English composition before he has anything to write about. (179)

What is more, he adds, potentially strong faculty are destroyed, their talents wasted, by having to teach composition to first-year students, "because the work of a Freshman English instructor does not fit him for the teaching of literature" (182). Here Campbell begins to articulate his primary anxiety: "But the most serious of all the objections to this composition course is that it obscures for everyone concerned the extremely important service that English literature, as one of the still living humanities, must render to college students and through them to this disordered world of ours" (182). Like Eurich before him, Campbell recommends that faculty in specific disciplines take responsibility for their students' writing, though without help from English department specialists, who will be free to pursue literary study.

The coming of World War II and the subsequent growth in the college student population following the War constituted a period of growth for the first-year course, with no published abolitionist argument appearing

until 1960, when Warner Rice, chair of the English Department at the University of Michigan, came out strongly against the course. His article in *College English*, based on an address given at the previous year's NCTE Convention, is entitled "A Proposal for the Abolition of Freshman English, As It Is Now Commonly Taught, from the College Curriculum." Connors describes Rice's proposal as "the voice of literary professional self-interest" (17), and this view is perhaps an understatement. Rice recapitulates familiar arguments about student motivation, the impossibility of teaching in a short time intellectual dispositions which take years to develop, and the need for departments to teach their own students how to write. Yet he also declares that "The elimination of Freshman English will improve the situation in which college teachers find themselves," resulting in "the diversion of teaching energies into different, and more attractive, channels" (362). And the students? Those without the necessary skills will simply be denied admission to college, "though of course not prohibited from trying again to qualify" (363), he generously adds. Rice's views perhaps represent the coming of age of English literary studies as an academic discipline, secure enough about its place in colleges and universities to disavow any responsibility for the perceived academic scutwork it had been saddled with for so long.

### The Present Arguments

When Sharon Crowley published "A Personal Essay on Freshman English" in 1991, she raised what seemed the most far-reaching attack on the required course to appear yet. She decried the complicity of Freshman English in ideological practices based on a misguided cultural and academic myth which equates mastery of Standard Written English with admission to the "class of educated persons." Freshman English courses thereby serve to function as gatekeepers and checkpoints of the university. She described the curricula of these courses as a form of cultural capital and a site for transmission of a received dominant culture. On the face of it, this sounds like one critique not based on snobbery and exclusivity.

However, Jeff Smith's essay "Students' Goals, Gatekeeping, and Some Questions of Ethics" can be seen to constitute a response to some parts of Crowley's argument and perhaps help reframe it for us. Smith asks us to see Freshman English within its context as part of the larger college experience. Colleges, in general, represent cultural capital and perform gatekeeping functions. As Smith says: "It is the gate-in-chief to the professional-managerial occupations, and hence to the social class those occupations define—the one Michael Lind, in his recent book the *Next American Nation*, calls the 'overclass'" (302).

Smith argues that when we take employment at universities, we understand that we are participating in a system intended to prepare people for both professional and social roles, and certainly when our students enter our classrooms, they come with the expectation that what we teach will help them achieve career advancement. Smith's students respond to questionnaires about their reasons for being in college by writing things like "being successful," or "\$," or "I don't want to work at McDonald's my whole life" (303).

So, while we might well wish to expand the imaginative horizons of our students and to help them formulate both more ambitious and far-reaching goals for their own intellectual development, and also more complex ways of understanding their own situatedness within the culture, we cannot ignore the work we are paid to do: educating people who come to us, at whatever level of sophistication, in the fields of our specialization. More directly, we cannot educate our students solely to our purposes, ignoring their own.

Let's look at the opening sentences of Crowley's 1991 article:

Freshman English is a sentimental favorite in America, like big bands and Norman Schwartzkopf. If you don't believe me, talk to your colleagues and neighbors about the introductory English course they took as undergraduates. (156)

On first reading, this is persuasive, rhetorically effective; we give automatic assent. But further thought calls into question our right to the smugness of our superior taste and judgment. In fact, we begin to sound not entirely unlike colleagues of an earlier time who saw their students as "crude," "thoughtless and indifferent" because they arrived at college with different backgrounds, tastes, and values. In our own time and place, our students are less likely to be all eighteen-year-olds and can less easily be dismissed as "immature." It is quite possible that the differences we as teachers perceive between our goals for them and their goals for themselves may be as much a matter of class and circumstance as a matter of education. The disinterested pursuit of knowledge is, itself, a luxury, and our view of the meaning of education rests on the privilege we ourselves have had. To dismiss the values, tastes, beliefs, and goals of those we teach hardly seems a fertile starting point for instruction.

On the other hand, if we are to accept the argument that we must not be complicit in this system of credentialing that Crowley exposes, then we might be encouraged to give up the project of teaching in schools altogether, since first-year English is, after all, only an easy target for what the entire enterprise of higher education represents.



But there is another way to view this situation. The critique that Crowley raises rests on what has been called the reproductive theory of schooling: schools reproduce the values, social practices, and skills needed for the dominant social and economic order. As Henry Giroux points out, conservatives and radicals have taken different positions about schooling as a reproductive public sphere: conservatives wanting more attention to what would suit corporate needs, radicals wishing not to be complicit with legitimation of the established order and its concomitant tracking and differentiation along class, gender, and racial lines. (Crowley's argument is one example of this radical position.) But Giroux claims that both conservatives and radicals have concurred in failing to see the complexity of the teaching transaction, and of cultural transmission in general. Both political positions share

a disturbing indifference to the ways in which students, from different class, gender, and ethnic locations, mediate and express their sense of place, time, and history, and their contradictory, uncertain, and incomplete interactions with each other and with the dynamics of schooling. In other words, both radical and conservative ideologies generally fail to engage the politics of voice and representation—the forms of narrative and dialogue—around which students make sense of their lives and schools.... Within this discourse, schools, teachers and students have been written off as merely extensions of the logic of capital. Instead of viewing schools as sites of contestation and conflict, radical educators often provide us with an oversimplified version of domination that seems to suggest that the only political alternative to the current role that schools play in the wider society is to abandon schools as sites of struggle altogether (114).

Again, the supposition that schooling is a one-way transmission and that those who study do not also transform is another form of arrogance. If we think of education as a contestatory site, then we can see the opportunities implicit in the Freshman English course, a place where the politics of voice and representation are right up front and can be made explicit and open to interrogation.

### First-Year English in the 90s

Those who argue against the requirement often represent writing itself as a rhetorically sophisticated, nuanced, socially aware field of study but depict the first-year introduction to the field as backward and benighted. In Sharon Crowley's 1991 "modest proposal" to "abolish the universal requirement" (170), she explicitly criticizes the "haphazard pedagogy" (156) and "repetitive, repressive curriculum" (157) of first-year writing. In other



work, Richard Larson complains about “the absence of attention to the quality of student thinking and ideas” (9). And John Schilb raises the possibility of eliminating the first-year requirement so that undergraduate writing courses “will be free to pursue other, nobler aspects of rhetoric” (402).

To read the first-year course as a site where the teaching is instrumental, the method is skill and drill, and the intended outcome is error-free prose is deceptive. While teaching students to write error-free expository prose may have been a primary goal of the Harvard administrators when they instituted their program at the end of the 19th century, and while helping students to understand socially constructed concepts of error continues to be a legitimate agenda item in first-year classes, to read the site today as it existed 150 years ago, or even 50 years ago, denies the tremendous changes that we have seen in the field since this journal was first published in 1949. (This is not to suggest that *every* contemporary classroom uses contemporary methods.) CCC readers are familiar with the scholarship and the accompanying epistemological changes in the teaching of writing that have occurred in the past several generations, and they are aware that much of this research and innovation has been developed in first-year classrooms. Even scanning the table of contents of several popular first-year rhetorics allows a quick glimpse into the ways our practices have changed.

Published in 1949 for composition students, the 928 page *Modern Rhetoric* was, in the words of authors Brooks and Warren, “a tissue of examples and analysis” of modern prose writers (XVII). The book began with topics like “Finding a True Subject,” “Unity,” “Coherence,” “Emphasis,” “The Main Divisions of a Discourse,” “Proportioning the Main Divisions,” and “The Outline”; it moved to a long chapter on each of the forms of discourse, to chapters on aspects of style, and then to the readings.

In 1950, the first edition of McCrimmon’s *Writing With a Purpose* opened with “Choosing a Subject,” “Patterns of Development,” “Purposeful Detail,” and “Outlining.” And the first section of Baker’s 1962 *The Practical Stylist*, described in the introduction as “a rhetoric primarily for Freshman English,” urged students to “Find your thesis,” “Sharpen your thesis,” “Believe in your thesis.” So, although these two books from the 50s and 60s moved away from the model represented by Brooks and Warren of analyzing published texts for instruction in writing, they were still formalist in orientation, not yet emphasizing the practice of writing. It was only in the 70s, through, for example, the work of Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, and textbook writers like Elizabeth Cowan, that we began to understand the importance of teaching students to write by writing and to emphasize invention, revision, and collaboration, practices we now take for granted and that appear, in one form or another, in texts for first-year writing students.

Collections of essays or “readers,” another genre of text often used in a first-year writing course, demonstrate a different kind of change. While many of us were weaned on teaching the aesthetic of E. B. White’s “Once More to the Lake” or the organizational pattern of Bruce Catton’s “Grant and Lee” in collections such as Decker’s *Patterns of Exposition*, we are, today, much more likely to work with a reader whose essays address more controversial social, academic, and political issues and our goal as teachers is not only to ensure that students “understand” the essay but also that they probe its ideas, work with and against its complexities by exploring them in writing. We think, for example, of Bartholomae and Petrosky’s *Ways of Reading* as an example of the genre.

Of course our scholarship in our books, our journals, at our conferences, best represents the knowledge our field is generating. Still, even in textbooks, the discourse that instantiates the applied knowledge of our field, we see evidence of how our understanding of teaching writing has changed. Making possible these changes is our experience in the first-year required writing course. It is our primary field site: the site which generates most of our scholarship and research, the site where we train graduate students to be teachers, the site that spawned Writing Across the Curriculum and other discipline-based writing programs, the site that inaugurated the field of basic writing. It is where we do our most visible work and where others learn from us. How could it be possible that in upper-level courses, the field of composition is sophisticated and politically aware, but in the introductory courses, it is narrowly locked into a repressive paradigm of 19th-century “correctness”? For the most part, we learned what we know from teaching and studying first year writing courses, and it is our own students who also teach them now.

One question members of our field sometimes ask is whether we are giving first-year students what they pay for when we put them in classes taught by inexperienced TAs or by adjuncts who are overworked and underpaid. It is undeniably true that TAs are inexperienced, but in programs we know of—and we are thinking here primarily of state universities across the country—the TA training that occurs is extraordinary. TAs routinely take both a readings course and a practicum course; they visit other teachers’ classes; they are mentored by more experienced faculty; and as they near completion of their doctoral work, they are often themselves mentoring new TAs, or working in a writing center, or assisting in a first-year writing office. TAs, in other words, are often among our best-trained teachers. The case of adjuncts is more complex. They do indeed have little status and low pay, but that does not mean that their work warrants such mean compensation. In our view, this corps of teachers often has years of experience and a deep commitment to the work of teaching introductory

courses. While full-time faculty all too often have commitments that they consider more important than teaching first-year students, many adjuncts have made a serious investment in just these teaching assignments. So, rather than argue that we should not require first-year writing because the requirement exploits adjuncts, we argue that we should work to increase the pay and support that adjuncts receive. This change has been slow in coming, but there are signs that it is beginning to happen on many campuses. Recently, for example, the University of Cincinnati created ten composition instructorships. Three-year renewable appointments, these positions are represented by the bargaining unit and offer much improved salaries, benefits, and contractual raises.

So while TAs and adjuncts enjoy less status and support than full-time faculty, we believe it is a mistake to equate that difference with the level of skill these teachers possess. Further, we think the training of TAs is one of the most significant roles that composition has played in English departments. It is in our training programs that graduate students learn to be teachers; this may be the most radical ground we have for rebuilding the field of English studies.

In indicting the first-year course, critics often make it sound as if there were only one such course. Not only is this patently not the case, but it is, in part, the flexibility of this site that has allowed us to explore so many different, context-specific options within it. Many programs emphasize cultural studies, focusing on the social construction of cultural assumptions and of authority. Textuality itself can be the center of study: how we use texts and how we produce them, how one text answers another. Some courses use a theme: multiculturalism, ecology, community, popular culture. Most emphasize workshop strategies and collaborative groups.

One of the most interesting new developments in composition courses has been the incorporation of service-learning initiatives, opportunities for students to combine experience-based learning with community service (Herzberg; Schutz and Gere). In *Writing the Community*, a 1997 collection of essays articulating concepts and models for service-learning in composition, editors Adler-Kassner, Crooks, and Watters write that service learning enables students to move "from the personal and intersubjective toward analyses of larger political, ideological, and institutional forces and processes that shape the social conditions governing personal experience and interaction" (5). Far from focusing on error-free prose in an artificial writing situation, students in composition courses with a service-learning component face head-on the challenges of writing for multiple audiences and, in the process, are exposed to the plethora of contingencies that affect social change.

In part, the richness of first-year writing as a site has been its openness to new possibilities; because its content is not prescribed, many avenues

toward critical literacy can be explored. The site becomes, then, context specific; it arises out of discrete institutional histories. Not only is there not just one freshman course, but we could never wish that to be the case. To imagine uniformity is to imagine mechanized, teacher-proof programs that substitute the integrity of a set of topics for the integrity of a teacher's vision of rhetorical consciousness.

### Service and the Profession

Perhaps the heart of the debate over the first-year course now centers on the meaning of the word *service* for the profession. Once a term of denigration, indicating the low level, foundational nature of required work, service is making a comeback as a term that garners support for socially responsible action connecting the university with its larger environment. Campus Compact, founded in 1985 as an organization of colleges and universities committed to promoting community service among students, now comprises 500 institutions. It is one of many initiatives aimed at breaking down the perceived isolationism and insularity of universities, in the process reconfiguring our use of the word *service*.

English departments have grown over the years to be the largest departments in the college precisely because so much of their work has been viewed as service, not only the first-year writing course but the often required general education courses in literature. With the logic that separates white collar employment from blue collar employment, academics continue to view specialized work with upper division students as powerful and significant, while work with lower division students, work that is seen as skill building or foundational, is viewed as demoted, less important, less prestigious, and less highly compensated. So, practically every college campus in the country now has a de facto two-tier system of employment; groups of non-tenured adjuncts or a supply of teaching assistants handle the bulk of the lower level teaching, while the tenured faculty try to restrict their work to upper level specialities. When full-time tenured faculty members are assigned lower division courses, they often feel imposed upon. There are, of course a host of reasons for these attitudes. For one, our training is increasingly specialized; we make our reputations doing specialized studies, so the graduate seminar is a place to pursue the concerns uppermost in our minds (with students who can both appreciate and collaborate in these projects). For another, working with large groups of beginning students is labor intensive; it generally involves us in responding to large amounts of student writing and dealing with students who are least socialized in the ways of the university (the "barbarian" problem already alluded to). But perhaps a more fundamental issue is

that once a course is defined as a service course, faculty feel that it is less within our control, less defined by our perceptions of the discipline within which we work and more the property and the agenda of outside forces. These courses are resented as foisted upon us with the values and needs of the larger institution and the constituencies it serves taking precedence over our professional interests and concerns.

Again, Sharon Crowley has made the telling argument. In her article of 1995, "Composition's Ethic of Service, the Universal Requirement, and the Discourse of Student Need," she describes introductory composition courses as having been justified in instrumental terms and sustained by a manipulative construction of students' needs that allows us to bring student writing under surveillance; she urges us to "abandon the institutional discourse of student need, abandon the service ethic of remediation, and abandon the universal requirement" (238). But recently other voices have come forward to rethink the status of these claims. Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky offer a provocative reconceptualization of this issue in "Remapping the Geography of Service in English." They argue that we need

to develop a critical language that understands service relationships as a constitutive feature of English studies at every level...The challenge is to initiate alliances and conflicts that make service problematic and that disrupt its seemingly "natural" placement in the curriculum and in our labor. In so doing, we move questions about the functions and effects of our labor to the center of the discipline—which is where they belong. (644)

Mahala and Swilky ask us, then, to see all of our work in the larger context of student needs and to "resist reductive definitions of service" (631). This aversion to service is responsible, in their view, for a paralysis in our thinking about our relationships with the larger world, and it also limits our abilities to think productively about the "general," or "basic" courses that we have written off as mere "service courses." Their examples of reform at Drake University open a whole new set of possibilities for thinking through the issue of the demoted status of first-year courses.

Another account of departmental reform, this time from Temple University, also urges us to rethink our use of the term service. In "Student Needs and Strong Composition: The Dialectics of Writing Program Reform," Sullivan et al. invoke Gramsci, Sandra Harding, and Patricia Bizzell, among others, to argue for situated leadership.

We cannot do "composition and rhetoric" outside the institution of the university any more than we can "do writing" outside of language: it is only within the social location we have inherited (and which we continue to

choose) that we can do the work of fashioning professional practices and reflecting on them, the work of situated leadership (387).

In another place they make their redefinition of terms even clearer:

We argue that the notions of need, requirement, and service are not simply pre-disciplinary formations, externally imposed on our work. Minimally, the themes of "requirement," "service," and "need" served as available means of persuasion: they enabled us to construct a position from which we could argue for positive reform and interrogate the logic of domination which undermines such reforms. But our use of these terms was not merely tactical. We argue further that these ideas are central to our practice and that they can be reconstructed in fruitful ways (374).

In both the examples cited above, the Drake experience and the one at Temple, compositionists are not abandoning the ground of first-year writing in order to find themselves a more comfortable spot in the existing academic hierarchy; they are attempting to restructure that hierarchy from within and to reconfigure the place of the first-year course inside it.

## Conclusion

As we have suggested throughout this piece, the impetus to separate composition as a field from the complicated position of the required first-year writing course has been in part a desire to escape the demoted status associated with courses that are introductory, mandated, viewed as "remedial," and labeled under the heading of "service." The line of thinking behind this argument is that composition can never have the academic prestige accorded literary studies if it is most identified in people's minds with a course compromised by the staffing patterns that support it, and by the general attitudes on college campuses (or in schools as a whole) that what is elementary is inferior, less challenging, and less worthy of respect.

While many of these assumptions may accurately reflect entrenched academic attitudes, they are becoming less and less viable. They are replications of an elitist class structure that shows some signs of being under siege.

It may, in some circles, still be acceptable to find "service" incongruous with academic pursuits, or to imagine "narratives of progress" as vestiges of an outmoded modernist program, but staffing patterns follow perceived need and most of our students still come to us in search of what they perceive as advancement. The model of disciplinarity that we have grown up with, based on the organization of 19th century European universities, is being challenged. The favored position of our literary colleagues hardly



looks as favored as it once did. Advanced classes in esoteric specialties can't fill, highly educated PhDs in narrow fields can't get jobs. Everywhere that we look we see the demand for generalists, for people who can teach basic skills, communication skills, introductory courses, for educators who can make connections between the world's work and the university, and, specifically, for people who can teach, not just research.

The 1997 report from the MLA Committee on Professional Employment further supports our contention. It begins, "Higher education in the fields our organization represents has reached a crisis that has been building for a long time..." (3) Part of the documentation of that crisis is conveyed in these figures: between 1990 and 1995 of the total number of newly granted PhDs in English and foreign language departments only 45% obtained full-time tenure track positions. A large proportion of the remaining group (60% in English) accepted part-time or full-time lecture-ships or adjunct positions. The report summarizes: "In English and foreign language departments, for example—and especially in PhD-granting departments—first-year courses are often taught almost entirely by part- or full-time non-tenure-track faculty members and (where they are available) graduate student instructors" (8).

So, we can see that the problem, by now, is not just a problem for first-year composition courses and not one that can be resolved by simply doing away with that course; it is a massive problem of global labor reorganization affecting all university employment policies, most especially those in English and foreign language departments. The MLA report makes several recommendations, but two of them are especially pertinent to our argument. First, that wherever possible part-time lines be converted to full-time, preferably tenure-track, positions, but until that happens, that part-timers be granted more equitable salaries and improved working conditions. Second, that graduate programs redirect their energies to focus on the realities of the workplace. "Most PhDs in our field will spend much of their time doing the kind of lower-division teaching associated with the great experiment in social access that inspires American education, teaching that offers rich rewards to which graduate students ought to be quickly and imaginatively introduced" (32).

We wish the MLA had gone further in assuming some responsibility for the current situation and in considering a redirection not only of graduate students' energies but of current faculty members' teaching responsibilities. Still, this report supports our view that the desire to professionalize composition by cutting it off from the part of its history that is most complicatedly enmeshed in the day to day pedagogical realities of contemporary higher education in a multicultural society is both self-defeating and historically ill-timed.



Compositionists are people who have, from years of work in the freshman classroom, learned a great deal about individualizing instruction for diverse populations; negotiating difference in “contact zones”; exploring the full range of language use for formal purposes and informal ones, workplace settings and home settings. We have made ourselves the interface between community and school, and many of us are skilled in this work in remarkable ways. From the beginnings of classical rhetoric, we have shaped our field in relation to pedagogy.

In her CCCC Chair’s Address in 1989, Andrea Lunsford celebrated composition as a postmodern discipline. She was at that moment remarking on the ways that composition studies has been an incorporative field, reaching across the boundaries of traditional disciplines to link psychology, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, legal studies, and much more into the purview of our work. Now, almost ten years later, interdisciplinarity seems, increasingly, to be linked with the globalization of our world, the creolization of our languages, the hybridity of our music, the “fusion” in our cuisines, the fluidity of our communication systems. Whether we focus on “teaming” in the middle schools, or school to work programs in the high schools, or parental inclusion initiatives in school districts, we are looking at a period of linkages and border crossings, not a time when ivory tower isolation makes for power and effectiveness.

Postmodernism, as a term, may be responsible for more confusion than clarity, and it may have led many to turn their backs on the best of modernism: the politics of hope and possibility. Still, the complications of postmodernism are ours; we live its intertextual web of connections and implications. No category is any longer self-sufficient and free-standing, unentangled. So, these interpenetrations of school and community, education and work, learning and teaching are a significant expression of our current historical moment. At the same time, postmodernism has introduced us to a heightened regard for the specificities of difference and the violences of homogenization. It is in this time that we have learned to question our easy assumptions of community and cohesiveness and have had to face the challenges of identity politics and the particularity of individual needs. The power of composition as a field has been, and continues to be, its hybrid and entangled nature. We have, from the beginning, concerned ourselves with pedagogy and with rhetoric, purposes and effects. The “politics of voice and representation” is our legitimate ground; the first-year site is where we have our most challenging and inclusive opportunity to work, and it just may be that the rethinking of that site will offer the opportunity to reconceptualize the whole organization of English departments, a task that seems increasingly to be on the agenda for the future.

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