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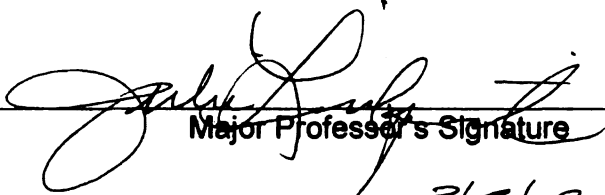
Negotiating Literacy: the Implications of Writing Program
Reform in one University

presented by

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NEGOTIATING LITERACY: THE IMPLICATIONS OF WRITING PROGRAM
REFORM IN ONE UNIVERSITY.

By

Michele R. Fero

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

NEGOTIATING LITERACY: THE IMPLICATIONS OF WRITING PROGRAM REFORM IN ONE UNIVERSITY

By

Michele R. Fero

This study will analyze the process of revising a first-year writing program at a large Midwestern university. The institutional structure and practice of first-year writing, particularly the connected subject of basic writing, creates a site where many interrelated areas of research converge—disciplinary, pedagogical, institutional, and especially larger social concerns about diversity and equal opportunity in education. Thus, while the reform effort is internally motivated, there are numerous external factors to consider.

The primary goal of this study is to understand and represent the reform effort as situated within larger social and institutional contexts. The over-arching question is this: What is at stake and for whom in revising the current curriculum? This question allows me to explain the impact of institutional history, the role of administrative processes, and the significance of different strands of research. Using critical theory, especially critical theories of discourse, this study will highlight the complex relationship between institutions, persons, and social change. In particular, institutional documents will be examined for the key role they play in the process of change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This dissertation simply would not exist without the encouragement, support, and especially the patience of the many incredible people I've met in graduate school. Over the years, my professors, advisers and committee members have witnessed the complete spectrum of my emotions—my personal and academic challenges, my successes and failures, and my ongoing struggle to understand what it really means to pursue and be awarded with a PhD. They have given more than their time and expertise; they have given of themselves. For this, I will always be grateful. For those closest to me and this project, I owe you all.

Special thanks to Linda Adler-Kassner for introducing me to an area of study that shaped the rest of my graduate life, including this dissertation. Thank you for the opportunity to write about things that mattered to me and for all of your help in and out of the classroom. You are a wonderful teacher and mentor. Thank you Julie Lindquist many times over for all things great and small, and for more things than I can possibly list here or anywhere. Thank you Stacy for enduring a year of ABD. I know it wasn't easy. Thanks also to family and friends who encouraged me not to quit, though I certainly thought I wanted to. And thanks to several others in and out of the academy for helping me find my perspective when it was lost.

I can honestly say that I have learned as much about myself as my field of study. My understanding of my place in the world, in my community, and in the institution of higher education has been forever changed by my experiences. Maybe that is the real

purpose of an education after all. I am not sure this work or any other can really capture it, but I believe this project reflects at least some of that development.

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Introduction

The Road to Literacy is Paved with Good Intentions

This is a study of one institution's challenges in creating and sustaining a first-year writing curriculum. This study brings together a range of research emphases because writing instruction is linked to so many areas of inquiry—curricular, pedagogical, administrative, institutional, and even political. Each individual area contributes to what it means to design a writing program.¹ The various attempts at curricular reform I studied (only some of which succeeded) can be seen as entirely local, motivated by specific university and departmental events. However, those same efforts can also be seen as representing much larger concerns within the discipline of Composition and Rhetoric, broader discussions of literacy and literacy instruction, and even issues about the educational system.

Composition, for example, has a complicated history and (perhaps arguably) didn't gain much academic recognition until the 1950s or 1960s. Writing instruction was already a fixture in higher education and had been the subject of research and debate for many years.² However, the teaching writing was only beginning to be professionalized. The National Council for the Teaching of English (NCTE) and Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCC) had both been formed (NCTE long before the CCCs) but the work of teaching writing was dispersed. Professionals whose work emphasized writing were likely to be in English programs, only some which would have

¹ Though this study is specific to a university setting, many of the same questions and concerns could be applied to writing programs in other settings, such as community centers.

² Interestingly, writing instruction faced critiques for the same things that would turn up years later in Composition literature.

offered any specific course work or training in Composition and Rhetoric. It wasn't until the 1970s that graduate programs in Composition and Rhetoric begin to grow.

Since then, there have been many versions of Composition's history and just as many suggestions for its future. This project is more closely linked to disciplinary developments, the issues that emerged as graduate programs were appearing and new professionals were trying to define a specific field, not a subject matter buried in an existing field. It is the act of defining that raises questions about the history, purpose, status, and overall development of what we now call Composition.

One source of debate in Composition can be put under the umbrella of *work*. Because Composition (long before it emerged as a distinct field) is so closely tied to writing instruction in colleges, especially first-year instruction, there is a strong link to teaching as necessary work. As the field has grown, though, the importance of teaching could be seen as diminishing, or at least as being overshadowed by the need for more research, the need of theoretical models, and of course the need for more scholarship.³ In fact, some teachers and scholars would argue that teaching writing has never been awarded much status—not before Composition “became” a field or after. Then, the possible distinction between teaching and research placed teaching even lower on work ladder (so some would argue).

Research is definitely part of what sustains a discipline (it is disciplinary *work*), but there are also concerns with what we might call working conditions, which can include salaries and the ability to earn tenure, availability of physical space and departmental support and even life for some administrators—WPA work, for instance, is

³ Some early contributors include Stephen North, Louise Phelps, Gary Tate, James Berlin, and Sharon Crowley.

often difficult and not well supported. In some cases, a writing program administrator may not even hold that title, and might have numerous other obligations to juggle. When conditions are questioned, the perceived value of all kinds of work comes under scrutiny (e.g. Horner, Marshall, Bousquet).

In the gray area of value judgments and the meaning of work, adjuncts and especially basic writing students and teachers comprise a particularly interesting group.⁴ Scholarship in basic writing routinely points out that basic writing classes are predominately filled with minority and/or working class students (e.g. Rose, Gilyard, Shor). The consistent demographic make up then leads to the ongoing argument that basic writing is a tool to sort and separate students. Interestingly, adjuncts, graduate students, or newly appointed faculty members are frequently at the front of basic writing classrooms, making it possible to also argue that basic writing serves to sort students *and* workers (Crowley).⁵

Further, because writing is closely linked to notions of literacy, it is important to consider research that looks outside of typical classrooms and investigates a variety of literacy practices in the home, community, and/or workplace (e.g. Heath, Gee, Brandt, Cushman, Grabill). To fully understand the practices students bring with them to school, we need some understanding of what happens in other areas. Finally, any discussion of literacy must include some attention to larger shifting social and political contexts. Again, schools deserve particular attention because *schooling is a system*—a very powerful

⁴ Basic writing can be considered independent of Composition, but is often classified as a sub-set, or sub-discipline. In this project, basic writing is placed under the Composition umbrella because the program under investigation offers both “regular” writing courses and basic writing courses.

⁵ This argument can be made of first-year writing more generally, especially if the school does not offer a specific basic writing course.

social system—with consequences for those who cycle through it. Sometimes the consequences are good; sometimes not.⁶

Thus, while the focus of the study is very specific, one particular department and its challenges, the overall project should be understood as one part in a much larger structure. The primary question driving the project is this: What is at stake and for whom in changing the writing program? This question allows me to discuss the planning and development process, to examine interrelated research emphases and importantly, to explain some of the resistance to change I uncovered through the course of my research. This study is not designed to evaluate changes, *per se*, but to describe the various conditions and constraints surrounding the change process. The outcome of this project will be of interest to anyone affiliated with a writing program, whether as an administrator, full professor, or adjunct.

The descriptive nature of this study required several different types of data, along with different theoretical and methodological approaches. Personal interviews and a wide range of institutional documents (reports, meeting minutes, course descriptions, mission statements, etc.) account for the majority of the data collected. However, these data serve different functions throughout the project. In some cases, the data is meant only to provide historical information about the department and university. Even many of the personal interviews were designed solely to gather information. In other cases though, especially in reference to certain documents, the selected data will be read using theories of discourse (e.g. Fairclough, Foucault).

⁶ Studies that include the role of social class in education have much to offer in understanding why some students may have adverse experiences with school.

Researching the Researcher

The stakes in literacy education are always, already high, but the stakes are higher for some. My own educational experience provides a nice example from which to begin. When this project was first taking shape, I thought I would be studying a pilot course for developmental writers at my university. I planned to cover both the planning phase (the administrative work) but I also wanted to observe the course, learn about and from the students—most importantly gain first-hand knowledge about how they experienced not just the course but life in the university. For various reasons, however, the course didn't reach the pilot stage and I had to adjust my research trajectory. As it turned out, the failure to get the pilot course approved and running within the anticipated time frame is entirely representative of other attempts at change in this department. In fact, resistance to change and an ever expanding time frame emerged as a key theme.

The shift in my study makes it incredibly difficult to discuss one of the more pressing issues related to education and especially writing instruction, the impact of social class for the students and perhaps for teachers, as well. If the demographics of the pilot class would have been consistent with trends in basic writing, it would have provided an excellent site. That isn't to say the work I've done here isn't interesting or important. I believe it is. And, this project is still every bit about class, it's just less obvious. Education is never neutral and one of the ways in which schools (at all levels) try to enact ideologies is through their curricular models. At the most theoretical level, curriculums can be seen as representing social norms (often dominated by certain groups), specific beliefs, and/or specific political leanings (see Lippi-Green, Schmidt, Cadiero-Kaplan, for example). Unfortunately, curriculums often exist at a level far

removed from the people most affected by them. Furthermore, program development is largely an administrative act, involving a sometimes absurd amount of planning, meetings, and paperwork, all of which can seem to result in absolutely nothing, a sea of proposals, reports and minutes that never actually get approved and therefore, never have a chance affect change. In this case, “seem” is an important term. As will be noted in various places throughout this project, change can be hard to capture and just because there have been no specific outward changes, things that can be measured or at least documented, it does not mean that a change hasn’t taken place. As such, studies like this have much to offer the educational community, especially those working in writing programs.

This study also contributes to conversations about literacy more broadly. While the project is ultimately very specific in focus—one institution’s writing program—educators at all levels must be aware of the shifting nature of literacy. Changing technologies, new modes of communication, and numerous other variables affect what it means “to be literate.” (Graff, Brandt, Kress, New London Group). Additionally, cultural background, class background, and other identity markers can affect literacy learning and literacy practices, which can then impact academic performance in a variety of ways. All educators (and especially language educators) participate in furthering particular views of literacy, so it is crucial that we all understand what underlies our courses, institutions, and our own ideologies. A curriculum is ultimately a statement about what is valued, what is expected, and also what is not.⁷

⁷ To be fair, even the best intentioned, well planned, well researched, and ethical curriculum might face any number of roadblocks—no administrative support, loss of funding, poor timing, poor proposal writing, and so forth.

Study Overview

Because the curricular focus masks class issues, chapter one is the place where I bring together critical studies of schooling, work in literacy studies, and studies of social class. The goal of this chapter is first to present schooling as a powerful social system (following Swartz, Bourdieu, Douglas, Foley, and Holland). This chapter will also include reference to studies of literacy because schools rely heavily on notions of literacy (Heath, Cushman, Grabill). Finally, the role of social class will surface at various points because class plays a significant role in how people experience education (Lindquist, Lareau, etc.) Basic writing research is included not only because the program I studied has a basic writing course, but because basic writing research also highlights the impact of class in educational settings.

Chapter two examines the emergence of Composition as a distinct field, noting disciplinary developments and institutional variables, such as where and how writing programs come to exist within colleges. Because notions of writing and literacy and inexorably linked, Composition holds a unique position on the academic landscape. All of the social and political issues revolving around “literacy” often surface in writing courses, especially first-year writing, which is often viewed as a proving ground or training ground for teachers and students alike (Crowley). And while college writing courses certainly pre-date what we now call Composition, a disciplinary focus is especially important for this study because the attempts to integrate *composition specific* practices into the writing program I studied were (and still are) a source of tension. Work in Writing Program Administration and program development more generally will be

also referenced as a way to better explain the administrative aspects of curricular decision making.

Chapter three discusses the specific writing program and department under investigation. The majority of the data comes from interviews and a range of institutional documents, such as meeting minutes, departmental memos, mission statements, and reports. The primary goal of chapter three is to describe the history of the department and the various attempts to make changes, curricular and otherwise. In fact, one important variable in the overall evolution of the department (of lack thereof) is rooted in the department's history. This chapter also helps to identify other points of contention within the department and provides a glimpse of the key role administrative processes have played here. The importance of creating persuasive reports and proposals, as well as moving them through bureaucratic channels, is obvious.

Chapter four then analyzes key proposals and reports through the lens of discourse theory, especially following the work of Norman Fairclough. Documents are one of the primary ways in which the department I investigated actually argues for change. Whether or not change happens is another matter. For the purposes of this chapter, the written documents are the focal point. Discourse plays a key role in how disciplines and institutions make knowledge, and discourse both reflects and shapes social realities. After the administrative dust settles, the documents present particular views of writing and teaching writing. The arguments these documents make, and make possible, will be elaborated.

Chapter 5 closes this project. Whereas the overall project starts broadly and narrows with each chapter, chapter 5 does the opposite. I start with specific local

implications for the program I studied and move outward. One surprising find was that the goals and objectives for the writing program were not always a primary source of disagreement. The bigger argument seems to have been rooted in *how* the goals and objectives would be met—with what materials and teaching styles, for example, along with what resources. Then, I move to broader implications for disciplinary growth and other institutions. For professionals working in various strands of writing studies (Composition, Composition and Rhetoric, English, etc.) this study offers both strategies and pitfalls to consider when managing change. In closing, I address implications for those groups that may be disadvantaged in higher education.

Chapter One

Becoming an Academic: Class and the Hidden Dangers of Intellectual Labor

I never wanted to write a dissertation. I never wanted to go to college at all, and finally did so out of desperation, the result of automation and company downsizing. I probably could have found another distribution center, but even then, most of us doing the work knew that labor jobs were in permanent decline. And, though it was ultimately my decision to finally go to college, I went with caution and much skepticism. My early resistance (and later, complete aversion) to college is perhaps the most critical part of this story, though it won't come up much after this chapter. Perhaps it seems self-indulgent to put myself first, but who I think I was before college, who I think I started to become in college, and who I flat out *refused* to become in graduate school, has everything to do with this project—both for what it is and for what it is not. So, I can't in good faith pass on the product without disclosing a bit more about my educational process, which began the moment I entered community college, but didn't really get "interesting" until I reached graduate school. It was in grad school that I started learning about why I felt conflicted by school, and why I was especially miserable as a graduate student. It is deeply ironic.

At 25, I left the manual labor world behind and threw myself into student life at a local community college. Unable to completely give up working (had to eat, after all) I initially moved to another distribution center that needed part time help. I later "upgraded" to a part time office job. I swore I would never look back, no more hard

labor, a bright future. Hope. I didn't have a plan and I didn't have a clue, both of which would come back to haunt me. At that moment, though, I felt adventurous and college was fun. I took classes that sparked my curiosity and dropped the ones that didn't (this too would come back to haunt me). My course load varied from one semester to the next, based in part on finances, but mostly based on my whims and my work schedule. After three years and a very strange and circuitous route, which included everything from business writing to basic guitar and Judo, I managed to earn an associates degree in general studies. Still dissatisfied with my career outlook (why didn't anyone tell me liberal studies didn't necessarily translate into better employment?) I decided I might as well finish what I started. I took the next step and transferred to a nearby university, *swearing* that one more degree would be the end of it. Just two more years and I would be on the road to "success."

I could not have predicted the next several years. I have felt more than once like I got sucked into a black hole and just recently got spit out the other side. The university was not like the community college. Suddenly, my part time job didn't have much of an impact on the cost tuition and books. I couldn't just take classes whenever I felt like it and I couldn't just overlook the ones that didn't appeal to me. If there was going to be a degree, there would have to be changes. I needed more daytime availability, which cut into work. I already had an associate's degree, so I needed upper-level classes with far fewer sections to choose from. Even more aggravating, though, was my introduction to university bureaucracy. Beyond the fact that I had problems with my financial aid package (problems which lasted for two degree programs), what I thought would take four semesters to complete was actually going to take five or more because not all of my

community college courses met equivalency. I had never been introduced to a transfer guide. The credits counted toward my class standing, and my overall credits, but didn't count toward my degree.

More time. More money. More years in an occupation that I didn't like. My office job beat the warehouse I left behind, but production clerical turned out to be a not-so-distant relative of manual labor. It was cleaner and less physically demanding, but it was no less repetitive and mind numbing than putting books into boxes all day and it actually paid worse. In an effort to expedite things, I actually left the office life for a retailer so I could work a varied schedule. Absorbing yet another pay cut, I started counting on student loans to make up the difference, a mistake I might literally be paying for, for the rest of my life. I swore I would never get into debt trouble. I watched my family struggle under the burden of debt, always barely scraping by, and I vowed not to let that happen to me. In fact, cost was one of the many things that made college seem pointless, unreasonable, and unreachable. Later, I learned it was much more than that. I *had* borrowed some to get through the first two years, but it was manageable, negligible even. I still sometimes wonder if I should have just taken my Associate's Degree and called it good. But I didn't. Instead, I invested even more into the educational system, with what I perceive to be mixed results at best.

Trading Class for Classes: from something to *do* to something to *be*

The difference between *doing* academic things and *being* an academic is an important distinction, one I didn't recognize until academia went from a place where I took classes to get a job, to the job itself. Student life was certainly different from what I

was used to, but it wasn't that difficult to adjust. At the community college, in particular, many people were returning adults with kids, jobs, and all kinds of life experiences. I did not stand out at all, just another displaced worker trying to get ahead. At the university level, it was a little more jolting, especially at first. I was frequently the oldest student in the class; I didn't live near campus; I didn't participate in typical student life. It was very lonely at times, but I managed to meet a few older folks in my major and life went on. When I look back, I can honestly say I had a lot fun in many of my classes.

At the graduate level though, especially the doctoral level, the demands on my sense of self were suddenly severe. In fact, much of my time in graduate school has been troubling for me. I have met wonderful people and made great friends. I have even enjoyed many of the classes I've taken. But the nature of academic work, and the life that seems to go with it, have taken a toll on me. I sensed something was wrong during my first semester as an MA student, but attributed it to all kinds of things—a very heavy work load, the introduction to graduate life, teaching for the first time, and generalized anxiety at everything being so different from my undergraduate life. I felt completely unprepared. I talked to my MA advisor, my peers, and other professors. Everyone seemed to think my anxiety level was “normal.” Plus, I was doing quite well. No one seemed concerned but me. Graduate school was not supposed to be easy. It was meant to challenge me, to push me. In good faith, I told myself it would get better and I committed to finishing my first year before making any major decisions.

It was in that first year of coursework that I started to learn about the role of social class in education, about the politics of literacy and literacy instruction, and began to investigate what it really means to *be educated*. I was introduced to these issues largely

through the scholarship on basic writing, a big part of the required first-semester course for all new TAs. Basic Writing has been labeled many things—a subject, a discipline, a sub-discipline of Composition, a political statement, a political nightmare, a cash-cow for colleges and universities, an unfair sorting mechanism, a place for students to grow into college level writing, and more. Basic writing is an area rich with research potential and important implications for students, educators, and institutions of learning. This is not the place for a literature review, but it is the place to explain a bit about the role of basic writing in my graduate life. One extremely important part of my development came with the discovery that certain groups of students turn up in basic writing courses time and time again. Minority students, students from lower socioeconomic brackets, first-generation college students, and various combinations of the three seem to be good predictors. The other important discovery was that students in basic writing courses seemed to struggle with much more than writing. For some students, struggling with issues of identity, culture, and belonging also came with a college education.

The attention to notions of self was what struck me because despite my outward success in all things academic, I don't know that I have ever been truly comfortable being "an academic." Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps* remains one of the most powerful books I have ever read (followed perhaps by Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods*). I remember reading *Bootstraps* and crying because I "got it." In fact, I "got" a lot of my required reading. I am not a minority student, and I actually struggled very little with writing, but I do have a working class (or even working poor) background and I recognized much of myself and the students I taught. Many of them seemed suspicious, unconvinced that college was going to be worth it. Others were totally convinced that college was the

magic potion they needed. Most of them worked more than they should have, given their course loads. But like me, many of them needed to work to help finance their educations, and though I do not know for sure, I think several were contributing to a household income. They sometimes shared their struggles, in papers or in person, and many times, I understood. During a cleaning binge (something I started doing to avoid doing *this*) I found some old undergraduate work and took the time to read my portfolio from a non-fiction writing course I took in my last year. Each piece centered on my collegiate life, and reflected my uncertainty and underlying dissatisfaction with the whole experience. In my final reflection for the course, I said very bluntly that I was glad I had come to college, but that I knew it wasn't "me" and I was glad to be finishing. Why did I write that? What did that even mean?

Since then, most of my graduate career has been spent trying to understand feelings of discomfort (for lack of a better word) in educational settings. I have learned a lot about why the school system seems to work well for some, but not for others. I'll openly admit that I've argued with many folks about whether or not this system has worked for me. The fact that I was able to become a Ph.D. student in a major research university is certainly a marker of success, or at least a significant piece of social and cultural capital. This is a dissertation, after all. Yet, I have never been able to shake the feeling that something is not quite right. As meaningful as a Ph.D. should be, so should be my permanent sense of unease in higher education. At least now I know I'm not alone in my feelings.

Though I've spent most of my time learning about higher education, I've learned that students can experience similar things across grade levels. I've also come to

understand that it matters who we are, where we come from, and who we decide we will and won't become as we go through school. What it means "to be educated" is far from universal and different people experience education very differently. I have willingly (sort of) become entrenched in a complicated, strange, and potentially hostile system. Mostly because of my degree emphases—an M.A. in Written Communication with an emphasis on teaching writing, and a Ph.D in Rhetoric and Writing with an emphasis on critical studies in literacy and pedagogy—writing, literacy, and literacy instruction are focal points in my research.

Because literacy is a core concept in nearly all institutions of learning, it is critical to investigate who gains access to what types of literacy experiences. Access, like literacy, is a loaded term. And like literacy, access is affected by many of the same things, such as class and institutional conditions. Additionally, identity markers, to include class but also race, gender, and other subject positions, provide the lenses through which people view education, and perhaps more importantly, shape the experience of being educated. For instance, research indicates that minority students and/or students from working-class class or working-poor backgrounds often experience both academic *and* personal challenges in school (e.g. Rogers, Gee, Heath, Purcell-Gates). These students seem to experience a conflict of beliefs, a conflict of self, and other forms of dissonance as they are "being educated." Literacy educators must find ways to understand the complicated process of being educated. We must find ways to better understand the full implications of what we do and attempt to discover why it doesn't often "work" for *the same* groups of students time and again. Only then can we

effectively train teachers, write about best practices, and design curriculums that don't automatically advantage some at the expense of others.

The remainder of this chapter will provide several perspectives on literacy (broadly), literacy instruction, and the role of the educational system. Each section focuses on a specific area: schooling as a social system, changing definitions of literacy, and literacy in multiple contexts. None are comprehensive in nature. Rather, each section is meant to provide an introduction to the wide range of issues and concerns associated with literacy education, especially formal education.

Investigating Literacy and the Educational Enterprise

This section references a body of research and scholarship that has taken up questions about the social consequences of mass education and serves to highlight the powerful, systematic way schools function. Concerns about necessary and expected literacy levels are hardly new, and mass literacy education has a long history of questionable “sponsors,” (see Brandt) motivations, and results (see also Larson, Cadiero-Kaplan). And while schools are not the only institutions involved in literacy education, they are among the most socially influential. Therefore, research into literacy and literacy learning must include some investigation of schooling as a particular kind of system—one whose practices, values, goals, and effects, should not be seen as neutral, objective, or even necessarily desirable.

The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice is a fascinating and useful collection about the social effects of schooling. The editors, Bradley Levinson, Douglas Foley, and Dorothy

Holland, include ethnographies of schooling in a variety of places—the U.S., France, Taiwan, Mexico, Bolivia, and more. The global perspective helps illuminate aspects of the educational system that Americans may simply take for granted. For instance, schooling takes children out of the home and emphasizes certain ways of thinking and acting, while deemphasizing others. Whether or not this is desirable is actually quite dependent. In “Formal Schooling and the Production of Modern Citizens in the Ecuadorian Amazon” Laura Rival describes the impact of formal schooling among the Huaorani, a group of “hunters-and-gatherers” (153). The effects were quite remarkable. Whole groups were forced to make significant changes their cultural practices, first by having to stay near the school village when they normally would not. Schooled children dressed differently and did not maintain many of their cultural behaviors, causing differences between the formally-schooled children and the community-schooled children.

Considering whether this is “good” or “bad” is less important than recognizing that schooling is a powerful force with social consequences. At the same time, people are not at the mercy of the educational experience. The editors use the term cultural production to describe a theoretical framework for understanding the impact of schooling: “Cultural production enables us to use the insights of structuralists as well as culturalists as we probe how it is that groups construct identities inside specific sites” (xi). This notion of cultural production studies the space between structure and agency, seeing them in a dialectical relationship. Yes, schools send particular kinds of messages, but students do not passively receive them; nor do they accept, resist or redefine those messages only within school environments. The tension between structure and agency, as

part of the way people make sense of education, will be examined throughout this chapter.

David Swartz also provides a useful theoretical foundation by revisiting the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* Swartz does an excellent job of introducing and explaining some of Bourdieu's key themes, such as social class, capital, symbolic power, habitus, and field. Education figures prominently in Bourdieu's work and according to Swartz, Bourdieu's concern with "...exploring the intimate connections between class, culture, and power in modern stratified societies ultimately leads him to study educational institutions" (189). Swartz says further that, "Bourdieu sees the educational system as the principal institution controlling the allocation of status and privilege in contemporary society" (189). This is a large claim, yet access to better schooling (more prestigious, better equipped, better funded, better staffed, etc.) typically leads to better social realities.

Chapter 8, "Education, Culture, and Social Inequality," is especially noteworthy. Here, Swartz elaborates on key aspects of Bourdieu's analysis of the French Academy. For example, Bourdieu's work points to stratification within French higher education—the most elite schools recruit and accept only the most socially elite. Through this arrangement (and many others), "the educational system...reinforces rather than redistributes the unequal distribution of cultural capital" (Swartz 191). Swartz acknowledges that these theories might not easily apply to other countries, including the U.S., but literacy studies in the U.S. support a similar pattern (see Heath, Anyon, Lareau).

Taken together, Swartz (via Bourdieu) and Levinson, Foley, and Holland provide an important framework for thinking about the system of schooling. The idea that the

educational system is actually a powerful social tool that can (and does) create, maintain, and otherwise influence complex social relationships is an important and recurring theme in various types of educational research. *How* the system works, and how people work within, without, and around the system, ultimately leads to deeper inquiries into notions of literacy, which then lead to questions about class and access. In *Response to Reform: Composition and the Professionalization of Teaching*, Margaret Marshall describes this progression. This book is primarily about teaching (mostly teaching writing in college) but literacy is an important underlying concept and Marshall devotes a significant amount of time explaining her particular use of the term.

Citing Geraldine Clifford's work, Marshall notes that each time the majority of the population reaches an expected literacy level, the expectations increase. Then, once a current view of literacy becomes widespread it becomes culturally significant; thus the population gains a "literacy consciousness." According to Clifford, this kind of literacy consciousness shapes "institutional structures, political and social interactions and values" (qtd. in Marshall, 6). Literacy levels then, become a marker that can be used for social stratification. Similarly, Marshall cites John Trimbur, who argues that recurring "literacy crises" and critiques aimed at schools are the results of "an ideology that uses reading and writing abilities as a means of sorting the population into 'masters' and 'servants' (qtd. in Marshall, 6). While I find the terms master and servant archaic, I accept the basic concept. Schools regularly sort students into a variety of categories, many of them negative. Marshall then offers examples that support both Clifford and Trimbur⁸: the spread of literacy and the subsequent rise in arguments for more common

⁸ For more examples of how literacy and literacy campaigns have functioned on a broader scale, see Harvey Graff's "The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Our Times," in *Literacy: a Critical Sourcebook*. Graff shows

schooling near the beginning of the nineteenth century, the literacy crisis of the 1980's, and especially the growing concern for writing ability in higher education.⁹

Rising literacy demands will always create advantages for some students and disadvantages for others. In *Defending Access: A Critique of Standards in Higher Education*, Tom Fox argues (rightfully) that standards have a history of performing gate-keeping functions in higher education. Any time the status quo is threatened (as it was during the 1960s, for example) the calls for new and better standards appear. These standards claim to be neutral and objective, but are always political. So, debates about access are always also debates about standards. Fox is primarily concerned with African American students (Chapter 2 provides a concise account of African American literacy growth in the 19th century) but also mentions other groups who can be disadvantaged by standards, such as working-class students.

In sum, the above work helps to identify education as the socially powerful system it really is. Fox and Marshall both point out systematic strategies and patterns which help to create, and then reinforce, various kinds of inequality. The collection of ethnographies (Levinson, Foley, and Holland) provides more examples of the ways in which schools alter social realities and perhaps more importantly, offer examples of how people actually negotiate the impact of schooling. Despite some specific examples, however, the references here are best read for their macro-level research contributions.

how, in the United States, particular notions of literacy, furthered through mass education, were essentially *designed* to separate groups of people. The biggest beneficiaries of education were, arguably, not those who needed it most.

⁹ Specific to writing/writing instruction, various strands of research in Composition (and especially Basic Writing) addresses the role of institutions in social stratification because writing tends to be one way students are "sorted" into categories. Some scholars have voiced harsh criticisms against preparatory writing classes in particular, saying they serve only to stratify higher education because minority students (many of whom are also working/lower class) are over-represented in lower-level writing courses (e.g. Shor).

The following section will provide specific examples of how literacy is constructed and negotiated in different contexts. It provides a necessary supplement to macro-level studies because context shapes literacy needs, desires, and demands, for institutions and individuals. Recognizing how notions of literacy change from one instance to another makes it possible to understand how definitions of literacy, and subsequent practices, frequently come to compete or conflict with one another, especially for at-risk students. For other students, home and school practices often complement one another. Therefore, it is within specific contexts that we can see even more clearly the tension between structure and agency.

Putting Literacy into Context

Conventional thinking would have it that more literacy is better. But who gets to decide how much more, and more of what exactly? Further, who gets to decide the use(s) of literacy? The term literacy has become an identifier for a variety of concepts: media literacy, critical literacy, information literacy, and even multi-literacies. This indicates that definitions of literacy are highly contextual and constructed; they change depending on a variety of individual, situational, and institutional constraints. Because what it means to be literate is not fixed, it is crucial to consider the individual, group, or institution doing the defining *and* those on the other side of the defining.

The following books and articles draw attention to a range of complex relationships between literacy learning, people, and institutions. These references highlight many of the complicated processes embedded defining literacy and literacy learning, including but not limited to writing. Key points include the role of institutions in

determining what counts as literacy, how literacy skills will be taught and evaluated, and who should be involved in determining the goals and objectives.¹⁰ Any writing curriculum can be seen as an institutional statement about literacy, and underlying all definitions of literacy are assumptions about what counts as valuable knowledge in the first place—assumptions that must be continually questioned. There are numerous books and articles to draw from, but in the confines of one chapter, I can only include a small sample of work. I have chosen books and articles that show a conflict or disconnect between the literacy expectations of a determining agent and the people meant to become “more literate.”

For instance, changing technologies affect assumptions about what it means to be literate and so have implications for curricular decisions. Consider, for example, “A Seven Power Lens on 21st-Century Literacy: Instilling Cross-Disciplinary Visual, News Media, and Information Literacy Skills.” Author Debbie Abilock presents a teaching method which asks students to look at news media through seven different lenses: senses, inference, research, contexts, evaluation, synthesis, and teaching. Abilock writes that “Explicit teaching of 21st-century literacy metaskills can position students to analyze and evaluate news reporting in today’s visually drenched world” (30). She begins with the senses noting that, “The visual language of the news can be read” (30, fig. 1). Each new lens asks students to consider the image, and attached news article in a more complex way, taking into consideration all the variables involved in producing it. This article is worth noting because it implies that these are necessary literacy skills for the 21st century. While it is certainly true that more and more print material is actually online material, and

¹⁰ It is important to point out here that institutions are not represented as all-powerful, however. Institutions cannot function without people, and people choose to engage with institutions in a variety of creative ways.

it is mostly true that print communication is actually a combination of print, pictures, sound bytes, and even interactive modules, it is not necessarily true that all students have had equal access to the kinds of technologies that make Abilock's sequence useful or even possible.¹¹

In a similar article, Ladislaus Semali is concerned with media literacy, saying that "The explosion of media literacies has outpaced our pedagogy, our curricula and methods of instruction, and the definition of what it means to be literate in a multimedia society" (271). "Ways with Visual Languages: Making the Case for Critical Media Literacy" is consistent with other articles that consider k-12 education and the tension between new media and our current climate of school reform. Semali mentions several states that have enacted one or more major school reform policies. One consequence seems to be a move away from new media and a refocusing on what we might call traditional print. This is cause for concern because, "...new literacies education...would strive to develop literate people who are able to read, write, listen, talk, analyze, evaluate and produce communication in a variety of media, including print, television, music, video film, radio, and Internet technologies" (Semali 272).

For Semali, this is critical media literacy, meant to train democratic citizens, enact social change, and resist dominant power relationships: "Media literacy aims to move audiences from awareness to action, from passivity to engagement, from denial to acceptance of responsibility for what each of us can do...as participants of our media-dominated society" (275). What Semali is advocating is closer to what some scholars

¹¹ Here, I am not suggesting that poor or working class students (or citizens in general) could not benefit from the kind of critical examination advocated here, or that any group should be excluded from particular pedagogies. I am merely suggesting that access is not universal. Any pedagogical approach should be examined for its possible impact on a range of students, not just the "ideal" student.

might call critical pedagogy. However, his hope for active and engaged citizens is noteworthy and other scholars have supported the idea that student productions (which he advocates) allow for increased agency. As with Abilock, however, the ability to enact this kind of pedagogy is weighted with assumptions about not only what students need, but about what they do and don't already know. Why would we assume that students are passive or unaware?¹²

Many educators see “media literacy” or “visual literacy” as an important trend and it would be unwise to ignore the importance of emerging technologies (see also Bustle, George, New London Group, Kress, Selber). We live in a visually saturated culture and technology is changing the ways in which we all communicate. It is important that educators help students critically assess, use, and produce knowledge in new ways. Yet, a significant amount of this research and practice is linked to digital technologies—current hardware and software at the very least—and the changing nature of writing. No one can produce a personal web page or a video for a course without access to the right equipment and the right training. Unfortunately, not everyone can expect to receive either one. In “The Digital Divide as a Complex and Dynamic Phenomenon” Jan van Dijk and Kenneth Hacker show that unequal access to technologies is still common. They argue that access means more than material access; true access also requires experience, skills, and opportunities for usage. Therefore, it is possible to have material goods, such as a computer, but still fail to have adequate access.

¹² Because curricular choices, and even whole education programs, can rest on assumptions about what students are *supposed* to know, student who don't know specific things can be disadvantaged before they ever enter the classroom. Thus, definitions of literacy (especially when they change) can serve a “gate keeping” function in education. Teachers and scholars have written much about the notion of gate keeping, especially as it relates to writing and language education more broadly. Gatekeeping will be referenced again later in this chapter and in the next.

Age, income, education, race, and ethnicity were shown to affect access, with income and education being especially important. Lower income and/or educational attainment correlated with limited access (van Dijk and Hacker). It *might* follow then, that certain students need this type of literacy instruction even more, that certain students would benefit from it even more because a gap in access exists. I would argue, though, that such a pedagogical assumption could easily work in reverse, giving students that already have advantages even greater advantages and widening the gap even further for other students.

The issues and concerns identified with the use of technology are not limited to technology; technology provides a good example because it is so prevalent. The underlying issue is actually one of access, agency and opportunity within a structured system (schooling, in this case). Any writing curriculum can be seen as an institutional statement about literacy, and underlying all definitions of literacy are assumptions about what counts as valuable knowledge in the first place—assumptions that must be continually questioned.

Institutionalized Literacy

The remaining references engage these questions more thoroughly. For example, all literacy programs have goals and objectives, but the ways in which those goals and objectives come to be, and the ways in which people choose to engage with them (or resist them) is hardly uniform. In *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change*, Jeff Grabill more explicitly investigates the relationships between literacy, people, and institutional variables. Though Grabill uses work in Composition and

Rhetoric to help situate his project, he looks specifically at writing that takes place *outside* of academia. Looking outside the typical school classroom (college or otherwise) is important because, as the title suggests, this is not a book about academia or academic models of literacy.

Grabill analyzes adult basic education (ABE) in two contexts, a workplace literacy program and an ABE class. Through examples and interviews, Grabill demonstrates a variety of conflicts and conflicting ideals. For example, the ABE class seems to rely on a functional, a-contextual model of literacy learning, one that many academics would not favor. Media literacy and/or multi-literacies were not a factor here. Yet, students continued to attend and two indicated (in interviews) that they were very happy with the instruction. In the workplace program however, some students chose not to attend certain classes and those that did attend had reasons that did not necessarily relate to work.

Why this mismatch? Grabill's book takes into account the important role of institutions in the definition and deployment of "literacy skills" and literacy programs. In fact, in the very first chapter, Grabill writes that "Perhaps the key concept in this book is "institution." I will argue that institutions give literacies existence, meaning, and value..." (7). In short, what it means to be literate might be defined by an employer, a school, or a test (among other possibilities). At the same time, Grabill points out that people are a necessary part of institutions. I find the space between the individual and the institution a compelling area of inquiry because defining a curriculum is very much like defining and regulating access—what information is privileged and why? Who will decide? In response, Grabill lays out a model for good program design, which he calls

“Participatory Institutional Design.” Good design, in this case, is democratic in its ideal, and must strive to include those affected and especially those not normally represented.

The brief article “Leadership Through Language and Literacy: How Immigrants Repositioned Themselves into Active Community Participants Through Classroom Discourse,” by Sherry Drobner also identifies conflicts in a community based literacy program. The article discusses an initiative called, “The Write to Read” program. At the time, Write to Read was one of many programs being offered in different California libraries. The Write to Read program was designed to broaden literacy services by moving to small group instruction (from one-to-one tutoring). According to Sherry Drobner, she wanted to write about the program because “...the students found the process provocative, exciting, and life changing...” (11). The program ran for three years and became known as “The Leadership Class.” The actual data represented comes from interviews, focus groups, entries from written journals and from student evaluations. The participant list is small, just six adults (four immigrants), ranging in age from 30-55. Five are women.

The students entering the class primarily wanted to improve their skills, especially in conversation. However, the teacher (Michael James) “...had much higher goals for the students.” (12). Rather than seeing themselves as immigrants, the students could see themselves as citizens, voters, and leaders. Personal narratives provided a vehicle for students to explore their social positions. Various quotes from the students seem to indicate that they did develop a more critical awareness of their own positionality in and through society. The teaching approach outlined here closely follows that of Paulo Freire, whose book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is often cited as “the” model for teaching critical

literacy. Michael James studied with Freire and Drobner even calls this model education for freedom. What I would have liked to see, though, is her engagement with the fact that many students dropped the class. Drobner mentions this briefly, saying only that, “As the goals of the class became clearer, only those students interested in stronger community involvement remained with the project” (11). I wonder why the need or desire to improve communication skills is not considered a worthy goal, or why the students’ goals were not taken into consideration.

A similar tension can be seen in “The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse,” by Lisa Delpit. This article is largely a response to a set of papers authored by the linguist James Gee. Delpit challenges several of Gee’s main claims. For example, in “Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics: Introduction and What Is Literacy?” Gee claims that students can really only be fluent in their home discourse (primary) and that success in secondary discourses (like that of schools) is predicated on the relationship between the two.¹³ Basically, Gee claims that the only way to really have fluency in a dominant discourse (and thus be successful) is to be born into it. If Gee is correct, then most dominant models of literacy represent locked doors with keys that can only be handed down in the family. This doesn’t bode well for minority groups and/or working class students, as these groups tend to be the ones who struggle most. Delpit takes Gee to task for such an overly deterministic view. To counter, Delpit points to numerous examples of successful African American students, all of whom managed to learn the language of school with real success.

¹³ Work in discourse studies, linguistics, and educational ethnography (among others) has shown that language practices outside of school settings, such as those practiced at home, also influence educational experiences. Home practices that more closely match those at school provide advantages for students.

What is equally important to note is that Delpit points to many “liberal” or “progressive” teachers who claim it is oppressive to teach students the dominant discourse. Instead, these teachers want to validate students’ home languages and help them find their authentic voices (whatever that means!). Delpit points out that many poor, working class, and/or minority students complain bitterly because they want to learn Standard English. This article raises important questions about educational agendas and whose will get privileged. If educators do not help students learn how to negotiate academic language, then once again, the social gains of literacy learning may be lessened. Delpit’s article also points to the complex relationship between literacy, identity, and access because “appropriate” language skills are linked to increased access (to further schooling and better jobs, for instance). The students with already limited access wanted the cultural capital that comes with the “right” language. Failure to acknowledge their perspective is both selfish and unfair.

One final book (for now) that openly addresses potentially competing visions of education is Stephen Fishman and Lucille McCarthy’s *Whose Goals? Whose Aspirations? Learning to Teach Underprepared Writers Across the Curriculum*. This book is primarily about Fishman’s experiences with under-prepared writers in his Introduction to Philosophy course. The authors frame the study as a teacher-research project, with the impetus coming from Fishman’s desire to find ways to help underprepared writers in his course. For the purposes of this book, Fishman defines underprepared writers as, “pupils whose lack of experience reading and writing in the so-called standard code puts them at a disadvantage in his classroom” (Fishman and McCarthy 5). Fishman is a philosophy teacher, not a writing teacher. His philosophy

course met a general education requirement, so the students in the course needed the credits to graduate. The course was considered writing intensive, but philosophy was the core content. Co-researcher and co-author Lucille McCarthy is a composition researcher who observed Fishman's course, looked at student writing, and also spoke with the students that make up the majority of the book.

The blending of student, teacher, and outside researcher perspectives make this book unique. Their perspectives sometimes agree, sometimes conflict, and sometimes overlap. For instance, in one case example, Neha (an Indian woman) already held a degree from an Indian university; yet, her writing did not meet academic expectations. She resented being forced to take the course and was frustrated because she felt her true goals (to return home) were being delayed. Both Fishman and McCarthy explore their particular positions as another way to understand their responses to the students' writing and the students as people. Fishman is a privileged white male, but one with a particular minority experience due to his Jewish heritage. McCarthy is a woman, yet her ethnic background (Anglo-Scandinavian) provided her with a very different kind of social capital. Still, both Fishman and McCarthy recognize their privileged positions respective to the students. Tellingly, the case studies are of non-white students (two African American women and one ESL student, along with Neha). This is regrettably typical in research about under-prepared students.

To this point, the common denominator I've tried to highlight is the tension that can exist between institutional demands and actual people. People that don't seem to meet various institutional expectations or models, or choose to challenge them, are often the same groups. And all too often, the same groups are institutionally marked by labels,

placements, pedagogies, and educators that (usually) have the students' best interests at heart. Of all things, this is perhaps the most perplexing and serious question to ponder. How can institutions like schools genuinely meet the needs of a diverse population, taking into consideration multiple perspectives and significant variables—from individual goals to much broader concerns like public pressure, budgets, and administrative actions? Is it even possible?

In sum, this chapter provides a framework for thinking about the remainder of the book. First, the educational system is about the business of creating literate persons and writing is inexorably linked to notions of literacy. Yet, literacy is an incredibly vague term, almost meaningless without additional context (which can be found in homes, schools, work places, and communities). Therefore, it is important to understand how multiple influences all work to *construct* literacy, literacy learning, and the ways in which people experience becoming literate. For some, the experience is unpleasant at best, and downright harmful at its worst. With so many institutional constraints, the concept of literacy might seem impersonal and completely out of the hands of actual literacy learners; this is not the case. Institutions are powerful players, but people are, too. People can engage, disengage, or engage in unexpected ways, and they do. While the remainder of this project will narrow substantially in focus, first by discussing the development of composition as a discipline, and then to analyzing a specific university department and its changing writing program, this chapter should be remembered for its implications about the work educators do—whether in the classroom, conference room, or break room.

Chapter Two

Writing Instruction at the University: A Brief Survey of Challenges, Politics and Possibilities

“Those of us who teach composition to undergraduates are engaged in the newest level of common school literacy” (Marshall 4).

The previous chapter presented the view that schooling is a powerful social system that relies heavily on notions of literacy. Chapter one also introduced specific issues related to literacy education, such as the shifting and highly contextual nature of literacy, the role of institutions in defining and evaluating literacy, and the ways in which identity markers like culture and class (among other things) can affect literacy learning—and by extension, can affect the entire educational experience.¹⁴ This chapter will examine a specific type of literacy instruction: writing courses at the university level. In particular, this chapter will discuss a very specific type of institutional creation—first-year writing.

Writing is hardly new to the standard college curriculum, but first-year writing is unique in its institutional position and function. Because first-year writing courses, and the various programs that sustain them, are in the business of perpetuating specific types of literacy as students first enter college, they deserve careful study. At most universities, students must take and pass one or more writing courses to graduate. If students do not

¹⁴ Despite the significant role of institutions, it is important to keep in mind that institutions are not all-powerful. The relationships between people and various institutions are in a state of constant negotiation. People can and do find creative ways to accept, resist, modify, or otherwise engage with institutional demands.

pass, they risk being held back from other studies, they can incur extra tuition costs, and in the worst case, they may not receive a degree. Students who don't already possess or quickly acquire "appropriate" kinds of academic literacy may also be labeled in a variety of ways, from under-prepared to merely unmotivated.¹⁵ This process is not new, but continued work in literacy studies (e.g. Brandt, Delpit) along with the influence of critical approaches in educational research (e.g. Pennycook, Rogers, Gee) has continued to raise serious questions that literacy educators of all levels should take into consideration.¹⁶ "Literacy" is not a universal concept and it should not be seen as neutral. There are consequences attached to literacy, literacy education, and the educational experience, all of which can be associated with first-year writing.

For the purposes of this chapter, and as a way to frame the specific writing program I studied, I will bring together references from three areas: institutional, administrative (Writing Program Administration and local institutional variables) and disciplinary (primarily from Composition and/or Composition and Rhetoric). The administrative and institutional elements are closely related and will frequently overlap. Each of the three areas has its own body of work, but all three are important in understanding first-year writing. First-year writing is first and foremost an institutional structure, which might stand alone, but could also be represented by one or more classes offered within a larger department (such as English, Composition or a Composition and Rhetoric program, among other possibilities). For instance, the writing program I studied

¹⁵ Basic writing courses are the sites where many "under-prepared" students find themselves, sometimes by choice, but more often by placement. Some universities have basic writing courses and some do not. Basic Writing can be considered a discipline; its research and scholarship is unique in many ways. But basic writing is sometimes considered a sub-field of Composition. The writing program I studied does include basic writing courses, so research on basic writing is relevant and will be addressed later in this chapter.

¹⁶ See chapter one for a brief review of literature related to changing definitions of literacy and some of the implications of literacy instruction.

is embedded in a larger, interdisciplinary department, offering a variety of writing courses (many advanced) and also courses in American Cultural Studies. Additionally, the department itself is part of a specific college within the university, the College of Arts and Letters. As such, there are numerous stake holders involved in the evolution of the writing program—different faculty members within the department, various college administrators of all levels, and of course, the students.

While there are numerous ways to approach first-year writing, a disciplinary lens provides a useful entry point because the development of Composition as a discipline has meant a body of research and scholarship that deals very specifically with writing, the writing process, writing pedagogy, and life as a professional writing teacher/scholar. Certainly, there has been research on writing prior to Composition's appearance, but the appearance of Composition as something definable has made possible more sustained research in writing (which has then made it possible to produce more scholarship). I will refer to this body of work to help frame particular developments in the writing program I studied.

Another important and related area of study comes from the Writing Program Administrator's council (WPA). WPA work and Composition are necessarily affiliated because both share a concern with writing, teaching writing, and training teachers of writing. As the name would suggest, though, WPA work focuses on administrative concerns, such as program development, program administration, and program assessment. Still, WPA work isn't far from Composition. In "The Essential Unity of Language Arts Programs: Its Pedagogical Implications," a brief article in just the second the ever WPA journal, Greg Larkin notes that:

As administrators of language arts programs, we are all painfully aware of the multiplicity of our calling. We must train new faculty, and what is worse, retrain old ones. We must keep up with the explosion of knowledge in the area of composition and rhetoric, and we must apply that knowledge to our programs in practical ways. (25)

Taken together then, an awareness of issues in literacy and literacy education, work in Composition (and Rhetoric) and writing program administration provide a much more comprehensive view of what it really means for a college to have a writing program. The remainder of this chapter is not meant to address “everything you ever wanted to know about Composition and WPA work.” There simply isn’t room. The references and subsequent discussions in this chapter are meant to introduce key issues that surface again and again in the field’s scholarship and perhaps more importantly, in the program I studied.

The Emergence of a Discipline: What is Composition Anyway?

Though teaching writing is not new to the college curriculum, Composition is still comparatively new as a discipline. Prior to the mid-1970s, there were virtually no graduate programs with a Composition emphasis, and it seems it took quite a few years of flux just to get a writing emphasis within the discipline of English. According to early Composition scholar, Stephen North, the late 1950s and early 1960s are marked by an emergence of English as a discipline, not merely as a school subject, even though the Conference on College Composition and Communication was formed in 1949 (North 9).

North points to certain shifts in education to support his stance: an emphasis on the long terms goals and nature of English apart from immediate classroom needs and the idea that English encompassed language, literature, *and composition*. The three strand approach created more space for Composition as a distinct field.

With this distinction, however, came significant challenges. The quest to define Composition led to difficult questions about the field's boundaries and purpose, about the kinds of research that should take place, about the role of different theories (and the probable need for new ones) and about its affiliation (or not) with other disciplines.¹⁷ In other words, professionals were asking, who are we and what do we do? Where do we belong? For any discipline to evolve and answer tough identity questions it must produce new research and new scholarship—and Composition did just that.¹⁸ Yet, then and now, there seems to be no clear answer to the same nagging questions. With its nearly inseparable relationship to first-year writing, Composition must always be concerned with teaching. In fact, for some Composition professionals, teaching is a primary (or only) duty. At the same time, many would argue that teaching is, and has always been, under-appreciated and under-valued.¹⁹ So, questions about the “real” nature of Composition are not easily answered.

¹⁷ At different times, writing instruction has been linked to English, Communication courses, and even Linguistics. Its pairing with Rhetoric, though, has been lasting.

¹⁸ There are numerous scholars that could be identified as making early contributions to Composition's growth, even though they were writing long before Composition and Rhetoric could be called a discipline. See Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* for a good overview of the conditions that fueled the need for more specialized training in teaching writing. For the purposes of this study, early refers primarily to the 1970s and 1980s, when specialized degrees were becoming available. For instance, Stephen North offers a research-based approach, Louise Phelps offers a more theoretical approach, Kenneth Bruffee writes of his experiences with “Freshman English” and collaborative learning (in the 1980s and well beyond), Janet Emig is well known for her study of the composing process, and Gary Tate offers his very early contributions to professionalizing teaching writing.

¹⁹ This issue definitely surfaced in the program I studied.

All of the debates about Composition's identity and purpose have been generative in some ways, but the drive for a legitimate space in academia has also continued to cause conflicts. With so many internal possibilities—differences among professionals within the field—and so many external variables (institutional constraints, public pressure of all kinds, budgets, employment conditions and so forth) it is difficult to imagine a consistent vision or version of Composition. Over time, the apparent lack of disciplinary definition has simply become part of the landscape.

For instance, in “Crisis and Panacea in Composition Studies: A History,” Robert Connors argues that composition scholarship differs greatly from other professional (academic/disciplinary) literature because it has *not* been concerned with new research or advancing new theories: “Instead, the historian finds a tremendous amount of literature devoted to the cultural and professional conditions within the field: forensic bows to what has come before, deliberative discourse on what must or should be done, and especially epideictic praise or blame for the conditions described” (86). And while there is scholarship that specifically addresses research and theory, even that can be interpreted as a question of identity making *and the meaning of work* in the field. After all, teaching, publishing, conducting research, training teachers, creating and evaluating programs, and all the other practices of disciplinarity require work. Perhaps the real issue, then, is the perceived meaning and/or value of the work. The following section will examine some of the ways in which professionals have broached the subject of work in Composition. As will become clear, notions of class and status are issues of great concern for professionals and students alike.

Finding the Meaning of “Work” in Composition

From the purely conceptual to the realities of day to day working conditions, scholars have picked apart the discipline’s treatment of its work and its workers. What counts as legitimate work? What type(s) of work should Composition focus on? In *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, researcher Sharon Crowley claims that “The history of composition studies has been written in the fortunes of the required introductory course in composition. Unfortunately, this course enjoys very little status within the university...” (4). Crowley suggests that once full time faculty realized “there was no professional future in teaching a course that produced no research,” required courses were passed first to graduate students, and later, as postwar enrollments became overwhelming, to adjuncts (4). Research became the legitimate work, teaching writing the grunt work. Crowley argues further that Composition remains unfortunately linked to its initial service ethic, claiming to meet the needs of the academic community, the student community, and even the broader community.

Unlike other disciplines that can proudly claim a service ethic (such as science and even philosophy) the service work of Composition is held in low esteem. Why? Primarily, it has been linked to the required Composition course. Following Susan Miller, Crowley claims that Composition is actually used “...to make student writing available for surveillance until it can be certified to conform to whatever standards are deemed to mark it, and its authors, as suitable...” (253). Crowley goes on to say that, “The marginalization of the entire freshman class...serves to underscore and enforce the exclusivity of academic discourse, both with regard to the academy’s newest members (students and teachers alike) and with regard to the culture at large” (253). Crowley

would see the required first-year course abolished and believes that doing so would allow Composition to gain status, not to mention removing a major academic sorting mechanism. Crowley's book is aging now (written in 1998) and for better or worse, Composition is still firmly rooted in most universities. Yet, her arguments should not be overlooked because similar arguments continue to surface, albeit through different lenses.

For instance, in *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*, Bruce Horner argues that professionals in the field need to reconceptualize the terms they use to talk about what they do. In six chapters, Horner presents six key terms: work, students, politics, academic, traditional, and writing, "...because, in the inflections given these terms and those with which they are associated, I identify a tension between Composition's desire for disciplinary status and its material location(s)" (xv). In many institutions, Composition can still be said to have a lower status than other disciplines, especially in material terms (pay, instructor/professor status, institutional support, and so forth.) He reviews the various and competing definitions found in published and unpublished discourse on Composition to show how the competing constructions of these terms either completely overlook material realities or see them as overly determinant.

According to Horner, a failure to fully confront the complex materiality of Composition has led to a series of binary dilemmas. For instance, either abolish first-year writing and lose its institutional base or assign it as "service;" either force tenure-track faculty to teach the courses or exploit adjuncts; either make Composition more theoretical or design it to teach students to be successful in business and trades (thus reproducing dominant power structures). His argument is, "...that these dilemmas result from a failure to confront the materiality of all work in composition, including that work deemed

‘theoretical’ or ‘scholarly’” (xvi). Like others, Horner agrees that Composition is conflicted. In his materialist view, it all hinges on conceptions of work and the idea that everything we do is material social practice—located in a specific historical period, operating under a variety of specific institutional and social constraints.

Margaret Marshall also takes a long, in-depth look at the discourse surrounding teaching and teachers, going back to the beginnings of public education in this country. In *Response to Reform: Composition and the Professionalization of Teaching*, her approach is similar to Horner’s in that she is concerned with notions of work and the rhetoric we use, but her argument is nearly opposite. Instead of pushing us to think of our work in different ways, she suggests that aligning teaching with *work* (through attempts at unionizing, for example) has equated teaching with manual labor, making it all the more difficult to change conceptions. In her book, she reveals a compelling history filled with inequality (especially for women); an early and marked distinction between teaching and “real” intellectual work; persistent blaming of teachers for the failure of education; and the consistent (though often failed efforts) for teachers to be recognized as true professionals and intellectuals.

Marshall points to ongoing discussions about the use of adjunct faculty as teachers of first-year composition courses, the prevalence of women in those positions, and the fact that more women receive advanced degrees but fewer of them receive tenured positions. She suggests that at least some of these stratifications have been inherited from composition’s past and that an awareness of this history can help affect change. Marshall analyzes the history, language, and practice of composition, paying

particular attention to the ways in which the discourse of the field has and still does enforce particular and long standing academic hierarchies.

In Chapter 4, “A Mere Factory Hand” Marshall provides clear examples of the patterns she lays out in earlier chapters. Unlike other chapters, this one relies less on textual evidence and more on actual labor conditions, past and present. She provides a lengthy example of the history of teachers and union movements, arguing that the association with *labor* and the predominance of working class women and immigrants further contributed to teaching being viewed as mere work, not a real profession. Marshall claims that, “we need to recognize the traps created by the discursive patterns we inherit and work to conscientiously construct alternatives if we hope to improve either the material conditions of classroom teachers or the relative value of teaching within the structure of higher education” (94). Though she suggests the argument can apply generally to higher education, she indicates a specific focus on composition and provides examples of current conditions in her own institution.

As a final example for now, “Reimagining the Landscape of Composition,” by Art Young, takes a different approach, arguing that common corporate practices have invaded academia, such as importing staff and replacing full time jobs with temporary and contract labor: “...the demand for temporary composition teachers across the nation each fall semester the week school begins exemplifies delivering just-in-time education with a just-in-time workforce” (99). Young’s essay is useful because it addresses a difficult issue in a very realistic way. Citing several different studies, Young shows that tenure track jobs are shrinking and the use of adjuncts is growing. This is consistent with other forms of “dejobbing America” currently taking place (Young 98). At the same time,

he also shows that more writing classes are being added. Some schools are requiring a writing course for the first time, while others are moving to two writing requirements. What this means is that current labor practices are unlikely to change because, in the current economy, there will never be enough tenure line jobs to adequately staff the number of composition courses being offered.²⁰ The concerns about the institutional location and purpose of first-year writing, along with interrelated labor concerns, have become commonplace within the discipline. Labor issues are intertwined with this particular study, too, because some of the recommendations for change speak directly to the institution's current labor practices.

Despite its growing pains and persistent labor concerns, Composition has become a recognizable fixture in many universities, particularly in the form of first-year writing. Most universities have some type of writing program, though they can vary significantly in institutional structure, pedagogical approach, credit load, and content. Regardless of institutional location and structure however, nearly all first-year college students will take at least one required writing course. Because the course(s) are required, the stakes can be high. If students do not pass, they risk being held back from other studies, risk incurring extra tuition costs, and in the worst case, risk not graduating. Depending on the college or university, there may also be one or more preparatory courses. In either case, students are not likely to have many choices. If the school has only one course, all students must take it. If the school offers preparatory courses, students are typically evaluated and placed

²⁰ This essay comes from the collection *Composition Studies in the New Millennium*, published in 2003. The state of labor conditions is highly debatable and dependent on numerous things—degree type, type of institution, personal work preferences, and numerous other variables. The bulk of concern also seems to focus on the use of graduate teaching assistants and adjuncts. A close second might be the status of writing/teaching writing within English departments, though that seems to be changing, too. The primary point here, as with the other references in this section, is to show that labor debates aren't new to the field.

into them based on standardized tests, taken long before they ever enroll. Students who don't already possess the expected kinds of literacy (primarily the type needed to test well) may then find themselves in basic writing courses.

Recognizing the Work of "Others:" Historical Perspectives on Basic Writing

"...basic writing reflects both this country's promise and its deepening contradictions. It signifies struggles for inclusion, diversity, and equal opportunity...It has played a key role...in illuminating the politics of writing in terms of race, class, ethnicity, and other social structures that would have remained invisible in the mostly white, middle-class classrooms that have traditionally constituted the "mainstream." (Mutnick 183)

Basic writing can be considered a specific discipline (see the *Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Basic Writing*). However, because much basic writing work takes place at the community college level, or other non-academic sites, it is necessary for this study to place basic writing within the structure of first-year writing, within the *slightly* more prestigious field of Composition. Like composition, basic writing has a long and difficult history, more difficult in some ways. Many researchers point out that the first freshman composition class originated in 1874, as Harvard responded to "poor writing" by its upperclassmen. And, as early as the 1920's, the phrase "remedial" was being used in the academy. However, the term basic writing, as it has been referred to in recent years, (and as I refer to it here) is something different. Writing has long been used to mark and separate people; literate from illiterate, formally educated from informally

educated, cultured from uncultured, and appropriately educated from under-educated. Inevitably, schools have become the primary institutions to decide what counts as appropriate written literacy and for many years now, schools have been trying to account for “poor” writing. Basic writing is hardly a new phenomenon. Yet, as the opening quote suggests, basic writing continues to be troubling on many levels.

It is important to know that Mutnick’s quote speaks to a particular view of basic writing (Basic Writing hereafter). Histories of literacy and schooling can predate or simply overlook two important moments that create the need for a distinct definition—the emergence of Composition as a unique field of study (whether affiliated with English or not) and the subsequent emergence of Basic Writing as a *specific* area of study and a *specific* institutional creation. Though various kinds of preparatory writing courses have been a part of the college curriculum for years, the current understanding of Basic Writing (and the one I will be using) emerged in the 1970’s, when colleges began to change their admission policies, some even going to open admissions. The result was an influx of students that universities were just not prepared to teach. Many of these new students, often minorities, did not have cultural or educational backgrounds that supported the kind of literacy valued (and expected) in the academy. Their writing, in particular, diverged from the “norm,” forcing colleges into a difficult position. Either fail large numbers of students, design classes to meet their perceived needs, or, as more recent developments would suggest, find ways to keep these particular students out of universities all together.

Then and now, the particulars of Basic Writing represent significant challenges for higher education. Debates about how to understand and work with seemingly under-

prepared students often lead to vigorous debates about rights, access, and equal opportunity *because* under-prepared students so often come from “non-mainstream” backgrounds. Basic writing students tend to be incredibly diverse, racially, ethnically, and socio-economically. This is as true today as it was in 1970, perhaps even more so. Then and now, growing student diversity is often perceived as a threat to dominant social structures and can be met with measures that seek to limit access (such as entrance exams). Though the open-admissions era did not last and access to higher education continues to be threatened by various economic and political trends, it is possible to see the 1960 and 1970s as permanently changing the “typical” student population. Whereas Harvard’s poor writers would still have been predominantly white males, the poor writers of the 1970s represented an entirely new student body, including more women, minorities, and working-class (or even poor) students. These students wouldn’t have been allowed access to universities previously, and their presence demanded change.

In her chapter contribution to *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Deborah Mutnick recounts her initial experience with Basic Writing and basic writers beginning in 1986. She writes that she was not prepared “for the gritty, urban working-class scene I encountered... What could I possibly say to these students or write in the margins of their papers that would help them?” (184). Stories of overwhelmed and under-trained teachers are not surprising, especially during growth stages of Basic Writing, when degrees in Composition were still much less common. Many teachers had literature (or other) degrees, with little or no experience working with diverse populations or even with teaching writing. This arrangement still exists, especially in universities where teaching

assistants and part-time faculty, in particular, may or may not have the training or desire to help under-prepared students become better writers (or to teach writing at all).

Basic Writing is a particular kind of institutional creation, with a particular kind of history, with a particular relationship to variously marginalized groups (students, basic writing teachers, Composition more generally). Current conceptions of Basic Writing still encompass many of the original concerns—appropriate pedagogy, issues of social class, models of assessment (in classrooms and institutions), labor issues, disciplinary issues, and even political issues. Yet, I suggest that most of these issues can be understood as manifestations of just one thing—*class differences*. The impact of class, within the academy and within the day to lives of students and teachers underpins nearly every troubling question raised by Basic Writing. And while I would suggest that class differences matter in many different sites of Basic Writing work, they are particularly glaring in university settings.²¹ Similar to Composition, then, basic writing has a long and difficult history, more difficult in some ways. The influx of students who would become labeled “basic writes” forced colleges into a difficult position, either fail large numbers of students, or design classes to meet their perceived needs. Composition teachers and researchers began trying to explain the “problems” in students’ writing, hoping that defining the problems would make fixing them possible.

From this perspective, basic writing is primarily concerned with pedagogy. Mina Shaughnessy’s germinal book *Errors and Expectations* was written in direct response to her teaching experience at The City University of New York (CUNY) after the university became an open admissions school. In the field of basic writing, this book is considered

²¹ Continued work in areas such as literacy studies (e.g. Brandt, Delpit), critical work in education (e.g. Bourdieu, Rogers), and specific research on social class (Lareau, Lindquist) indicates that class seems to exert an especially powerful influence on educational experiences.

groundbreaking because it is one of the first published pieces that attempt to explain the kind of writing these new college students brought with them. According to Shaughnessy, “There are styles to being wrong” and teachers should learn to decipher the students own style, rather than simply pointing out errors (49). Written in 1978, her work has since been criticized for focusing only on sentence level errors, for failing to acknowledge context, and for failing to consider the writers intended meaning, all aspects of more current research. According to Min-zhan Lu, “...the pedagogical advice Shaughnessy offers...seldom considers the possibility that the meaning ‘one has in mind’ might undergo substantial change as one tries to ‘coax’ and ‘communicate’ it in different discourses” (29). At the time though, the idea that students’ errors were deliberate, even logical, presented a new perspective.

Initially, many researchers followed Shaughnessy’s approach, trying to classify errors and find better ways to teach academic conventions. As early as the 1980’s, though, questions about “academic literacy” began to surface. David Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” is another landmark work because it places “good” academic writing specifically *within the context of the academy*. His premise made room for the idea that basic writers *wouldn’t* necessarily know all the correct conventions the moment they stepped into the classroom. Bartholomae suggested that students needed to learn a new language, university discourse, to be successful. It wasn’t that the students lacked literacy skills, or even writing skills, in particular, they simply needed to learn to blend their current practices with those required in the university.

An important shift took place in the early 1980’s when questions about terminology and the impact of non-academic contexts came under scrutiny. Terms such

as remedial and developmental, often interchangeable with basic, begin being critiqued. Mike Rose, another well known basic writing teacher and researcher challenged definitions of basic writers, saying, “Exactly what the adjective “remedial” means...has never been quite clear.” Further, Rose added, “What remedial means in terms of curriculum and pedagogy is not clear either...what is considered standard during one era might well be tagged remedial in the next” (349). Rose was critiquing institutions both for labeling students and for failing to produce consistent definitions of those labels.

Rose and others also began to consider both academic and personal contexts as a factor in students’ writing. Perhaps most notably, Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways With Words* demonstrated just how much community experiences shape literacy practices at home, and subsequently, in school. Compositionists often refer to her work because, in academic culture, “good” writing is seen as evidence of participation in notions of “appropriate” literacy. The notion that literacy practices in the home or community might affect writing practices in school opened up even more research possibilities. The works of Heath, Rose and Bartholmae suggested that basic writers were not necessarily defined by cognitive process, but cultural differences or arbitrary language. Yet, despite new research and some new teaching methods, attention to students’ previous experience with writing, especially practices found outside the academy, continued to be minimal.

Researchers examining the foundation of basic writing, its role in the academy, and its potentially harmful consequences for students called into question its very existence. For example, using data from a study of writing placements at Essex Community College, where he worked, Peter Dow Adams argued that students were more successful in writing (and in college, overall) when *not* placed in lower level

writing classes. CUNY professor Ira Shor argued that basic writing should be abolished because of its socially unjust, “gate-keeping” nature. According to Shor, basic writing was another form of discrimination, which led to segregation, because poor and/or minority students were most likely to be placed in lower level classes. Shor also claimed that basic writing programs were “cash cows”, charging full tuition prices, but employing the lowest paid staff, often adjuncts and graduate students (95). Sharon Crowley not only argued against basic writing, but any required writing courses.

Despite critiques, other composition teachers and researchers not only defended the institution of basic writing, but thought it essential. Terrence Collins, then Director of Academic Affairs at University of Minnesota-General College, argued in a response to Shor that GC’s basic writing faculty were among the best paid at the college, indicating that Shor may be making unfair generalizations about the way colleges manage basic writing programs. Also responding to Shor, CUNY basic writing professor Karen Greenburg, argued that basic writing differs from school to school and that, “...unlike most other college courses [basic writing courses] are places where students ideas are taken seriously, regardless of the dialect or register in which they are expressed...” (92). Both Greenburg and long time basic writing teacher Keith Gilyard (formerly at CUNY) also advocated basic writing as one of the few places where underrepresented students had a chance to succeed. Both expressed concern that, without these classes, many students would not be successful in college because they would never get a chance to acquire the academic writing skills they need (see Gilyard, Greenburg). Regardless of institutional structure or the presence of specific basic writing courses, regardless of personal beliefs about the structures, and regardless of the names we give, there are sure

to be students whose writing does meet certain academic expectations. Therefore, the research on basic writing is relevant to any discussion of Composition more broadly.

Composition at the Institutional Level

By now it should be clear that Composition encompasses a broad range of important issues. From notions of literacy to labor practices to student and even teacher demographics, Composition is a gold mine for research and scholarship. Studying just one of those areas of inquiry in-depth would give any Composition professional a lot of information to sort through and probably a life-long research agenda. As I argued early on however, to best understand a writing program (the ultimate objective in this study), it is best to think of things as connected, like an organism that relies on all parts working together for its survival. As such, there is one more area that must be addressed, administration and program development because all writing programs are housed somewhere within a specific institution.

Given the challenges in Composition alone, it should come as no surprise that program administration can be very difficult, especially when developing or changing a program. In “Internal Friction in a New Independent Department of Writing, and What the External Conflict Resolution Consultants Recommended,” authors Eleanor Agnew and Phyllis Surrency Dallas discuss the emergence of an independent writing program at Georgia Southern University. The new program was formed in 1997, when the English and Philosophy departments were reorganized into two separate units. According to the authors, the reorganization was met with plenty of enthusiasm, but within a short period of time (by 1999) “the honeymoon ended abruptly, as buried feelings exploded” (38).

The department was in such a poor state that outside consultants were hired. Agnew and Dallas summarize some of the consulting report, which said the department was in crisis, marked by tensions, suspicion, divisiveness, problematic communication and more (39). How does a seemingly happy program implode so quickly?

Two factors identified include a top-down administrative decision (vs. being faculty driven) and mixed feelings among faculty trained in literary studies, who were now teaching in a writing department. The mission of the program wasn't clear, the number of composition/rhetoric faculty was increasing, and "The department had broken into factions" (39). There were differences in opinion about how the program should develop, about the merit of different degrees, and about how best to teach writing. Part of the reason I became so interested in studying Tier One reform is because I have experienced first hand the kind of tensions described here. In fact, the parallels are striking. The outcome at MSU is still uncertain, but the end of this chapter indicated that Georgia Southern survived and is maturing nicely.

In addition to dealing with change and learning to get along, a good writing program should evaluate itself. Unfortunately, evaluation can be as problematic as developing the program. In "The Assessment Trick: Trial and Error in Assessing Temple University's First-Year Writing Program." Christine Palumbo-DeSimone details the risks and rewards of programmatic assessment. As the abstract warns, "...the grand expectations of writing assessment committees can be quickly deflated by the real logistic and pedagogical challenges of large-scale writing assessment." The assessment process really began in 1995, with the review and revision of the first-year writing sequence at Temple. Initially, the focus was on the basic writing course, worth no credit at that time.

The no credit course was abolished and replaced with a regular credit course called “Introduction to Academic Discourse.” According to the author, the elevated nature of the basic writing course led to a need to reconsider the regular general education requirement, English 50.

The rest of the story is at times funny, at other times scary, and in every way interesting. The first attempt to assess English 50 failed pretty miserably. Despite a large sample of student portfolios, experienced writing teachers as readers, and an agreed upon set of criteria, “they could not agree on just about everything” (Palumbo-DeSimone). The lack of context was problematic—too many variables to account for, no sense of the assignments they were actually reading, and no way to know where the assignment was in the overall course sequence. One lesson, among many, was that the committee found that they weren’t sure what they were really trying to assess. The second go around was much better, with a smaller sample, course syllabi, and the language from Temple’s fy-comp handbook. The results showed more consistency and also seemed to show that students were coming away with important writing skills (though reflection and revision were somewhat lacking.). Unfortunately, the first-year writing director then asked if anyone could be sure students actually learned those thing in English 50 and not prior. The third time (the charm, it seems) got closer to identifying actual progress.

Like other areas of research identified to this point, there is an existing (and substantial) body of work related to program administration, roughly 30 years of the Writing Program Administrator’s journal alone. The program I studied faced many of the

administrative issues I've identified here.²² The initiative to make change within the department sometimes came from within, but as the next chapter will elaborate, internal pressure was largely unsuccessful. Change was more likely to happen, or at least be openly discussed, when the initiative came from another source (such as a Dean or Provost).

How do We Change a Curriculum and Will it Really Matter if We Do?

In sum, the curriculum reform effort represents much more than a new policy. In a sense, it represents an instance of convergence. There are numerous administrative concerns, concerns about the growth and stability of Composition (and Rhetoric) within the department, concerns about basic writing and basic writers, and concerns about what type(s) of literate persons the university is claiming to "produce." Specific to basic writing and basic writers, it also encompasses debates about access, social justice, and legitimizing the work of many teaching professionals. It is about uncovering class differences across many levels. I am entering this debate, in part, because of my own difficult experiences as a first-generation, working-class college student. I have *been* the basic writer and the academic outsider. Now, as a doctoral student with experience teaching first-year writing, I have implicated myself in a strange, potentially hostile system. I have a responsibility to conduct research that might work to make this system better. Or, at the very least, help educators, administrators, and other students better understand where and *why* the system often goes wrong. Armed with such knowledge,

²² Here, it would be more accurate to say that the program I studied is still working through the process of change. Even as I write this footnote, members of the department are working toward a new pilot course for first-year writing and the department is in the process of large scale assessment.

maybe it is possible to make change. However, as Richard Miller explains (or perhaps warns):

By juxtaposing plans for reform with evidence of what a given reform looked like when implemented, my aim is to throw into high relief the dynamic interplay that exists between intellectual desires and bureaucratic realities, as all utopian aspirations encounter inescapable, historically produced material constraints. (21)

Reality is truly inescapable. For one thing, I had hoped to study a pilot course, but the process was delayed and then delayed again. I was, however, able to learn about the history of first-year writing at this university and trace the results various attempts at changing the curriculum. The attempts at change proved interesting, to say the least, and explained a lot about why the pilot course continued to sit in limbo. Bureaucracy and inner-departmental strife emerged again and again. In the closing chapter, there will be some comparison of the attempts at change against actual changes. However, it will be nearly impossible to do more than speculate as the program is still in a state of flux. There have been noteworthy changes, but the long term effects may not be realized for many, many, years. Thus, it will be difficult to provide a set of fixed results, which would surely be a welcome addition.

Chapter Three

Defining Writing in an Inter-disciplinary Department

The Research Site: An Institutional Snapshot

The writing program I investigated is housed in an interdisciplinary department at a large land grant university. Employing approximately 4500 academic faculty and staff, the university offers more than 200 programs of study across 14 degree-granting colleges and an affiliated law college. It is the largest single-campus residence hall system in the country with 23 undergraduate halls, one graduate hall, and three apartment villages. The figures for fall 2006 list 45,520 total students, 35,821 undergraduate and 9,699 graduate and professional. 55 percent are women. The students come from all 83 counties in the state, all 50 states in the United States, and about 125 other countries

(<http://newsroom.msu.edu/snav/184/page.htm>). The Fall 2006 Registrar's report on race and ethnic make up indicates that the student body is 74.8 Caucasian, 7.9 percent African American, 5.3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, .9 percent Chicano, 2 percent Other Hispanic, and 0.8 percent American Indian/Alaskan Native

(http://www.reg.msu.edu/reportserver?/ROReports/UE-ComparisonEthnicOrigin&term_seq_id=1064).

The Freshman class profile shows a high school GPA of 3.4-3.8; SAT combined score of 1040-1270; and an ACT composite score of 22-27.

(<http://newsroom.msu.edu/snav/184/page.htm>) According to the office of admissions and scholarships, the numbers are slightly above the state average and well above the national average. The Freshman class dominates the first-year writing courses. Some students do

wait to take the course, especially International students who complete additional required language courses prior to Tier One; but, most students will take their first required writing course in the first year. In the fall 2006 semester, there were more than 7,000 “first time” undergraduate students admitted.

([http://www.reg.msu.edu/reportserver/?/RORreports/UE-](http://www.reg.msu.edu/reportserver/?/RORreports/UE-TrendCompStuEnr&term_seq_id=1064)

[TrendCompStuEnr&term_seq_id=1064](http://www.reg.msu.edu/reportserver/?/RORreports/UE-TrendCompStuEnr&term_seq_id=1064)). Briefly then, this college enrolls a significant number of above average undergraduate students, all of whom must take, at minimum, two writing courses to complete a degree program. As such, Tier One writing plays a critical role within the university structure. However, as this chapter will explain, exactly *what* that role should be, and how it should be realized, has been the subject of vigorous debate for many years.

Chapter Methodology

This chapter (like the whole project) is firmly rooted in qualitative research. In *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, author/editors Denzin and Lincoln provide both a definition and an historical overview of qualitative research in the human disciplines, noting key differences between quantitative and qualitative research: “Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin and Lincoln 13). Qualitative research is a departure from positivist notions of reality; it relies instead on point of view and multiple levels of interpretation. It is highly contextual and often includes the voices of the participants, instead of the just researcher. Qualitative research is one way scholars have worked to make a space for the

value of differing human experiences and differing (“other”) voices.²³ Qualitative research methods have become quite common when working with groups that are either under-represented or misrepresented in existing scholarship.

This chapter does not *directly* engage with any groups that could be called “othered” or even underrepresented, but there are underrepresented students in the university, many of whom end up taking the preparatory writing class. Thus, the Tier One curriculum *does* impact students that may be labeled “at risk.” Additionally, as mentioned in chapter two, some strands of research in Composition consider the notion that writing teachers are often marginalized, especially because of the reliance on adjuncts to teach lower-level writing courses. As such, class differences are still very much a concern in this study.

This particular chapter also relies heavily on description, point of view, and multiple interpretations. Additionally, the primary goal of this chapter is not in-depth analysis. An in-depth analysis of key departmental documents follows in the next chapter. Primarily through interviews and a collection of institutional documents (meeting minutes, memos, proposals, and reports from various committees) I have been able to trace the evolution of this department and its approach to Tier One writing over the span of nearly 30 years. The purpose of these data is to paint a picture of the department, to provide some historical context, and to introduce key issues in the attempts to change the writing curriculum.

The history of the department shows that establishing a curriculum with a clear *writing* focus (as compared to classes that require writing but emphasize other goals) has

²³ The idea that any research project, however well intentioned, is not without bias and in some way still shaped by the researcher is unrealistic. My understanding of qualitative studies, in the ideal, is that they strive to be fair and equitable, especially if the study involves groups that have been underrepresented, misrepresented, or harmed outright by academic work.

been a real struggle. The years prior to the 1990s were the hardest to learn about, primarily because there were fewer faculty members left to speak with. However, I was able to interview three faculty members who have been with the department for many years; one with more than 30, one with close to 20, and one with better than 15.²⁴ I then interviewed 2 comparatively new faculty members, one with approximately 7 years in the department and one with only 5. All of the participants were selected based on time in the department, involvement with one or more writing task forces, and the simple willingness to speak with me.

The three faculty members with the longest history here have very different educational backgrounds; each has a different type of degree (only one with any concentrated study in writing or writing pedagogy) and each came to the department under different circumstances. Thus, their responses reflect a lot of diversity, both about the department and about writing. The newer faculty members both have writing degrees from the same university and both joined the department within a few years of each other. As such, their responses show more commonalities, again with respect to the department and writing. However, they came to the department under different circumstances, have played different roles in their time here, and currently hold different positions.

Though this is an extremely small group of participants, the differences among them do provide a cross-section of the department. Still, because of the small number of interviews and the personal nature of experience, their stories and memories cannot provide an exact or even unbiased picture of the department then or now. For instance, the two participants with the longest history here have a specific kind of investment in the

²⁴ Additionally, I located two print sources that refer to the history of this department, one book chapter and one unpublished manuscript.

writing program and the department, one shaped by such long history. Additionally, at the time of the interviews, I was a Teaching Assistant in the department. My position as a student, worker, and researcher is extremely important, though no doubt complicated. In *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person*, Levinson, Foley, and Holland discuss the complications of field work generally, but also make pointed observations about the difficulty in studying schools. They suggest that schools have been understudied, with one possible reason being the challenges involved in gaining and maintaining access, especially for an outsider. In addition, "...sustained observations and interviews are needed to construct a compelling interpretation of the effects of schooling...[and]...the finished product of this research may very likely involve a critique of the very people who made the research possible" (Levinson, Foley and Holland 19). Thus, a quality study is very involved, requiring a significant amount of time and effort. Furthermore, the end result may or may not be favorable for the institution that allowed the study to take place.

Levinson, Foley, and Holland speak from an Anthropological position, which is very different from my background. However, the points are useful. I did have to anticipate many of the same issues and concerns. Access and sustained contact were not significant barriers, but there were challenges. As a third year doctoral student and Teaching Assistant, I was definitely an insider. My insider position could be viewed as an advantage, allowing me access not available just anyone. However, insider status has its own set of problems. I have my own experiences to contend with, my own beliefs about writing and teaching writing, and my own relationship with the university as a student and worker. Further, I have a very short history here (comparatively) and have only experienced the department through my particular disciplinary lens—Rhetoric and

Writing. Finally, I have not been involved in shaping the Tier One curriculum, though I did teach in Tier One. Thus, I am an outsider in terms of policies, procedures, and departmental events, even the ones that took place during my teaching and coursework. My position has shifted over time and may continue to shift. Currently, for example, I am no longer teaching, no longer taking graduate courses, and have significantly less involvement with all aspects of the department I studied.

Another concern comes from the data I have collected. It is possible that the participants, or even my department, would not want certain information available to a wider audience. It is also possible that my participants did not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences with me, even though they remain anonymous. As will become clearer later, curricular change has been a sensitive subject for some time. Even though I assured confidentiality, the responses I received could have been filtered for any number of reasons. Thus, I can only share here what my participants were willing to share with me, but I have done my best to accurately represent what I learned while maintaining participant confidentiality. To do that, though, I have had to limit (or eliminate completely) some lengthy quotations and instead, provide my own summaries.²⁵ Despite the potential limits, the interview data can still provide first-hand information about the nature of the writing curriculum, the department, attempts at change, and of the importance of institutional history—all information that supplements the written documents with first-hand accounts. In this chapter, the primary goal of the

²⁵ In the interview segments with direct quotes, this “...” indicates a pause, while this “[...]” indicates the omission of words and/or phrases.

data is to be descriptive, used to paint a picture of the department and to introduce key themes and tensions that will be further discussed in the following chapter.²⁶

First-Year Writing Here: What Counts and Who Says So?

Composition has struggled to legitimate itself at the institutional and especially the disciplinary level. And though Composition *has* become an established discipline, it has been a challenge getting there. The history at this institution shows no exception. The institutional configuration of first-year writing in this place creates an especially difficult climate for the growth and development of, ironically, a writing curriculum that specifically emphasizes writing and incorporates elements of the now well-developed field of Composition.²⁷ In fact, the department responsible for teaching the majority of the first-year writing courses has resisted creating a new writing curriculum in many ways.

At this university, first-year writing is known as Tier One. A Tier One writing course is worth 4-credits and meets the university's general education writing requirement. Currently, the majority of students will take their Tier One writing requirement through the Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures (WRAC) department, which is part of the College of Arts and Letters.²⁸ Within Tier One, students can choose

²⁶ Documents (especially proposals and reports) emerge as extremely important vehicles in the quest for change (or the resistance to it, as the case may be). Documents will be a key point of discussion in the next chapter.

²⁷ Composition *and* Rhetoric is perhaps a more accurate way to describe the areas of research that have come to influence the department and the curriculum. It is worth making the distinction because sometimes Composition and Rhetoric are wedded in one program and sometimes they are not. Here, for example, there is no composition program at all. There is a Professional Writing Undergraduate major and a graduate program in Rhetoric and Writing. However, the growth of composition as a discipline provides important foundational work.

²⁸ Residential colleges within the university offer a tier one writing course; however WRAC serves the largest number of students.

from a range of themed courses (numbered 110-150), such as Women in America, Men in America, and the Evolution of American Thought.²⁹ Currently, there are 8 themed courses and one honors course. According to the WRAC mission statement:

The overall goal of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures is to prepare students for the kinds of writing they will be called upon to produce in the university and in their personal, professional, and civic lives. In all its courses, the Department views writing as key to students' intellectual development and as inherently linked to other aspects of communication.

(http://www.msu.edu/unit/wrac/wrac_mission.html)

Mission statements are an important part of identity formation for institutions of all kinds. They provide information to the public, to employees, and in this case, to students and even faculty. Mission statements also provide a kind of "persona," a glimpse into the culture of a place. While somewhat generic, the WRAC mission highlights specific goals and implies a set of beliefs about what writing is and what it should do. The current Tier One main page provides this additional information about the nature of the courses:

In our courses, students receive instruction and practice in drafting, revising and completing papers of various lengths, based upon sources that challenge them to seek new information and to reflect upon its relevance to their own observations and experiences. Necessarily, our courses are

²⁹ There is also Tier II requirement. Tier II is not part of this study, although the addition of the Tier II requirement did impact Tier I. I address this later in the chapter.

reading courses as much as they are writing courses, and these two activities tend to permeate each other. Ultimately, they are courses in critical thinking as students learn to question and connect, to analyze and synthesize. (http://www.msu.edu/unit/wrac/t1/t1_index.html)

Similar to the WRAC mission statement, the information provided about Tier One courses provides a window into beliefs about the purpose of writing and implies something about how writing will be taught—with instruction and practice in drafting and revising, for example. Here though, the importance of reading and critical thinking are more clearly emphasized. Based on the two descriptions, Tier One courses are very comprehensive, covering a range of directed writing activities while also fostering critical thinking skills, reading skills, and improved communication overall. In some ways, this description reads like a “catch all” course, one that addresses all kinds of important skills. It could easily be called a service course given its description.

The university also offers a course called “Preparation for College Writing” (PCW). There is significantly less information available for this course; the WRAC web site states only that students can be placed into the course and must complete it before taking a regular Tier One course. Students are placed based on a combination of standardized test scores and/or other admissions criteria.³⁰ From my own teaching experience and my interactions with other Teaching Assistants, the students in PCW are fairly consistent with the research on Basic Writing. PCW students are more likely to be students of color, first-generation students, and/or students from lower socioeconomic

³⁰ For example, students admitted into programs run through the Office of Supportive Services are likely to be placed into both the preparatory writing and math courses.

brackets. They are more likely to be admitted into the university through a variety of supportive services programs. However, this university also has a large international student population, which can be seen in PCW, too. Students enrolled in PCW must pass with a minimum grade of 2.0 on a 4.0 scale to move into the regular Tier One courses.³¹ PCW is a 3 credit course, which counts toward a student's GPA and total university course work, but does not meet general education requirements.³²

In the Fall 2006 semester, WRAC offered a total of 121 sections of the 110-150 course and 15 sections of PCW. If the courses maintained their capacity—27 for the general education course and 24 for PCW—then 3,627 students took a writing course in the fall semester alone.³³ Additional sections of both courses are also offered in the Spring semester, though not as many. Even if the courses ran at less than full, a significant number of students are impacted by the Tier One curriculum. Based on enrollment figures alone, Tier One is an important component in the university structure.

With its two semester sequence, the institutional structure here is not uncommon, though colleges and universities certainly differ in approaches to first-year writing. And, for a Composition professional at least, the language found in both the mission statement and Tier One main page should not seem unusual. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA), The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and

³¹ Students who receive better than a 1.0, but less than 2.0 must enroll in a “writing tutorial” the following semester. The writing tutorial is not offered through the WRAC department.

³² Students are able to count the course toward their overall number of credits completed. However, the course does not meet the writing requirement for graduation. It is also an oddly configured class. Students must enroll in an additional “lab” section, which meets for 1 hour and 50 minutes on top of the regular three credit lecture hours. Students do not receive course credit for the lab even though it is required. With the regular class meetings and the additional lab, PCW actually requires more contact hours than the regular Tier One courses, but is worth one credit less. Thus, the PCW class exhibits some of the same issues that have long plagued Basic Writing.

³³ These figures are estimates based on the number of sections listed in the Fall schedule of courses, available online.

Conference of College Composition and Communication, all well recognized and (generally) respected within Composition, provide outcomes and position statements on writing that support the WRAC department's language. WRAC seems to represent the latest thinking in Composition.

However, the current language is extremely significant, in part because of the unique make up of the department. Unlike many universities, there is no Composition program, no writing program administrator (WPA) and no *regular* first-year writing committee to help monitor and evaluate Tier One.³⁴ There have been numerous committees and task forces over the years, but nothing permanent or even ongoing. There is no *consistent* attention to Tier One, and so, no sustained opportunity for evolution. WRAC is also unique in its faculty make up. The WRAC department is comprised of faculty members with varying degrees, including American Studies, American History, Literature, English, and more recently, a growing number of faculty with writing and/or rhetoric based degrees. Within WRAC, there is a Professional Writing undergraduate major and an American Studies major, both of which were approved within the last 5 years. In the College of Arts and Letters, there is a graduate program in Rhetoric and Writing, which was (not coincidentally) approved at approximately the same time as the new undergraduate writing program.

Thus, within the department, some faculty members have specific training in writing and teaching writing and some do not. However, all faculty members in WRAC, regardless of background and degrees, have taught Tier One writing. For many, teaching Tier One is part of their regular teaching duties. For others, Tier One may be their

³⁴ As of this writing, there was no WPA in place. However, the department has since hired a faculty member who serves as a writing program administrator, along with other duties.

primary or *only* teaching assignment. Teaching assistants (TAs), who also teach Tier One courses in WRAC, have varying degrees of experience and training in writing and teaching writing, as well. Some TAs are affiliated with the English Department, some with American Studies, and some with the Rhetoric and Writing graduate program, among other possibilities. There are also different TA coordinators, one for the Rhetoric and Writing TAs, and another for TAs getting other degrees. Even the TA coordinators have varying degrees of training and experience with writing instruction. As such, the responsibility for Tier One writing, including all matters of assessment, and the training and mentoring of teachers old and new, is spread among the TA coordinators and the department chair, with the department chair being the primary authority.

The institutional configuration and departmental make up creates a unique environment, but also creates numerous points of contention, especially where the writing curriculum is concerned. Because so many different people with different backgrounds (and experiences) teach writing, it is difficult to argue for specific best practices, especially when many faculty members in WRAC have been teaching writing for years. Furthermore, because the responsibility for Tier One is dispersed in the way it is, there is virtually no way to know what is really happening in these courses and no way to determine if there is any consistency in what students are learning. And despite the ever-growing body of scholarship in Composition (and Rhetoric) along with the presence of more faculty with specific training in writing, the department has retained a remarkably unchanged focus and structure since the 1970s.³⁵

³⁵ One major change in structure did happen in the early 1990s, a switch from a quarter system to a semester system. The switch from quarters to semesters will be discussed in this chapter. It is worth noting here that the change in sequencing did not appear to have a significant impact on course goals and objectives.

Growing Pains and a Curious Graduate Student

When I started the Rhetoric and Writing doctoral program in 2004 (in just the second cohort), the WRAC department was obviously in flux. Primarily through my experience as a teaching assistant, I recognized very different pedagogical and curricular approaches among both the TAs and the TA coordinators.³⁶ From my perspective (and memory), the meetings were often tense and marked by disagreement. Disagreement can spark generative conversations, but that was seldom the case. Initially, I attributed the tension I felt, and often witnessed in TA meetings, to departmental growing pains. I knew the department had recently changed names and revised its mission statement, going from American Thought and Language to WRAC, and adding numerous elaborations about Tier One writing. I also knew that the department had recently hired several new faculty members with writing and rhetoric degrees (how else could I be in the newly formed graduate program?). I imagined that the new faces in the department, the name change, and new mission statement were creating an exciting but complex moment in the life of the department. I learned that I was right and wrong.

Over the years, there have been numerous changes (and attempted changes) in the department, some very specific to the curriculum and some only loosely related. However, all attempts at change have met with some type of resistance, ranging from mild to downright nasty. What I experienced was nothing new and is best seen as the result of events set in motion many, many years prior. The next section will elaborate on

³⁶ In my first year as a TA, all TAs met together for various types of professional development and mentoring. Currently, TA training is split into groups. TAs in the Rhetoric and Writing program work with one coordinator and TAs in other programs work with a different coordinator. At the time of this writing, the two groups did not meet together regularly.

the history of the department, identify key points of contention, and provide added contextual information about the stakes involved in changing the curriculum.

Living with Ghosts: A Brief History of American Thought and Language.

Prior to 2003, the WRAC department was called American Thought and Language (ATL). Investigating the history of ATL helps to illuminate some of the tensions that still exist in WRAC. As mentioned previously, one of the unique aspects of the Tier One writing curriculum was the presence of “themed” courses. The courses required intensive writing, but, as described above, the majority of the content was based on (or in) American Culture. The book *Courses for Change in Writing: A Selection from the NEH/Iowa Institute* includes a chapter by Henry Silverman, a past chair of the ATL department. Though the book was published in 1984, the content actually dates back to 1979, the first year of the NEH institute, making it one of the older pieces of data in this study. Silverman’s chapter focuses on a year-long sequence for developmental writers called “The American Dream,” an obvious nod toward the expected content. But a footnote provides an even better description of the overall culture of ATL at that time.³⁷

According to Silverman’s footnote, the ATL department has quite a long history with the college, dating back to just after World War II. At one time, the department functioned as “Written and Spoken English,” then as “Communication Skills,” and then sometime near 1960, as “American Thought and Language.”³⁸ Silverman notes that the historical context is important because it highlights the role of content in the writing

³⁷ It is worth mentioning that one of the things Silverman advocated was more balance between *writing* and reading. The dynamic between writing and other content has been an ongoing issue.

³⁸ It is not clear from the footnote if “Written and Spoken English” and “Communication Skills” are departmental names or descriptions of departmental emphasis. Based on the capitalization and mention of ATL, however, it seems reasonable to assume that these were past names.

program (something which continues to be debated). I quote him at length here because he identifies some of the ideals that continue to surface in the department, some of which also create tensions:

The Department took on, in 1960, not only the responsibility of teaching [university] freshman how to write but also the task of teaching them about their American heritage...Reading literary, social and historical documents, mainly primary sources out of the American past, would help students improve their understanding of what it is to be an American and at the same time would help students improve their ability to write and understand American language. (67, footnote.)

As the next section will show, the ATL department has remained extremely attached to this mission and carries with it, even now, many similar goals and ideals—not without a struggle, however. The remainder of this chapter will explore the “life” of this department, as best as could be determined, and attempt to reveal some of the reasons for the continued attachment to the mission statement and elaborate on some of the areas that continue to create tension.

Behind the ATL Mission: Negotiating Writing in an Interdisciplinary Department

Mission statements and other types of documentation are important because they provide physical records that can be studied. However, there is always an underlying story and what *isn't* in the physical records can be even more important. Until 1980, MSU had University College (UC). UC had 4 departments; all 4 taught required general

education courses and nothing else. All departments taught 3 courses each quarter over 3 quarters. According to one interview, the faculty in all 4 departments had a lot of camaraderie based on a shared mission of providing the first 2 years of undergraduate education. However, because they had such a large teaching load, they did not have the same expectations for publishing as their colleagues in the other colleges, and they did not teach upper-level courses or graduate students, except for an occasional special arrangement. Then, when the UC was disbanded, ATL faculty had to hold on to the idea that first-year students were taught writing by PHD-bearing professors because that was the primary reason for being at the university. They also held tightly to the content of ATL courses because it gave their scholarship (which many of them were active in though it was not necessarily a demand) visibility and merit.

ATL survived the end of the UC and into to the early 1990s, the university was still using a 3 quarter system instead of two semesters. The teaching load for ATL faculty was still three courses (9 credits) per quarter across three quarters and it was still a heavier teaching load than required by other departments. All students still took three quarters of writing and still, *all* faculty members in ATL *only* taught writing courses.³⁹ The past teaching conditions are important to remember in the big picture because they also underlie some of the resistance to later attempts at changing curriculum. Given the history of ATL—a department devoted (or relegated depending upon the point of view) to teaching first-year writing with a core commitment to particular content—it is not surprising that some faculty members fought to retain certain elements. The other points

³⁹ I did not investigate the developmental writing approach during this time period as the focus of the chapter is on the overall culture of ATL.

of contention (which will be examined in more detail later) can be grouped into concerns about course content, faculty choice, and the overall mission of the department.

For instance, when I asked faculty members to describe the department prior to becoming WRAC, I learned that it was seen as innovative (and one participant said it continues to be innovative) for several reasons. Having a particular kind of course content was mentioned more than once. As one interviewee pointed out, "...you know probably in the early days it was more... they made a distinction between content and writing instruction in a way that people don't now, in the latest thinking. So their idea was...they felt that they were revolutionary in adding content to writing instruction..." (LA). Not only was the notion of adding content important, but the goal of using that kind of content was also important, as can be seen here: "the writing program was formed with the idea that you would have regular faculty members teaching the writing courses and that it would be a combination of teaching writing with a kind of civics lesson in American history and culture" (LA). Thus, the department really had a dual mission, teaching writing and teaching American history and Culture.⁴⁰

Choice was also mentioned as an important part of the department's history. Even though the core content revolved around American history and culture, the variety of courses gave students and faculty the chance to pursue things of interest to them. One faculty member said that the courses were a response to "student discontent with that kind of single math course and too much of the same thing going on in a large number of writing courses..." and that "...[the] variety of courses satisfied the students much better;

⁴⁰ Culture, as a concept that to be taught in schools, must be questioned. Given the history and timing surrounding ATL (when the department became ATL especially) this is perhaps not surprising. Over time, though, such an approach should beg for critique. Surprisingly, though, this did not emerge as an issue until after the year 2000.

they could gravitate toward their interests. It kept the faculty involved in the development of new courses.” (ND). With its themed courses and focus on American history and culture, the department either sought out or attracted faculty members with varying backgrounds, such as American History, American Studies, American Cultural Studies, and American Literature.⁴¹

Currently, the department retains many of the above ideals. As of this writing, the themed courses remain basically unchanged (at least in title) and the faculty members in the department continue to be extremely diverse in background, bringing with them various degrees—Literature, English, American Studies, and more.⁴² What is different, however, is the presence of more faculty members with degrees in writing, especially with training in multiple areas Composition and/or Rhetoric. Thus, the department has even more diversity among the Tier One courses. In looking at just a few recent syllabi for “The Evolution of American Thought,” (WRA 150) students could read and write about feminist thought, popular culture, body modification, rhetorical approaches to literature and more. Students could end up with a course resembling a literature course, but also end up in a course that more closely resembles a professional writing course, a web authoring course, or a creative writing course.

The PCW class is unlike the Tier One courses in that there is no prescribed theme and the students are placed there; they have no choice. Still, as with the themed courses, what happens in PCW is either determined by the individual instructor or in many cases the TA coordinator because PCW is taught almost exclusively by TAs. First-year TAs may teach from a common reader in their first semester, so the TA coordinator obviously

⁴¹ It is also likely that the faculty make-up is related to the time frame. In the later 1970s and early 1980s, writing degrees were available, but still less common.

⁴² There have been *some* curricular changes, which will be discussed in a later section.

shapes some of what happens in the course.⁴³ With two TA coordinators, though, PCW also reflects a range of topics and approaches, some very rhetorical in nature, some focused more on reading, and some appearing quite balanced between the two.

With the amount of difference among the all the Tier One courses, and the graduate students and faculty teaching them, it is no wonder that curriculum becomes a sensitive issue. Different degrees necessarily come with different beliefs about all kinds of things—teaching, writing, making knowledge, students, grading, and more. Thus, within the department, there is bound to be a wide range of beliefs about what can and should happen in a writing class. However, as the next section will show, the department has seemed especially resistant to change when change calls for emphasizing Composition and Rhetoric as an important foundation for Tier One courses.

Rethinking Writing and the Process of Change

“[...] I think one thing about our department that has always been really nice is that there's never been an imposition of one way to teach [...] I just think that's way too restrictive for the kind of intellect that we have in our department” (LA).

“:...[T]he tension between writing and content has existed in various ways all along, but with so many people not in writing it was sort of like voices crying in the wind” (JL).

“In order to do curricular changes, you have to prepare the ground for those curricular changes” (GJ)

⁴³ At one time, faculty members taught PCW, with only a small number of TAs.

Despite the persistence of the early ATL curriculum and the beliefs that came with it, Tier One has been reviewed and even revised at different times (but the ground has been tough, indeed). The departmental makeup has also shifted at different times. A flurry of activity began taking place in the late 1990s, and the year 2000 marks the beginning of an extended hiring period where several new faculty members, most with writing and/or rhetoric degrees, joined the department. The years from 2000 until the present also show a greater measure of success at creating conditions that support changes in the department and Tier One curriculum.⁴⁴ Still, as the opening quotes suggest, what it has meant to try and revise the writing curriculum has not been easy, especially during the years when there were very few faculty members with training in writing. Consider that in 1990, the department received four tenure track positions. Three were filled by existing temporary faculty with *some* background in writing, but not in Composition or Rhetoric. The fourth was an outside hire (the first in 10 years) and the first person to have something closer to what might be called a Composition background (an English degree with specific coursework in writing/writing pedagogy). According to one interview, of the 80 faculty members in the department at that time, only a handful had any background in writing at all. As such, the likelihood of changing the existing curriculum was small.

However, a major change did take place when the university switched from quarters to semesters. The change was initiated by the then Provost as a way to align the MSU calendar with other research universities in the state and remain competitive in recruiting new students. The proposal passed by just one vote. There was a writing task

⁴⁴ For instance, as of this writing, a pilot course for developmental writing is much closer to becoming a reality. The pilot course is the result of a significant amount of Task Force work.

force and subsequent task force report, which was approved in January of 1991. The two semester sequence began in 1992. The task force report, simply titled “Report of the Joint Committee on Writing Requirements” is an important historical moment because it establishes a structure that still exists today, one developmental writing course based on placement and one general education course.⁴⁵ Moreover, some of the language in this report can still be seen in the most recent mission statement. Critical thinking, reading, listening, and speaking are all mentioned as interrelated to writing, even in 1991. Also worth noting is that the report specifies that, while the content shall remain rooted in American culture, “In emphasis, these are writing courses, rather than content courses” (1991 Joint Committee report).

The effects on the department were substantial, though perhaps in unexpected ways. For instance, the switch to semesters was a major departmental-wide project, something that would affect everyone. As one faculty member told me, “When we switched over from quarters to semesters, the whole department, everybody, absolutely everybody from the department was working on curricular revisions because there was no way out of it” (LA). Given what I learned about the department’s history and resistance to reform, it is indeed significant to imagine everyone involved in a discussion about the writing curriculum.

⁴⁵ The report calls for each writing course to be worth 4 credits. Currently, the regular Tier One course is worth 4 credits, but the preparatory course is only worth 3, even though it actually requires more contact hours.

The task force also recommended adding the Tier II requirement and a writing center.⁴⁶ As described below, the addition of the writing center had a tremendous impact on the department, or some parts of it, anyway:

[T]he writing center was supposed to eventually evolve into a center for the study of writing [...] for people who talked about writing and knew about writing to have a conversation and an identity. To me, it was a life saver. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for that because it was a place for me to have colleagues talking about writing, which didn't exist before..." (JL).

Here too, simply having a conversation about writing was something worth pointing out. Later, in the same interview, the participant mentioned other changes that came with the writing center; saying it "...made an enormous change in how people thought and there was a lot of tension between the department and the writing center because people didn't know... it was like, you people who do writing over there..." (JL). Between the switch to semesters and the addition of the writing center, the writing curriculum had to take center stage, at least for a time. Apparently, it was great for some, but not all, a dynamic that has continued within the department.

Though the Writing Center and the extensive discussion about writing seem to overshadow it, there were some changes in the curriculum, too. Courses had to be condensed from three quarters to one semester, making things more compact. When all the courses had to be re-submitted to a curriculum committee, several were not

⁴⁶ In a later chapter, I will look more closely at several different reports on writing. The emphasis here is actually on the impact of the initiative, not the initiative itself.

recertified, which meant fewer themed courses. Still, the curriculum that emerged after the switch to semesters has remained almost unchanged. Additionally, the new system changed the requirements for basic writing students. Prior to the implementation of this report, the 3 quarter developmental writing sequence met the general education requirement. Everyone had to take a full year and as mentioned earlier, the developmental sequence attempted to balance the reading and writing load differently. In the new system, students identified as basic writers still take a full year. From an access and equality stance, this can be seen as a real loss because of the way the course is configured.

In sum, the 1991 report represents an important historical moment for the department for many reasons. The biggest impact of switching to semesters seems to be the level of departmental involvement required coupled with the fact that changes actually took place. In other instances throughout the department's history (as much of it as could gather), many changes have been proposed and haggled over, sometimes vehemently and at length, but were never approved. For instance, sometime in the 1990s, a departmental name change was being discussed. Trying to change the name at that time was described this way: "[...] it was such a disaster that nothing got changed" (JL). I will return to other attempted changes in a later section, including the name change, but I use the above example now as a way to show that the climate for change in this department has a history of difficulty, and the tension around what should happen in writing courses has been ongoing. The late 1990s showed greater possibilities for curricular change; however, like the major shift in 1991, it was not internally motivated. That is, the

department did not initiate change. Rather, the departmental activity in the later 1990s also began with another university initiative.

Rethinking Writing. Again.

In a series of documents I reviewed from 2002-2003 academic year (department memorandums, advisory council minutes, emails, and reports) I located a May 2002 memo to the ATL department, which included a draft of a new catalog description that would cover “the department’s expanded mission, commitments, and curricular emphases” (memo). Though the proposed description still recognizes the importance of reading historical and literary texts, it also reflects a much stronger stance on writing and especially on *rhetoric*, a term not used in previous descriptions. For instance, the new language indicates that, “...the Department focuses especially on the rhetorical and cultural contexts within which written discourse is produced and distributed, with special emphasis on digitally mediated writing...” (memo). The importance of rhetoric is then mentioned several more times in a series of elaborations and extensions. The presence of rhetoric and the mention of digitally mediated writing are important because these terms reflect disciplinary changes, the changing nature of the department, and especially the influence of more faculty members with training in those areas.

In the fall of 2002, a departmental email (summarizing an earlier Advisory council meeting) indicates that, after some editing and revision, the Advisory council was able to reach a consensus on the new mission statement. The same email mentions a move from a faculty member to change the department name to Writing, Rhetoric, and American Culture, to better represent the revised description and mission. According to

the email, there was "...general assent to the proposition..." A new catalogue description, a new mission statement, and a new name (Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures, vs. Culture) were all approved later that fall. In light of the information I received about the earlier failed attempt to change the name, I found the whole series of events fairly significant. When I asked specifically about the 2002 name change, I learned that the Provost had initiated a major project during the 1998-99 academic year. The charge from the Provost is not directly related to the name change, but it marks the beginning of an intense period in the department, which seems to have created the conditions that made change at least possible.

In the 1998-99 academic year, the dean of the College of Arts and Letters was charged by the then Provost with reviewing and revising writing in the university. There was another task force, which spent the entire academic year working on a new proposal to revise the writing requirement. One faculty member and member of the task force told me this about the task force report:⁴⁷

[T]his was... quite a wonderful document, actually... [W]hat we set out was a way of rethinking the writing requirement for the university, turning it into a one year requirement [...] a two course sequence, uh, kind of preserving the pieces, the traditional piece of ATL that was the content...It was actually a really nice compromise because the first semester was more like understanding university writing. (JL)

⁴⁷ It may not be surprising that this participant has a background in writing.

Like the 1991 report on writing, this proposal is significant. First, it is very comprehensive; it offers three possible sequences for students to complete the writing requirement, lists possible themed courses, explains placement and assessment, and even explains the role of writing within the larger university curriculum. Interestingly, this proposal is remarkably similar to the 2004 Writing Task Force Report, which will be discussed in another section.⁴⁸

The path of the 1999 proposal also deserves special attention because it so clearly emphasizes another major barrier to facilitating changes—bureaucracy. The task force worked for the 1998-99 academic year creating a proposal. Because the proposal was created by a task force, it went back to the dean (in June of 1999), but the dean sent it back to the department for further review. The department chair then sent it on to a curriculum committee and the curriculum committee decided that more proposals should be generated. So, for the next year (1999-2000), the department generated a slew of new proposals, none of which were actually approved.

Thus, the process that began in the 1998-99 year was still unresolved at the end of the second semester, in the year 2000. In August of 2000, the dean generated yet another proposal—this one without the department, and during the course one interview, I was told that the dean's proposal angered many people. The dean's proposal makes several suggestions, but one that stands out is the suggestion to create a Rhetoric and Composition emphasis in the English department and, subsequently, to move the responsibility for Tier One out of ATL and into the English Department (Dean's position paper). The position paper also specifies that the Rhetoric and Composition strand would

⁴⁸ The final 2004 task force report also includes recommendations for revising Tier II, but my focus remains on Tier One.

eventually develop upper-level courses, which could include professional writing and rhetorical theory (as examples) and even a graduate program. From piecing together emails and memos, it is clear that the proposal did come as a surprise.⁴⁹

A memo from the ATL department chair to all ATL faculty explains that, on August 7th, 2000, the dean called a meeting and presented the position paper. (8/23/2000 memo). It was not well received. In a memo to the department, dated the very next day (August 8), the chair indicates that he “had no prior knowledge of [the proposal] or [the dean’s] intentions of making it available to chairpersons or directors.” The memo to the department also includes a copy of an email from the chair back to the dean, expressing several concerns about the position paper, two of which are especially significant for this project.

The first issue of particular importance is the possible curricular effects of moving Tier One writing out of ATL. For instance, according to the chair, there were concerns about the use of adjuncts and teaching assistants, with some faculty (possibly) viewing it “...as a retreat from or lessening of a commitment to teaching composition, reading skills, and discussion skills...” Further, the move to English could be seen as “...the diminution of a flexible diverse approach (with an emphasis on cultural documents and texts) into a single approach of composition and rhetoric...” (8/23 memo from ND). As with other proposed changes, the ATL department strongly resists a departure from certain core values, such as the importance of *content*. In discussing this moment with

⁴⁹ I need to point out that a separate interview provided a different point of view about the significance of the Dean’s proposal. I was told the idea was never really taken seriously and it did not surface again. However, from my perspective and from what I learned in a later interview, it is worth mentioning. During another initiative, it was again possible that Tier One could be housed in another department, possibly English. I was told, though, that the English Department was not interested in taking on Tier One. So, whether by choice or not, Tier One remained in ATL.

one of my participants, it was also noted that the resistance was likely rooted in more than a changing curriculum. A move to another department would have raised serious questions about faculty lines and teaching assignments, among other things.

The other major issue here is entirely administrative. According to the same memo, because the dean's plan was so unexpected, the ATL department could read the new proposal as a "...breach of faith and as a unilateral move...." (memo from ND). The ATL department had been working on other proposals believing they would be seriously considered. The faculty expected to have until the end of the Fall 2000 semester to present a proposal. In response, the Dean agreed to more officially present her proposal and open up more discussion. The next position paper from the Dean was sent to the ATL department in November 2000, set to be discussed in December. The revised proposal from the dean states that she is "...recommending and preparing to move ahead on the following modified reorganization plan." Primarily, the plan involves redefining and expanding the mission of the Department of American Thought and Language (memo from Dean). The dean also provides a new title for the department, "The Department of Rhetoric and American Discourse," though she also indicates that the department will have ultimate say in choosing a new name.

Unlike the first position paper from the Dean, Tier One would not be housed completely within the English Department. Instead, the new "R&AD" department would not only keep its commitment to Tier One, but would also "take the lead" in developing a vertical writing program, which could include a writing certificate, a specialization, *and* a PhD program in Composition and Rhetoric. The Dean also recommended an interdepartmental Writing Board, made up of existing faculty members with specific

training in writing, *and* recommended an external search for a director of composition. Over time, the Writing Board would be responsible for overseeing Tier One course development. At this stage of Composition's disciplinary and institutional life, such an administrative structure would not be unusual—a writing program administrator and some type of permanent committee or group to help manage first-year writing. It is worth noting that the 1999 task force recommended some similar things, such as a writing specialization and more writing across students' academic experience (like a vertical curriculum). Recall also that the 1999 task force report was never approved or even able to move forward. But consistent with past attempts to initiate change, the Dean's revised position paper still received resistance, especially the idea of a lead department. The dean provided an alternative model in a follow-up memo dated Feb 2001, which did not include a lead department.

In sum, the 2000-2001 academic year was very busy and very tense for the ATL department. It is clear that there were many challenging issues surrounding Tier One writing, some of them primarily administrative and some of them curricular. But even though nothing had been resolved, the ATL department *was* at a major crossroads; events were set in motion. All of the difficulties with designing a new curriculum (past and present), finding a new department name, and the role of Tier One, would be heightened in the years to follow, as several new hires and *another* major university initiative began to once again put pressure on the department. The next section looks specifically at the years following 2001-2002, when another flurry of activity began to take place.

What's Really in a Name? We are WRAC

“It's unbelievable how much hinges on a name” (LA).

“[...] there were those of us for, you know, 11 years previous to that, had been trying to figure out how to make some changes... So it was the hiring of someone with a big name who had negotiated with the provost position and money that enabled us to do the thing we had been trying to do for awhile” (JL).

As mentioned above, the ATL department was in a state of flux going into the 2001-2002 academic year. With the Dean's position paper still lingering, and nothing yet resolved, two additional events finally pushed the department into new territory. In August 2001, just prior to the beginning of the academic year, a new faculty member was hired as an advisor to the dean. When I asked about the position in an interview, the new advisor to the dean told me, “The provost's office wanted some major revisions of Tier One [...] The plan at that point was to repurpose ATL into a comprehensive writing program with a strong American Studies and Cultural Rhetoric angle” (PJ). In the same interview, though, the new advisor to the dean also said, “the three big agenda items the first year were creating the graduate and undergraduate program, so the third big issue was hiring faculty.”⁵⁰ So, revising Tier One was only one part of a much larger plan, making the amount of change (and the stakes) much greater. In the Fall of 2001 then, there were two committees for writing, one undergraduate and one graduate. The writing committees were not the only ones that fall, however. Per the department chair, *everyone*

⁵⁰ There were 3 new hires that year.

in the department served on a committee, but the writing committees were first to present their proposals. By December, the undergraduate committee had finished a proposal for the writing major, with the first courses being approved in December 2001.

According to interviews, the apparent fast approval of an undergraduate writing major caused stress within the department, especially among faculty on other committees. It forced many long-time issues to the surface: questions about the home of Tier One, the role of writing in the department and the university, and the future lives of the faculty had to be negotiated.⁵¹ The undergraduate writing program actually preceded the graduate program in Rhetoric and Writing, but both were approved in the same academic year, 2001-2002. And once both programs were approved, there was no turning back, no way to remain ATL.

Then, (finally) in the year 2003, the ATL department managed a name change, in just one academic year. As mentioned previously, the department has not always been receptive to change, and the earlier attempt at a name change was a complete failure. So, I was surprised at how quickly a new name was approved. When I asked about the time frame, I was told that the faculty were very responsive to the need for a change, but that choosing a name was difficult. Though the name change is not directly (causally) related to the attempts at curricular or other departmental changes (past or present), they can be seen as connected. Recall that the name change was approved, by a large margin, at the same time as a new department mission statement, which more clearly emphasized

⁵¹ Recall that the idea of moving Tier One writing had surfaced previously. In interviewing the newer faculty members, the possibility was mentioned again. One participant told me that there was no reason why Tier One couldn't be taught through another department. It just happened to have a history with this particular department.

writing and also rhetoric. Whatever the other outcomes, the ability to change the name meant that there was finally enough writing faculty in the department to warrant it.

According to one interview, the new name was needed because “of the kind of faculty members we were hiring in tenure system positions [...] This certainly pushed the department or extended the department into areas rhetoric and writing, professional writing, electronic writing, uh that uh, we had never had anybody working before” (ND). The name needed to reflect the departmental make up. Another participant put it this way, “I think what sold it to the whole department was the fact that there were two majors” (PJ). Even with the large margin of agreement, though, the name change was still referred to as “a big political issue.” in part because of the department’s history in the college:

[...] we had managed to survive and continue as a department out the old university college, the four departments in the old university college, and all of those departments were disbanded and faculty ended up diffused into other, distributed-redistributed into other departments. We were the only department in the University College that managed to stay intact. So, therefore, I think that the name had a particular significance to them. And, I think also they were critical of this diffusion of the department, taking on new dimensions, taking on areas of professional writing, electronic writing, rhetoric and writing. I think there was some concern that the department had lost its center, so to speak. ND

Questions of curriculum, identity, and ownership (which are all intimately connected) continued to be a source of concern. The addition of new faculty and a new

major challenged (even necessitated) the department to evolve. In fact, the significance of the new hires was mentioned in each of the interviews I conducted. For example, the presence of the new writing program resulted in more (and different) teaching opportunities. As one participant put it, “[...] our sole duty was to teach writing for many years, and then, we’ve developed these more advanced courses and programs and so that’s really the big shift to WRAC.” (LA).⁵² And while the name change is actually more of a by-product of other developments, it is representative of other major shifts that had been unfolding for at least a couple of years prior.

Even though the name change was overwhelmingly approved, and the department seemed to be in agreement for once, the history of the department continued to create friction. And, the brief moment of consensus was not to last. There were simply too many changes already in motion. The new hires associated with the new programs, along with other faculty members, were already working toward another comprehensive vision statement: “[O]nce the graduate and undergraduate programs got approved, we turned right to this in 2003, the comprehensive vision of the writing program because we had the two necessary pieces in place” (PJ).⁵³ Then, Provost provided the ultimate opportunity with a university initiative called, “Realizing the Vision: The Future of Liberal Arts and Sciences at MSU.” The “Realizing the Vision” web site explains that:

As Michigan State University enters into both the 21st century and its sesquicentennial, it looks to enhance - and strengthen - its vision of the liberal arts and sciences at the land-grant university. Toward this goal, the MSU community has been engaged in a conversation about what

⁵² Writing here refers to Tier One writing.

⁵³ Recall that part of the goal in hiring new faculty was to improve Tier One. The advisor to the dean told me that the move to get the undergraduate and graduate programs approved first was strategic.

initiatives might best help bring such a vision to life.

(<http://realizingthevision.msu.edu/>)

Through my interviews, I learned that essentially, any person, academic department, or academic unit, could submit a proposal. As one participant put it, “[...] she invited, basically opened the door to individuals, groups, sub-groups, departments, programs [...] it seemed as if, that anything was possible...” (ND). The resulting proposal from a handful of faculty members in WRAC (who had been working on something already) was titled “A Strategic Vision for Strengthening the Writing Curriculum at MSU.” For numerous reasons, the Strategic Vision statement caused quite uproar in the department.

One major source of grievance was the way in which it was presented to the Provost. The Strategic Vision was not a departmental-wide statement, but the work of a handful of faculty members who had already been working toward a new statement. The department chair signed the document—not as a way of speaking for the whole department, but as a way of showing support as a faculty member—yet the signature was read as the former, as speaking for the department. Additionally, even though the Provost asked for proposals, some faculty members in WRAC were critical, believing the document should have gone through regular governance before being sent on. However, according to one co-author of the Strategic Vision, it was never meant to be official, merely a pre-proposal to generate conversation and put new ideas forward. Shortly after the proposal went to the Provost, though, a group of American Studies faculty (within WRAC) submitted their own proposal, requesting to become a stand alone department. The request was denied.

At this point, the WRAC department was in another moment of crisis. I was told that the Strategic Vision statement “really destabilized the department...” and that, “[the department] has been trying to recover from it ever since.” (ND). In asking about the impact of the Strategic Vision, and why it was met with such resistance, I learned that it *was* more than the administrative process. For example, I was told that some points of contention had to do with propriety control over first-year writing, even though most of the faculty no longer teach first-year writing on a regular basis: “[...] there's a stake, people feel that they are the major stake holders, uh, in the first year writing program. They are the ones who in fact taught first year writing, three sections, four sections, uh every semester.” (ND). Much like the attachment to the name American Thought and Language, the history of the department created a barrier to creating change.

One of the more recent hires and co-authors of the Strategic Vision told me that the negative reaction was more than that; it was a response to proposing “significant change in a short period of time” along with “structural changes in where writing was located.” (GJ). Furthermore, I learned that the Provost expressed interest in the Strategic Vision and asked for a more detailed plan, which was also submitted. Thus, the Strategic Vision could be said to be gaining momentum, something that seemed to cause additional anxiety.

As can be seen, things were not well in the department, especially early in the 2003-2004 academic year. Part of the departmental recovery process began in early 2004, when the Provost presented the *official* charge explaining the next steps of the Realizing the Vision project. Ultimately, the broad project included several different initiatives: college reorganization, graduate and research initiatives, and undergraduate initiatives.

Part of the undergraduate initiative was yet another writing task force, charged (once again!) with reviewing the current tier one model and suggesting areas of improvement.⁵⁴

Unlike the Strategic Vision proposal, the 2004 Writing Task Force was comprised of a more diverse group of faculty members, and was described as “a repair job on the division that had been created by the Strategic Vision document...” in part because the writing task force documents were distributed to everyone in the department and there were meetings and open discussions. According to one interview, there was even support for many of the recommendations (ND).

Not all agree about the reparative role of the 2004 report, though. Two co-authors of the Strategic Vision said openly that the Strategic Vision was really more like the first draft of what became the 2004 Task Force Report. Though the members of the task force were more diverse, the report did not necessarily represent compromise. In fact, one participant told me it was like a line in the sand, with people choosing sides.

Interestingly, the content of the 2004 report is remarkably like the 1998-99 task force report, recommending a two-sequence approach with one course focused more specifically on rhetorical approaches to writing and the other course focusing more on reading and content apart from writing.

Another important similarity is this: as of this writing, now almost three years later, it is difficult to gauge the effects of the various initiatives and reports. After the 2004 Task Force report, there was another follow-up report and the possibility of piloting a two-semester linked course in the near future. The hope of the pilot course is actually a huge step forward, but considering that a very similar model for Tier One has been circulating since 1999, it is a bit troubling. However, with the new hires and new writing

⁵⁴ The final task force report also includes recommendation for Tier II.

programs, there have been some significant changes. One of the newer faculty members told me this, “[I] think where there have been changes is how we professionalize graduate student teachers. Um, and I think there's been some significant cultural shifts in how the department understands um, what it takes to professionalize the teaching of writing.” In the same interview, professionalization and training opportunities related to the role of technology were also mentioned. So, though potentially hard to capture (and certainly hard to measure) the department has definitely evolved.⁵⁵

Summary: What is a Curriculum Anyway?

The path to becoming WRAC can be seen as an ongoing struggle to establish a Tier One writing curriculum that actually emphasizes writing and incorporates disciplinary developments in Composition and Rhetoric. The name change from ATL is representative of a major shift, and major gains, at least from a writing perspective. As should be obvious, it has been quite a challenge to reach this point. What becomes most noteworthy, though, is the nature of the challenges and the ways in which the department has tried to manage them. When discussing the evolution of the department, history, identity, and control are mentioned repeatedly. At times, it seems that the resistance is less focused on writing or writing pedagogy and more focused on who gets to make the rules.

And regardless of any curricular “best intentions,” the role of administrators and the function of various institutional documents are both crucial in all attempts at change. Without pressure from a Dean or Provost, without key university initiatives, would this

⁵⁵ The effects, or lack thereof, of various task force reports and other departmental activity will be addressed again in a closing chapter. For the purposes of this chapter, it is enough to recognize that the department has been struggling with Tier One for many, many years.

department have been able to move forward? To affect change here seems to require that the right kind of proposal happens at the right time and falls into the right hands. Without such kairotic help, it is possible to imagine that nothing would ever happen. This raises serious questions about how institutions really function and highlights the unfortunate reality that educational decisions might not have anything to do with the people they most go on to affect—students.

Chapter 4

Persistence and Resistance: the Discourse of a Changing Writing Program

By juxtaposing plans for reform with evidence of what a given reform looked like when implemented, my aim is to throw into high relief the dynamic interplay that exists between intellectual desires and bureaucratic realities, as all utopian aspirations encounter inescapable, historically produced material constraints. (Miller 21)

The previous chapter described the development of one particular writing program and introduced key issues and concerns surrounding the process of change. By now, it should be clear that a university writing program can be seen as an enormously complex institutional creation with many stakeholders. The program I studied may be even more complex because of its institutional history, unique faculty makeup, administrative structures, and the process of large scale change being initiated *outside* of the department. In fact, the most substantial changes have come when pressure from university administration has demanded it, not because the department, as a whole, has wanted it.⁵⁶ It is no wonder that change has been difficult here. This chapter continues analyzing the evolution of the American Thought and Language Department. Whereas chapter three provided context for key documents, and a kind of narrative history, this chapter will focus more specifically (and more critically) on documents associated with moments of pending change.

⁵⁶ This is not meant to be a blanket statement about the views of all faculty members in the department. As mentioned in earlier chapters, there have been various attempts at change from within the department; however, most failed.

Given the politics of literacy instruction broadly, the specifics of writing within the university, and the ways in which different groups are affected, it may seem strange (or even pointless) to look at something so abstract as a mission statement, report, or a set of goals and objectives. However, the documents I will analyze do much more than provide basic descriptions. The descriptions and recommendations in them, and the actions they make possible, try to make possible, and try to resist, are extremely important. By studying the language used in various documents, it is possible to see how different groups argued for particular (and often competing) visions of the writing program. It is possible to see the influence of external factors, such as existing and emerging scholarship on writing and writing programs and the influence university administration. It is also possible to see the influence of institutional history, personal beliefs, and long standing investments in the writing program.

Theoretical Orientation

This chapter will rely on a combination institutional critique, discourse theory, and critical theory. My use of the term institutional critique follows from the article, “Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change” (Porter, et.al). The authors were not satisfied with existing theories or methods for studying institutions; the empirical work lacked theoretical substance while the theoretically rich work was not practical. Institutional critique attempts to address both and importantly, it works from a point of trying to affect change, especially for those who may be overlooked and disadvantaged. Porter’s co-authored piece argues that institutions are rhetorical entities and as such, rhetoric can be used to change them. They explain, for example, how the

addition of the word “usability” into a product development manual for a software company can be seen as representing an important shift in making *users* (not just designers) an important part of the development process. The authors describe their methodology as an “unabashedly rhetorical practice mediating macro-level structures and micro-level actions rooted in a particular space and time” (612). My data analysis relies primarily on an adaptation of discourse theory (not rhetorical theory) but the goals of institutional critique very closely match my own.

The importance of space, for instance (literally and figuratively) adds an important layer: “[...] control of space is power; inclusion and placement on the institution’s web page, newsletters, and so on reflects institutional identity...” (620). Specific to my study, students identified as “basic writers” and often, those who meet with them as teachers, can be overlooked in larger institutional structures. And, the potential to create literal and metaphorical space for changing approaches to writing is an important part of the work of the institutional documents I collected. The need to work between macro-level structures and micro-level actions, along with the same attention to how things are written, fits perfectly within the goals of this project, too. Over the years, a variety of forces have been at work in creating (or attempting to create) change in the ATL (turned WRAC) department. Macro-level pressures, such as the larger university system and the continued growth of Composition and Rhetoric, have bumped up against the every day practices and beliefs (micro-level actions) that had been ingrained into the ATL mission for many, many, years. One of the places where these points of contention can be studied is in the series of reports and proposals that have circulated through the department. Though it would be possible to call this a rhetorical analysis, my approach

relies heavily on a particular view of discourse taken from the work of Norman Fairclough.

Fairclough's book, *Discourse and Social Change* lays out his then new method of language analysis, calling it an approach which will be "particularly useful for investigating changes in language, and will be usable in studies of social and cultural change" (1). Though he ultimately provides several methods of analysis, his theoretical foundation is most important to this study. The changes in the department I studied can certainly be viewed as cultural shifts, attempts to create a new culture of writing and potentially, a new culture within the department. In fact, some of the resistance to change can *best* be explained as resisting a cultural shift. Fairclough brings together a variety of existing work—in linguistic studies, language studies, and even social and political thought. His blending of social theory is very useful for my purposes; He refers to the work of Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens, among others. Necessarily, the notion of reproduction surfaces, which Fairclough defines as the "mechanisms through which societies sustain their social structures and social relations over time" (5).

The concept of reproduction is important to this study in several ways. On the largest scale, the educational system has been described by some researchers as a primary mechanism for social reproduction, both good and bad.⁵⁷ On a smaller scale, the ATL department went nearly 40 years with only one major change, the switch from quarters to semesters. And while the switch did impact the ATL curriculum in some ways, the biggest changes were actually structural. In every day practice, there are arguments as to whether or not first year writing (especially basic writing) does anything more than

⁵⁷ See Levinson, Foley, and Holland, for example. See also Bourdieu

reproduce an unequal structure for the students and faculty associated with it.⁵⁸ Though my analysis in this chapter will not directly address social reproduction arguments, it remains an important concept for the study as a whole (refer back to chapter one for additional explanation). And, as will be seen, several of the documents I analyze *do* attempt to retain (reproduce) certain aspects of the writing program I studied.

When attempting to discuss social systems and institutional structures, Michel Foucault deserves an additional mention for his work on the ways in which language can be used to structure knowledge and social practice. Language does more than simply describe. It is both a *product* of social practice and a *producer*. One of Foucault's many arguments is that through discourse, certain kinds of knowledge can become legitimated and then circulate as truth. When certain kinds of knowledge become legitimate, other kinds become discredited (*"Truth and Power"*). When considering the stakes of curricular reform, it will be necessary to consider the same relationship because the specialized knowledge available about writing and writing programs played a role in major reports and recommendations.

Fairclough acknowledges Foucault's strong influence on his work, but differentiates his approach in several ways. For instance, Fairclough examines a much larger pool of discourse—political discourse, classroom discourse, educational discourse, media discourse, among others, and includes spoken language in many of his examples. Fairclough then adds discourse production and interpretation, with a particular interest in "real time" examples.⁵⁹ Fairclough provides a way to see the "...relationship between texts, social practices, and social identities" (*CDA in Education*, 240). It is an

⁵⁸ See Sharon Crowley especially.

⁵⁹ In Fairclough's terms, texts can be spoken or written examples of discourse.

investigation into the relationship between discourse and social structure. Some researchers have since argued that a more thorough application of Fairclough's orders of discourse should include local, institutional, and societal contexts.⁶⁰ For example, in this study, a Writing Task Force report represents a departmental conversation about writing (local), a conversation about existing institutional arrangements and institutional pressures (institutional), and potentially reflects changing societal views of writing and literacy and even education broadly—all at the same time. The descriptions found in reports and other documents are an attempt to create, maintain, or change, a particular kind of structure, or structures..

Fairclough's thinking was not entirely new. He acknowledges earlier attempts to blend language studies with social theory (citing Halliday's critical linguistics and the work of Michel Pecheux, for example), but argues that they had only limited success. Similar to Porter et.al.'s argument, there lacked balance. Halliday was short on social theory while Pecheux lacked depth in actual language analysis. Further, he argues that, "Little attention has been paid to struggle and transformation in power relations and the role of language therein" (2). In this way, he says his approach adopts a "critical" stance, which "implies showing connections and causes which are hidden; it also implies intervention..." (9). The attention to struggle as it can be found in language, uncovering hidden causes, and the desire for intervention are all relevant to my analysis, as is the use of critical theory.

⁶⁰ See Rogers and Haley Woodside-Jeron in *An Introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis in Education*.

Broadly, critical theory is concerned with studying power relationships, with an important emphasis on how relationships are created and negotiated.⁶¹ Education and literacy researchers have adapted critical theory in various ways. Rebecca Rogers writes that, “Critical research rejects the overdeterministic view of social theory espoused by Marxists and instead argues for a dialectic between individual agency and structural determinism” (CDA in Education 3). What this view of critical research allows for is the study of tensions and moments of resistance within larger social and institutional frameworks. The ATL department had become, in a sense, a kind of institution within an institution. It was firmly established with a history and vision that remained unchanged for decades. Yet, the institution of ATL was challenged. Repeatedly, the institutional history and particular institutional structures of the writing program were most visible *when* they were challenged because the changed curriculum would change not just what counts as writing, but would also change long-standing institutional structures.

Another elaboration of critical theory can be found In *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*. Author Sandy Grande provides a more elaborated view of critical work:

Critical theorists extend critiques of the social, economic, and political barriers to social justice as well as advocate for the transformation of schools along the imperatives of democracy. In doing so, they position schools as “sites of struggle” where the broader relations of power, domination, and authority are played out. (6)

⁶¹ This particular notion of critical is usually attributed to the Frankfurt school of critical theory and the works of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Jurgen Habermas, and several others.

Grande's quote can serve as an important reminder that the stakes in the reform effort go beyond faculty members, administrators, and the particulars of one department. The reform effort is embedded in the larger educational system, which does not always meet its democratic ideals. Students will also be affected by departmental changes and students often have the least amount of input in the entire process.

Grande's hope for critical theory provides perhaps the most important reasons for doing this work—people, especially people who may be disadvantaged within or by a system. In this study, the notion of cultural production best applies to the experience and position of basic writers, perhaps the most vulnerable and overlooked group that stands to be effected by any changes in the writing program. Therefore, in my analysis of key documents, I will pay particular attention to any mention of basic writing or basic writers. However, there are many other stakeholders in this story. For instance, faculty members with backgrounds in writing were well outnumbered at one time and had little success in arguing for changes in the writing program. They had very little voice. At the same time, members of the department who had been there much longer, carrying a substantial teaching load, also felt a tremendous sense of ownership and personal investment in the writing program. As such, critical theory's goals of investigating power relationships, along with the hope for intervention, can be applied in multiple ways.

Applying Discourse Theory to a Changing Writing Program

Though education researchers have done much with CDA as it can be applied to spoken discourse, especially in classroom interactions, there are also examples of policy analysis. "Making Sense of Public Policy," Chapter 8 in *Critical Discourse Analysis in*

Education, for instance, provides additional examples for application purposes. Author Woodside-Jiron focuses on changes in reading policies that took place in California between 1995-1997, blending the work of Norman Fairclough and Basil Bernstein to explore “the use of CDA as a tool in the critical analysis of public policy...[to seek] a deeper understanding of how power operates in policy” (174). Through CDA, it is possible to draw attention to “texts, discourse practices, and social practice issues that are particularly relevant to thinking about the engineering of social change through language and practice” (176). In this case, mandated policies significantly influenced teaching and literacy learning (and necessarily for the better).

Blending the above theories and examples, it is possible to analyze various documents as windows into much larger struggles. And while Fairclough’s methods are well suited to doing a very detailed analysis of fewer examples, I will be adopting a thematic approach because it best suits this project.⁶² Key themes include definitions of writing, curricular statements (including content and pedagogy) and any mention of basic writing/writers, and working conditions.

Each of the coming examples is decidedly local, but each one represents the shifting landscape of a discipline, a department, a university, and changing beliefs about writing and literacy. And while concrete changes are obviously important (the addition of new classes, the loss of other classes, the emergence of a writing center), perceived changes are also important. In some ways, the perceived changes have been even more contentious. A change in language does not have to point to *specific* changes in practice to be meaningful. Recall the tensions surrounding the new departmental mission statement and subsequent name change from American Thought and Language to

⁶² See Fairclough’s chapter 8, “Doing Discourse Analysis” in *Discourse and Social Change*.

Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures (see chapter three). As mentioned in more than one interview, the name was significant because so much of the department's history and identity was linked to the name "American Thought and Language." Clearly, the way the department presented itself through its discourse was worth arguing over because a change in discourse could be seen a change in identity, in power relationships (and especially associated resources), and a change in values.

The documents I selected appear in chronological order. Each shows how the department has worked, over time, to try and create a first-year writing program that meets the needs of students, faculty, and the college. A critical reading using an adaptation of Fairclough's view of discourse will further illuminate how these documents are interwoven with different voices and sometimes very different hopes for the future of the department. They can be seen as the attempt to create a new (perhaps even dominant) discourse of writing in the department (as ATL and WRAC), or at least as attempting to integrate the ever emerging discourse of Composition and Rhetoric. They can also be seen as a site of struggle, where the dominance of ATL is challenged in various ways. Though there were many possible kinds of documents to choose from, I am focusing on three Task Force Reports and three proposals that came in response to one of the Task Force Reports. Below is a timeline and brief context for each section:

1. 1991 Report of the Joint Committee on Writing Requirements. This is the report that established a two semester sequence, which replaced three quarter. It also established a two tier approach to writing and recommended a writing center. Recall that at this time, there were very few people in the department with specific training in writing/teaching writing.

2. 1999 Writing Task Force Report. This was written when the dean of the College of Arts and Letters was charged by the then Provost with reviewing and revising writing in the university. It includes the recommendation for a return to a full year of writing in the first year of college. This report shows a much greater disciplinary voice.
3. Responses to 1999 Report. These three informal proposals that present very different alternatives to the 1999 report.
4. 2004 Task Force Report. This stems from a large university initiative and is one of several reports on undergraduate education. However, this report can also be linked to the Strategic Vision document, something that caused major upheaval in the department (see chapter three).

I have chosen the Task Force Reports because they can be seen as official, even if not acted upon, because they are the result of some specific request to generate findings and make recommendations. The proposals I selected were also solicited; they came in response to the 1999 Task Force Report. Though the proposals are not official in the same way as the Task Force Report, they are very illuminating, speaking to key recurring issues of work, related status issues, departmental identity, and the growing influence of specialized knowledge in writing studies.

The 1991 “Report of the Joint Committee on Writing Requirements.”

Though American Thought and Language had a substantial history prior to 1991, the 1991 writing report is a crucial document. As explained in the previous chapter, the

1991 report provided a new structure for Tier One writing that would be applied when the university switched from a quarter system to a semester system. It required major rethinking and restructuring for everyone in the department *and* impacted other departments as well. The decision to switch to semesters was a university decision, heavily influenced by other colleges, both in the choice to adopt a semester system and in some of the additional report recommendations. The changes were seen as an important way to stay competitive and to continue attracting new students. So, institutional factors and even larger societal trends actually created the exigency for the first major change in ATL for nearly 30 years.

Whatever the exigency, though, the switch created an opportunity for change. For instance, faculty with specific training in writing had a greater voice in the future of the department. It also provided the opportunity for *all* faculty members to argue for different working conditions. As such, the 1991 Report of the Joint Committee on Writing Requirements is one of several examples of how discourse has been used to create new structures within the ATL department. A review of this report will provide a backdrop and a measure of comparison for later reports; it will also identify points of contention that continued to surface years later and will provide specific examples of how the changing discourse in these documents can be read as representative of changes in the culture of writing in American Thought and Language. Because the structure established by this report remains so similar even today, I will devote more space to analyzing it.

The report begins with an overview of the committee make up, which included representatives from the University Curriculum Committee, the University Committee on Academic Policy, a smaller writing task force, two Provost appointed writing experts,

and two students. Along with the varied knowledge and experience of the committee, the report notes that they referred to the growing body of scholarship on writing program design. And, the report attempts to "...[keep] students needs foremost in mind..." while still being conscious of demands on faculty and university resources (1). The result is writing defined like this:

"Writing is a highly personalized and intricate art developed through student-instructor contact. It is an important component of a student's intellectual endeavor and, consequently, inextricably linked to critical thinking and other language processes such as reading, listening and speaking. Good writing is the product of instruction in writing at various stages in a student's academic experience and has value which goes beyond academic life to extend into professional and civic affairs" (1).

The outcomes indicate that students will "conceive, draft, revise" and complete papers of varying lengths (3). Students are expected to search for information from outside sources, use it correctly in their writing, and apply the rules of American English. The objectives, as listed, "are to increase students' abilities to organize information into coherent forms, state a clear and authentic point of view, direct argument to specific audiences and control the patterns and mechanics of written expression" (3). The report specifically states that, "Students will engage these tasks in the context of a coherently presented set of interdisciplinary materials on American Culture..." (3). The outcomes also continue to say though, "In emphasis, these are writing, rather than content courses..." (3). At first read, the above description does not differ significantly from the

original ATL course. The link to reading, listening, and speaking is consistent, as is the statement on a specific content.

However, there is some noteworthy language in the report and a more critical read finds evidence of a subtle, but important, shift. One especially significant statement is that good writing is the product of instruction in writing at various stages in a student's academic career. Recall that the department had (and still has) faculty members from a range of disciplines. Their training in teaching writing varied considerably. How to best teach writing is not easily agreed upon even among Composition professionals, so the idea that a particular kind of instruction would be necessary can be seen as evidence of disciplinary scholarship. The report includes references and citations in another section, too. Additionally, and this will come up again and again, the courses are described as *writing* courses, not content courses that include writing.

Though the specific language and use of referenced can and should be seen as significant, the curriculum remained largely unchanged. The move to semesters did create the need to condense the same basic approach into one semester, which presented challenges, but the goals, objectives, and content were not significantly different. According to one interview, the structural outcomes of the 1991 report were actually more significant than any curricular changes. For example, the report recommends replacing the full year sequence with a two tier approach, adding writing across the curriculum (called writing in the disciplines in the report). So, instead of 3 quarters of required *first-year* writing, most students would take one 4-credit course in the first year and then an upper level writing course in the student's major.

One of the noted concerns with moving to a semester system with only one required first-year course was that students would not receive enough instruction in writing. The return argument is that the addition of the Tier II class would really only reduce the total credits by 1, going from 9 to 8. Additionally (and well worth pointing out) the reduction in the number of courses needed in the first year would enable ATL faculty to teach just 2 sections. The ability to teach 2 courses would make more individualized instruction possible, which would benefit students. However, is not just significant to students. In the quarter system, ATL faculty taught 3 courses each quarter, a heavier load than faculty in other departments. The report also states, “Most important, the first year writing course [...] will no longer complete a student’s writing requirement” (2).⁶³ Thus, the two-tier approach would benefit faculty in two ways, by reducing their teaching load and by spreading the responsibility for teaching writing.

The reasoning for the upper level course as presented in the report actually comes from scholarship and a statement about writing expectations for MSU graduates: “...MSU graduates can expect to spend significant amounts of time producing and analyzing written documents. Thus, a complete education should include practice in the writing tasks, forms, and styles appropriate to the student’s discipline or professional field” (4). This argument is significant in many ways. Other departments certainly incorporated writing into their courses, but prior to this report, no other department was officially charged with or held accountable for teaching writing. The addition of a required upper level course (and the recommendations for additional writing in other courses) significantly broadened the responsibility of teaching writing and created new

⁶³ Additionally, it was recommended that courses in Integrative Studies add writing assignments as a supplement to course content.

opportunities for faculty in ATL, such as being involved with a writing center and writing laboratory, another key outcome. According to the report, the writing center would be established to assist faculty with incorporating writing into their courses and to aid students. It is noted that several other Big Ten schools had successfully established writing centers. The center would have a director and be staffed by faculty “writing experts” ⁶⁴(6). The switch to semesters opened the door to make this argument possible, creating a metaphorical space that led to a physical space.

While there is some evidence of new disciplinary influences, and the important addition of a place to more fully support writing pedagogy, the only mention of basic or preparatory writing is that it should exist in the form of a 4-credit class taken prior to taking the regular Tier One course. Students should be placed into it based on a variety of test scores. The report indicates that the university already had a placement model, based on a combination of ACT and SAT scores, a Reading Comprehension Test, and an Academic Orientation essay. At the time of the report, about 8% of new students were placed into a developmental writing program, “...where they receive the intensive instruction they need” (2). The information I was able to locate on the developmental writing program (not much) dates back to 1984, a chapter in the book *Courses for Change in Writing*.⁶⁵

According to the chapter, by Henry Silverman, the developmental courses had a reduced reading load and offered more time to focus on writing. The courses are described as process oriented and students attended a supplemental writing lab each week. The recommendation in the 1991 Report is that the university keeps a similar

⁶⁴ At this stage, the Writing Center and Lab are described separately, with the Lab being staffed by undergraduate and graduate students, who would work as tutors.

⁶⁵ This book is also referenced in chapter three.

system in place. At no point in the report is the Developmental Writing Program explained further; the curriculum is not mentioned, there are no outcomes given, and there is no explanation as to how it relates to the general education writing requirement. Further, no one thought to mention the fact that the new system could be seen as making greater class-like distinctions between incoming students. The omissions speaks volumes about the “importance” of developmental writing at this stage of the writing program’s evolution, especially since the semester model would affect the way students met the writing requirement.⁶⁶ Prior to developing the two tier model, all students took equal credits in writing with a small percentage doing so in the developmental writing program. Either “track” met the general education requirement.

In sum, this report represents a major moment in the life of the ATL department. First, it was approved and implemented. It created a structure for Tier One that hasn’t changed significantly from when it was introduced in 1992. It also called for more writing within the university, including the addition of Tier II requirement. The benefits of a comprehensive approach to writing were supported by references and it is reasonable to assume, reflective of input from the writing specialists. And while the curriculum remained incredibly similar (though condensed) working conditions were improved and writing faculty got a writing center.

The Year of the Proposal: ATLAS and Other Options for ATL

The next major moment that involved significant documentation came between the years of 1998-2000. Recall from chapter three that in the 1998-99 academic year, the

⁶⁶ Because Silverman’s chapter is nearly 10 years older than the 1991 report, it is difficult to know what remained the same and what may have changed at the time of this writing. However my point remains—not much attention is given to basic writing.

dean of the College of Arts and Letters was charged by the then Provost with reviewing and revising writing in the university. There was another task force, which spent the entire academic year working on a new proposal to revise the writing requirement and develop a full-year, first-year writing program. The final report was printed in June of 1999. The dean's original talking points, which are included at the beginning of the report, are significant and include, "multiple placement options [...] that would take into account the needs and levels of students, including non-native speakers of English" and "the possible content and approach of the two first-year writing courses," along with staffing concerns (2). The Task Force recommendations are foregrounded by a set of nine "working assumptions" (2). I am including language from four of the nine because they clearly represent significant shifts in thinking about writing (in general) and especially writing in American Thought and Language. The second working assumption is particularly rich, so I quote it in full:

A writing curriculum for the 21st century should prepare students for the challenges of living and working in an age of accelerating and proliferating information, through digital literacy and computer skills, while at the same time providing them with a critical awareness of their own culture in a global context, the abilities needed to express themselves in varied writing tasks and situations, and critical reading and thinking skills." (2)

The inclusion of global contexts, digital literacy, and computer skills provides clear evidence of shifting definitions of writing and more than likely, reflects the make up

of this particular task force. At the time of the 1991 Report, there were very few members of ATL with backgrounds in writing and no writing center. On this task force, though, one member (still a faculty member in WRAC) has a degree emphasizing rhetorical theory and according to biographical information, has a strong interest and background in technology, particularly online technologies. The possible influence of the task force make up can be seen in other working assumptions, too. Two of the seven members of the task force were affiliated with the writing center and point four states that “Conversations about writing practices, goals, and outcomes must be encouraged and stimulated at all levels...” and that “Sites and venues have to be created, nurtured, and maintained...” (4). Though no particular statement stands out as representative, it is still worth noting that a fourth member of the task force lists language and literacy instruction as two core research interests. Unlike the report in 1991, this report much more clearly represents a strong writing focus and does so in many ways.

Working assumption six, for instance, also speaks to particular faculty members, saying that, “Faculty who are devoted to the core writing instruction and who develop and enhance the writing curriculum have to be recognized and rewarded for their work and commitment...” (3). Recommendations include merit pay and advancement in rank, along with recognizing research into teaching as significant scholarly work. Here, we can see the ever present debate about the position of writing faculty in universities. Point seven, on the other hand, strives to maintain balance and states that any new curriculum must “take fully into account the current ATL course curriculum as well as the varied pedagogy and writing instruction practices of the department’s composition faculty...” and that “The ATL faculty should have full opportunity to propose

alternatives...”(3). Clearly, the ongoing struggle to maintain the core mission and values of ATL, while trying to move toward a stronger writing foundation, remains.

To some degree, the actual proposal is less noteworthy than the talking points and working assumptions that support it, however there are some key statements that point to the ever growing presence and voice of writing faculty. For example, the courses are meant to be “...process oriented and revision based...” and should encourage “active learning and problem solving strategies...” (4). Terms such as “process oriented” and “revision” are common in writing scholarship and can be read here as an example of a very specific discourse on writing. Additionally, the report states that “...students not only need time to practice their writing strategies but need the support of a community of readers and writers.” (4). And in a closing paragraph, the report claims that the writing courses outlined “give students opportunities to develop a wide range of invention, editing, and proofreading strategies...” (4). Though the importance of acknowledging the ATL curriculum is mentioned early on in the working assumptions, it is not specifically mentioned in this part of the report. Instead, in the overview and beyond, there is strong evidence of specific scholarship on writing and teaching writing; more specialized discourse.

To be fair, many of the suggestions are also in response to MSU’s Guiding Principles (mentioned at different times in the report), but the descriptions of *how* the courses should meet those guidelines are noteworthy.⁶⁷ For instance, in the proposed course description for Writing 101, “Understanding College Writing,” instructors will be encouraged to use draft workshops, free-writing, written reflections, and inkshedding,

⁶⁷ The guiding principles are important in that they provide some exigency for reviewing and revising the writing program.

among other activities. This is clear evidence of specific disciplinary influences, along with the make up of the task force. It is the talk of professionals who study writing and the teaching of writing. The course goals and outcomes also show evidence of specific voices (in the department and in a discipline) by using the terms rhetorical situation and rhetorical conventions, plus reiterating the importance of things like drafting, writer's workshops, and revision. In this course, students would be expected to write in different forms and to different audiences using a variety of evidence (including cited sources).

Also worth mentioning is the absence of specific kinds of content. The description outlines what the course should do, and how, but says simply that instructors should "select course materials that help students to see topics and issues from a variety of perspectives" (6). It is very clearly a writing course with very clear information about can be expected for teachers and students. The description of Writing 102, "Writing as Inquiry" is more concise, which may be because the courses share the same basic goals and objectives: "Those goals introduced in Writing 101 will be revisited and extended in Writing 102" (7). The course description indicates that writing will be used as a means of inquiry into a particular subject or field, though not to show mastery of a body of knowledge. It is very much like the single ATL class that came out of the 1991 report, a writing class built around a theme.

Thus, to this point, the most significant changes from the 1991 report can be seen in the description of Writing 101. A critical examination shows how adding Writing 101 to the first-year sequence would give writing faculty a greater voice and greater influence within the department and even across the college.⁶⁸ The class is clearly defined

⁶⁸ The report also addresses writing in IAH (Integrative Arts and Humanities) courses and Tier II. Since neither are new creations at the time of this point, I am not devoting much space to reviewing

by research and scholarship in writing. Since most students would be expected to take this course first, it could strongly influence how they approach writing in other courses. Additionally, since Writing 101 and 102 are linked, it would make it much easier to argue for certain curricular and pedagogical choices in Writing 102. Even with the presence of themes, Writing 102 would be expected to take on certain characteristics in an effort to meet the guidelines in the proposal.

The task force takes continues to take full advantage of the dean's charge to consider connections between students' writing experiences across the whole university by proposing several possible "additional opportunities" for undergraduates beyond Tier 1 and Tier II (13). The options listed include participation in writing groups (organized by the writing center), helping students prepare writing portfolios, increased availability of advanced writing courses, and most significantly, a certification program in writing. The first three suggestions can be read as student and university focused. The university seeks a more comprehensive and sustainable writing experience so that students will continue to reinforce and advance their writing skills throughout their academic careers. Students are given more opportunities and support to meet that goal. The addition of the writing certificate, though, works much more like Writing 101. According to the report, "This proposed Writing Specialization will provide opportunities for interested faculty, including ATL faculty, to participate in the instruction of writing at levels beyond the first-year writing program. Such a plan would help create a community of writers and teachers" (13). At the time of this report, there were few opportunities to teach writing above the 100 level and none through the ATL department. It was possible to teach a

recommendations. It is worth mentioning, though, that the report recommends that IAH courses provide some specific instruction in writing and the opportunity to give and receive feedback during drafting stages. This is similar to suggestions in the 1991 report, just more developed.

special topics writing course through another department, but even those were not upper-level writing courses (300 level or above). The writing certificate proposal includes several 300 and 400 level courses with multiple areas of emphasis, such as writing and technology and professional writing. The certificate proposal also includes an emphasis in Writing, Rhetoric, and Disciplinary Discourse. The nature of this emphasis would seem to point toward graduate study in Writing and Rhetoric, more evidence of the trend toward writing as a developed discipline.⁶⁹

Finally, the report calls for continuing support (with the possibility of increased support) for the writing center, and in a “Recommendations and Extensions” section, calls for even more structural changes. For example, writing courses should be limited to 15-20 students per section and computer labs should be established “specifically for the needs of first-year writing courses and subsequent writing courses, with those labs exclusively reserved...” (16). As with gaining a writing center, the possibility of more physical space to support writing would be extremely significant. At first read, the approval of this report would seem to benefit all concerned. The themed courses, a hallmark of ATL, would continue. All students and faculty would benefit from reduced class sizes. Faculty with training and interest in writing would have increased opportunities to work in their subject areas, including teaching upper level courses. The writing center would continue and possibly expand its services. According to the report, the basic writing program would also enhanced by being modeled after successful “stretch” programs in other colleges. Because the proposed model would complete Writing 101 and 102 (just over an extended period of time) basic writing students would

⁶⁹Later, the proposal mentions specific support for graduate teaching assistants for composition and rhetoric training. This too supports the notion that a graduate program was on the horizon.

receive the same instruction. Thus, while there is not a specific section on basic writing, there is a continuity and level of awareness not visible in the 1991 report.

Things are never as simple as they first appear. This report shows a clear direction and makes it obvious that there is a strong interest in creating a first-year writing program reflective of knowledge in writing studies. While that would seem to make sense, it could be seen as infringing on the lives of other faculty members, especially faculty with a history in ATL. Prior to this report, there was not much “official” documentation about *how* to teach a writing class, and though this proposal does not say writing courses can only be taught in certain ways, there are more visible expectations. Additionally, the report shows that there is a real desire to teach advanced courses in writing, up to and including a writing certificate program. To support a new certificate would take additional resources and administrative support.

Unlike the 1991 report, though, the 1999 Task Force Report was never approved and nothing close was implemented for several years. Recall from chapter 3 that the 1999 Task Force Report first went back to the dean, who then sent it back to the department for further review. From there, it went to the curriculum committee and it was determined that more proposals should be generated. So, during the 1999-2000 academic year many more proposals were written.⁷⁰ Though none of the additional proposals were approved either, a review of their content will more clearly show points of contention surrounding the future of Tier One. The opportunity for so many faculty

⁷⁰ Recall from chapter three that in the year 2001 a new faculty member was hired to help build a graduate program in writing, an undergraduate writing program, and to address Tier One writing. In an interview, I was told that the conversations about the need to revise Tier One had been taking place for about 8 months prior to the hire date. Knowing this, it is difficult to imagine that either the Task Force Report or subsequent proposals were going to have much impact unless they aligned with what the university was hoping for. At the same time, it is clear that some type of change was going to take place.

members (some not in ATL) to present their hopes for a writing program demonstrates the wide range of beliefs and concerns that existed. In fact, analyzing these competing versions for Tier One makes the stakes in the reform process even more obvious.

The Task Force Report works to create particular spaces, opportunities, and structures, many of which respond to the growth of Composition and Rhetoric—at this university and elsewhere. It does so in many ways, but one way is through the use of certain kinds of discourse about writing, supporting writing, and teaching writing. Yet, the Task Force was a diverse group and multiple voices are threaded throughout. The proposals are a different story. I will not analyze the proposals with the same depth as the Task Force Reports because they serve a different function, both for the department and this project. I will focus only the parts of the proposals that speak to key issues already introduced, such as course content, pedagogical expectations, and faculty work life. Additionally, because there were seven proposals, I have chosen to mention only a few that show significant contrast from the Task Force Report.⁷¹ Their primary function is to highlight just how much contention really existed during this time period and to further demonstrate the significance of the Task Force Report. Though the Task Force Report cannot be considered neutral, it is subtle in its attempts to affect change. As will be seen, the proposals have no need of subtlety or balance.

Now Tell Me What You Really Think

Recall from the previous chapter that agreeing on the “best” direction for Tier One, and the department, was not a simple matter. The Task Force Report presented an “official” statement. The following proposals were generated in response to the initial

⁷¹ Two of the proposals are very similar and make only minor suggested changes.

1999 Task Force Report. The responses are illuminating! One proposal, for example, recommended integrating ATL with Integrative Arts and Humanities. Recall that IAH courses are content-based (looking at history, societies, and cultures, for example) but include substantial writing. The rationale for this move is that it would “Use faculty and graduate students to their fullest level of ability” because “Currently, graduate students in IAH either have no experience as teachers, or no experience with US course materials, or no experience in teaching writing or all or some of the above” (2)⁷². On the other hand, “The ATL faculty is both expert in the content area of IAH 201 and in teaching writing. Clearly they should teach the more advanced courses...” (2).⁷³ In the proposed model, graduate students would teach ATL courses consistent with those outlined in the Task Force Report and take a supporting course in general pedagogy.

Two things are particularly striking in this proposal, the negative connotations about first-year writing and the statement that ATL faculty are experts in teaching writing. Though it may have been true that most ATL faculty were better prepared to teach in IAH (probably true) because of their areas of specific training, the claim of expertise in *teaching writing* was likely based on experience. There is a distinction. Though ATL was home to first year writing in the College of Arts and Letters, many of the faculty members did not have a strong background in teaching writing, even at the time of this proposal. Certainly, many of them had years of experience to draw from, but such a statement does not take into account specific disciplinary knowledge found in Composition and Rhetoric. Moreover, it assumes that all ATL faculty would want to teach in IAH, when not **all** ATL faculty share the same background. And finally, while

⁷² Then and now, some graduate assistantships are available in IAH.

⁷³ In this proposal, IAH 201 would be third writing course, following ATL 101 and 102.

it is probably true that senior faculty deserve the opportunity to teach advanced courses and advanced students, this proposal strongly implies that teaching first-year writing is below them. Yet, it does not follow that graduate students are prepared to teach writing in ATL. In fact, graduate students with little or no experience in teaching writing risk doing more harm than good when teaching a first semester writing course.

This particular proposal exemplifies some of the arguments found in Composition literature, especially the argument that teaching writing is often viewed as a “lesser” job—by those who teach it, by departments and institutions that don’t fully support it, or some combination of the two (refer to Chapter 2 for a brief overview of issues in Composition). In this case, the same issues appear even more directly in another one of the proposals. This one indicates that two things must be addressed in rethinking first year writing, “...the perception that ATL faculty are “underemployed”, and “...a number of students who don’t appear adequately prepared after they pass their ATL class” (N and H 1). Before this, there is no *direct* mention of student performance as part of the exigency for a full year sequence. The 1999 Task Force Report reiterates the Dean’s statement that writing should be extended to enhance students’ learning and to better prepare them for professional life. Perhaps one can make a connection, but it is not the same as saying outright that students are not writing at an acceptable level when they complete their writing requirement.

Before this, there is no direct mention of faculty perceptions about their status, either. However, faculty life seems paramount here. The proposal goes on to say that, “...balancing against these perceptions is that fact that our faculty does not want to teach an added section per semester, in order to staff a full-year...” (Nover and H1). The

proposal offers a model that can address those concerns while “simultaneously helping to prevent our faculty from being relegated to a three section per semester teaching load” (n and h 1). The recommendation is to keep the current 4 credit courses (with themes) but with a new set of goals and objectives that would be in line with the Task Force Report. According to the proposal, doing so would answer the charge that they (in ATL) “don’t teach writing” (N and H 2). The report also leaves room for the possibility of 200 and 300 level courses. Though this proposal does not differ substantially from the Task Force Report in terms of preferred curriculum (it merely identifies a way to meet the goals of the Task Force in a more compact way) I include it here because there is little attempt to conceal or soften the concerns over working conditions, a constant undercurrent in nearly all the documentation.⁷⁴

A final example of the wide range of ideas about the possible future of Tier One is a proposal for a department called ATLAS, which would merge ATL with American Studies.⁷⁵ Like several others, the proposal is very short, just a page and ½. This proposal deviates even more than the others by saying almost nothing about the recommendations in Task Force Report. It doesn’t support, refute, extend or even address a full year option or provide any alternatives to a full year sequence. Nor does the proposal include specific curricular suggestions, though a reasonable inference can be made based on the merging of the two departments. In this model, the course content would not need to change and could probably be broadened.

⁷⁴ It is also worth noting that the authors of this particular proposal have a very long history in the department. It is not surprising that certain issues would surface.

⁷⁵ As mentioned previously, there were seven proposals in all. Those I have included demonstrate the tension (and contention) surrounding the possibility of adopting the recommendations in the Task Force Report. They also demonstrate a wide range of beliefs and values, both in and out of the ATL department.

The proposal does state, though, that “...we must look to our long-range future by attaining “verticality” (rising up out of the prone position?) and viability” (ATLAS 1). The addition of the parenthetical has to be noted. Without asking the writers directly, it is not possible to know the true intended meaning, but based on the numerous times working conditions and status have surfaced, it seems likely that this is another reference to the perceived position of ATL. According to this proposal, the merge with American Studies would provide two needed things, existing upper level courses (the verticality) and students, including graduate students. Additionally the merge, “...offers benefits to both: we maintain our department status (with control of its faculty lines, budget, quality of work environment, collegiality, etc.), they gain a large and competent AS faculty to staff their expanded programs” (ATLAS 1).⁷⁶ With the combined department, faculty “...would be encouraged and allowed to teach where our skills, experience and inclinations lead us...” (ATLAS 1). Thus, similar to other proposals, faculty concerns over the perceived consequences of approving the Task Force recommendations take center stage.

Whether by design or default (with the other alternative being two semesters for all students) several proposals do present alternatives for under-prepared students. For instance, one proposal suggests that students receiving a 1.0 or 1.5 in the 4 credit course take an additional 2 credit course the following semester. The same proposal also suggests the option of an online course that would be taken before the identified students begin the fall semester.⁷⁷ Another proposal suggests that students should not be placed

⁷⁶ This refers to the possibility of an expanded and revitalized undergraduate program in American Studies. It is mentioned briefly in this proposal, though not in others.

⁷⁷ The benchmark here is below 16 on the ACT. Interestingly, the possibility of such a course has continued to circulate.

into a separate course, but should take a two-hour lab as a supplement to the regular first semester course. Yet another option presented is similar to a stretch model, where identified students would have the same basic curriculum, but complete it over two semesters.⁷⁸

Despite some attention to students, though, students would not seem to be a primary concern in most of the proposals. Ultimately, the proposals best illustrate what people really think about the recommendations in the Task Force Report, what they really want to see, and maybe more importantly, what they definitely *don't* want. Recognition of new knowledge in writing studies, the growth and importance of technology, and concerns over pedagogical approaches are curiously absent from most of the proposals. Thus, while the Task Force Report incorporates much discourse on and about the changing nature of writing and writing programs, most of the proposals reflect the discourse of work, especially a kind of struggle over work and related status.

In the end, nothing about Tier One was *visibly* changed, despite a lot of time and effort. The 1999 Task Force Report and the response proposals that followed are still significant, though. The Task Force Report shows an evolving department and an evolving view of writing. There is greater attention to technology and also evidence of at least some hope for revising of the current placement model for basic writers. The responses show a combination of support and also resistance, especially where working conditions are concerned. Thus, even though the Report did not have an immediate impact on the department or Tier One writing, it is representative of past issues and a signal of things to come.

⁷⁸ This possibility continues to circulate, as well.

Though the department was still in flux, it wasn't until 2004 that another official report on writing emerged.⁷⁹ As with other Task Force Reports, this one is the result of another charge from administration and linked to a broader university initiative. As of this writing, now 2008, the 2004 Task Force Report remains the last official, comprehensive report specific to writing. Recall from Chapter three, though, that as part of a mass call for proposals, a handful of faculty members had written The Strategic Vision, a comprehensive vision statement for Tier One writing. It is no coincidence that one of the authors of the Strategic Vision was hired to help build a new writing program. The Provost was interested enough in the proposal that another (longer) version was resubmitted. In interviews, I was told that the Strategic Vision was very influential in the later Task Force Report.

Perhaps it is not surprising then that the 2004 Writing Task Force Report is the most comprehensive of the reports, more explicitly addressing student needs, faculty concerns, course content, pedagogical approaches, ongoing program assessment and writing within the university. It is remarkably similar to the 1999 report. For example, the 2004 report recommends courses that provide direct instruction in writing vs. writing intensive courses; it calls for more integration of technology, and it supports a similar two semester sequence for the first year while retaining the Tier II requirement. However, even where it echoes the 1999 report, it provides much more extensive recommendations and goes well beyond the earlier report in its scope.

⁷⁹ Recall from chapter three that the department was hardly stable during the time period between official reports. There was a lot of activity, new hires, a new name, and a writing major, among other things. In 2005, there was also a "working group," charged with evaluating the 3 major reports that came from Realizing the Vision, another university-wide initiative.

In general, the importance of writing is far more developed. The following paragraph comes near the end of the “Principles, Findings, Recommendations” section of the report and provides a kind of summary of the impact writing can have:

Writing is an important means of acquiring and exploring knowledge, even of creating it. Through the process of reflection, engagement, and inquiry that the act of writing requires, students develop knowledge. The writing process itself requires that the writer engage with communities, cultures, disciplines, audiences—and this interaction between subject, audience and writer itself shapes the nature of knowledge and brings knowledge into action. The process of writing itself helps test, refine, and apply ideas in the world.” (2004 Report 10-11)

This statement on writing integrates disciplinary knowledge (e.g. writing process, reflection, inquiry) while situating writing in disciplines, cultures and communities, not unlike the 1999 Report. It then extends far beyond earlier versions, though, by clearly stating the link between writing and knowledge and the power of writing to lead to action. Interestingly, it is not unlike the argument I use as the basis for analyzing the various documents in this chapter. With this view of writing, students have tremendous expectations, to “...be critical and ethical users and producers of writing, aware of the ways that information in its various forms can heal or hurt, educate or mislead, unify or divide” (2004 Report 9). Here too, the *power* of writing is more explicitly stated and the stakes in literacy instruction are more evident, both for what students might be asked write and what might be written about and for them.

Another greatly expanded area is the role of changing technologies. In this report "...it is important that the curriculum promote an expanded notion of writing as including web-based authoring, electronic publishing (in a variety of forms and genres), graphics, audio, video, and the digital media arts in general" (2004 Report 3). The 1999 Report also argued for the inclusion of more technology (and one of the response proposals even more so) but this report is much more specific. The inclusion of more technology has implications for students and faculty because "...students need to be competent, skilled, smart, and effective in producing (and interpreting) this new kind of writing in an array of cultural and public contexts" (2004 Report 9). The Report recommends writing classes that also include visual communication because technology has significantly changed what writing looks like (literally). Further, "Literacy educators must prepare teachers capable of teaching writing and other communication competencies within and for these new technologies" (2004 Report 9). This report echoes the 1999 Report by calling for encouragement and technological support for faculty to integrate technology. It also includes a recommendation for the development and support of wireless classrooms. Recognizing the link between technology and writing could begin conversations about the need for more computer classrooms, the need for more technology training for students and faculty and many other possibilities. Nothing is guaranteed, but official documentation creates a space for negotiation.

Finally, this report is also far more attentive to changing student populations and potentially at-risk students. In the initial, brief overview, the report recommends "...more specialized courses and additional support services for students who need additional help with writing and language development—in particular, students whose

primary language is not English and students from disadvantaged economic or academic backgrounds” (2004 4). This is the first direct mention of the importance of personal background. Later, in its guiding principles, the report elaborates by including “two interrelated imperatives: (a) to offer the best possible literacy instruction to students from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds; and (b) to fully incorporate excluded discourses of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and disability that enables diverse voices to find legitimate courses of public action” (2004 Report 17). It also recommends a new placement model for students enrolling in Tier One courses. The new process would allow for self-placement, giving students more individual agency, especially students who might be automatically placed in the universities preparatory writing course.

Conclusions

This chapter has analyzed a series of Task Force Reports and response proposals that document one department’s attempts to revise its first-year writing requirement and make additional recommendations about writing in the larger university. Using discourse theory (primarily from the work of Norman Fairclough) and institutional critique (Porter, etl al.), the reports, in particular, can be seen as a reflection of already changing realities about writing. Using specialized knowledge of writing (not available in the early life of the department) the documents show an attempt to create a new, somewhat standardized discourse about writing. The emergence and growth of writing in and for digital environments is especially prominent in later reports.

The influence of disciplinary growth does more than provide new language, though. It also provides a reason to develop new structures, such as specific writing

classrooms with access to computers and the Internet, more support for teacher training so that new technologies can be used effectively, various kinds of recognition for specializing in writing as a faculty member, the need for upper-level courses, including a specialization, *and* the need to better support a variety of students⁸⁰ The documents also capture an attempt to protect certain existing structures, such as the content of writing and pedagogical freedom. Much of this struggle is found in the discourse of work and working conditions. For many years, ATL faculty had great freedom, the ability to teach themed courses that appealed to them or fit within their research and the ability to teach using a variety of pedagogical approaches.

Despite concern about content, there is a high level of persistence where certain issues are concerned. For example, there is a very similar view of writing and teaching writing in each of the three large Task Force Reports. Each report shows expansions and elaborations, but at the core, there is a noticeable commitment to developing a writing curriculum that is grounded in writing studies. Starting with the 1991 Report, there is a persistent call to make writing of greater concern (and shared responsibility) within the university. Each report makes some type of recommendation to encourage and support more writing in various disciplines and departments.

Unfortunately, attention to basic writing is limited and sometimes non-existent. At a time when the entire writing curriculum was under review, why not try to put the best possible structures in place? This is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the various attempts to revise Tier One. The 1999 and 2004 reports are much improved from the 1991 report and maybe this is to be expected. In 1991, there were far fewer faculty

⁸⁰ None of the documents I analyzed referred to the graduate program in Rhetoric and Writing, though that is obviously a significant addition to the overall writing program because faculty in Rhetoric and Writing teach in Tier One, as do graduate students in that program.

with writing backgrounds. However, compared with other strides—the attention to technology, the obvious inclusion of specialized discourse about writing, and the eventual addition of an undergraduate and graduate major—basic writing barely makes the conversation. It does surface, but remains *very* underdeveloped. Only the 2004 Report gets at some of the deeper issues involved with basic writing and makes recommendations that attempt to find a more equitable solution.

In sum, the documents in this chapter capture a struggle. A careful analysis demonstrates how discourse has been a key part of that struggle. Whether literally creating something new, such as a writing center, or working more indirectly, the language found in the reports and proposals highlight the many issues and challenges related to change, real, perceived, or pending. Only time and additional study can reveal the impact these documents have had.

Chapter Five

The Implications of Writing Program Reform in one University

Study Summary

This ends, for now, the study of one institution's challenges, over many years, in (re)creating and sustaining a first-year writing program. The guiding question was this: What is at stake and for whom in the process of revising the writing program? The combination of normal institutional bureaucracy, the particular departmental history, and the broader social and political implications for writing programs made for complicated answers, so each chapter has addressed a slightly different aspect. Given the scope of this project, I will briefly review the chapters and some of the key issues and concerns that drove my research interests and formed the foundation for the study. Then, I will provide a summary of key findings and discuss implications for further research.

Chapter one began quite broadly by looking at notions of literacy and the role of schooling as powerful social system. To be considered literate, one must demonstrate certain characteristics. Writing (and reading) are often at the top of the list. "Good" writing, in particular, is deeply connected to notions of literacy. As such, the concept of literacy provided a good starting point. The concept of literacy raises many difficult questions. What does it really mean to be literate? Who decides? Can there be a blanket definition of literacy? Should there be? Literacy is a very complex idea, almost meaningless without a specific context. Literacy expectations are not universal and often, the expectations are established by institutions, such as schools. In schools (and elsewhere) the same groups of people, often those from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds and/or racial and cultural minority groups are identified as lacking some type of expected literacy skill. As such, it can be argued that literacy is a concept that has been used to consistently place certain groups at a disadvantage, or prevent those groups from having equal access to any number of resources.

From there, each chapter narrowed in focus. Chapter two examined writing within the context of higher education, briefly introducing specific disciplinary concerns, such as how writing developed as a distinct field, its relationship (or not) to English, and its larger purpose. This early growth of Composition is important background information because the department I studied has been responsible for teaching writing since long before Composition emerged as something distinctive. Some of the challenges presented in this chapter can be seen in the history of the department I studied. Chapter two also introduced key institutional concerns that seem to plague Composition, such as the status of the discipline, the status of writing teachers, the often related working conditions, and issues in program development.

Somewhat dispersed between chapters one and two is a deep concern for something called basic writing. Basic writing encompasses not just issues related to literacy and writing studies; it reaches into social and political issues, too. With its connection to the class status of students and teachers, its particular connection to at-risk and minority students, and its questionable role in higher education, the very existence of basic writing raises troubling questions for individual educators and larger institutions. Why do the same groups of students turn up in basic writing classes? How should schools address the needs of these particular students? What makes some writing “basic?” Who should decide? In colleges especially, there are significant issues to consider because

basic writing has been championed and challenged. Does it really help students or does it merely reinforce an already unequal social relationship? Is its real purpose just to add credits (and so add revenue) or is it to give students additional time and support to develop necessary academic writing skills? Like questions about literacy, questions about basic writing must not be forgotten when considering the implications of a writing program.

Through interviews and a variety of institutional documents, such as mission statements and statements about goals and objectives, chapter three then provided a chronology of one department's writing program over several decades, emphasizing points of contention that surfaced each time the writing program (or the entire department) was faced with the possibility of change. Finally, using a combination of discourse theory and institutional critique, chapter four analyzed a smaller set of key documents related to changing the writing program. The various attempts at curricular and departmental reform I studied (only some of which succeeded) can be read in multiple ways. On the one hand, they can be seen as entirely local, motivated by specific university and departmental events. However, those same efforts can also be seen as representing much larger concerns within the discipline of Composition (and Rhetoric in this case), broader discussions of literacy and literacy instruction, and even issues about the educational system. This project also makes a case for the use of discourse theory in institutional research. Documents are an important part of institutional identity and they can be very revealing when read critically.

The primary limitation in this study is that it does not capture the student experience and it does not *directly* address some of the key concerns that initially drove

the project, such as the impact of class background and other identity markers have on the educational experience. Still, the realization that the educational system and especially writing seemed *designed* to place certain groups at a disadvantage (and possibly keep them there) should not be overlooked. Those issues remain very important and I attempted to address them in other ways, especially in my analysis of key documents, but I urge readers to keep in mind my original motivations. All too often, those who most need a voice don't get one.

It's Only a Matter of Time: History, Bureaucracy, and Tenacity

"... you know the institution is massive, you can't get it moving in any direction" (LA).

The evolution of the American Thought and Language department as I have been able to trace it is a testament to the power of institutional history and time. For ATL and eventually WRAC, it took many, many, years and a numerous departmental and university initiatives to create visible (or even subtle) changes in the writing program and surrounding structures. Some of the changes were welcome, some were not, some were hardly recognizable and some were very substantial. None of them came easily. There had been various attempts to change one or more things in the department, but most of them failed. As the opening quote suggests, it takes *time* to change things in institutions, for many reasons. The normal pace of institutional movement was not the only difficulty here. The long institutional history of ATL was also a major factor. After conducting this study, it became clear that there had been tension in the writing department for quite

some time. It came to the surface whenever the writing program came under review, or when other changes were possible in the department. Many areas of resistance emerged, but there was great unease related to real *and* perceived changes to certain fundamental aspects, such as the department's mission, the ATL curriculum, and any potential change in pedagogical approaches.⁸¹

The roots of this resistance can also be attributed to time. In 1958 (prior to there being an ATL department) the new department head of Written and Spoken English declared that there would be a new "communication skills" course (a required course for all freshman). The course would emphasize writing, but the subject matter would be American documents. Interestingly, the new course caused such an uproar that many faculty members left the department. In 1961, the course name was officially changed to "American Thought and Language" (ATL). Though the new course was quite different from the communication skills course it replaced, it was still *the* required writing, reading, and speaking course for all first year students. The course changed and adapted to different student and university needs (as changing times dictated), including adding a developmental track, broadening the reading list and doing away with an exit exam. However, the overall mission and distinctive emphasis on American content remained—and it remained a requirement for all incoming students.⁸² Then, ATL went on to survive the disbanding of the University College (its original home) and became housed in the College of Arts and Letters, where it continued to serve the same basic purpose.

⁸¹ "Change" can be a muddy concept. The department I studied was in flux much more often than can be documented and even when there were marked changes, like the move from quarters to semesters, it is difficult to assess the real impact. This study emphasizes moments that were documented, mostly through various reports and memos, because the paper trail provides materials that can be studied. Additionally, many of the materials have an official quality about them since many were in response to official university business.

⁸² The university's registrar has online archives dating back to 1970. ATL course descriptions can be found there. (<http://www.reg.msu.edu/UCC/DescYearIndex.asp>)

Thus, from roughly 1958 to 1991, ATL was itself an institution, the primary department responsible for teaching writing to the majority of incoming students, first in its original home in the University College and later in the College of Arts and Letters. It was also a department with a larger than average teaching load, with ATL faculty teaching 3 classes per quarter instead of 2, which was typical of other departments. In 1991, when the university declared the whole system needed to be reviewed and restructured, it was the first major structural change in decades. Every course had to be re-written and reapproved and the three course sequence, which had been in place for more than 30 years, had to be adjusted. With the curriculum and nearly everything else about the writing program under review, there was a lot at stake for everyone.

Based on the 1991 Task Force Report and interviews, the stakes for faculty members seemed to revolve around work (research interests, degree background, and an opportunity to teach beyond first-year writing) and working conditions (primarily teaching load but also related status issues). For faculty with the longest history in the department, it was an opportunity to possibly get a reduced teaching load and work in other areas of interest. The report recommended that the standard assignment be no more than 2 sections a semester, which would “free up resources” and allow some faculty to work in other areas. The reduction in teaching load would also potentially reduce the need to use contingent faculty (by reducing overall sections offered) and help ensure that tenured professors continued to teach first-year writing (1991 Report). Recall that one of the hallmarks of the writing program was the commitment to having tenured professors teach, and for the majority of the department, teaching the first-year sequence had been a career.

For a smaller number of faculty members, the stakes were high in additional ways. Internally, by 1991, the ATL department had at least some faculty members with training in writing. Externally, Composition Studies had been growing steadily and there existed a significant amount of research on writing and writing instruction. The 1991 Task Force Report showed evidence of both internal and external influences, referencing Composition research, making recommendations for supporting pedagogical practices, and recommending a writing center, which would support students and faculty but would also facilitate more research on writing. The 1991 report demonstrates the hope and desire to implement new practices and new ideas.

What about the stakes for students? *Perhaps* arguably, the stakes would have been even higher for students who would be entering the new writing program. One concern listed in the report was that students would not receive enough writing instruction in just one semester, but the addition of a second tier course and the recommendation for more writing in other courses was supposed to offset that concern. Officially, students would receive 8 credits in writing instruction (4 credits for Tier One and another 4 credit course in a discipline), which is down only one credit from the quarter sequence. Plus, the addition of a writing center would offer another avenue for student support. And, for students receiving a grade of less than a 2.0 in the first semester course, a two credit supplemental course would be required. Though the 2 credit course could be seen as marking or penalizing students, it presented a response to larger concerns and could potentially give students more time and support to continue developing their writing.

To this point, it seems as though students and faculty would experience benefits in the new model. Yet one impacted group remained significantly under the radar. There is

very little attention given to the needs of basic writing students. There is the recommendation for a developmental course that would be a prerequisite for students (based on placement tests) but only one paragraph in the entire report explains anything further. There is no mention of the expected curriculum, no mention of who would teach the course, and no mention of the fact that this model created a greater distinction between developmental and non-developmental students. In the quarter system, all students took the same number of credits and either track—developmental or not—met the university writing requirement. In the new system, only some students would incur the cost of an extra course, one that would only count for general elective credit.

From this perspective, faculty members fared better than at least some students. The addition of a writing center was seen as a major gain. The addition of a Tier II course spread responsibility for teaching writing and created an opportunity to make writing a university concern, not just an ATL concern. Yet, what did all of this amount to in practice? On paper, there was evidence of a greater awareness of research on writing, but the newly written goals and objectives still retained some of the same language found in much older descriptions and many of the same classes were re-approved (though not all). In interviews, I was told that the ATL curriculum remained remarkably similar and that the biggest change was in having to condense the courses. It isn't clear what if any impact developments in Composition had in everyday practice. One conclusion then is that the history of ATL had greater influence than new faculty members and/or new developments in Composition Studies, at least in this case.

However, from 1991 forward, the same issues continued to circulate at the department level and at the university level. For instance, at the department level, there

was an attempt to change the department name in the mid-1990s, but the attempt failed—miserably, according to an interview. In some ways, the failed attempt is especially revealing if seen a marker of the department’s “readiness” to move in a new direction (it wasn’t). However, a series of university initiatives, which resulted in several Task Force Reports on writing, did show evidence of the desire for new approaches and ways of thinking. Each report contains more comprehensive course descriptions and more specific recommendations for pedagogical approaches, institutional structures, and even content, in some cases. It is worth noting that the goals and objectives were not a primary source of disagreement. A bigger concern was with *how* the goals and objectives would be met—with what materials and pedagogical approaches, for example.

In sum, this department has been negotiating what it means to sustain a writing program since 1958, even longer if I include the class that pre-dates ATL. A persistent theme emerged from 1991 to the present—a call for writing classes that more clearly incorporated best practices and emerging knowledge of writing studies, along with a strong resistance to all things that might threaten foundational elements of ATL, even after the department changed names and became WRAC. What then can be said for all of these efforts? The results are somewhat difficult to gauge.

There have been several obvious and tangible changes. The addition of a Writing Center obvious, of course, but there has been many other significant changes. The use and availability of technology has grown, for example, with one classroom being devoted to technology rich courses (such as Web Authoring). Instructors have the option of a laptop computer cart and can reserve computer classrooms for all or some of the courses they teach. While the option of using a lab is not new, the process for getting a

reservation has been streamlined by being able to make requests through one person, well in advance. There is a technology workshop offered each summer to support faculty and graduate student instructors who wish to incorporate more technology into their professional lives. There are also brownbag seminars offered throughout the year. The Professional Writing undergraduate major is flourishing and has reached capacity. There is now a Director of Tier One Writing and a newly approved set of shared goals and objectives.⁸³ While these changes cannot be directly linked to a single report or proposal, the paper trail makes it obvious that the department was going in a particular direction and slowly but surely, it has succeeded in developing new statements and structures to support new goals and objectives.

What about intangible changes? Many things can be tracked—increased computer usage by instructors, student enrollment in the Professional Writing program, faculty attendance at technology workshops—but it is much harder to identify changes in beliefs and day to day practices. One of the hallmarks of the ATL department was a belief in the role writing should play in the education of university students. That belief was supported by a commitment to certain kinds of content, a commitment that remained visible in official documentation. There was also a belief, whether official or not, that one should be able to teach writing in a variety of ways. Both elements of ATL were potentially threatened when the writing program came under review and despite succeeding in changing the language (and in creating new structures) a content-based course remains a centerpiece of Tier One. And while the Task Force reports show a greater attention to writing pedagogy over time, it is nearly impossible to evaluate the day

⁸³ Interesting, they are very similar to those found in the 1999 and 2004 reports, meaning it took nearly 10 years to get them approved. Importantly, the goals apply to the developmental course and the regular Tier One course.

to day practices of an entire department. Thus, it is very hard, even impossible, to tell if there has been a significant shift in thinking within the department. As noted in chapter three, though, the professionalization of graduate teaching assistants has undergone significant changes. By extension, it is likely that there have been changes in thinking and in practices. Still, such intangible qualities can only be measured over time, perhaps the subject of another major research project or internal assessment.

Another area of consideration is actually outside of the department. Though the writing department in this university is growing and developing, however slowly, outside of the department, perceptions of writing may still be very different. If writing was an isolated activity, it might not matter. Since writing occurs in other courses, including a second required upper-level writing course, it raises questions about the connection between what students experience in Tier One and the writing they will do in other courses. As the writing department continues to evolve, perhaps there will be greater opportunity to have conversations about writing across departments.

For professionals working in writing programs (regardless of department name or institutional location) this study should provide both strategies and pitfalls associated with change. It is important to understand what is at stake in proposing any type of structural change, especially if the department has a well developed history. This may well apply to building new programs, too, if another department (or part of another department) had responsibilities for teaching writing. It is also important to pay special attention to the language used in all manner of documentation as this is a primary vehicle for implementing things in most institutions. Finally, it is perhaps most important to hold on to patience and persistence in all things. It takes time to make change. If enough

faculty members had not been willing to persist, it is possible that the department I studied may have never moved forward.

The Discourse of a Discipline

While this is a localized example, it is also possible to see this study as a way to investigate broader disciplinary developments. Over time, the department slowly began to use the language of Composition and later, language that reflects a greater attention to Rhetorical Studies. Mission statements, Task Force Reports, and other opportunities to define the department show a consistent trend toward incorporating specific kinds of knowledge about writing. If not for the ongoing growth of Composition and Rhetoric, such language would not be available. The continued presence (and growth) of this specialized language is important because it can be read as an attempt to create a new, somewhat standardized discourse about writing—what writing is or should be, how it should be taught, and how it should be viewed in the larger context of a university education.

The presence of specialized language is also important because Composition has such a wide range of concerns, from working conditions to new areas of research and theory. Of the many things that could have been highlighted or argued for, certain things persisted and continued to evolve. For example, over time, more and more attention was given to the role of technology, first only in addendums, unofficial proposals, and wish list sections of reports. Later, an awareness of changing technologies emerged as a key component of the writing program. While this was likely a reflection of the faculty in the department, it also reflects the growth of certain areas connected to writing. Technical

Writing, Technical Communication, and Professional Writing are areas that have grown tremendously. Not only is it possible to find such emphasis areas within Composition and Rhetoric (or other writing programs), but there are numerous independent programs, as well. Plus, there are numerous professional journals and organizations that specialize in writing and technology.

Another area of emphasis worth noting is the attention given to non-native speakers of English and other students with cultural or personal backgrounds that could impact their writing. Though this only appears in the 2004 Task Force Report, it is extremely significant because it shows a tremendous shift in thinking about students and their writing. The understanding that students' backgrounds will shape their writing practices has been a part of Literacy and Basic Writing research for quite some time, but to see it recognized in official recommendations—for all of Tier One and not only the developmental course—is most impressive. It is more difficult to determine whether or not this is reflective of a true disciplinary shift or the influence of particular Task Force members, but it certainly bodes well.

However, where the growth of technology and greater cultural awareness can be seen as representing positive trends, the discourse of work found in the various reports and proposals would seem to indicate a lack of progress. The recommendations for reduced class sizes, more support and recognition for focusing on writing, and the number of statements that implied a lower status for Tier One teachers (whether real or perceived) clearly echoes concerns that have been in Composition Studies for years. The arguments are not without substance here, with fixed term faculty and graduate students now teaching the majority of Tier One sections (fixed term faculty teach the most). And

though fixed term faculty receive regular university benefits, including health care, fixed term positions offer less security and pay than tenure track positions and carry a larger teaching load.⁸⁴ As with the awareness of student background, it may be more difficult to apply the local situation to the larger discipline, but it should not be discounted. Even though employment practices have improved greatly, at least in some colleges and universities, it is not universal and the state of employment for writing teachers continues to surface in the literature.

Discourse, Power, and Possibility

In addition to offering a glimpse of the difficulties in managing a writing program, this study also offers an example of how discourse theory can aid in institutional research. As mentioned above, many important moments in the history of the department had related documentation—the switch to semesters, the department’s official name change, and the new mission statement, among others, had to be written into existence. Even documents that did not result in specific, noticeable, or immediate change (such as creating a writing center) still reveal much about department. Further, because documents often outlast people, documents can be one of the only sources of information about the past.

Fairclough claims that discourse is a site of struggle and this study bears that out. The language of work, of a discipline, and of a long-standing department can be seen in various documents. Often, one or more competing visions can be found. And regardless

⁸⁴ It is not my intention to compare graduate teaching assistants and fixed term faculty or to spark any substantial debate about the use of either one. Both complicate the picture of Tier One writing and raise questions about employment practices. Some would argue, rightfully I think, that fixed term appointments are much more humane than adjunct work. At the same time, concerns about the loss of tenured professors in Tier One seem to have been realized.

of the immediate impact, language is one of the ways in which the ATL department negotiated its identity and its future. Using a combination of discourse theory and institutional critique to go beyond my initial descriptions, I was able to recognize how the documents worked on a much deeper level. Discourse is a reflection of current practices and beliefs, but it can also *shape* practices and beliefs. Further, discourse carries with it history and ideology. Through the study of discourse, it was possible to identify the roots of the department, including key principles and beliefs, which made it possible to understand why the prospect of change might cause such concern.

Without a written record, it would have been much more difficult, impossible even, to capture many of the key tensions involved because it was through a series of documents that stakeholders made their claims. Over the years, there was a struggle to gain power. As new faculty members joined the department, the need for supportive structures grew—as evidenced in various reports and proposals. Clearly, there were attempts to improve aspects of working conditions and increase status for all writing faculty, though faculty with the longest history could have had more right to complain. Recall that ATL carried a heavier teaching load than other departments and had for years. However, there was also a struggle to maintain certain kinds of power. Faculty members with a long history were accustomed to having autonomy in teaching style and choice of course content. Moreover, they had established careers to think of, making stakes in change even greater. Though the teaching load may have been high, there was some measure of security in being the primary body responsible for Tier One.

Discourse, Policy, and Advocacy

All of the issues, challenges, hopes and fears of one department can be found in a careful, critical read of institutional documents. Each time the writing program was reviewed, it created an opportunity to use discourse to make and also resist change—and both can be seen in the results. So in parting, I am compelled to point out that there were not many arguments about the developmental writing course, the students placed into that course or the teachers responsible for that course. It was not entirely absent, but it certainly wasn't a priority. If anything, in the switch to semesters, the developmental course became something with added negative connotations and negative consequences because it became an additional course, not just an alternate track. It wasn't until the 2004 Task Force Report that another model was even officially proposed; that's 12 years after the switch to semesters.

In fact, students in general are woefully absent in many ways, especially prior to the 2004 report. Instead, faculty concerns about faculty life often take precedence. For the basic writing student, it means being pushed even further down the list of concerns. As professionals, we can, we *must* take advantage of opportunities to argue for the changes we know we need. If given the chance to be involved in policy making, we must write policies that make spaces for those with little voice and little choice in matters that affect them. Because so few people are actually involved (typically) in the change process, it is even more important that we make the most of any involvement we have. Moreover, because it can take so long to affect change, it is that much more important to argue early and often. To be fair to the department I studied, maybe there were greater concerns, or concerns that simply had to be addressed before others. However, I have to wonder what

could have been possible if arguments about basic writing had been as passionate as some of the others.

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