COMPOSITION’S ABOLITIONIST DEBATE: A TOOL FOR CHANGE

One of the most prominent debates in the field of composition over the past ten years has been a debate about the necessity and efficacy of the universal requirement of first-year English. A brief sketch of the debate would start with Sharon Crowley’s challenge to the field to rethink its sacred cow, the universally required first-year composition course, because of 1) the exacerbation of terrible employment conditions, 2) the ways in which the service requirement has inhibited the growth of composition into a full-fledged discipline, and 3) the ways in which the requirement patently mis-represents the needs of students (228-65). Lil Brannon documented the theory and the practice that informed SUNY-Albany’s abolition of the required first-year course, and, at least in 1995, three-quarters of Albany’s students took more writing courses than were required (239-48). Faculty at Temple University considered abolition as they re-evaluated their first-year program, but chose to re-define and reform composition in terms of “strong needs” rather than abolish the universal requirement (Sullivan et al. 372-91). Marjorie Roemer, Lucille Schultz, and Russell Durst, all directors of composition at the University of Cincinnati, similarly defend the first-year requirement on the basis of a pedagogical re-definition of the course. They see abolition as misguided, and they are optimistic about the positive social and intellectual work that can be done in first-year composition (377-92). And Richard E. Miller at Rutgers has argued against Crowley’s position in three different articles, advocating the need to see composition from an administrator’s perspective, as a resource-rich colony to be put to the use of program teachers, administrators, and the home department, English (“From” 25-40). Many other scholars have contributed to the debate in the form of commentary on these essays, or in articles of their own, but this assembled collection of

Kevin Brooks is Assistant Professor of English at North Dakota State University. He has published work on the history of composition and higher education in Textual Studies in Canada and The Great Plains Quarterly. His work is forthcoming in Profession 2002 and The American Review of Canadian Studies.

Composition Studies, Volume 30, Number 2, Fall 2002
scholarship shows the range of positions and attitudes adopted in the
contemporary abolitionist debate.

In this paper, I am not trying to stake out a new position, nor am I
reporting on curricular changes at my own institution that would support
abolition or reform. I am looking at these exchanges from the perspective of
someone interested in pursuing change, and I see three key themes in this
dramatic performance that are worth commenting on:

• all of the participants listed above share a common goal—to
improve the working conditions of writing instructors and
improve the learning conditions for students in writing classes—
but this goal is occasionally obscured by the fray that ensues over
achieving it.

• diametrically opposed tactics have been successful in achieving
this goal, suggesting that others who are considering plans for
institutional change need not adopt one position or the other (at
least initially), but should explore the efficacy of a variety of
tactics for change.

• a set of goals, tactics, and attitudes for achieving change can be
culled from this debate, and even though some of the suggestions
contradict one another, they all need to be considered as potential
tools for change if the goal is in fact more important than the
means of achieving it.

I will elaborate on these points as they contribute to my overall argument
that the abolitionist debate is not one that needs to be resolved, but instead
is an exchange of ideas from which others in the field can learn and seek
guidance.

THE COMMON GOAL OF NEW ABOLITIONISTS AND REFORMISTS

In “What’s New about the ‘New Abolitionists,’” Maureen Daly
Goggin and Susan Kay Miller claim that “The binary of reformists versus
abolitionists—what has been termed the great debate—is not only not useful
but is perhaps quite damaging. There is no one answer, no one structure, no
one system that will fit all sites” (103). They see what they call the “many
voices of reconceptualization” (95) to suggest programmatic change, and
they treat the “intersections among oppositions” briefly (97-98). My
analysis of the common goal of New Abolitionists and reformists builds on
their insights, by elaborating on the intersections among oppositions and by
looking at what I call misreadings that obscure the commonalities. I do not
want to suggest that, when the final analysis is complete, abolitionists and
reformists are really the same, but I do think it is clear that both camps are
focused on improving the working conditions for temporary workers,
adjuncts, graduate students, long-term lecturers, and even rhetoric and

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composition faculty. And both camps would like to see high-quality writing courses offered throughout university curriculums—first-year through graduate classes.

In the first attempt to account for the rise of the New Abolitionist movement, Robert Connors compares and contrasts contemporary abolitionists with abolitionists of the past one-hundred and twenty-five years. He says New Abolitionists are similar to previous abolitionists in their concern about the futility and low status of work in required first-year composition, the expense to run composition programs, and the incredible challenge of administering such programs. This new generation of abolitionists, however, is different in that they are insiders, playing out the argument in national forums (23). They also have a well-established tradition of WAC to support their call to make everyone on campus responsible for writing instruction, and they often have students’ interests, rather than their own, in mind when they call for abolition (24).

Connors interpretation of the New Abolitionists’ motives draws on Crowley’s list of six negative effects of the universal requirement. Four of those negative effects impact students and non-tenurable staff (the requirement exploits teachers, but “particularly part-time teachers and graduate students;” it “exploits students” who take the classes because “the requirement has negative curricular effects”; and it “negatively affects classroom climate” [241-42]). Only two of the effects negatively impact “the professionals” (“The requirement has negative disciplinary, ... institutional, ... and professional effects” [243]).

Roemer, Schultz, and Durst have seen the New Abolitionists in very different light, particularly in regard to whose interests are being served: In contrast to Connors, we believe that, more than any other feature, what unites attempts to abolish the required first-year writing courses across disparate historical periods is a fundamentally elitist view of the English department mission and its move toward full disciplinarity, a view which we find in many ways quite disagreeable and contrary to the purposes driving composition studies. (378)

Roemer, Schultz, and Durst consider the possibility that Crowley’s argument is in some ways not a part of this tradition, but they conclude that she, too, is elitist because she does not give students enough credit for resisting or transforming the education they receive (383). They go on to argue that the “abolitionist position” is “self-defeating and historically ill-timed” (390), and that the Great Debate about first-year English should be a debate about the nature of service, a debate that would seemingly be about “attempting to restructure that hierarchy from within and ... reconfigure the place of the first-year course inside it” (389). In other words, they seem to
want to end the debate and questions about the efficacy of first-year English, and make a claim about the legitimacy of the universal requirement:

The "politics of voice and representation" is our legitimate ground; the first-year site is where we have our most challenging and inclusive opportunity to work, and it just may be that the rethinking of that site will offer the opportunity to reconceptualize the whole organization of English departments, a task that seems increasingly to be on the agenda for the future. (391)

An abolitionist rejoinder to the argument by Roemer, Schultz, and Durst would challenge what seems to be a set of misreadings. They, like Richard Miller, have found Crowley's arguments about pursuing disciplinarity to be offensive and "contrary to the purposes driving composition studies" ("From" 33). But Crowley is very clear about the fact that composition has "met the first requirement of disciplinary status"—establishing itself as a research discipline with publications that advance knowledge about writing (254). "[W]hat remains for composition studies," she writes, "is to improve the status and working conditions of its practitioners" (254). This improvement in the status of workers is about achieving a greater degree of disciplinarity—we know that TAs, RAs, and Adjuncts in other service disciplines like mathematics typically make more money than their counterparts in composition, in part because of the disciplinary stature mathematics has achieved.

Crowley is also ambivalent about pursuing disciplinarity, but writes, "Whatever might be said about the evils of disciplinarity, until recently its institutional practices impeded the full-scale implementation of part-time instruction in the academy" (254). She agrees that "composition's bid for disciplinarity could not have been made at a worse time" (254), but she sees it as the best strategy for improving working and learning conditions. And at no point does she indicate that abolishing the universal requirement ends composition's service role: "the examples of medicine and law suggest that a powerful discipline can be developed around an explicit service ethic" (251-52). Her point is simply that composition and English more generally have not been able to translate their service role into better pay or higher status in the ways that other disciplines have.

Roemer, Schultz, and Durst state that they are working from within the system of higher education and English departments, and they seem to imply that the New Abolitionist argument is coming from "outside" the discipline, or outside institutional thinking, even though that is clearly not the case. Richard Miller also suggests that the New Abolitionists are idealistic and not thinking in terms of institutional constraints when he summarizes their position:

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Once the universal requirement is dismantled, the Abolitionists believe, part-time lecturers will be free to pursue more productive work elsewhere; students will never again be compelled to receive writing instruction; and research and scholarship on rhetoric and composition, mired in the dreary world of the first-year classroom, will be liberated to explore more pressing social and theoretical issues related to language use. ("A Writing Program’s Assets" 244)

This division of the debate into insiders and outsiders, or realists, pragmatists, and idealists, is simply not helpful because the New Abolitionists are insiders and pragmatists, too. Crowley acknowledges that her plan might look like a job reduction plan, but she clearly advocates “engaging in the hard work and planning that are necessary to upgrade teaching positions, institute meaningful professional development, and write curricula for new elective composition courses” (246). And as Connors noted in his historical overview, it is this insider position, and a strong awareness of the difficult nature of reform, that makes the New Abolitionists unique. Brannon’s account of abolition at Albany is a consummate insider’s account of working through bureaucracy and politics in order to abolish the universal first-year requirement in favor of a wide range of writing-intensive courses students can choose from.

While I am clearly defending abolitionism and Crowley, I am primarily doing so because I think that position needs to remain a part of the debate about the “whole organization of English departments”; we need its perspective, alongside those offered by Richard Miller and by Roemer, Schultz, and Durst as we consider our local possibilities for achieving the goal of better working conditions for our colleagues and ourselves, and better learning conditions for our students. We should be careful to examine the positions in the debate, because in the name of argument, considerable misreadings seem to distract us from the common goal. Goggin and Miller have noted that those who oppose abolition have much in common with the New Abolitionists or “reconceptualists” (97); I would add that their differences, however, are important to keep in mind because they offer significantly different concepts of institutional change.

The abolitionist perspective, as Tom Fox argues in his response to the Sullivan et al. essay on Temple’s reform, holds out the possibility of strategic reform, not just tactical reform (258). These are terms employed by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, and summarized by Fox: “while de Certeau celebrates tactical practice, it is ultimately the work of stalling and forestalling. The success of radical teaching depends ultimately not on tactics, but on strategies, which de Certeau defines as long-term actions that work from one’s own place” (258). The abolitionist
position seems much closer to a strategy than a tactic, although I would hate to see this debate turn into a definitional scuffle. I will continue to discuss all institutional moves as “tactics” because there isn’t enough evidence to suggest abolition or reform have had sufficient long-term effects to be considered “radical teaching” or “strategies.” However, what is significant and potentially radical about the abolitionist position, as Fox states, is that it challenges the standard two-course sequence model, and it calls into question the efficacy of a universal requirement, rather than simply tinkering with the courses in order to attempt to place them on more legitimate ground. There are some very good reasons for not abolishing the universal requirement, but to dismiss a consideration of that position because it is elitist, self-serving, or naïve, does not do justice to the careful arguments that Crowley, Connors, Brannon, and Goggin and Miller have presented to the field.

**OPPOSITE TACTICS, SUCCESSFUL RESULTS**

In shifting the focus of this essay from the common goal of the debate to actual results reported by those engaged in the debate, I turn to Brannon’s essay “(Dis)Missing Compulsory First-Year Composition,” the only detailed account of successful abolition, and “Student Needs and Strong Composition: The Dialectics of Writing Program Reform” by Francis J. Sullivan, Arabella Lyon, Dennis Lebofsky, Susan Wells, and Eli Goldblatt, a detailed account of programmatic reform. These essays describe diametrically opposed tactics used to achieve similar reform goals. Brannon and her colleagues at Albany were able to convince their university colleagues that the “skills’ concept of writing” was ill-conceived (240), while the Temple group used an appeal to “strong skills” as a means of convincing the university community that Temple students did not have skills deficits, but that they were in need of strong skills (“Strong” 379). Their stories are worth looking at closely because the details of reform are the practical and conceptual tools for change that those outside the debate need to see. The issue of strategies and tactics is also worth considering again in light of the successful results both programs report, although I will only return to that discussion after summarizing the work of each program.

Brannon reports that abolishing the first-year requirement has been good for students, staff, faculty, the whole English department, and the university.

After much discussion and debate, in 1986, the University at Albany boldly abolished compulsory first-year composition, a move away from ghettoized general writing skills instruction. This was possible because a group of faculty from across the curriculum understood that their reason for requiring
composition of all students was based on a “skills” concept of writing that was losing professional currency; indeed, that it worked against the idea of writing that the English department faculty responsible for the program and the major researchers in the field found credible. (240)

Albany replaced the universal requirement of two first-year writing courses with a requirement of two writing-intensive courses, one of those being an upper-level course in a student’s major (240). The Writing Center was given additional support, and was expected to take on additional responsibility for writing instruction (240). So just as Crowley suggests, the English department did not abandon writing instruction, including the teaching of first-year writing courses, nor did they downsize. Instead they gave students choices, extended the writing curriculum vertically, and also extended it out into the university as a whole.

When we abolished compulsory first-year composition, we did not abolish writing or our commitment to students as writers. Those who had traditionally taught first-year composition were redeployed into writing-intensive literature courses, upper division writing courses, lower division creative writing courses, literature courses, courses in rhetoric and poetics, in teaching within the writing Center, or working as consultants to various disciplines. Our students began writing more as a result of these curricular changes. Before the institution of writing-intensive courses, students wrote little before entering compulsory first-year composition and little after they left, but now it seems we cannot offer enough writing-intensive courses: More than three quarters of our students take more than the required two. Our new writing sequence within the English major must turn away students because we cannot offer enough places for them. There has not been any increase in the numbers of students from the general student population who have failed or left the university. (245)

Those who have opposed abolishing the universal requirement have had little to say about the success reported by Brannon. Crowley’s polemical articles have drawn most of the fire, but when Crowley is read alongside Brannon, it seems that abolishing the universal requirement can indeed achieve the goal that everyone in the debate is pursuing: improving the working and learning conditions for those engaged in writing courses. Brannon encourages others to try it:

These practices [and changes] are possible in virtually any collegiate setting and with virtually any population. What is at stake is not student ability but a competition of educational
assumptions, including competing notions about what language is, what writing is, and what the responsibilities of teaching and assessment are. (242)

For those considering reform for writing programs and/or requirements, perhaps the most fundamental decision to be made is “do we challenge institutional assumptions about education and writing, or do we play-off those assumptions—spin them, rather than challenge them?” The Albany reformers choose to challenge assumptions, while the Temple group choose to spin, or in the more formal and academic language they use, “translate” assumptions (“Strong” 390).

The Temple group’s first act was to take Crowley’s abolitionist argument about the ways in which students’ needs for writing instruction are mis-represented and translate that negative representation of “needs” into a positive “strong needs.” Sullivan, Lyon, Lebofsky, Wells, and Goldblatt explain how they used their definition of “needs” to their advantage in the mid 1990s to garner resources that in turn supported “strong composition.” They represented Temple students to other faculty and administrators not as lacking in skills but as being in need of the ability to read and write critically (377); they represented students not as falling short of standardized evaluative measures, but as being in need of education in disciplinary and professional practices (384); and they also used evaluation not as a gatekeeping mechanism but as way of “support[ing] writers in the development of their abilities” (385). In short, they attempted to “transpose the language of needs from a way of talking about student deficits to a way of talking about desires” (379).

The authors do not so much disagree with Crowley, or engage her argumentatively, as they acknowledge her powerful critique of the universal requirement as one way of thinking through the complex set of definitional, disciplinary, and institutional problems that follow from enforcing a universal requirement. They simply chose to use definitions of requirement, service, and need differently than Crowley—they saw the terms as the “available means of persuasion” (374). They successfully used an “appeal to skills” to earn them support—the exact opposite of the successful tactic used at Albany (376). It is at this point, when we who are looking to the debate for guidance and for tools, must conclude that either strategy—abolition or reform—can potentially work.

The Temple group also considered abolition itself, yet writes:

while we discussed what a writing curriculum might be without a first-year requirement, we never seriously considered abandoning it. If our disciplinary desire is to intervene strategically and effectively in the struggle over literacy in this country, it would be very strange to throw away the term and

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institutional space that lets us practice our discipline and effect the literacy of large numbers of students. (380)

This argument makes sense, if a program can garner the resources and personnel to make a program work and to ensure that indeed “our discipline” is being effective in the first-year curriculum. But of course what Crowley is arguing is that she knows of no program (or at least tells us of no program) that works. The Temple group does seem to have garnered the necessary resources, even as most of the University faced budget cuts (375). They were also able to enact “as university policy most of the principles enunciated in the Wyoming Resolution.”

Overwhelmingly, our faculty have voted to eliminate a “rising-junior” proficiency exam; to reform testing; to raise adjunct pay; to eliminate remediation on campus, without eliminating support for “underprepared” students; to hire a senior writing program director; to insist that trained, full-time faculty teach at least 30% of first year writing courses, and to require that all TAs teaching in the program receive substantive training and be committed to at least two years teaching in the program. (374-75)

The authors also devote a paragraph to the process they went through: conducting a self-study of their writing program, hiring WPA evaluators to write a report on their program, establishing a large working committee of rhetoric and composition faculty but also other “strategically placed faculty who cared about the quality of undergraduate education,” writing a concise report with recommendations, proselytizing among the faculty, bringing in more outside help, holding town-hall meetings and letting their critics and supporters speak, and being honest about where the money would come from—“all our pockets” (379).

The heart of this article is in the reporting of these details. The argument with Crowley functions as a framing device, perhaps an entrée into the journal and the disciplinary discussion because journals do not typically publish program reports. The abolitionist debate functions as a tool for leveraging space in the academic conversation, as well as a tool for considering reform. That is not to say, of course, that the debate is all veneer. I am simply arguing that the substance, as reported by Sullivan, Lyon, Lebofsky, Wells, and Goldblatt, is not primarily the debate itself, but the institutional report that will offer ideas and tactics for how the rest of us might go about reforming our own writing programs. This is a debate that needs no single resolution, and we should not expect a synthesis or a dialectically achieved third position because the resolutions will be worked out locally and institutionally in program reform or stasis.

If it were possible to measure in some significant way which institution’s reforms have been more successful than others, we might be
able to say with some confidence that other institutions should follow one model or the other. But because success is determined and decided locally, spectators to this debate are better off exploring both options—testing departmental and institutional interest in abolition or reform, and analyzing the kinds of discourse used to talk about writing. The abolitionist position, in Fox’s analysis, might be the more “strategic position,” the one more likely to make long-term changes stick, and the one in which writing gets defined “from our own place” rather than in the language of the institution as “strong skills.” But as the Temple group says in response to Fox, “even if this change is merely tactical, it still has produced, at least potentially, a space in which even underprepared students can do substantive intellectual work, one in which they develop critical literacy” (“The Reform” 266). And Stephen North of SUNY-Albany summarizes a history of Albany’s Writing Intensive Program—written by his students—as having moved from “humble beginnings through boom years, and then on down to what is represented as a[n] . . . unsatisfactory, albeit not entirely hopeless, current scene” (137). In other words, even what appears to be the strategic plans at an institution can be undone, perhaps returning those plans to the realm of temporary tactics. While strategic reform remains a goal that compositionists can pursue, either space—the one described by Brannon or the one described by the Temple group—would likely be appealing to those in the field considering programmatic and institutional reform.

SUMMING UP, TOOLING UP

While it is not unusual to find multiple positions within a debate convincing, it does seem unusual, and unnecessary, for the Abolitionist debate to be carried out in contested terms. In other words, the debate might not really be a debate. There seems to be no compelling reason to stake out one’s turf, and certainly no good reason to try and curtail others’ positions, especially when there is evidence that even opposing tactics can be successful in achieving similar kinds of positive results. What is really at stake in the New Abolitionist debate is an exchange of conceptual and tactical tools for improving learning and working conditions, and the “debate” seems most useful as a framework for asking: What tactics are working at various institutions? How can these tactics or tools be exchanged? How do they get translated from one institution to another? The debate needs more careful representation of others’ positions, and more detail about the process of reform, rather than knock-out punches intended to end or curtail the debate.

From the literature that has been generated in the last ten years, however, I do see a specific set of goals—more specific and extensive than the core-issue I articulated in the first section of this essay. I also see a fairly
clear set of tactics that have been applied at institutions like Albany and Temple, although the pattern of application need not be the same at every institution. And I see a variety of attitudes informing these goals and tactics. I have compiled the first two lists without reference to specific articles because most of the items appear as a goal or tactic in more than one piece, and many of these goals and tactics will be familiar, but worth recounting, in list-form. I will go into more detail about the nature of “attitudes” and how they might be adopted at the local level.

Goals

These goals are not listed in particular order; at my own institution the first two items need desperate attention, but the fourth item is by far the easiest to pursue. We can only hope that a successful vertical curriculum will shed light on the importance (and popularity) of good writing courses, and in turn have a positive effect on salaries and working conditions.

• Better pay and better contracts for adjuncts. This could be achieved through contract negotiation in states where contracts are negotiated, through redistribution of writing teachers into writing centers, writing intensive courses, or consultant positions.

• Better pay and/or fewer courses for graduate students to teach. Where graduate students do not receive benefits and/or tuition remission, these goals should also be pursued.

• Better courses for the students taking either the universal requirement or other writing requirements. This goal could be at least partially met if the first two goals are also met, and through regular professional development for all writing teachers.

• Vertical curriculum development that would benefit all teachers through course variety and professional development and benefit students who choose to take writing courses that will fit their needs and interests.

• More visible practices, so that university communities see the investment of people and time in writing courses. This goal would need to be achieved without introducing considerable anxiety about surveillance and oversight.

Tactics

As with the goals, there is no specific order to these points—although some are closely related. The next-to-last item might be the best place for many would-be reformers to start, and some tactics, like outside evaluation, might not be necessary if there is widespread departmental and institutional support for plans being discussed.
• Perform a thorough self-evaluation of your writing program, as outlined in the Writing Program Administration’s “Guidelines for Self-Study to Precede WPA Visit.”

• Request an outside evaluation of your writing program from the WPA if your department or institution can afford the service or is willing to pay for it.

• Establish widespread institutional support for any possible changes. That support needs to come from faculty and administrators in a variety of disciplines and colleges, as well as from central administrators.

• Establish institutionally driven recommendations because the first-year requirement is, in many ways, institutional property. Eliminating the universal requirement will require as much institutional support as reforming it.

• Allow for open discussion of changes among your own faculty and staff, and throughout the university community.

• Identify institutional or system-wide constraints or barriers to change. The task of abolishing a requirement or implementing reform may turn out to be more than a local issue, and therefore may require tactics beyond those discussed here.

• Establish any necessary funding for changes, or at least have a good answer to the question: “how are we going to pay for this”?

**Attitudes**

Attitudes are worth commenting on in “The Great Debate” because the exchanges have become heated, and reformists of any stripe will obviously have to adopt some sort of attitude. I suspect that those of us interested in institutional change will have to adopt a range of attitudes to a variety of issues and audiences. The attitude one brings to the academic debate, for example, is unlikely to be the same attitude used while pursuing academic reform. Miller suggests that compositionists need to “get beyond impassioned teachers and enslaved workers” and begin to “think like . . . administrator[s]” (“From” 38-39), but in fact it seems that individuals and collectives can adopt multiple personas. If the Temple group and the Cincinnati group are the “impassioned teachers,” it is also clear that they think like administrators, and have had administrative success. If Crowley and Brannon represent the voice of “enslaved workers,” I have also cited evidence that they think like administrators, and can make positive changes at their institutions. If both groups are guilty of using language that is too dramatic and inflammatory in their publications, perhaps there is something wrong with the nature of academic discourse that encourages argumentation and debate rather than program reports within our journals.

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Miller’s own administrator’s voice, of course, is a specific rhetorical strategy too. Our disciplines’ “impassioned teachers” and “enslaved workers” perhaps conjure up the image employed by Susan Miller, the sad women in the basement (121-41), while our administrators are typically imagined as James Sledd’s “boss compositionists” (12). Richard Miller’s way of describing the difficult work of being a reformist-bureaucrat is compelling, seductive, and gendered, both in the labels he uses and in his claim that we should “arm ourselves and our students” against a “beguiling trap” of endless critique (“‘Let’s Do’” 105). The administrator’s voice and subjectivity are far from neutral; assuming this voice and subjectivity are tactics that may be used towards reform, but, as he himself acknowledges, these tactics offer no particular guarantee of success (“From” 38). He and his institution have been successful in improving contracts and pay for adjuncts and graduate assistants, and if taking on a “tough guy” role worked at Rutgers, it might be worth trying at other institutions. But as we write to one another about disciplinary and institutional reform, we cannot expect to free ourselves from metaphors or the drama that such thinking involves, nor pretend that we do not assume roles—none of which are essential—within our local pursuit of change.

Rather than look for a transcendent position, a single attitude or a subjectivity to adopt, it seems to me that if we seek reform at our institutions, we have to be prepared to use “attitudes” as one more tool for change. Compositionists need to be able to think like abolitionists without feeling like traitors, and they need to be able to think like reformists without feeling naïve. In pursuing either of these options, they will need to think and act like administrators. The discussion needs to continue with the full range of possibilities and voices included, and reports of institutional reform (successful or failed) need to be published. WPA: Writing Program Administration will be publishing a special issue “Changing the First-Year Writing Curriculum” in 2003, and Composition Studies should consider publishing “Curricular Design” reports in addition to its Course Designs feature in order to provide a regular venue for publication on curricular reform. Such publications would certainly be in the spirit and tradition of the journal, as suggested by current editor Peter Vandenberg’s revival of an early mission statement by the first editor of Freshman English News, Gary Tate. Tate envisioned FEN as “a continuing report on the status of Freshman English throughout the country . . . . A broadening of our sense of what is possible, an extension of our vision, might well occur . . . when we know how others have tried and succeeded, how still others have tried and failed” (qtd. in Vandenberg 7).

Much of this reporting happens online via discussion lists—in part because institutional reports have not been a regular feature of our journals,
and in part because such reports will not necessarily be valued as research publications for tenure review. But there is an important place for published reports, as authorized reports that could be brought to bear on the Great Debate—transforming it to the Great Exchange, perhaps. And more important, the would-be abolitionist/reformists—those of us at institutions in need of change—would have a wider range of concrete models to consider and translate to our local needs. Exploring the possibilities for change is more important than refining positions within the debate, but we can certainly learn from and use the institutional and programmatic reports that surface as part of scholarly exchange about the teaching and administering of writing courses in higher education.

_Fargo, North Dakota_

**Works Cited**


