"UNIVERSITY COURSES, NOT DEPARTMENT COURSES": COMPOSITION AND GENERAL EDUCATION

“To the extent that a general education acts mainly to pass on received wisdom, it fails to prepare students to adapt to the very different world that lies ahead. . . . To the extent that we ignore these forces of change and merely pass on the humanistic and scientific traditions, we risk unintentionally teaching that general education is irrelevant to the problems of contemporary life and producing the cynicism and absolute relativity of values we abhor.”

—Michael C. Parker (222-23)

“Work that carries little or no status in traditional terms, at least within English departments, may carry high status outside English. . . . [If] it is not ‘packaged’ into an institutionally recognized commodity form, such work will not be recognized; and so long as recognition is withheld, so too will be the material support for continuing it.”

—Bruce Horner, in Horner et al. (91-92)

It’s likely difficult for academics to think of a college or university that doesn’t have some program of general education. Over the past century, general education’s model of liberal learning has become so entrenched in U.S. universities that it is widely seen as the core of the national undergraduate curriculum. In a series of distributed courses that may continue through all four years of college, students engage in focused inquiry, problem-solving, collaborative work, and instruction in specific content areas, all to develop lifelong learning habits that prepare them for future roles in a democratic so-

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ciety. Because the responsiveness of general education (GE) to national needs often serves as an indicator of the overall state of postsecondary education, proposed reforms to GE are often considered inextricable from larger societal changes. And while the variety of GE programs (and the language used to describe them) is extreme, their common set of goals is generally thought to align neatly with those of Composition Studies.

GE operates according to the institutional conventions, ideologies, and cultural beliefs of a college or university faculty. David Tyack and Larry Cuban’s structural history of public school reforms calls these underlying systems a “grammar of schooling” that not only frames teachers’ perspectives on how knowledge should be understood but also mediates how it is ultimately organized and taught. The grammar includes both the mechanisms for organizing learning—from age-graded classrooms and block schedules to the creation of subjects and credit—and the strategic efforts of educators to convince the public that such features were those of a “real” school. The grammar of education has remained remarkably constant over the years, fixing in people’s minds through habit and custom the notion that innovations like GE are “just the way schools are” (86).

I want to use this notion to look specifically at what role a grammar of GE might play in regulating and “generalizing” first-year composition and its teachers. As part of a discourse focused alternately on meeting requirements and granting choice to student “consumers,” composition often functions outside of the immediate control of program administrators and writing teachers (see Gallagher; Heyda). Institutional groups may demand through oversight procedures that writing courses remain both “general” and “liberal” in order to retain their GE status or set policies that do not meet with best practices in Composition Studies. When composition faculty at my university were expected to teach writing in ways we didn’t endorse, we came to some hard realizations about the effects that the languages of disciplinary and universal learning had on our course pedagogy and teacherly subjectivity. We realized that we didn’t own the course we regularly teach, couldn’t fully control how our course would be institutionally assessed, and didn’t understand why (as writing teachers) we couldn’t simply revise the GE documents we found wanting. In effect, we couldn’t change the “grammar.”

This counternarrative suggests several ways that Composition Studies can be more strategic about local institutional arrangements for writing instruction. Because the discourse of GE is narrowly focused on students’ future roles and habits, we should consider the notion that composition is a general education course owned and often tightly controlled by the university. First-year composition is not solely our course; it serves multiple acculturative purposes in the university, and many discourses outside of composition impinge
on how it is taught and administrated. If we recognize the institutional pressures to serve that writing courses may face within general education, we may be better able to respond to them.

OUTSOURCING DISCIPLINE

General education at California State University, Chico is a 48-unit program that spans both upper and lower divisions courses. Course requirements must be met in three areas: the “core,” which includes one course each in oral communication, writing, critical thinking, and math; four “breadth” areas for science, humanities, behavioral and social sciences, and lifelong learning; and the “upper division thematic,” in which students complete three courses with an interdisciplinary theme, such as “Contemporary Health Issues” or “Global Music, Culture, and Technology.” The GE website and catalog stress the “integrative intellectual experience” of a common knowledge base by emphasizing education as both inquiry and commodity. Addressing students directly, its description states that GE “will help you to see your major’s place in your total education by showing you that knowledge is not isolated, that what you know of one subject is related to what you know of another, that there is always more to know, and that what you know affects the way you live.” At the same time, GE at Chico State is portrayed as a “powerful career exploration tool” that may help students “become better acquainted” with themselves as they “discover and deepen [their] interests and abilities in various academic disciplines and programs” (“General”). English 001 (First-Year Composition) and its honors counterpart are the only options for the written communication component of the skills core. While upper-division GE courses are generally taught by Ph.D. faculty, core courses such as English 001, Philosophy 002, and lower-level Math employ significant numbers of lecturers and graduate students.

As a relatively flexible, multidisciplinary program with upper and lower division requirements, Chico State’s model for GE is not unique. In their taxonomy of general education, Hurtado, Astin, and Dey found that over half of the institutions they surveyed had distributional programs “that are not especially distinguished by any unique features” such as an interdisciplinary core, independent or service-oriented study, or a religious or philosophical emphasis (145). This characterization is often associated with large or comprehensive public institutions like Chico State, which “are less likely to have a prescribed general education program or one that is particularly distinctive”; it further suggests that institutional factors such as selectivity, control, and faculty input all play a role in shaping curriculum (146, 158). But that a program lacks an overarching philosophical focus should not be read as an
indication that the curriculum, or the courses in it, are ideologically neutral. Hurtado, Astin, and Dey characterize programs with diverse offerings and distribution requirements as taking a “laissez-faire approach to general education” that makes for a less-integrated educational experience (152). From an economic standpoint, the laissez-faire metaphor points to an educational, free-market approach that places student needs above disciplinary concerns. It implies that GE curricula are noninterventionist, highlighting freedom of choice and variety at the expense of educational coherence. GE thus may only provide educational advantages to students who consider the use-value of the courses more important than the exchange value that comes from completing the requirements and moving into a major. Its very structure as a set of discrete requirements or learning outcomes may mitigate its potential to support integrative learning.

In Fall 2001, this tension between integrative disciplinary learning and generalized requirement-driven education reached English 001 at Chico State. The English department offers about 80 sections per year of English 001, a one-semester course described as “instruction and practice in writing university-level expository prose.” About ten percent are taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty in composition; fifty percent by long-term, contract lecturers; twenty-five percent by part-time lecturers; and fifteen percent by graduate students, who work as tutors and workshop leaders and take courses in writing center pedagogy and composition theory before beginning to teach. Three years earlier, the then-coordinator of composition reported to a university general education board that full-time faculty in the program had begun developing common syllabi in order to streamline course goals and to train new TAs, but the syllabi were adopted by long-term lecturers only on a voluntary basis. The board directed the coordinator to make the course more uniform and, as a result, she made common syllabi a program requirement. From then until 2001, the course featured four or five common syllabi that were collaboratively authored by all writing instructors and asked students to engage in extended, inquiry-driven research projects of their own choosing on topics related to rhetoric, literacy, representation, and discourse communities. The long essays used methods of rhetorical and critical analysis and were often modeled after readings by Susan Bordo, Linda Brodkey, Michel Foucault, Kenneth Burke, and others.

The common syllabi were very much specialized texts, based in large part on theory, research, and assumptions about teaching that came directly from Composition and Literacy Studies. Faculty with Ph.D.’s in the field led their construction. The syllabi combined a focus on helping students develop strategies for reading difficult academic texts (e.g., Bartholomae and Petrosky) with a structure that encouraged them to engage in dialogic, project-based
inquiry (e.g., Wells; Jolliffe) and to chart their process. Of course, teaching the syllabi revealed deep problems with several of the assignments and course schedules, but composition faculty felt that continued collaboration with all writing teachers would work out the kinks. However, that these disciplinary syllabi were made mandatory across the program—in what might now seem a heavy-handed fashion—provoked much resistance by long-term, contract lecturers. In meetings with the department chair, dean, and provost’s office, they argued (in part) that the syllabi (which featured texts such as Foucault’s “Docile Bodies” or Cintron’s “A Boy and His Wall”) were too complex for first-year students and that they were being used by compositionists to exert ownership of the program and control over the people who taught in it. They agitated to be free to draw up their own syllabi, based on their own interests and years of teaching in the program. The chair and associate provost, concerned that contract faculty might be playing too large a role in program decision making and full-time faculty too small, asked for clarification from the provost about what constituted a uniform experience in large-enrollment GE courses like first-year writing.

The provost’s office answered by directing the composition coordinator to bring order to the program using Executive Memorandum (EM) 99-05 (1999), a governing document first written in the 1980s that lays out common learning objectives for all GE courses:

Students enrolled in courses meeting the written communication requirement must demonstrate:

1. ability to select worthwhile subjects to write about and generate interesting ideas about them;
2. ability to state a clear thesis, build support for it, and reach an appropriate conclusion;
3. use of description, narrative, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, and other patterns of development effectively;
4. ability to tailor writing to various purposes and audiences; and
5. ability to edit prose to make it more clear, fluent, and concise and to minimize errors in usage, spelling, and punctuation.

(EM 99-05, 1999)

Even a brief look at the language above reveals conflicts between this paradigm and accepted composition practice. It assumes a strictly linear model of invention, arrangement, and delivery that presupposes that students write to
demonstrate their learning, not to learn. It overlooks the situated, contextual nature of argument, analysis, and research, and it establishes the modes as the ends, not the means, of learning to write. Generating interesting ideas about worthwhile subjects and reaching appropriate conclusions about them in writing, all presuppose a legitimation process at work whereby teachers, not students, certify the knowledge that is allowable in the classroom. Its universalized language presumes foundational standards for literacy by constructing students as basic writers, who meet the standards by fitting the formula. As a regulatory mechanism, it embodies our institution’s ambivalence about writing and writing instruction. The seven compositionists believed that the language of the Executive Memorandum 99-05 could not be used as our defining framework because it was based upon a belief that the social and ideological differences in student literacy could be solved with one general composition course. It represented the elevation of what Linda Brodkey calls “common sense” myths of literacy to the status of natural facts.

Without consulting composition faculty, members of the provost’s office set up a review procedure to ensure that English 001 teachers had linked what the administration called the “boilerplate language regarding the common learning objectives” in the executive memo to the activities and assignments in our syllabi. In several meetings during this period, an associate provost encouraged us to use our expertise to construct syllabi that complied with Executive Memorandum 99-05 and stated that they would read our syllabi as students would. But our expertise led us to believe that no middle ground could be found between its values and our goals for the course, which emphasized inquiry projects, multiple forms of research, and critical/rhetorical analysis. So for the provost’s office review we submitted our syllabi unchanged.

Predictably, our syllabi failed this review process. We were told that our syllabi, along with those of new TAs we’d trained and worked closely with, “needed work” in order to demonstrate in greater detail when and how class activities linked to GE requirements. After meeting with our union representative, we wrote a letter to the university president demanding the removal of the syllabus review on the grounds that it obstructed us from using disciplinary expertise to teach courses, infringed on academic freedom, and imposed an assessment with an unclear meaning in terms of retention and promotion. The executive memo’s current-traditional emphasis, we argued, was “derived from an approach to the teaching of writing that was rejected by professionals in the field more than twenty years ago” (Fox et al.). The provost’s response gives a sense of the ideological tensions at the heart of general education. He stated, “GE courses [like English 001] are university courses, not department courses, and as such are governed by [Executive Memorandum] 99-05. . . . It is important to remember that all GE instructors
on our campus are responsible for helping students achieve [these] learning objectives. . . Compliance is not optional” (McNall). After much consultation, he eventually rescinded the review process—replacing it with a subcommittee to create a “buffer document” linking current teaching practices in composition to GE language.

Several of us participated on the committee for one year. But despite our hard work, the resulting buffer document never established sound, discipline-specific principles for writing courses. Instead, it was a noncommittal list of the multiple and conflicting ways compliance could be reached rather than a full-scale revision of the Executive Memorandum. An outsider reading the buffer document would likely conclude that just about anything, from grammar drills to literary analysis, was legitimate practice for the course. When we continued to chafe, the provost’s office quickly threatened the writing program with loss of GE status, which would lead to the dissolution of both the program and the graduate concentration in composition, rhetoric, and literacy. An upper administrator was appointed to maneuver us into compliance by developing common learning objectives and targeted assessments that would demonstrate “multi-section uniformity” across all sections of composition.

So what went wrong? Structurally, we failed to see that the institution of sets of rules related to first-year composition had a discursive relation that put the course at the bottom rung of general education. The management philosophy of the GE program imposed meaning from the top down through assessments based on student outcomes, not actual teacher practices or programmatic goals. Using “student learning outcomes” as its unit of analysis made for GE assessments in which individual courses must demonstrate that students had learned discrete skills and, thus, that keeping in compliance meant teaching the skills. In this way the GE program asserted ownership of composition as a “university course.” This reductive rhetoric also contrasted sharply with earlier GE documents, which contained more flexible language about writing:

Written Communication (A2). Each course must
1. help students learn how to find worthwhile subjects to write about and how to generate interesting ideas about them;
2. focus on formulating a thesis, building support for it, and reaching an appropriate conclusion;
3. teach how to use description, narrative, comparison-contrast, cause-effect, and other patterns of development effectively;
4. help students learn how to tailor writing to various purposes and audiences;
5. teach how to edit prose to make it more clear, fluent, and concise and to minimize errors in usage, spelling, and punctuation;
6. encourage students in the use of reading, reasoning, and organization as components of effective writing;
7. frequently demonstrate the role of critical thinking in writing;
8. include a discussion of the impact of recent technology on written communication.

(EM 92-18, 1992)

This earlier emphasis on courses instead of students facilitates discussions of program administration and enables talk about the relation between individual pedagogies and program goals. Its emphasis on literacy, critical thinking, and technology was more in keeping with the interdisciplinary ethos of general education nationally. The language above had stood as the accepted, if wholly invisible, charter for English 001 for almost twenty years—it passed into each successive executive memorandum without discussion or revision. The 1999 EM’s emphasis on students, part of a national trend toward institutional accountability that establishes student learning outcomes as the end products of education, has the rhetorical effect of erasing teacher agency and disciplinary expertise. It institutes a rhetoric of teacher docility and of teaching to the criteria.

The curricular effect of our resistance was to reinforce a system in which writing would not be defined at all, except in the blandest ideological terms as a universalized tool for communication. Indeed, at every stage of the process, the mechanisms by which GE bylaws were used to regulate composition were enacted according to limited assumptions about what writing is and does. Administrators read composition syllabi as if they could assume the position of students and told us as much. But in creating this student subjectivity, they looked for learning outcomes that ensured that writing would have no content, no discipline, of its own—even as the GE literature claimed that reviews never involved the content of any course. By ensuring that only basic writing standards were met in first-year composition, general education codes and the administrative procedures that support them seem to have outsourced disciplinary content from the teaching of writing; they locate the intellectual capital of general education only in its area courses, not first-
year composition. In doing so, institutional managers relegate the course to an institutional space that is not only remedial, but also general.

**GENERAL EDUCATION AS A CIVILIZING GRAMMAR**

The rise of General Education as an administrative method for organizing undergraduate education came as a response to socioeconomic changes at the beginning of the twentieth century. Berlin, Russell, Crowley, and others have noted GE’s tremendous growth in the 1920s and 1930s and its ties to the acceleration of capitalist industry and its discourse of efficiency, the enrollment pressures brought about by rural students and immigrants looking to professionalize as well as social fears about illiteracy and the loss of a cultural core. As Arthur Applebee notes, students whom the Depression had left “with little else to do” were staying on into college, creating “a new band of students for whom neither vocational nor college-preparatory training would be appropriate; for these ‘general’ students a new kind of education was needed” (139).

Progressive educators in secondary and postsecondary schools, faced with demands that education foster capitalist values by preparing students for the work force, reformed the English curriculum to be a cornerstone of this new general education. The problem that GE programs were to meet was often not how students could use their general learning to act upon the world, but how they could best absorb core values in order to accommodate it. Many early attempts at a general education thus narrowed the focus of education to correcting student cultural deficiencies through a menu of required courses in the sciences and humanities.4

While it is tempting to read general education reforms as a central component in the defense of liberal culture, there are stark differences between GE and what came to be known as liberal education. As Russell notes, liberal education programs, with their emphasis on learning for its own sake, tended to establish more cohesive guidelines for undergraduate curriculum—such as the great-books approach—that narrowed “the definition of general education to acquaintance with a limited body of texts and [humanities faculty’s] own critical approaches to them” (168). What we think of now as the liberal arts are fields of study united by belletristic, romantic, or artistic approaches to knowledge, but resistant to scientific or vocational education and to the external constituencies that endorse them (see Russell; Berlin). By contrast, GE programs responded to the influx of diverse students and added cultural demands by rewriting programs to articulate better relationships with community colleges, professional programs, corporate interests, and other constituencies (G. Miller; Bledstein). The structure of early general education thus resembled a curricular collage that often added more disciplinary courses,
graduation requirements, and “options” without taking any away. The result of this positioning is that many GE programs articulated common goals out of diverse, local interests—that is, what started out as a model for universal student learning often ended up as a patchwork of particular courses. First-year composition was one of these courses.

Indeed, the first-year composition course seems to be one of the few common features of GE programs nationwide. Arguably, first-year composition is nearly always a general education course, and its position in the foundation or core of GE, one of the key factors in its status as a “universal requirement” (Crowley), subject to disciplinary turf battles, managerial oversight, and perhaps abolition. As a foundational or skills course, composition provides the necessary corrective in the basics that not only precedes students’ disciplinary work in their majors but legitimates their other core and distribution requirements. Cheryl Geisler reads this curricular movement in general education as a “simple curricular succession” from training students in traditional or civic values to increasing their familiarity with professional culture. Drawing on Burton Bledstein and Laurence Veysey, she argues that “general education made access to the rewards of professionalization contingent upon a pledge of allegiance to the high cultural values enshrined in the liberal arts—or at least enough of one to get a passing grade” (7). The effect historically was that students often either accepted GE courses because they reinforced home or professional values, or they dismissed them as irrelevant to their future.

By defining the work of writing instruction solely in preparatory terms, general education shapes not only the course itself, but the teachers, students, and activities within it. Under this skills mindset, individual composition classes reproduce education as the acquisition of basic tools that have value only in the progress toward a degree, not in their meaningful or disciplinary use. As at Chico State, the goals of GE are often highly privatized, effecting only inward growth or adjustment to the world rather than collective action for public good. The metaphors of foundations and basic skills that inform curricula fix writing as a prerequisite to students’ other, more serious work—that of more specialized or disciplinary study. As Geisler argues, “A ‘foundation’ is a foundation for something else, something to be added later, something insufficient in itself” (9). Because students practice the active, critical agency to act in the world only in their later courses, the skills mindset deprives GE courses of any cultural meaning or worth. In this way, GE programs construe writing as a remedial skill that must precede even the “foundational” work of students’ other general education classes.

Postmodern critiques of GE tie its successes to the ways in which the crafters imposed or reinforced value systems that defend humanist principles such as rationality, individuality, and the belief in human progress (Davies).
William Spanos critiques Harvard’s many GE reforms in the twentieth century for professors’ nostalgic attempts to recoup this authority of tradition, which favors individualized, apolitical learning over the “wild excesses” of ideology and emphasizes disinterested, objective inquiry over knowledge tainted by social convention (qtd. in Spanos 121). Spanos argues that the “old humanist ideals” embedded in Harvard’s 1975 plan for general education favor the universality of knowledge at the expense of material history and social concerns because to acknowledge them would be to undermine the grand narrative of Enlightenment progress. He finds this “hidden agenda” most active in “the inculcation of the ability ‘to think and write clearly and effectively’” (138). Drawing on the work of Berlin and Richard Ohmann, he argues that in these documents language is “inherently able to comprehend and master the mystery of being” and, thus, functions to “bring the ‘truth’ out of darkness into permanent and inescapable light (‘clarity’) by way of the force of a systematic executive method (‘effectiveness’) that gets rapidly to the essence of apparent difference (‘conciseness’) without digression and thus the costly waste of time” (139). Teaching writing, in this formulation, becomes an ideological mechanism for civilizing language users via a pedagogy of discipline so that they may be efficient in producing and reporting information. Read this way, GE standards for writing that focus on worthwhile subjects or interesting ideas mirror more closely managerial criteria of time, budget, and resources than they do sound writing pedagogy.

The process-based and current-traditional overtones in such language support academic, humanist traditions by allowing for only bellettristic student writing or what Janangelo calls the “rational, paternalistic discourse of thesis-oriented prose” (8). The ideological and material consequences of a pedagogy that favors such “unauthorized discourse” (S. Miller) have been widely interrogated by Sharon Crowley, Alan France, Susan Miller, and others. Required current-traditional composition courses in the early twentieth century constructed humanist subjectivities by asking students to examine texts “as exemplars or standards to which [they] were expected to measure up” (Crowley 181). Process-oriented assignments and texts reinforce the idea of the authentic self as they teach students to conform to the ideals of consumer capitalism, potentially rendering them “politically quiescent” (France 2). But the particular effects that national and local reforms of GE might have on perceptions of writing and writing instruction at the university level have not often been studied in composition and rhetoric.

Tyack and Cuban’s notion of a grammar of schooling extends the ideological critique of composition to the material, regulatory work of college administration. The grammar has a consolidating, centripetal effect on education that reproduces tradition and hinders innovation. And as with
language, they argue, teachers and students do not need to think about the grammar in order to reproduce its effects: “Neither the grammar of schooling nor the grammar of speech needs to be consciously understood to operate smoothly” (85). Reading the grammars of GE calls attention to the rhetorical nature of institutional power and the imbalances that may erupt as groups vie to make institutional change. Thinking of general education’s regulation of writing as a grammar brings several points into focus. Just as a student’s understanding of grammar does not ensure that she can produce responsive, rhetorically persuasive prose, understanding the grammar of an educational enterprise does not automatically ensure that compositionists may rewrite the practices of the particular institution. The overarching grammar of general education is independent of its embodiment in any particular GE class. It operates prior to the level of inscription—it’s not a representation of a university’s orderliness, but a system for establishing the order in the first place. In this sense, general education is not a generative but a prescriptive grammar—normative rules often used to foist social agendas on the uninformed (Pinker).

There are several implications here for composition programs and, arguably, for understanding the history of general education programs. It is the grammar of general education, embodied in the institution’s controlling documents, that turns instruction in all “core” areas into institutional requirements by designating each department’s contributions to GE service courses. While they may count toward a major, the primary educational duty of GE teachers is to serve general education, not offer advanced or discipline-specific training. Always already occupying a remedial or prebaccalaureate slot, composition thus becomes what Brooke Hessler calls in another context “the ultimate service course—a general education class associated with soft yet labor-intensive learning” (32). Its status as a kind of ultima Thule of GE can send mixed messages to writing teachers and university communities about its methods and goals. Universities may not want what their initiatives call for and may even deadlock over differing conceptions of what the initiatives mean. These difficulties can work against a writing program’s efforts to align local pedagogy with their disciplinary sense of best practices. In an article written with colleagues from Drake University, Bruce Horner argues that faculty who see their work only in disciplinary terms can be blinded to the weight their work might have outside their own professional spaces. Horner proposes, “Whatever use-value work may have for those faculty and students participating in it, the exchange value (or lack thereof) it possesses within the institution will depend on those with the institutional social capital to recognize—and thereby confer—such value” (92). Teaching that carries little or no intellectual capital within disciplinary enclaves may be highly valued and secure us the goodwill of those outside of Composition Studies. But the university grammar,
not the individual teacher or program, sets its ultimate value to the academic community. The course’s essential exchange value surfaces both in students’ acknowledged desires to get a passing grade and in faculty’s perception of the separation of their scholarship from their teaching.8

This is but one way to understand why the scholarly expertise of compositionists and literacy specialists does not always persuade either institutions or publics as we think it should. But arguing that the cultural common sense of writing instruction has a tight grip on university teaching is not enough. When composition was located inside the skills core of GE at Chico State, it was legitimated as a site for efficient, uniform teaching, scientistic outcomes language, and discipline-free learning. Our attempts to “discipline” the course, in keeping with our disciplinary training, may have been read as an abnegation of our responsibility to GE because the course could no longer serve as an all-purpose fixer of writing problems. This mindset represents a local phenomenon but also a larger trend—the conflation of remedial or preparatory education with general education. Whereas other general education courses that are required of undergraduates inculcate them into the seemingly universal education of civilized minds, GE composition courses civilize only through the skills they impart and only by formally excluding specific content. To craft a disciplinary composition course would not serve the function of inculcating general habits of mind in students that somehow prepare them for the writing work of the academy. Or it may not serve a broad, heterogeneous base of ostensibly unprepared students. Such a course, whether it focused on literacy, representation, or on the disciplinary conversations of Composition Studies itself, would no longer be a core course that teaches fundamental skills. It would be a breadth course assuming the status of universal knowledge.

A teacher’s credibility with students, administrators, and publics derives in large part from her position within a credible institution and the authority the position accords her. As Xin Liu Gale and others have observed, a teacher’s authority derives from her expertise but more centrally from her position as an agent of the institution, with its own system for enacting power “in a diffuse and unspecified way” (Bourdieu and Passeron, qtd. in Gale 48). Traditional critical analysis would see the formation of academic disciplines as one key element in reproducing hierarchies of power. But here, it is the absence of formal, disciplinary language that produces a double conditioning of both student and teacher. Where the humanist discourse of GE limits writing instruction to compartmentalized outcomes, the institutional grammar renders both course and teacher seemingly discipline-free. The inevitable consequence for us at CSU, Chico was that GE had discursively replaced teacherly expertise and our desire for internal program coherence with the
external authority of the executive memorandum. And what internal authority the course had through its practitioners and its students was rendered moot as the external review of English 001 replaced knowledge and inquiry with faculty (and student) compliance. The external review, while unique to us, was in keeping with general education’s long separation of training from learning, a regime that outsources discipline from any content area. And it was a direct consequence of having a cluster of general education courses taught by disciplinary specialists (who thus serve the academic community’s general goals) but not necessarily linked to any particular disciplinary program. The paradox is that in bringing our course into line with humanistic values, we slowly began to gain back what authority we lost as a teaching cohort. As we demonstrated our adherence to the university grammar, we gained institutional recognition for our work “in the trenches,” remediating students to fit these commonsense notions of writing.

**ACTING STRATEGICALLY WITHIN GENERAL EDUCATION**

As universities brace for yet more rounds of budget cuts and increasing pressures to commodify learning into learning outcomes, compositionists can begin to interrogate the particular effects that national and local reforms of GE might have on perceptions of university writing and writing instruction. Examining general education as an institutional discourse that materially and rhetorically regulates the teaching of writing gives us a new mechanism for understanding the potential worth of writing on college campuses. It may spur us to inquire into how writing program administrators have historically responded to the institutional positions writing courses were made to adopt. It adds a needed dimension to long-standing abolition debates because it is general education that universalizes composition as a requirement and the grammar of GE that establishes its service relation to other academic courses.

It also helps us to rethink the scholarly tendency of compositionists to locate the individual teacher or program administrator as the sole agent of program change. A hallmark of sociological studies of teachers negotiating institutional pressures is that those teachers think individually. When new policies or codes increase the centralized control of their work, teachers and other professionals think of their conformity and autonomy dualistically, deterministically rather than thinking structurally about the strategic ways in which they both accommodate and resist managerialism (Giddens; S. Miller). Graham Benmore and Gillian Forrester, both sociologists of education, argue that teachers respond to outside pressure by gauging only their sense of their personal autonomy: levels of happiness, freedom of time, personal development, and trust of colleagues. Or teachers assume that autonomy is a thing in itself
that can either be *lost* or *gained* rather than as a state that is constructed daily through the texts, people, and material conditions that surround us and mediate our work. Resistance to administrative pressure thus becomes an isolatable act, all the more risky because teachers fail to think strategically or collectively.

Our principal misstep? We perceived the ways that general education constructed students, teachers, and learning as attacks exclusively on individual academic freedoms. From the outset we composition faculty saw ourselves as a worthy band of experts assailed by unreasonable bureaucratic demands that threatened what we considered to be our absolute autonomy. This response is a central aspect of liberal humanism, one to which compositionists cling most tightly: the assumption that the writing classroom is a private space and the teacher an autonomous agent. According to this notion, students and teachers work alone inside the classroom, relatively free from the potential constraints of other classes, teachers, administrators, and students. Louise Wetherbee Phelps and Chris Gallagher both find that a cause of the “insistent individualism” of composition faculty lies in cultural studies critiques that cast social institutions like the academy as hegemonic structures (Phelps 13). Gallagher in particular notes that the discourse of critical pedagogy constructs a binary script of the uniformly oppositional teacher courageously resisting the “institutional arrangements and structures that conspire against her or him” (79). Janangelo extends these critiques to writing program administrators who enact a “romantic, elitist, nondialogical stance” toward colleagues and administrators that paradoxically hinders their potential to be change agents (14).

Spanos’s critiques of the liberal humanism of general education thus apply equally well, it seems, to compositionists and to composition teaching—as the faculty he finds tucking themselves into Harvard seminar rooms might very well approach teaching in much the same individuated, apolitical fashion as contract lecturers teaching four sections of comp at a large state university. We discuss learning and teaching in *Composition Studies* and other journals but don’t very often examine the effects a new pedagogy may have on the composition program, department, or other institutional site in which it is situated. Casual gatherings may find us lapsing into long stretches of first person narration when discussing a class we just taught. We largely assume that within the walls of our disciplinary garret or our classroom, we’re safe from the predations of outsiders, answering only to our personal best sense of the scholarship and lore of the field.

The continued insistence of many faculty in seeing themselves as autonomous actors and their classrooms as privatized spaces impedes collective thinking and reduces strategic action to simple reactions. In a similar fashion, historical education reforms often failed because what teachers proposed was “too intramural.” Writing about various reform efforts in mid-century
American schools, Tyack and Cuban note that progress-minded reformers focused almost exclusively on convincing their disciplinary colleagues; the result was that their proposals never gathered the broad social appeal needed to spur actual change (108). They add, “Because teachers retained a fair degree of autonomy once the classroom door was closed, they could, if they chose, comply only symbolically or fitfully or not at all with the mandates for change pressed on them by platoons of outside reformers” (9). Administrative autonomy, like a teacher’s freedom from managerialism, is mutable and socially constructed. When we adopt an individualist perspective on our teaching and administration, we may give the impression that our professional practices exist outside of, and are not accountable to, university governance.

We got our own chance to reform the grammar of general education as we began to think less intramurally. When an associate dean suggested that we were not well positioned institutionally, we placed compositionists on our academic senate, Educational Policies and Programs Committee, and on our General Education Advisory Committee. Our presence on these university-wide committees allowed us to raise our concerns with general education in public forums, connect with faculty facing similar issues with assessment, and begin to learn the convoluted rhythms of upper administration. Then an English department colleague assumed the chair of Educational Policies and Programs and encouraged us to bring our proposed changes to the executive memo through the chain of committees that led to a senate vote. Initially wary because of our previous experiences, we agreed to try because of her insistence that revising institutional documents was “normal behavior” for committees such as hers and, indeed, lay at the heart of faculty governance.

We started our work with our disciplinary best sense of the practices and habits of mind we wanted each student to assume in composition. At the same time, cognizant that readers who found our use of language economical might be more inclined to move it along, we attempted to avoid revisions to the GE criteria that were overly ambitious or laden with unfamiliar terminology. At each stage of the process we presented our revision to appropriate stakeholders, outlining in plain language the differences between current-traditionalism and critical inquiry. The strategic placement of change agents and help from other faculty desiring changes in general education spurred the process along. As our proposed changes headed toward the senate, they gathered noticeable steam—such that the more faculty who had previously signed on to the language, the less debate was needed at each subsequent stage. By the end of the process, I was surprised that the changes that we had so strenuously argued for at the department level, before passing unanimously in the senate, garnered no discussion at all:
Students enrolled in courses meeting the written communication requirement must demonstrate the ability to

1. Write and read texts in order to question, investigate, and draw conclusions about ideas and issues on a selected subject;
2. Find, evaluate, analyze, synthesize, and interpret appropriate primary and secondary sources and integrate their own ideas with those of others;
3. Apply knowledge of genre conventions such as organization, evidentiary support, and citation styles;
4. Revise papers to reach specific audiences for specific purposes;
5. Reduce errors in grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling.

(EM 99-05, Rev.)

Plans are now underway to begin a program-wide assessment that would examine oral communication, quantitative reasoning, and written communication in general education and would use this new language as a starting point for assessing writing in all GE courses. So, having just finished struggling over the construction of criteria to assess one course in the core of GE, we now begin to educate faculty that these criteria, like writing itself, are discipline- and genre-specific. This language, unlike the former objectives for written communication, shouldn’t be so easily generalized.

The challenge of articulating writing programs within institutional structures like general education is to view it as a problem not solely of psychology but rather as a learning problem uniquely related to the operations of discourse, power, representation, and rhetoric. Continuing to examine both our position as compositionists and our responsibilities as general education teachers will help us achieve a kind of “institutional literacy,” what Gallagher calls the ability to “read and write institutional discourses (and their resultant arrangements and structures) so as to speak and write back to them, thereby participating in their revision” (79). Faculty working to develop institutional literacies should try to understand the multiple and conflicted ways in which teachers, not just students, are interpolated as subjects in the modern academy. This does not mean that compositionists should acquiesce to what Richard Miller dubs the financial and institutional “realities” of the increasingly corporatized university nor that we should learn to accept “our more primary role as functionaries of the administration’s educational arm”
But neither does it imply we should forget the institutional structures beyond our classroom doors.

As a mechanism for real institutional change, critiques based in institutional literacy should take into account the lines of authority and power inequities inherent in managerial decisions in higher education and should at least entertain the notion that, as administrative procedures and the documents that mediate them calcify in our programs, they grow increasingly harder to change. The ongoing process of complying with institutional criteria can be mystifying and frustrating for many teachers—including my colleagues and me—in that many institutional models for assessment may insist that faculty use language they don’t recognize to justify teaching a class they don’t own. But a critical/rhetorical perspective on institutions enables us to see that the grammar of general education is not necessarily absolute nor evenly applied. After all, there may be no immediate ill effects of ignoring the discourses of GE. The slow growth and reaction times of large bureaucracies like colleges and universities may make executive memoranda and other regulatory documents the followers rather than the initiators of change. GE documents may in effect be rarely read and even more rarely used. And the language of deans, provosts, and faculty senates can seem so benign or vague that it’s unworthy of notice: “like mom and apple pie,” Cheryl Geisler notes, general education principles are “hard to take offense to” (9). On the surface they are often frustratingly generic, espousing the bromides of personal growth, citizenship, creativity, and core knowledge. Revising them may happen only by gradual, perhaps unsystematic, efforts by faculty insiders.

As our story makes clear, general education is not a local phenomenon but does operate locally, not solely outside or inside a writing program but both simultaneously. Changing the EM that governs first-year composition was a needed step, but we realize now that it means little if it is not accompanied by larger changes in practice. Thus, our story may predict wider institutional trends in the future and a consequent need for the profession to move differently when confronted by such constraints. The attempts at our campus to waylay pressure from GE are just one small part of a larger puzzlement Composition Studies faces about what the academy really wants writing instruction to be. This puzzlement over general education may become the next major challenge for compositionists as universities nationwide brace for the next wave of “general” students and look to “generalized” writing teachers for help.

Notes

1 The emphasis on breadth of learning and skills development, with writing as one component of a skills core, is a similarly widespread phenomenon. Toombs, Amey, and Chen report a dramatic increase since
the 1980s in both the number of skill-designated courses and the language associated with skills and breadth in general education programs. In their review of catalog statements from 501 four-year institutions, they find that 37% describe GE’s purpose in terms of providing breadth and range to academic study, and slightly fewer articulate skills acquisition as explicit goals. Courses that had traditionally been categorized in area studies or linked more closely with a disciplinary tradition, such as foreign languages, are also being redefined as skills. These changes may result more from the influence of external constituencies and their perceptions of learning and teaching than from academics making GE policy (108).

2 Following a collegewide decision that no one person could accept more than two courses worth of reassigned time for administration, the seven full-time composition faculty at Chico State proposed that a Composition Committee oversee our Writing Program. We worked for a semester to develop a collaborative structure for administration, dividing tasks such as instructor observations, TA group meetings, and program coordination among a crux group of five faculty. But as we struggled as a group to make program decisions as quickly as our former coordinator had done alone, the challenges of collaboration became evident to our department and college.

3 The mechanics of the syllabus review ensured that composition syllabi would be read acontextually, outside of the classroom environment where the text mediated activity and thus had meaning. To the extent that a syllabus represents the material activities of a writing class, the changes to syllabi mandated by the review process constituted significant modifications to the character and daily practices of our teaching. An argument that alterations to syllabi do not constitute any changes to the class itself would seem a tacit acknowledgement either that the syllabus review process wasn’t meaningful or that our syllabi weren’t.

4 Also see Berlin, who finds that the early motivation for GE was to “safeguard the American way of life” from threats of international fascism (92).

5 During the same time, academic communities fragmented and specialized in the wake of massive shifts in higher education. Newly professionalized, many university groups and communities clashed over the right to define what GE was to be and accomplish, so as it erupted on college campuses, the scope and size of programs varied, embodying distinct local purposes and values. See Gallagher.

6 According to Reardon, Herbert Hawkes similarly argued in 1919 that Columbia’s Contemporary Civilization program would “silence ‘the destructive elements in our society’ by preparing students to ‘meet the
arguments of the opponents of decency and sound government’ and thus to make the college student a ‘citizen, who shall be safe for democracy’” (3).

A few recent discussions of general education argue that there are deep civic and pedagogical links between composition/rhetoric and GE that can help bring increased institutional value to composition work or can mitigate educational commodification by political and business entities (see, e.g., Merrill and Miller; Slevin). This work assumes that a common educational discourse exists between the two fields, one founded in codifying the formal literate practices of the “generally educated.”

Because a majority of the courses he teaches are GE requirements, a colleague who teaches world literatures recently referred to himself in a faculty meeting as “GE Joe.” Similarly, a chair recently described Chico State departments that have many general education courses as “GE fiefdoms.”

**Works Cited**


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