RE-WRITING THE HUMANITIES:
THE WRITING MAJOR’S EFFECT UPON
UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES IN ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS

Calls for Composition Studies to move beyond the “universal requirement” of first-year writing,¹ and toward “a sequenced curriculum of courses that introduce students to discipline-specific principles and practices” (Crowley 9) have been partially realized by the growing number of writing majors. But only partially. Public descriptions of these programs have traditionally focused on developing writing techniques that are useful in a wide variety of careers, rather than on developing the “discipline-specific principles and practices” of our field. As such, less attention has been paid to the ways that this emerging group of majors might—and has indeed begun to—change our disciplinary relationships with English and humanities programs, where (despite the secession of many) most programs still reside.²

I will first provide a brief look at the ways that public representations of undergraduate writing majors have grown beyond claims to production or profession and toward wider definitions of “writing studies.” I will then draw upon the example of the Professional Writing major at York College of Pennsylvania to illustrate how this natural, largely student-driven evolution has begun to carve out a new disciplinary status for writing majors. A funny thing happened on the way to our (rhetorical) forum. As we prepared students for writing professions, they also became interested in the back story, in our shoptalk—i.e., in the scholarly and theoretical bases of our discipline. This interest was not limited to students in the major itself; rather, it included students majoring in other areas of the liberal arts. Our experiences, then, illustrate the potential that writing majors have to influence the disciplines with which we share institutional homes and to introduce undergraduate students to areas of research that, until recently, were reserved for graduate studies.³
WHAT IS A WRITING MAJOR?

The undergraduate writing major has no single shape; it is, rather, an amorphous and still-developing construction that has varied missions, purposes, and course requirements. A brief survey of the public presentations of various programs reveals this diversity. Perhaps the most interesting way to categorize the descriptions and development of writing majors is upon a continuum moving from praxis to gnosis. That continuum is evident not only across program descriptions (i.e., with some focusing upon one or the other), but within the rich—and sometimes schizophrenic—representations of these programs. In most cases, the practical, career-oriented facets of the programs get center stage, speaking to the difficult question that has increasingly plagued English studies and other liberal arts programs as the demographic of college students has shifted dramatically toward career-based educational goals: “what will you do with that major?” (see figure 1). But unlike other technical or pre-professional programs such as Business, Nursing, or Computer Science, writing program descriptions migrate into areas like cultural studies, analysis, theory, and other forms of gnosis—often framed as a corrective or apologia to the impression that our programs are based in vulgar careerism (see figure 2). Other programs (including our own at York College; see appendix 1 for program details) explicitly keep one foot in each world, showing how the liberal arts and practical focuses can co-exist (see figure 3).

It would, of course, be shortsighted not to acknowledge the role of power in this evolution. Our major—and majors nationally—have attracted many talented students who came to the program with a rich mixture of affection for writing (and the liberal arts more generally) and a desire for career and personal rewards. Had the major not gained status by numbers (we became, in just our third year of existence, the largest major in an interdisciplinary department that includes Literary Studies, Secondary Education English, Philosophy, Film Studies, and Foreign Languages), and by its “fit” within an institution that recognizes the need to provide pre-professional training as well as liberal education, we would not have gained a place at the table. After all, when “writing programs” consist only of first-year writing courses and upper division courses that support other majors, their role is still largely seen as that of service.

Writing programs have indeed spent a good deal of time, as demonstrated by the descriptions in figures 2 and 3 above, negotiating between the Scylla of expendability faced by the liberal arts and the Charybdis of a vulgarized professional instrumentality. But there are many reasons why offering profession-based outcomes, while still staking a claim to geographies within liberal education, is more than just a compromise position. The idea of

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a “writing studies” major, nomenclature that has gained an increasing amount of caché in our organization’s conversations, asks students to go beyond the imitation of already-finished professional discourses, and to examine the social constructions placed upon them by their occupational roles. Fortunately, as we learned in the early years of our writing program, student writers bring with them a native desire to consider the larger human functions of writing. It is they who have driven us to back to our disciplinary roots, forcing us to consider the place of undergraduate writing instruction within other humanistic pursuits.

BEYOND WRITING IN THE PROFESSIONS TO WRITING AS A DISCIPLINE

Though originally conceived and marketed as a pre-professional program, the four year-old writing major at York College has begun to assert itself as a site of humanistic inquiry as well as a site of career development. This change in perception has actually—and not surprisingly—been slower among our departmental colleagues than among the students, who have subtly (but firmly) asked that we make room for them in the scholarship of our discipline. By contrast, faculty colleagues within other areas of our English and Humanities Department continue to articulate concerns. One faculty member notes that the Professional Writing major has “taken students away from Literary Studies enrollments and separated our experiences,” worrying that “we may well have to face the question of the emergence of a separate Professional Writing department at some future date.” This same faculty member reported no effect upon the study of literature in his classes, a claim that is at odds with student perceptions noted below. Another faculty member noted that “I’m a little worried, in general, about the erosion of literary studies programs by the far more marketable and ‘useful’ field of professional writing.” She went on to suggest that “our department is a good example of this, insofar as the PW program seems much fresher and better organized and more theoretically sophisticated than the Literary Studies major.” Many of the faculty responses acknowledged that the “career focus” of the writing major was a positive draw, but at the same time something about which they felt “ambivalent.”

When faculty members across the disciplines of our hybrid department do see value in the major, they tend to focus upon the potential for the major toward “professionalizing” liberal arts students. One notes a sense that “the PW major definitely professionalizes writing students more than, in my experience as an undergraduate, English majors typically are. They seem to be more career-focused, with a broader sense of the usefulness of the English major.” But there are concerns as well; one Literary Studies professor captured this cross-current well: “I think these students see themselves as humanities
The Practical Focus:

Many writing majors are marketed through a focus on the major's practical results, including the following:

- career opportunities
- opportunities for experiential learning
- marketable skills in technology
- writing "skills" provided by the major
- writing techniques applicable to a wide variety of practical genres (that is, the study of genre as a means of production, not merely consumption or analysis)
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<tr>
<th>Program / Excerpts of Program Descriptions</th>
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<td><strong>Georgia Southern:</strong> Professional &amp; Technical Writing involves the kinds of writing done in business and industry. . . . The Occupational Outlook Handbook states that the demand for professional and technical writers will increase steadily through at least 2008.</td>
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<td><strong>Eastern Michigan:</strong> The English Department at Eastern Michigan University offers four options for bachelor’s degrees that lead to careers in writing.</td>
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<td><strong>Purdue University:</strong> Professional Writing is housed in the Department of English and is noted for cultivating expertise in writing for the digital workplace. . . . Students have numerous opportunities for internships and coursework in these subjects and gain important experience for the job market and advanced degrees.</td>
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<td><strong>University of Hartford:</strong> Professional and technical writers work in almost every discipline: software and computer industries, business, government, research, and non-profit organizations. These writers are in demand to make complex information available for experts and non-experts in any given field.</td>
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<td><strong>Kutztown University:</strong> Professional writing majors at Kutztown study a range of courses that includes magazine writing, journalism, copy and line editing, and writing for the workplace. These courses and others form a foundation upon which students can tailor their degrees to suit their individual career aspirations.</td>
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<td><strong>Millikin University:</strong> Millikin’s writing major emphasizes experiences in a variety of writing contexts including journalism, professional writing, academic writing, literary writing, editing, publishing, and personal creativity. By learning to shift between these multiple contexts, Millikin’s writing majors are prepared for a wide range of professional and lifelong writing, editing and publishing opportunities.</td>
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<td><strong>Oral Roberts:</strong> From courses like advanced grammar and technical writing to the off-campus internships that give the students hands-on experience in the field of technical communication, this major prepares students for a successful career.</td>
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<td><strong>University of Florida:</strong> In our current information-rich economy, an unprecedented demand now exists for college graduates with excellent communication skills. The Advanced Writing Model provides students with extensive preparation for the variety of writing tasks required of professionals in business, law, government, and administration, as well as of graduate students and educators in all disciplines.</td>
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<td><strong>Michigan State:</strong> The major prepares students for careers in professional editing and publishing, technical writing, information development, and web authoring. It also prepares students for graduate work in rhetoric, writing, technical writing, the teaching of writing, and the study of culture. This writing degree program emphasizes the organizational, disciplinary, and cultural contexts for writing.</td>
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<td><strong>University of New Mexico:</strong> The Professional Writing concentration is for those students interested in careers as technical and professional writers and editors. Students in this concentration learn and practice skills in editing, publishing, website development, technical writing, documentation, and proposal writing, among others.</td>
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<th>Stated Emphases for Writing Major</th>
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<td><strong>The Liberal Arts Focus:</strong></td>
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<td>A growing number of writing majors have stated objectives closer to the more traditional Liberal Arts values expected in English and other humanities-based programs, including such stated outcomes and features as:</td>
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<td>• The ability to analyze discourse and read texts critically (though often explicitly connected with production of professional texts)</td>
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<td>• Attention to the central role of aesthetics and creativity</td>
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<td>• Attention to the interdisciplinarity of knowledge</td>
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<td>• A focus upon cultural studies</td>
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<td>• Studies of rhetorical traditions</td>
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**Figure 2: The Liberal Arts Focus**
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| Eastern Oregon University: | The Bachelor of Arts in English with a discourse studies concentration is designed to help student recognize, analyze, and apply all facets of the writing and reading processes. In order to assist students in engaging, interpreting, and evaluating texts in a variety of genres and modes, courses are designed to help students understand the integration and interplay of language and its variety of expressions. Students discover the overlapping concerns of literary, argumentative, expository, and imaginative writing, and learn to recognize the common links language shares with cultural discourse and diversity. The degree nurtures an appreciation for the production of written and electronic language, with a focus on rhetorical conventions, variety, and the bond the written word shares with oral language. |

| Indiana Wesleyan: | The liberal arts major in writing is designed to prepare students to become outstanding communicators with a high level of proficiency in the use of the written word. The major stresses both the artistic joy of composition and the practical application of writing skills to communication problems in everyday life. |

| Ithaca College: | Because writing is, of course, the expression and analysis of something beyond itself, you will also take 18 to 21 credits in an outside field of your choosing—maybe politics or sociology if you're thinking of a career in journalism, or English literature if you think you could write the next great American novel. |

| St. John Fisher: | Writing majors have the opportunity to become writers in the fullest sense of the word through this focused program in professional writing. . . . A student who chooses the writing concentration moves through a focused program in writing toward these goals: |
| Enhanced ability as a critical reader and writer, able to make, express, and justify reasoned discriminations; |
| A thorough understanding of the writing process, in both its cognitive and practical dimensions; |
| Knowledge of various rhetorical traditions and their links to their cultural contexts |
| Increased versatility as a writer able to analyze the context for writing and respond to it effectively through multiple strategies and voices. |

| Waynesburg College: | The Waynesburg College professional writing degree prepares graduates to use the power and beauty of words to enhance their careers and to express their ideas with clarity, strength and grace. |
Hybrid Descriptions:

Many program descriptions attempt to blend a Humanities-based, rhetorical tradition with the goals of a pre-professional major.

These descriptions, on one hand, illustrate praxis:

- The ability to demonstrate technical editing skills in all work
- The ability to incorporate appropriate visual elements and design in written documents and oral presentations
- The ability to work in appropriate media
- The ability to acquire, evaluate, manage, and use information

And on the other hand, the descriptions reflect more traditional humanities-based approaches to writing studies:

- Understanding of the intersection of technology, information, and knowledge
- Communicating, both orally and in writing, across audiences and cultures
- Addressing issues of ethics in technical communication
- Gaining an awareness of the global nature of technical communication—both culturally and economically

Figure 3. Hybrid Descriptions
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<td><strong>SUNY Courtland:</strong> A Professional Writing degree gives students the chance to have important career-building learning experiences within the context of a well-rounded liberal arts education. In consultation with faculty, students create a professional writing portfolio to show to prospective employers. College graduates who are confident, well-trained communicators have an edge over their peers in the job market.</td>
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<td><strong>Utah State:</strong> The undergraduate Professional and Technical Writing option prepares writers competent in a range of genres from technical to creative writing. Our program provides students with two components: first, a theoretical foundation in rhetoric so that they can assess any writing situation and adapt their writing to the context as audience-aware, self-aware, self-confident writers; and, second, writing practice in a variety of contexts using the most up-to-date tools of technology so that they know both how to write and why they are writing, thus preparing them for the ever-changing job markets of the twenty-first century. An important component of the program is to help students become humanists with ethical standards in various professional contexts. As we designed our own Professional and Technical Writing option, we decided to adopt an Aristotelian framework, wherein the interpretation and production of texts are integrally related activities. Students in the Professional and Technical Writing option take a rhetorical approach to the science and technology of professional communication in all its many forms. They acquire a foundation of knowledge about rhetorical theory, reading theory, and linguistics before taking courses that focus on particular types of writing. While most of its graduates enter the workforce as technical writers, the program defines professional and technical writing broadly enough to allow students to supplement their training in technical communication with courses in the writing of poetry, fiction, drama, or nonfiction essays.</td>
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<td><strong>University of Pittsburgh:</strong> The English major at Pitt is responsive to many of the traditional goals of a liberal arts education: it seeks, that is, to develop a broad critical and historical understanding of influential cultural traditions and to foster a range of reading and writing strategies as well as skills of critical analysis. It prepares students fairly directly for careers in teaching or writing. But the skills and knowledge it imparts are widely useful in numerous business and professional settings.</td>
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<td><strong>Drake University:</strong> Unlike traditional English department curricula, which tend to be organized chronologically (literary history or periodization), generically (literary modes, like comedy or tragedy; or types, like drama, novel, and poetry), or by activity (critical reading OR creative writing), we have shifted our focus from a study of texts as containers of meaning (nuts to crack or puzzles to solve) to a study of the critical thinking process by which writers and readers activate meaning through language.</td>
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students when in fact they shy away from the more ambiguous and less product-driven aspects of the humanities education.” Still another faculty member, a professor of philosophy,” notes that to date “there has been too little overlap between the writing/rhetoric courses and the philosophy courses,” while noting that “my advising [of philosophy majors] has changed and I think I am more aware of career paths for students in the humanities by virtue of seeing the kinds of internships and careers professional writing majors are undertaking.”

Overall, there remains a persistent sense that Professional Writing students are not fully engaged with the “traditional humanities”—i.e., traditional as defined by post-World War II departments that overwrote rhetorical studies—while also acknowledging, however grudgingly, its positive effects on career preparation or academic “skills.” For example, one colleague in Philosophy, while asserting that “it’s not clear to me that the major has altered our understanding of what it means to be a major in English or humanities,” did acknowledge that philosophy students “probably pay more attention to rhetorical issues, especially when studying popular culture, film, and advertising” as a result of the writing major. Another faculty member in Philosophy notes that “students appear more capable of reading primary religious texts and separating style from content as well as demonstrating the ability to see how style informs content and/or opens up the possibilities of a surplus of meaning in primary religious texts” and now “recognize how important writing is in the workplace and how it is exactly those skills that the study of the liberal arts can develop.”

Conversely, students—likely because they have less concern over disciplinary turf—find less reason to worry about writing studies eroding the “humanistic” approach to education from which our discipline has been marginalized. While students are often drawn to the career options offered by the program, once there, they have demonstrated a deep interest in the humanistic pursuits afforded by the disciplines of rhetoric and composition. To illustrate the ways that students have redefined our major’s focus, I will examine two related phenomena: the ways that the writing major has begun to influence the literary studies and philosophy majors, and in turn, the ways that our professional writing and secondary education majors have melded their career focus with the goals of inquiry and scholarship valued within a liberal arts department. In each case, this evolution has been quite natural, a synergistic by-product of our students occupying the same rhetorical and physical topoi (i.e., places).

**The Writing Major’s Impact upon Literary Studies and Philosophy**

Though faculty members in the humanities demonstrate mixed feelings about the writing major, students are markedly less conflicted, reporting
that their research within courses across the humanities has benefited by
their wider understanding of composing processes and rhetorical traditions.
Students, interestingly, attributed these changes not only to courses offered as
part of the writing major, but also to the faculty members whose own areas of
training and research include rhetoric and composition. One Literary Studies
major wrote, “though it was not in a writing course that I was inspired, it was
certainly a professor of writing who has inspired me, extracting my talents
and encouraging me to pursue graduate school and eventually a career in lit-
erature.” Another student noted that “as a Literary Studies major, my writing
classes have allowed me to map the arguments of theoretical and philosophical
texts.” More specifically, the return of rhetoric to the undergraduate experi-
ence—both through specific courses and through faculty and majors whose
research interests lie there—has enriched the array of topics which students
research and upon which they write. For example, students in my own early
modern literature courses have used their understanding of rhetorical traditions
to re-think their approach to texts: one student wrote on the ways in which Mark
Antony’s and Brutus’s funeral orations in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, taken
together, enact Quintilian’s vision of the “good man speaking well”; another
wrote about Cicero, a relatively minor character in that play, illustrating how
his oratory powers made him a significant danger to the conspirators and how
his statements about “construing” meaning were based on sophistic ideas; and
a third created a “webquest” that he could use in his future secondary school
classes, which walked students through rhetorical principles used to elucidate
a Shakespearean text. In each case, rather than seeing rhetoric and literature as
separate categories, students were able to re-situate literature within a rhetorical
tradition (where it resides in classical rhetoric). Another student applied her
learning from our Advanced Composition class to her work on Milton:

Thanks to the careful study of word choice, word order,
and grammar in my Advanced Composition class, I feel I
have a deeper understanding and appreciation of rhetoric.
I recently put this understanding to use when reading John
Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. His use of grammar and syntax is
amazing—the reader falls in love with Satan, because he
can convince you that his ideas are valid. The individual
sentence and its components have become very important
to me as a reader and a future teacher. There is importance
in each mark of punctuation and each word—and when
these are understood, the reader can find a richer value in
the text. . . . It instilled in me a greater sense of love for writing
and literature, and helped me to understand both better.
But students’ use of rhetorical principles goes beyond analysis; because they have experience as reflective producers of writing, they see authorship less as the result of a sacred muse and more as a craft that they themselves use. As one student noted, “without a doubt, [the writing courses] have influenced the way in which I write and the way I read any literature. For instance, if I’m reading and I see that the author has used a dash, I can denote different meanings. It’s almost as if having studied the formula for writing, I can translate it into all facets of reading, writing, and teaching.” Another noted that “the study of writing has furthered my understanding of literature because I am more able to look at a piece and, by understanding more about how the author chose to put the words together, get so much more meaning out of those words.”

An understanding of rhetorical traditions has also had a positive influence upon literature and philosophy students. One student, enacting the relationship between literary and rhetorical theory advocated by John Schilb (in Between the Lines: Relating Composition Theory and Literary Theory), wrote:

The biggest influence the study of rhetoric has had on my research is in any of my writings on Derrida. One can’t write about Derrida unless one realizes the purchase his text has on a continued commitment by the reader to analyze both etymological roots and rhetorical movements. I also believe this to be true whenever I read Žižek. Žižek’s approach to Lacan and Hegel is totally unique; the reader must be able to pay close attention to the way he reads certain texts and the way he is forming his argument.

A Philosophy student also discussed the influence of rhetorical studies upon his work, noting that:

As a Philosophy major, rhetorical theory instilled a greater awareness as to the relationship between philosophy and the rhetorical traditions over the course of history. . . . A philosopher will soon recognize that rhetorical theory enlivens philosophical inquiry as well. Instead of reading Locke or Descartes as merely philosophical, one can read them influencing other elements of society. Conversely, many authors unknown to philosophy majors have an enormous impact on social discourse and should be studied for their many influences.
While there are signs that the existence of our writing major has widened students' understanding of humanistic inquiry (as illustrated above), there are also signs that Professional Writing and English Education majors have benefited by the merging of the liberal arts and profession-based goals within our humanities-based department. Since Professional Writing majors in our program are required to complete a number of literature and humanities courses—and because they are housed in a department with other humanities majors—their experiences illustrate how the liberal arts context guards against a narrow, utilitarian view of language. One professional writing major tied changes in his reading habits to his coursework in rhetoric in ways that belie the sense that Professional Writing students have a limited understanding of writing's place in humanistic traditions:

Much has changed in my attitude, especially now that I have taken rhetorical theory. After reading how philosophers, teachers, and orators of the past and present have discussed rhetoric, I've gained a better understanding of its purposes and importance in life. Rhetoric is about using language to communicate effectively, and it really does have a long, rich tradition of being tied to the search for truth. Moreover, rhetoric transcends disciplinary boundaries. Film, science, law, and every other field of study must use techniques of rhetoric to send a message, persuade people, and reach a desired audience.

Similarly, another Professional Writing major found connections between her study of writing and other humanistic traditions: "In all of my other courses, I usually find some sort of application for my writing. Literature offers examples of various writing styles and plot developments to compare to my own. I have taken a Human Nature philosophy course and am currently taking a biology course and both offer unique concepts which could serve as fodder for fictional stories and nonfiction." In her research, this student brought together her studies of Quintilian in Rhetorical Theory and her study of composition pedagogy in our Teaching and Tutoring Writing course to write a paper on "the theory behind teaching writing through discourse analysis." In this way, the writing major supplied an architectonic for her studies, allowing her to cross-reference the work done across the liberal arts and sciences.
Still another Professional Writing major, a peer tutor in our writing center, discussed ways that her training in rhetoric has helped her to tutor others who are writing about literature—suggesting potential influences upon the pedagogy of “English teachers”:

They come to me seeking help with rhetorical analyses, and although they can dissect and summarize the literature they’re analyzing and then identify passages that contain rhetorical devices, they often show little to no other understanding of rhetoric. I ask students to identify what rhetorical devices are at work—ethos, pathos, and logos. But I also ask them to explain how and why these rhetorical devices are useful to the author. I think this is key, and conveying this idea to my peers has strengthened my own understanding of rhetoric.

Rather than viewing her education as narrow and career-driven—as some of our faculty colleagues have suggested—she describes the experience as “well-rounded . . . especially in the various genres and styles of writing.” She describes her education in terms that are clearly markers of a liberal education:

Professor Walters [a Professional Writing faculty member] often says “Writing is thinking,” and I agree. Writing goes far beyond sentences and grammar. It has to do with ideas and curiosities. It’s an attempt to understand our world—and ourselves. Writers aren’t just writers; we’re also observers. We make sense of things we don’t understand and make senseless the things we think we do understand. It’s not just a career or a hobby or a course of study, but a way of seeing the world.

It is hard to imagine a more eloquent description of the humanistic tradition—this from a professional writing major.

English Education, too, has benefited from the rich mixture of experiences with a writing program that is housed within a humanities-based context—and by interactions with writing majors who have developed an interest in writing pedagogy. The post-World War II history of educating “English teachers” for our secondary schools has, after all, been no less career-driven or pre-professional than narrowly-defined writing majors; it has largely been about learning the technologies of literary criticism and the strictures of standardized written English—emphases only exacerbated by the culture of quantifiable, standardized-test based assessment. Though more recent literary theories
have filtered, albeit slowly, into secondary education curricula, the pedagogies for literature based upon formalisms such as the "old New Criticism" still persist—largely because they provide a technology for literary studies with a distinct terminology (plot, characterization, setting, irony, and so on), and which allows for a study of literature that is standardized, assessable, and easy to develop into curricular materials. This hermetic system of teaching literature is completed by the influence of current-traditional rhetoric, which values an easily-assessable set of outcomes. For these reasons, the study of "English" in preparation for teaching becomes a type of closed system, wherein a priori principles of literary value become not only a method of reading, but also a curriculum for writing—largely about literature. In such a paradigm, writing in the English classroom becomes a type of apprenticeship in producing literary criticism, often to the exclusion of the rich array of rhetorical occasions that are valued by Composition Studies.

The introduction of writing studies into the English department, however, has begun to break this cycle in ways that the influence of recent literary theories has not. The existence of rhetoric/composition as a discipline that is visible to students through courses in the professional writing major—and faculty who are defined by that specialization—has provided an alternative narrative of authorship for students, a narrative that treats composition pedagogy as an area of inquiry rather than a fixed professional system into which they are socialized.

Collaborations with our college writing center (under the direction of Cynthia Crimmins), and the development of a course in the teaching and tutoring of writing, has been perhaps the widest conduit for composition theory and practices to find their way into the ethos of what it means to "teach English." This course, because it has been populated by a mixture of Professional Writing, English Education, and Literary Studies majors, has given students a common geographic, as well as a disciplinary, topos that brings together gnosis and praxis. In that space, students not only read composition and writing center theory, but become paraprofessionals through hands-on experience in our composition classes and writing center.

Though the course in teaching and tutoring writing began as a way to train tutors and to supplement the methods courses in our Education department, perhaps the most surprising facet of this course has been the disciplinary scholarship and activity it has prompted in students. Most simply stated, the course has introduced "English" students to areas of research that reach beyond conventional paradigms for literature-based research and pedagogy. Because composition theory is rooted in practices with which students have had a good deal of experience, and because teaching writing was a tangible, professional outcome, students found a pragmatic base from which to theorize a position
within our disciplinary work—enacting the mixture of profession-based and liberal arts inquiry driven by the growth of “writing studies.”

Among the many effects of involving undergraduates in composition and writing center practices, perhaps most important and positive has been the growth of the inquiry-based community that students developed after completing the course. Many students, rather than merely finishing the course and taking on paid positions as tutors in our writing center, approached us with research ideas for independent studies, for internships involving writing pedagogy, for honors program projects based in our disciplines, and for information about graduate study in rhetoric and composition. The rich array of activities inspired by this course—activities carried out not only by education majors, but also by majors in Professional Writing and Literary Studies as well—provide rich examples of the synergy that can be created when the majors in all these areas come to see humanistic inquiry as their common geography rather than as separate forms of career preparation. Students took interest in the types of projects that rhetoric and composition faculty conduct, even asking to act as research assistants in our work. That is not to say that the Teaching and Tutoring Writing course was itself responsible for all of this activity; in fact, the full course of studies in Professional Writing—courses in rhetorical theory, advanced composition, editing, writing for the Web, etc.—all motivated the work that students planned and carried out. Still, our writing center has become a hub of scholarly as well as physical activity, a geographic and disciplinary space in which students have created a laboratory for humanistic inquiry. This new version of “professionalization” goes beyond vulgar careerism, developing students who are not merely training for future jobs, but for ongoing humanistic inquiry within those career fields. An overview of a few of the projects and initiatives taken on by students serves to illustrate the ways in which gnostics and praxis merged in ways that have the potential to drive a more engaged and vital version of the liberal arts department.

One student, Molly, developed an internship working with our writing center director and one of our developmental writing teachers, acting as a tutor for students in the course. After working with an ESL student who became overly dependent upon her, she then conducted research on theories related to dependent writers and developed a paper on the topic that she presented at our Student Scholars’ Day as well as at the MidAtlantic Writing Centers Association (MAWCA) conference. Molly has recently been hired as supervisor of a high school writing center and is currently conducting research in a graduate school seminar on the relationship between the move away from formal grammar instruction and the growth of writing centers. Another student, Jaclyn, took on the task of developing a writing center that served students in grades 7-12 for a local day school. She established a policy manual based upon writ-
ing center theory, trained peer tutors at the school, and acted as administra-
tor for the writing center. Based upon that work, Jaclyn studied the ways in
which students and tutors interacted, delivering a presentation at the MAWCA
conference called “A Linguistic Analysis of the Values of Directive and Non-
Directive Tutoring Approaches to Tutoring.” This study, too, had its roots in
experiential learning. She observed interactions among tutors and students,
noting the ways in which directive and non-directive tutoring were used, and
the situations within which they were most effective. She then researched
theories of collaborative and non-directive writing instruction from composi-
tion and writing center theory, testing the validity of those theories by using
transcripts of tutoring sessions. A third student, Cate (a Literary Studies major
who also completed a minor in the Professional Writing Program), conducted
an honors program project that analyzed linguistic patterns (and especially
the use of personal pronouns) across tutoring sessions in writing and in the
sciences. Her study has served her well: as a writing sample for applications
to graduate programs in rhetoric and composition (resulting in admission to
four top-notch programs with offers of fellowships and assistantships); as a
presentation at the 2007 CCCC; and as a forthcoming publication.

The success of these research projects has opened the door for research
among other students as well. One Professional Writing Major, Anna, acted
as my research assistant for a study of high school students’ attitudes toward
secondary and college writing; a Secondary Education major, Jenny, has begun
a similar study of high school students’ writing practices, a project inspired
by her work in the teaching and tutoring writing course and as a tutor in the
Writing Center. And, based upon the growing student interest, Writing Center
Director Cynthia Crimmins is piloting a Writing Fellows program, in which
students will work with students and faculty in specific sections of first-year
writing—a program that has already begun to breed a whole new wave of
student research projects.

This student research, which developed at the intersection between
profession-based interests and humanistic inquiry, goes well beyond the ex-
pectations we had for our course and for our program. Those projects, and
the students who have undertaken them, have demonstrated the potential for
expanding our concepts of “humanistic” research beyond the boundaries that
sometimes constrict it.

CONCLUSION: WRITING STUDIES IN THE LIBERAL ARTS DEPARTMENT

Though writing majors are sometimes treated as pragmatic intruders
among the humanities, literary studies has much to gain from re-membering
its place within those rhetorical traditions. Our students’ achievements under-
score the growing understanding among writing majors that liberal inquiry
need not be mutually exclusive with profession-based goals, lending credence to the expanding mission of writing majors seen in the program descriptions surveyed above. However, this conclusion will not be an easy sell, nor is it intuitive. If we recall comments about the writing program by other faculty in our department, such as “I think these students see themselves as humanities students when in fact they shy away from the more ambiguous and less product-driven aspects of the humanities education,” or worries that the power that comes with writing majors’ success will erode the “traditional humanities” (excluding rhetoric by some unknown formula of what constitutes the humanities), we must recall also that the student research described above may not impress those who find theory somehow superior to practice.

No matter, really. As our experiences have shown, evolution does not require institutional approval to occur. More important, perhaps, is finding ways as writing faculty and administrators to nurture our commitment to the humanities through writing majors. Developing undergraduate majors that prepare writers for productive careers while at the same time enacting reflective, humanist practices is perhaps among the most crucial challenge we face at this point in the evolution of writing studies. Yet, if we truly believe in rhetoric as a methodology for analyzing as well as enacting situated knowledge, as a mode of invention as well as delivery, as important to citizenship as well as to career; and, if we are willing to follow our students’ lead in the evolution toward the writing major’s new place in humanistic inquiry; then, the writing major has great potential to widen the scope of humanistic education.
APPENDIX I. YORK COLLEGE PROFESSIONAL WRITING MAJOR
DESCRIPTION AND REQUIREMENTS
(from the York College Undergraduate Catalog)

With advances in technology and new management structures, the need for skilled writers and communicators within various organizations continues to grow, both nationally and locally. As a result, professional writing has become one of the fastest-growing areas of English studies. A major in Professional Writing combines the broad-based liberal arts education offered by all of our department's programs with the practical skills and career opportunities that can lead to a fulfilling and successful future. The Bachelor of Arts Degree in Professional Writing at York College is designed to prepare students for a wide range of careers. It is excellent preparation for students interested in work as writers or communications specialists in fields such as publishing, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporate communications, non-profit and social-service organizations, health care, finance, the arts, etc. It is also among the most valued courses of study for those interested in post-graduate education in English or rhetoric, law, technical writing, or towards the Masters of Fine Arts in a variety of writing fields. And, in conjunction with our creative writing minor, the major can be useful for those who are interested in writing fiction, non-fiction, poetry, or drama.

The courses for the major in Professional Writing are designed to give students a broad base of writing skills. Courses are organized into five general categories:

- courses in language theory
- courses in practical application of writing skills
- courses giving students a hands-on career experience and asking them to reflect upon that experience
- courses in a field related to their career aspirations, and
- foundation courses in the liberal arts

Requirements for Graduation:

Required Major courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WRT210</td>
<td>Writing in Professional Cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRT225</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRT305</td>
<td>Rhetorical Theory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REWITING THE HUMANITIES 33
LIT310 Language and Literature
WRT315 Advanced Composition
WRT320 Writing for the Web
WRT410 Professional Editing
WRT450 Experiential Learning (on-site work experience as a professional communicator)
WRT480 Senior Seminar in Professional Writing

• PLUS 6 credits of Writing Electives

English and Humanities Electives: 12 credits beyond the required courses above, chosen from the various offerings of the English and Humanities Department. At least six credits of the 12 must be in Literature.

Minor: All Professional Writing majors are required to complete a minor in a field related to their career interests, to be chosen in consultation with an advisor. This requirement allows students to devote focused study to an area within which you may pursue work as a writer. For example, a student interested in writing for industry might minor in Business, a student interested in working in web design/copywriting might minor in Visual Communications, and a student interested in writing for a social service organization might minor in Human Services.

Notes

1 See, for example, such calls by Sharon Crowley in Composition in the University, Kathleen Yancey in her 2004 CCCC Chair’s Address, “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” and David Fleming in “Rhetoric as a Course of Study.”

2 This is especially true in undergraduate-focused institutions. As Linda Bergmann has noted, the distinction between literature and composition fields “is very different . . . in smaller institutions, where composition is an undergraduate course or two, not a graduate program, and where all or most of the literature faculty teach composition.” This essay, using the example of a writing major at an undergraduate institution like York College, explores what happens when the curriculum expands beyond that “course or two.”

3 This claim is made specifically in the description of the St. Edward’s writing program: “The English-Writing major at St. Edward’s University carries above-average prestige because there are only a handful of such programs
at the undergraduate level in universities across the U.S. Students can get a masters or doctorate degree in a major such as ours (a Rhetoric and Composition M.A. and Ph.D.), but not a bachelors degree.”

4 Many of these descriptions are drawn from the list of writing majors maintained at Drew University by Sandra Jamieson (with Doug Downs), available at http://www.depts.drew.edu/composition/majors.html.

5 Demographic shifts indicate the changing motives of the present college population. Perhaps driven by open enrollment policies and wider access to higher education, student interest in both career and monetary success has increased since the 1980’s. In 1980, 40% of women and 43% of men “said they went to college to prepare themselves for a career,” up from 21% and 31% respectively just a decade earlier (American Demographics, March 1987). By 1990, 72% of college students cited making more money their reason for attending college.

6 See, for example, the discussion of the pitfalls and potential of the “service” category by Daniel Mahala and Jody Swilky in “Remapping the Geography of Service,” where they note that “The problem is that such institutional definitions and pressures largely escape scrutiny when most subject to them are faculty members with the least institutional power to interrogate them, or when those pressures are regarded as shaping only the most marginal work of the discipline.”

7 Tim Peeples, in his Preface to Professional Writing and Rhetoric, argues for making “the field’s rhetorical discussions accessible to undergraduates and entry-level masters students” as “the field expands ‘up’ from service-oriented courses and ‘down’ from advanced graduate programs”—something that the writing major at his home institution, Elon University, has moved toward enacting. My own text, Composing a Life’s Work: Writing, Citizenship, and Your Occupation, similarly asks students to interrogate, rather than imitate, the discourses of various occupations.

8 I wish to express thanks to my students and colleagues in York College’s English and Humanities Department for their honest and thoughtful responses to queries about the effect of our writing major, which have greatly enriched this piece.

9 See my discussion on the links between literary studies and current traditional rhetoric in “Composition, Literary Studies, and the End(s) of Civic Education,” in Linda Bergmann and Edith Baker, Composition and/or Literature: The End(s) of Education.

WORKS CITED


———. “Composition, Literary Studies, and the End(s) of Civic Education.” Bergmann and Baker 17-35.


