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CURRICULAR ACTIVISM: THE WRITING MAJOR AS COUNTERDISCOURSE

Compositionists have come to recognize the importance of majors in writing for the field's disciplinary claims. As he outlines the basic structure of an independent writing department, Barry M. Maid contends, "If an independent writing program is going to be a real academic department, it needs a major" (458). Robert A. Schwegler addresses not just the writing department but the discipline of writing itself:

The widespread view that literature is a subject matter but that writing is a skill has tremendous ideological force, and this ideological force has created a curricular imbalance with direct and dire consequences for students, teachers, and the academy. What is needed now to build, or rebuild, our discipline is the ability to conceptualize writing courses as addressing fields of discursive, social activity. (25)

This vision of writing contrasts sharply—and ironically—with that of literary theorist Jonathan Culler. Schwegler describes the entrenched definition of writing "as a skill that is largely impervious to scholarly analysis" and explains that this definition has historically imposed tight restrictions on the development of writing curricula (26). As if to illustrate Schwegler's point, Culler imagines an English major based on writing yet describes the work of writing instruction exclusively in terms of skill development:

One could imagine organizing the English major around writing: to major in English is to major in writing; to study writing and its rhetorical structures, from the simplest to most complex; and to practice it, whether in the development of critical argument and assessment of evidence or in imitation of literary genres (creative writing courses might

actually take that form rather than subscribe to an ideology of self-expression). (90-91).

But the English major, argues Culler, also needs visual, historical, and cognitive/moral components (91-92). For that, of course, he does not turn to writing courses.

The development of a writing major at any institution is fettered by this ideological baggage, this notion that writing instruction is exclusively skill-based and that it is to be administered only to those with “substandard” writing skills. As they design, report on, and theorize about writing majors, compositionists have articulated rationales, design principles, and strategies for navigating the institutional approval process. As I’ve written elsewhere, faculty interests, students’ needs, and disciplinary paradigms all figure into most writing programs’ calculations as they design a writing major (“History”). Another factor commonly considered is institutional constraints: what will “fly” with the out-of-department decision-makers—the administrators and committees whose approval must be secured? (see Schwalm). Yet another factor is the scrutiny to which the writing program will be subjected when it proposes a major: because writing programs are chronically vulnerable in their institutions, they are sometimes loathe to make themselves visible by raising issues that will provide critics with a forum for a new round of assaults on the program, its instructors, its students, or its curriculum.

These are legitimate concerns, but they do not constitute the entire picture. A factor not often considered is the possibility that proposing the writing major provides an opportunity for curricular activism, a moment in which compositionists can seize the microphone, and the stage itself, to circulate informed, nuanced, proactive visions of writing, of student writers, and of writing instruction—visions that exceed the skill-based ideology of literacy instruction.

In the introduction to *Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum*, I argued that instituting an advanced curriculum benefits not only the students enrolled in its courses but also the teachers and students of the first-year sequence: the existence of an advanced curriculum challenges the expectation that “one or two required courses [can] provide all the needed writing instruction for an entire university” (“History” xxi). Here I extend that argument into the realm of ideology: The process of establishing a writing major can challenge the traditional normative vision of writing instruction and offer in its stead a representation of writing as a discipline and its instruction as a part of the intellectual work of the institution.

The writing major, I believe, can enact what Tracy Carrick and I have called curricular activism (Howard and Carrick 255-56): while the writing

major and its courses should be designed in respectful dialogue with a range of literacy ideologies, it can also be explicitly and overtly constructed around an egalitarian literacy ideology that coheres with disciplinary scholarship. Drawing on principles developed by the WPA Network for Media Action (NMA), compositionists who are proposing a writing major can prepare in advance for what amounts to an institutional public relations campaign. Then, once the writing major is successfully established, it can continue to function as an instrument of institutional activism that accomplishes what writing across the curriculum or first-year composition cannot: the demonstration of writing as an intellectual discipline rather than as a means of inflicting discipline upon the bodies of students. The desired result of this institutional activism is changed perceptions of writing and writing instruction, perceptions that do not participate in a class-based literacy hierarchy.

To explore these possibilities, I reviewed the rhetoric of websites established for U.S. writing majors, visiting each of the sites linked on a list compiled by Doug Downs and Sandra Jamieson (see Works Cited for URL). The websites listed typically detail the requirements for the major or minor, such as required courses and the grade point average students must maintain. Some, such as Illinois State ("Minor in Writing"), Cal State Long Beach ("Option"), and Eastern Kentucky ("Undergraduate Programs"), provide only this information.

Other institutions use their websites to promote the value of the major or minor. The University of Rhode Island page, for example, opens with the question "Should I Minor in Writing?" and then offers this answer: "It's worth considering! A writing minor pairs very well with a number of majors. Employers are always looking for graduates with a strong background in written communication" ("Writing Minor"). Some sites use multiple media to advance the rationale: the James Madison home page loads each time with a different vignette, usually a picture of a student writing minor, accompanied by a brief written testimonial to the value of the curriculum ("Welcome"); and the Syracuse site includes QuickTime clips of student testimonials ("A Minor").

All of these promotional messages seem to be aimed at an audience of students, presumably to recruit them. Kathleen McCormick and Donald C. Jones make the challenges of recruitment explicit: "After four years, we have not yet been as successful as we had hoped in marketing our program to our students as a single major, but we are achieving some success with marketing it as a double major." Similarly, the rationales for the major are focused almost exclusively on the ways in which students will benefit. One of the benefits, as Arthur W. Shumaker testifies, is self-knowledge. Shumaker also lists WAC benefits of the writing major: students of "English composition"

are better positioned to work in other disciplinary fields. A third major benefit is economic: as the University of Rhode Island observes, good writers are employable (“Writing Minor”).

While acknowledging the benefits that the writing major offers students, the scholarship on the writing major articulates a conflicted relationship with the larger university. From Shumaker’s 1981 “How Can a Major in Composition Be Established?” to John Ramage’s 2000 “From Profession to Discipline: The Politics of Establishing a Writing Concentration,” compositionists have imagined the relation of the writing major to the university as one of supplication: the institution is (or isn’t) “welcoming” of the major. In terms of its institutional relationships, therefore, implementing a writing major becomes a how-to question: How can the major be established?

This is a legitimate, compelling concern. The difficulties of establishing a writing major often exceed the challenges of establishing a major in, say, geography or film studies. As Susan Miller has argued, the teaching of writing—its students, its instructors, and its curricula—has traditionally been subordinated within the English department. Nor does removing writing instruction from English remedy the problem, because that problem is grounded in literacy hierarchies whereby U.S. educational systems preserve social privilege.

Insofar as it is commonly imagined, writing instruction in the university functions as one of the systems of difference that Pierre Bourdieu argues must be denaturalized. Hierarchical structures of social difference produce the fetishization of FYC as a literacy gatekeeper, and they inform the institutional structures that allow students to “test out of” required FYC, on the presumption that some writers have nothing more to learn about writing; in the association of FYC with writing instruction, as if nothing else of important can or does take place by way of writing instruction; in the staffing of FYC with legions of undercompensated part-timers, many of whom have no background or training in composition and rhetoric but who, by virtue of their own high literacy, are assumed to be qualified to teach writing.

Evidence of literacy hierarchies abounds, too, in the mass media, as the following headlines from CBSNews.com, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette*, *Kansas City Star*, *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, demonstrate:

- “Writing in Schools Is Found Both Dismal and Neglected” (Lewin)
- “Educators Demand Upgrade in Writing” (Strauss)
- “Why Johnny Can’t Write, Even Though He Went to Princeton” (Bartlett)

- “Young Plagiarists Beware: Teachers Go High-Tech to Unmask Cheating Students in Their Deceitful Web” (Soderlund)
- “Teachers Turn Tables in Plagiarism Battle” (Jackson and Laird)
- “Beyond File-Sharing, A Nation of Copiers” (Leland)
- “What Corporate America Can’t Build: A Sentence” (Dillon)
- “Too Many Workers Are Bad Writers” (Read)

The cultural context for the writing major is one of normative instruction (Musgrove; De Lancey), one in which writing instructors or programs are readily described as abrogating their responsibilities (Bartlett); in which students are depicted as cheaters (Soderlund); in which instructors and students are pitted against each other in battle (Jackson & Laird); and in which the result is a nation of incompetent, unethical writers (De Lancey; Dillon; Leland; Musgrove; Read). Compositionists who attempt to do anything but remediate the shortcomings of their charges may be subject to the kind of derision that Mark Bauerlein brought to bear on participants in the 2006 Conference on College Composition and Communication: in his March 2006 weblog, Bauerlein criticized paper titles he found to be too theoretical or too playful. Compositionists may also be subject, too, to the kinds of retribution that Bauerlein longs for: “All the participants should hope for is that nobody with any decision-making power gets wind of them. They might find their funding streams drying up.”

It is in this environment that we work to establish writing majors, but it is this environment that the writing major itself can help remediate. To the question of how to establish the writing major within the hierarchical university, I would add another: How can the establishment of the writing major contribute to changing the hierarchical university?

I do not ask this question lightly, nor idealistically. I realize that far more than a writing major is needed to remediate naturalized systems of difference in institutionalized writing instruction. Yet I do believe in the potential for individual and, especially, collective agency in effecting change. Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem describe an annual Celebration of Student Writing that has “change[d] public perceptions of students and of student writing” at their institution (127), and McCormick and Jones describe the results of changes in institutional attitudes:

[T]he status of our first-year courses has risen across the institution as our colleagues in other departments have increasingly come to recognize the serious, extensive scholarship of writing studies. We think it is fair to say that more of our colleagues in other disciplines regard working with us now

as engaging in a partnership among equals than would have been the case if we had only taught first-year writing. (40)

These are indeed important advances. If, however, such changes are based entirely in the required FYC, they take place within the frame that is to be changed, a frame in which writing instruction is entirely normative, rather than an activity from which all writers at all times might benefit. If all the efforts to expand the institution's notion of writing instruction take place within the frame established at Harvard in the late nineteenth century, a frame in which writing instruction occurs as the result of writers' inadequacies, that frame is being reinforced even as it is being challenged.

It is in this context that I describe the existence of the writing major as a form of institutional activism, not just on behalf of the writing program itself but on behalf of all the students—all the writers—in the university. What is to be remediated by the existence and visibility of the writing major is not the students in writing classes but rather the normative representation of writing instruction, a representation that naturalizes class discrimination. I do not mean that those who espouse normative literacy ideology are deliberately exercising class discrimination; rather, I mean that normative literacy ideology can contribute to class discrimination in ways that are invisible to all participants. Cultural hegemony, John Trimbur points out, "is rarely imposed from above. It has to be negotiated locally in the practices and procedures of everyday life, naturalized as a matter of what we take to be common sense" (280). Mike Rose details the naturalization of class hierarchy in institutional representations of writing and writing instruction. Institutional language about writing instruction, he says, conveys five reductive, behaviorist ideas about writing:

Writing ability is judged in terms of the presence of error and can thus be quantified. Writing is a skill or a tool rather than a discipline. A number of our students lack this skill and must be remediated. In fact, some percentage of our students are, for all intents and purposes, illiterate. Our remedial efforts, while currently necessary, can be phased out once the literacy crisis is solved in other segments of the educational system. (341)

The assumptions about writing, writing instruction, and student need that inform these ideas, says Rose, "keep . . . writing instruction at the periphery of the curriculum." Yet these assumptions are of long standing and are tenacious. They are also exclusionary (341-42).

I propose, therefore, that compositionists add an explicit objective when implementing the writing major: seizing the opportunity to circulate a counter-representation of writing instruction. In an era of increasing accountability, in which administrations and legislatures increasingly intervene in and dictate the terms of educational endeavors, departments and programs may experience increasing difficulty in teaching what they know matters, in ways that they know are effective. Our best response is to intervene in and affect public perceptions of writing instruction, so that we find ourselves less in conflict with our programs' powerbrokers and so that we are offering alternatives to hierarchical literacy ideologies. The public presence of the writing major offers a potentially important opportunity for counter-discourse. Instantiating the writing major can be a valuable public relations tool on behalf of the major itself, the writing program that sponsors it, and all the students in the university.

"Public relations" is of course a controversial concept today. Siva Vaidhyanathan raises a concern that commands attention in contemporary culture: the state and its institutions, he notes, have taken over some of the functions of the democratic public sphere. Instead of the public sphere, we have public relations. Vaidhyanathan notes that in Jürgen Habermas's analysis this phenomenon amounts to a "'refeudalization' of the public sphere" (191-92).

In its most extreme form, public relations becomes "astroturfing," which *Disinfopedia* describes as "the instant manufacturing of public support for a point of view in which either uninformed activists are recruited or means of deception are used to recruit them" ("Astroturf"). And its opposite, I would argue, might be the Rogerian argument, through which all the participants explore the available possibilities and strive for an equitable, reasonable position. With so much of composition pedagogy and theory oriented toward Rogerian argument and community service, a public-relations approach to persuasion might too easily be associated with the extreme utilitarianism of astroturfing.

The Network for Media Action, however, offers palatable, even appealing alternatives. Sponsored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators and predicated on the need for compositionists' involvement in public deliberations on literacy issues, the WPA-NMA asks, "Tired of headlines like these?" and lists obnoxious titles such as "Universities' Dirty Secret: Post-Secondary Institutions Dumbing Down First-Year Courses" (WPA Network).

The solutions offered by the WPA-NMA involve sharing information with other rhetoricians; writing not only letters to editors but also media stories themselves; and participating in publicity campaigns. Underlying such moves are assumptions that our classroom instruction and scholarly publications are insufficient to change public images of writing and writing in-

struction; that inaccurate public images of writing and writing instruction can adversely affect our classroom instruction and thus our ability to teach writing well; and that compositionists must themselves find ways to affect public perceptions. Such activism will not be accomplished by good classroom instruction and scholarly publications alone but by strategic public discourse, grounded in principles of ethical public relations (as distinct from astroturfing). Ellen Cushman asks, "How can we change institutional structures that devalue the teaching of first-year composition, that exploit the teachers of first-year composition, and that underestimate the disciplinary knowledge in the field of rhetoric and composition?" (121). One answer, I believe, is a highly articulated, visible major in writing.

A well-publicized, well-designed writing major is itself a public relations tactic, a material counterdiscourse to normative literacy ideology. Not only does the major need to exist, but others in the institution need to see it and be aware of it. And they need to be aware of it as a counterdiscourse to normative writing instruction. The writing major needs to be presented and enacted in ways that deliberately challenge normative literacy ideology, diminishing the possibility that observers might interpret the new major within that frame, as Culler does.

In addition to the strategies endorsed by NMA, websites offer a ready tool for pursuing this public relations campaign. Barclay Barrios has argued that the website for a writing program can be a pedagogical tool, offering information and materials that students need. I would add that the website for a writing major can also be a public relations tool, offering the intramural public a representation of writing and writing instruction that exceeds and challenges the hierarchical ideology in which writing instruction socializes the Great Unwashed.

I have previously argued for the need for multimedia presentations of the work of the writing program (Howard, "WPAs"). While I respect Barrios's premise of aiming departmental publications at students rather than at institutions, I believe these publications can and do have multiple audiences. To ignore those audiences is to miss an important opportunity. Barrios expresses a desire to avert institutional colonization by making students the audience for his program's website. Fair enough. But a department can exert agency within its institution by recognizing its multiple audiences and working to educate all of them, including administrators and faculty in the institution. The public relations objective should be an explicit agenda in the design of the writing major site.

The project is not an easy one. Douglas Hesse observes, "The wider academy can—in fact, for certain economic reasons, must—(mis)understand composition studies as freshman composition, an elementary skills-providing

activity it deems bereft of useful research beyond studies of student proficiency and teacher efficacy" (122). And for these very reasons, the project of curricular activism must be pursued at every opportunity. The implementation of a writing major is a very fine opportunity indeed.

Nor can the project be pursued through a universalized boilerplate. Rather, each writing program will need to consider its local context carefully, considering how target audiences might best be reached. The framing of the courses may contribute to the argument for a disciplinary rather than normative understanding of writing instruction. The description for the senior-level course, "Authors, Writers, Heroes," that I am now teaching reads,

Students in this course will develop their own descriptions of the ways in which U.S. culture represents the author, the writer, the student, and the plagiarist, asking why these figures are so important to our culture; how an understanding of these figures enables a greater understanding of the culture that sustains them; and how students might use these understandings to attain their own authorial goals" ("Authors").

The sample syllabus accompanying my program's proposal for a writing major is that of another senior-level course, Adam Banks's "Introduction to African American Rhetoric," whose description argues, in part, "African American rhetoric is the study of the persuasive practices of individuals and groups of African Americans in the collective struggle for freedom, justice, and full participation in American society on their own terms" (Banks). These and other courses in our offerings inescapably contradict the skills-based, normative vision of writing that has long prevailed in the academy. So do symposia; publications from and celebrations of advanced student writers; and websites that depict the array of intellectual work accomplished in the writing major—and not just the skills acquired or jobs secured by graduates.

At every institution there is an array of opportunities for the writing program to use its major to deliberately advance a rhetorically sophisticated vision of writing, student writers, and writing instruction. Those opportunities are a benefit of establishing a writing major, and seizing them will benefit not only the major but FYC, too, which will more readily be seen as part of an open-ended course of instruction rather than as a dumping-ground for the grammatically challenged. Most important, this curricular activism counters the will to regulation that has too long defined the work of composition and rhetoric.

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