Not long ago, Robert Scholes noted in *The Rise and Fall of English* that enrollments in English concentrations were dropping at most colleges. He suggested we re-evaluate our mission, asking if we are preparing ourselves, our graduate students, and our undergraduates for the critical reading and writing skills needed in our time. This was not a call for service learning or remedial skill building, but rather a re-appreciation of method. If students felt a disconnect between the passive consumption of literary/theoretical texts and the skills they needed to compete in the world, then we as teachers needed to reconnect what made a text useful with how it worked.

Prompted by an external review, in 1997 the English faculty at Brown University (including Scholes) took this challenge seriously and decided to transform a disorganized assortment of composition courses, taught mostly by graduate students, into a coherent writing program, taught primarily by PhDs who were active nonfiction writers. We recognized that most expository writing programs to date had not linked the process of writing in the academy to the nonfiction writing that many of us went on to produce; we acknowledged our students’ growing demand for such a link. So, we designed a program tailored to serve both the academic needs of Brown students and their professional aspirations. Due to Brown’s policy against mandating courses outside a student’s concentration and its encouragement of creative experimentation, the Nonfiction Writing Program (originally called the Expository Writing Program) was constructed as a small but deep cluster of nonfiction courses, meant to draw students from all disciplines, including English. Our goal was to move the self-selected student from sophisticated academic reading and writing courses to the disciplines of journalism and creative nonfiction. The emphasis in each course is on the “emerging” writer. The student is an apprentice in the process of critical reading, defining a problem, reflecting on
sources and drafts. Carefully they craft engaging, intelligent stories of life and intellectual journey that analyze, instruct, and persuade a general as well as scholarly audience.

Now an English concentrator at Brown can “focus” in Nonfiction Writing. They can take advanced writing workshops in the persuasive academic essay, journalism, and creative nonfiction—which includes the lyric essay, literary journalism, memoir, travel writing, historical narrative, science writing, and digital narrative. They can write an honors thesis of collected academic essays, feature articles, or prose poems; a memoir or biography; or a critical analysis of the evolving field of creative nonfiction. The top prize in 2006 for creative nonfiction written by an undergraduate went to a memoir in the form of a nonfiction graphic novel.

Early signs in our Nonfiction Writing Program at Brown show students are hungry for the skills we teach—writing that links academic analysis and research with nonfiction storytelling. Of the 3,005 undergraduates who took courses in the English Department in 2004–2005, 26% came for Nonfiction Writing courses. Among English concentrators of the class of 2005, 21% chose Nonfiction as their focus. In 2002 there was one inaugural honors thesis; in 2006, seven students wrote honors projects in Nonfiction Writing. Students are seizing the opportunity to be an apprentice nonfiction writer in a serious way, not just in a course or two. So far this seems an encouraging response to an English Department’s bold redesign so it stays useful to the world beyond the academy. The demand seems only to grow.

**WORK CITED**