“What Would Happen if Everybody Behaved as I Do?”: May Bush, Randall Jarrell, and the Historical ‘Disappointment’ of Women WPAs

Kelly Ritter

The feminized labor of composition studies is usually seen as being in service of, or subservient to, literary studies, ignoring composition’s disaffection position against other fields, specifically creative writing. Viewing composition studies’ complex labor histories in tandem with the meteoric rise of creative writing allows for a new way of historicizing writing instruction and writing program administrator successes and failures. Analyzing WPA work through an archival case study of one woman’s college faculty postwar, specifically the WPA May Bush and the poet Randall Jarrell, illustrates how the disciplinary rise of composition and rhetoric against creative writing was fraught with gendered labor issues still relevant to the struggles of women WPAs today.

In “More than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work,” Laura Micciche notes the under-theorized “climate of disappointment” that pervades the personal narratives and day-to-day experiences of writing program administration. Micciche argues that an open discussion of this disappointment, using a framework of emotion and affective performance, is critical to achieving better social and material conditions for WPAs. Almost all of Micciche’s example narratives of disappointment in her article belong to women—not surprisingly so, as Composition Studies generally and WPA work specifically is notably “feminized” (see for example Sue Ellen Holbrook’s “Women’s Work,” Susan Miller’s Textual Carnivals, and Eileen Schell’s Gypsy Academics). Micciche closes her article by opining “whether, en route to hope, we can speak candidly about professional inequities and disappointments without being regarded as doomsayers, as spoilers of the democratic identity that composition studies has constructed of itself” (454-55).

I want to augment Micciche’s charge by acknowledging that narratives of disappointment are difficult to voice, precisely due to the overwhelmingly positive (and perhaps positivist) view of Composition Studies as site for social and intellectual change. To admit to individual or collective failures within this mission is tantamount to ethical sacrilege. If we were to welcome this contrarian analytical framework for viewing WPA work, however, and also take this view of “disappointment” in a more historical direction, we might subsequently rediscover two often-elided elements of Composition Studies’
master narrative. One such element is the collective lost voices of WPAs who worked at women's public, regional colleges where disappointment was a real—if undocumented—aspect of professional life, in contrast to the more positive (and widely disseminated) narratives of women WPAs at the Seven Sisters colleges. Another less tangible, and perhaps therefore less-examined, element is the cultural phenomena that affected the work of women WPAs beyond those accepted within our disciplinary lore, i.e., the collapsing job market, the proliferation of contingent labor, and the devaluing of the humanities (Micciche 432). This phenomenon is the rise of creative writing as an academic field of study, a postwar event that put curricular and intellectual stress on the previously singular notion of “academic” writing, namely composition, as well as on composition's labor force and administrators.

I contend that we should re-examine the historical narratives of women WPAs who didn’t “make it,” in part, to acknowledge the larger disciplinary and departmental circumstances that led some of these WPAs’ work to be eclipsed by the rising star of creative writing courses and faculty. Such recasting of the WPA labor story in a new disciplinary context is critical to expanding our current understanding of the historical work of Composition Studies and creative writing, as well as the ongoing gendered nature of first-year writing instruction and program administration. We typically view the feminized labor of Composition Studies as being in service of, or as subservient to, literary studies, while ignoring composition’s very real disaffective position in academia more generally, particularly as set against the attractive and culturally revered field of creative writing. To see Composition Studies’ complex and often disappointing labor histories in tandem with the comparative meteoric rise of creative writing—a field that de-emphasized the conscripted “labor” of writing in favor of curricular and intellectual “artistry” in writing (literature) production—allows for a new perspective on how we have historically conceived of writing instruction and program administration successes and failures, writ large, at the postsecondary level.

There is a historical disciplinary tension between creative writing and composition that belies its current allied-discipline status present in the literature of Rhetoric and Composition Studies and made explicit in certain pedagogical approaches (for example, process theory). While today we see the relationship between creative writing and composition to be, in some departments, nearly seamless, we should be cognizant of the very different and very real economic and curricular impulses that led to the rise of, and historical conflicts between, these two fields of writing instruction. To position the WPA figure at the center of that tension is all the more critical, and logical, when we recognize the past and continued feminization of Composition Studies—a feminization that does not seem to be consistently associated with creative writing as a field. Is this because the work of writing program administration is seen as the supreme example of “women’s”
work? Is the difference instead rooted in the masculine tradition of the misunderstood artist, the impractical soul who holds students’ rapt attention but cannot be concerned with more minute matters of day-to-day budgetary or curricular issues?

In response to these two questions, I employ a case study of writing and WPA work at a public women’s institution mid-century, the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina. By dissecting archival evidence of the parallel—but clearly unequal—career trajectories of two Woman’s College faculty who serve as personifications of the tension between creative writing and composition, Professor May Bush, WPA, and Professor Randall Jarrell, prominent poet and MFA program architect, I demonstrate that the disciplinary rise of creative writing against Composition and Rhetoric is indeed fraught with gendered labor issues relevant to the struggles of women WPAs, and is thus a story that needs to be added to the history of WPA work in our field, in order to augment our existing aggregate perspectives. I aim in my examination to encourage readers, particularly fellow WPAs, to undertake similar small-scale studies that will uncover additional, and perhaps competing, narratives of women’s (WPA) work on other overlooked campuses, including, perhaps, their very own. So long as the field of Composition and Rhetoric continues to be highly dependent upon the goodwill of (women) scholars to run writing programs, while in contrast, the field of creative writing is far less dependent upon compulsory “management” constructions for its aggregate faculty, the relevance of uncovering and linking together individual histories of the divergent models of “work” between these two fields is an enterprise that needs to be encouraged and practiced via the examination of local archives and relatable, human examples.

The History of Composition is a History of Its People: WPA Narratology

If we accept the premise that the history of Composition Studies is a history of its people, people who can speak for themselves as well as those who must be spoken for through archival interpretations, it becomes clear that the voices of women who didn’t “make” it are key to understanding the larger narrative of the field of Composition Studies today. The historical narratives of women WPAs are peppered with failure, secondary to fierce competition for both program resources and professional recognition, and a diminishing institutional status for first-year composition, a course that prior to World War II had been a prodigious site for providing literacy-based acculturation to a homogeneous (white, male) college populace. As postwar populations shifted, however, making space for minority and female students to enter these classrooms, the figure of the WPA began to be troubled in both its conception and its mission. Whereas earlier decades of writing instruction
emphasized the solidification of class and status-based ideologies via writing instruction, as Sharon Crowley and Robert Connors have each illustrated, the postwar era emphasized rote assimilation of marginalized student-types into the status quo, and employed strategies emphasizing efficiency over edification in order to do so.

In addition to this shift in what it meant to teach and, consequently, administer writing, the postwar era ushered creative writing into college settings as a venue within which undergraduate and graduate students could broker a new and attractive merger of “academic” writing and literary appreciation, as has been examined by both Joseph Moxley and D.G. Myers in their historical studies. This emergence of creative writing as a hybrid sub-discipline within English studies exacerbated the already-tenuous status of the WPA, who found herself no longer in charge of a singular definition or dissemination of writing instruction on campus. Suddenly, the WPA was in competition with a viscerally appealing curriculum steeped in “artistic” aims. This postwar emergence of creative writing may be the true origin of composition’s association with “lesser” ways and means today, inasmuch as composition thereafter failed to achieve a similar public patronage and institutional admiration, and was subsequently reduced from an art to a “skill” for study. Along with this contrasting disciplinary standing for first-year composition and rhetoric came the lowered visibility of the WPA herself.

As other scholars of Composition Studies have noted, the figure of WPA through the 1960s is a shadowy one. English departments did not always give these men and women an official title, nor did they bestow upon them any extra compensation. The early WPA typically exists as a beleaguered and bitter paper-pusher assigned the intractable task of overseeing freshman courses that students did not want to take and faculty did not want to teach. As was articulated in the October 1964 report of the CCCC Workshop on “Administering the Freshman Course”:

Several representatives deplored the fact that most experienced members of the faculty wish to withdraw from teaching Freshman English as soon as they can. Some reported that their schools make Freshman English more palatable by . . . giving credit toward promotions and salary increases to those who distinguish themselves in teaching Freshman English. . . Most participants agreed, however, that these and other devices have done little to lessen the belief that Freshman English is a drudgery which the experienced teacher will abandon as soon as he can. (197)

This lingering impression of composition teaching and administration as undervalued and lacking in meaningful institutional recognition is in sharp contrast to that of creative writing faculty, who are charged with teaching and sometimes overseeing attractive, elective courses that enroll eager students. In this 1964 report, we see a familiar mid-century lament: teaching
freshman English is neither intellectually satisfying nor practically tenable, in terms of the work (reading, grading, commenting) required. We see a preview of the split in place in the twenty-first century, where upwards of 80% of first-year writing at the postsecondary level is assigned to contingent faculty, often the less “experienced” among us (graduate students, for one). In contrast, we rarely (if ever) see a similar lament about the undergraduate teaching of poetry or fiction writing; these courses are usually seen as a plumb assignment, a reward rather than a burden, despite their similar labor-intensive qualities (reading and commenting upon multiple pieces of writing) and lower-level position in the curriculum. Instead, the evaluation of creative writing is seen as an engagement in improving art, a far more mysterious, master-apprentice-based model than composition’s (perceived) rote corrective methodologies.

Unlike creative writing—which has its roots in the 1940s in terms of formalized graduate degree programs and has ancestors prior to that, especially in non-academic settings wherein poets and novelists worked with writers’ colonies, retreats, and other extra-curricular groups—Rhetoric and Composition was not a field of graduate study until the mid-1970s. Because this field is thus a relative latecomer to academia, early WPAs were almost without exception scholars and teachers of literature, often with no particular training in, or inclination toward, program administration, and with no community for professional support, as Amy Heckathorn has argued in “Moving Toward a Group Identity.” Historically speaking, the narrative of the WPA is not an uplifting one; however, this story is typically told in the absence of cultural phenomena, with the assumption that Composition Studies’ only “enemy” was literature. In fact, the rise of creative writing postwar posed perhaps the deepest threat to Composition and Rhetoric, and the WPA figure, in its presentation of a more palatable form of writing now available both inside and outside academia.

The rise of creative writing on college campuses creates a more dire paradigm for the WPA than existed prior to 1945, when the first graduate programs in writing emerged and the field exploded. As Mark McGurl has documented in his recent book, The Program Era, in 1945, just two years before the Woman’s College hired Randall Jarrell to join its faculty, there were only eight MFA or MA programs in creative writing in existence nationwide; these were at the University of Iowa, Stanford University, University of Florida, Indiana University, University of Denver, Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University, and Boston University. By 1965, not long after the MFA at the Woman’s College was formalized, just ten more institutions—Brown, Columbia, Virginia, Oregon, Massachusetts, Syracuse, UC Irvine, Montana, USC, and Washington University–St. Louis—had joined these ranks (25). Yet only one of these total eighteen programs—the MFA at the University of Virginia—was in the Southern United States; the remainder were clustered...
in the upper Midwest, the Northeast, and on the West Coast. Additionally, none of these MFA programs were housed at current single-sex colleges or universities (ignoring for the moment that Brown and Columbia did not admit women, and were thus single-sex male institutions, in their earlier years), nor did any have the history of educating women, or for that matter, teachers, that the Woman’s College possessed. These institutions with MFA programs were all either flagship state universities or prominent private colleges and universities. So for the Woman’s College to embark on first, an expanded creative writing focus in its English department, and second, an MFA program, in the context of these other national models was, indeed, a revolutionary step that would put the college squarely on the map where graduate study in the arts was concerned.

But the Woman’s College foray into graduate instruction in creative writing postwar was not necessarily a unique request in the context of colleges nationwide, despite the revolutionary move for women’s graduate education that its initial program proposal constituted. By 1975, in fact, there were 52 institutions in the United States with MFA programs in creative writing; that number had grown to 83 programs by 1999 (Bishop and Starkey 117). In 2009, that number was 153 (Fenza). These statistics evidence a 84% increase in programs between 1999 and 2009—indicating, perhaps, a second wave of creative writing popularity in post-secondary institutions—and a 300% increase in number of programs between 1975 and 2010. Thus, one may observe that while doctoral studies has experienced a comparative stagnation, due to an unsure job market in academia and a general decline in funding for less visible or financially profitable PhD programs (such as religious studies, philosophy, and, more recently, American Studies) the MFA in creative writing is, and historically has been, one of the fastest-growing graduate specializations in the humanities in the United States.\(^2\) The MFA, unlike the PhD, has historically served the dual purpose of drawing writers/artists into the academy when they might otherwise eschew such a restrictive setting, and calling the public’s attention to the academy as a patron of the fine arts.

The growth of the MFA may be traced to several more specific impulses related to this dual purpose of politics and aesthetics, as situated within English departments such as the Woman’s College postwar. One of these impulses was to reinforce the notion of writers as living, breathing entities rather than historical figures, which was to reify the English department as a colony of working writers passing on their trades, in real time, to students. As stated on the main page for the Associated Writing Programs (AWP), the organization notes that in the mid-1960s, “on most campuses, the best, most respected writers were those long dead and safely entombed in anthologies and libraries,” and thus AWP was founded
to support the growing presence of literary writers in higher education. Because, at that time, Departments of English were mainly conservatories of the great literature of the past, scholars fiercely resisted the establishment of creative writing programs. To overcome this resistance and to provide publishing opportunities for young writers, AWP was founded by fifteen writers who represented twelve writing programs. (Fenza)

The apposition here of “writers” and “scholars” is telling, as it signals the root division of creative writers as artists versus literature scholars as academics/researchers/non-artists. Such a stance, however, glosses over the position of Composition and Rhetoric, or in curricular terms, the enterprise of rhetoric and expository writing, within this paradigm. Indeed, the meteoric rise of creative writing has been documented in relation to literary studies, and as either the root of, or the inspiration for, more expressivist tendencies in Composition, particularly the use of the “workshop” model for peer review of student writing, and the multiple-draft, pure-process pedagogy of early 1970s composition scholars such as Kenneth Bruffee, Donald Murray, and Peter Elbow. But the politics of creative writing versus composition is in large part under-theorized, despite the clear declarations from the AWP about the identity of the writer as exclusively the creative writer, i.e. the poet or novelist, or perhaps playwright—not the writer of expository works or rhetorical criticism. As R.M. Berry notes, “as the academic contact with political and economic power has increased, Creative Writing has been in the thick of things while theory has remained aloof. . . Despite a generation of critical theories insisting on the historical situatedness of all literary practice, literary criticism still treats the institution for forming American writers as a world apart” (58). Because this philosophical separation exists, creative writing “is less likely to consider itself a sub-specialty of literary scholarship than to define itself in contrast to literary scholarship” (Berry 66, emphasis added). A similar separatist philosophy exists when one seeks out a disciplinary history of creative writing in relation to Composition Studies more generally, even when there is an explicit attempt to marry the pedagogical concerns and pursuits of these two related fields.

The WPA figure, as the administrative representative of composition within the university, was a relatively unproductive and unknown scholar and figure compared to the creative writing faculty member, existing at the intellectual margins and working outside the realm of the non-academic public. In addition to having less cultural clout, WPAs were identified not by their intellectual work, but by their association with management and paper-pushing tasks, particularly when it was commonplace for a literature faculty member to occupy the WPA role. WPAs were not expected—nor were often inclined—to produce scholarship about composition. There were few outlets for such scholarship anyway, as Maureen Daly Goggin has observed, since early articles in field journals “pose[d] no argument, interpretation,
evaluation, or critique . . . [but] explain[ed] in narrative form a practice or process in which the author engaged” (46). WPAs were assigned duties in administration, sometimes as part of a rotation, sometimes by the short straw, and very often prior to tenure, without hope of connecting their scholarship to their administrative duties. By comparison, the faculty who taught in creative writing programs were, by universal requirement, prolific writers themselves, publishing their own work to institutional accolades, selected as administrators not for any reason beyond their writing talents, but for ability to draw attention to the program. These administrators also did not face the structural, budgetary, or other personnel issues endemic to large-scale composition programs. They were already typically separated from the daily duties of the English department by a separatist curricular philosophy, as noted above, and were responsible for oversight of either a menu of elective courses or a concentration positioned beside, but not necessarily beholden to, either literature or composition.

While narratives of creative writing program directors are scarce3 and lore-based stories of program directors exist through self-studies of prestigious programs,4—its a problem facing historians who wish to integrate labor narratives of creative writing and composition in meaningful ways—scholars of Composition Studies have begun to compile historical evidence of some particular WPA’s working conditions. The most comprehensive collection of these narratives is L’Epplatenier and Mastrangelo’s Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration, wherein contributors reinforce the common instigating image of the undertrained, undervalued, and exhausted WPA. Historical Studies profiles WPAs at Bryn Mawr and Vassar, and also discusses the influential 1919 meeting of WPAs from Mount Holyoke, Wellesley, and other Seven Sisters institutions, but does not profile any public women’s institutions such as the Woman’s College. Mastrangelo and L’Epplantenier argue that the networking done by these elite school WPAs “refutes the notion that these women, like so many other participants in rhetoric and composition’s history, were individual actors, toiling in isolation, with little or no support from those around them” (118).

At the Woman’s College, however, May Bush did appear to be an “individual actor.” Her story exemplifies the social and material consequences of being a woman program administrator in the era of a male-centered creative arts movement. At the Woman’s College, creative writing grew exponentially, and raised the profile of the institution further with its MFA program, while composition comparatively fell. At the same time, the disciplinary notion of “feminization” in writing instruction interestingly cut both ways. As women students at the college were being trained to be inquisitive, independent thinkers and writers—if sometimes still being educated within a patriarchal paradigm that ensured their social growth be somewhat inhibited by strict campus rules and regulations5—their fellow women faculty were receiving
far less intellectual attention and recognition by comparison. This is a field paradox that unwittingly enacts Micciche’s observation of “an exacting bitterness, or disappointed hope, in what the academy has become and failed to become” (433).

A Tale of Two Promotions: May Bush and Randall Jarrell

As the only public women’s college in the state, the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina (since 1964 known as the co-educational University of North Carolina-Greensboro, or UNCG) sought and maintained a separate and specialized identity within the UNC system for over seventy years. It fiercely held to founder Charles McIver’s original decree that “When you educate a man, you educate an individual; when you educate a woman, you educate a family.” The college deeply believed in its promise to produce women graduates of intelligence and taste. It resisted threats of extinction for many years from the men’s campus at Chapel Hill, and going into the postwar era prided itself on the niche it filled in the South as the pre-eminent institution of its kind. The rise of creative writing as a field of study—already represented in college course listings since 1930, evidencing an early recognition of the widespread popularity of the field that was to come mid-century—combined with the college’s history of excellence in women’s education, allow it to argue, postwar, that its English department was a unique regional foothold worthy of any national adversary.

Such conditions enabled the appearance of an MFA program in the early 1950s, since, as D.G. Myers argues, creative writing was perhaps the most successful of all disciplines in allowing women a greater writerly agency, a goal that matched McIver’s. This agency was clearly contrary to the growing notion that composition was “women’s work” and that theme correction was an arduous task that discouraged positive connection between writer and text, or text and teacher, and thus was the province of women—as a housekeeping act not worthy of men’s time. In contrast to this negatively feminized work, creative writing allowed women to be not only teachers of writing but also producers of literary work—ergo art—themselves, and to be recognized both inside and outside the academy. This artistic production, as part of our culture’s valuation of the author as mystical star, was far more attractive than pursuits of any professional kind in composition.

Myers also notes that creative writing shifted literary study from the “past to the present” (140), providing women with a chance to become a part of a growing body of evolving work-for-study, and further, the opportunity of practical criticism, which “desexed literature by inverting the categories and values of the older literary and educational establishments” transforming literature into an “impersonal constructive technique” that did not discriminate (140). Indeed, Katherine Adams contends that between 1880 and 1940,
American women came to college to learn to be writers. They took advantage of every opportunity to form groups of colleagues, and they continued to rely on this model after they left college, creating new types of personal/professional groups. And from this home base, they crafted very influential texts that helped shape their era. (xviii-xiv)

Adams emphasizes the woman writer as one who sees writing, especially imaginative or creative writing, as a legitimate vocation, a career possibility that created a bridge between postsecondary institutions and the “real” world of reading, writing, and community literacy. We can see this viewpoint enacted in the Woman’s College publications of first-year writing, The Yearling (initiated by May Bush herself, in 1948) and the literary magazine Coraddi, which operated outside the English department as an extracurricular club. The grassroots origins of these publications positioned women students as the architects of literacy collectives, with the idea that they would spread their talents across their home and work communities, becoming “teachers” in a figurative (and sometimes literal, for education majors) sense.

Indeed, Adams notes that even though women’s colleges, starting in the 1920s, were reducing their offerings in dance and theatre, creative writing offerings were generally not cut, as they were a combination of “academic study and arts practice” (42). As early as 1915, colleges such as Smith and Barnard were offering a much wider range of creative writing courses than their elite men’s counterparts, who lagged behind this movement for some twenty years (Adams 51). Notably, Adams does not include public women’s colleges, where such creative work was also thriving, in her study. But these positive benefits of creative writing for women students had no administrative correlation for the Woman’s College WPA. Her separation from literary studies, like the required course that she governed, served to annex her from any writerly agency. This stands in contrast to the poet Jarrell, whose intellectual separation from literature increases his agency. Using a sports metaphor to illustrate this situation, if Jarrell was a sought-after free agent, Bush was the last-round draft pick.

“Surely You Have Enough About Me!”: May Bush

Little is known about May Bush, and that in itself is telling. As opposed to the boxes of Jarrell’s archival papers housed in the UNCG library, May Bush has just one slim folder. Bush came to the Woman’s College in 1934, with an artium baccalaureus (A.B.) from Hollins College and an MA from Columbia University. She taught high school in Greensboro from 1924 to 1926, at Finch College (NY) from 1926 to 1932, and at Peace College (NC) from 1934 to 1935 (“Two To Retire”). At the bottom of her final 1960-1961
“Biographical Information” form, dated October 10, 1960, Bush added a handwritten comment: “Surely you have enough about me!”

Perhaps Bush’s frustrated missive reflects the fact that while she had completed this same form four times during her tenure, her answers had hardly changed. Bush had published one article on Milton concomitant with receiving her doctorate, but in the space for “Titles of published works” she never lists it, nor is it mentioned in her retirement announcement. Between coming to the Woman’s College in 1934 and retiring in 1968, Bush received her PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1942, allowing a promotion to assistant professor after eight years of instructor rank. In 1952 she would be promoted to associate professor, and in 1960, to full professor.

The only archival prose about May Bush come from a brief, published eulogy written by departmental colleague Amy Charles, and a letter written by a later department head on the occasion of Bush’s death. At Bush’s retirement from the university in 1968, Charles noted:

Miss Bush’s students have commended her insistence of high scholarly standards for herself and for them, her fair-mindedness, her enthusiasm, and her belief in them. Colleagues have mentioned her unflagging concern for excellence, her courage and integrity, her steadfastness and lack of self-seeking, and her utter honesty. New instructors have had reason to appreciate her friendly welcome, her instinctive kindliness, her grace and dignity, as well as her awareness of practical difficulties that more than once has led to loans to tide over the newcomer awaiting his first pay day.

We can see Bush’s feminine traits ("grace and dignity") being highly valued here, in contrast to the sometimes-rough or isolationist portrait of the typical (male) writer—think Hemingway, Faulkner, any canonical male author held up as a writerly ideal. Indeed, her apparently outgoing nature and enthusiasm would stand in some contrast to widely accepted portraits of Randall Jarrell, often characterized as a “loner” and supremely private individual, dedicated to his craft. It is ironic that one of Bush’s noted traits would also be generosity, given her own financial difficulty throughout her career; Jarrell, in contrast, is not characterized as stingy, but is known for his love of sports cars, bought with his considerable Woman’s College salary.

Charles closes her piece by recalling Bush’s lifelong ethical principle, advanced by her philosophy professor at Hollins College: “What would happen if everybody behaved as I do?” This question seemed to drive her polite acceptance of her lesser departmental status. It also provides a haunting meta-question for this article, and my inquiry into postwar women’s WPA work: What, indeed, would have happened if everyone at the Woman’s College “behaved” as May Bush did, and failed to get on the lucrative bandwagon of creative writing when it burst onto the academic scene? Or, what would have happened if composition had been a more forceful presence in the

"What Would Happen if Everybody Behaved as I Do?" 23
English department, and in the English departments of other colleges like the Woman’s College, and had been recognized as a scholarly subject in the 1940s rather than the 1970s? Would this story of professional disappointment and denied promotions for women WPAs, and for women laboring in Composition Studies in general, instead be one of accomplishment and advancement, across department sub-fields, and genders?

Chairman Robert Stephens repeats Bush’s philosophical mantra in his letter to her two sisters in 1983, insisting

> It is good now to remember her as she was during her long active career on this campus, as a fine and conscientious teacher and adviser, as a responsible member of this department and this faculty, who set high standards for her students and for herself. . . May had a rare quality of thinking of others first. . . She opened the eyes of her students to learning. . . she always took more than her share of the responsibility.

Stephens makes no note of Bush’s scholarship—which, admittedly, was minimal—and instead focuses, like Charles, on Bush’s personality and ethics. She is the good soldier; she is the one who took “more than her share” while being given far less in return. She is the martyr for a variety of unpopular departmental causes, among them composition, left unstated here. While very little in the archives narrates Bush’s accomplishments, in fact, her presence at department meetings was regular and her contributions always noted respectfully, in a department that had its own personnel tensions and unique women colleagues. Bush is not in the league of Professor Nettie Sue Tillett, whose behavior was frequently characterized as disruptive or inflammatory, and whose actions were critiqued by Randall Jarrell himself.\(^7\)

Nor is she comparative to Lettie Hamlett Rogers, who resigned her position over the chancellor’s censure of a nude sketch (drawn by an art student) in the literary arts magazine *Coraddi*. Additionally, Bush cannot by definition have kinship with the first and second Mrs. Jarrell—who were tied to their husband and thus purely contingent labor, yet given pay raises more often than Bush was herself.

Despite her heavy service load, May Bush was keeping up with the profession—in her case, the literary profession, and its relevance to school teachers. In the December 13, 1954 minutes it is noted that Bush would attend that year’s MLA; Bush also appears in several notes in the *South Atlantic Bulletin*, citing her work for the North Carolina Education Association, which articulated and refined secondary school English requirements for the state. Stephens notes further in his letter that Bush “worked hard to see that younger colleagues were promoted and that older ones were honored for their accomplishments.” It is notable to recall that each of the institutions where Bush was employed—Finch, Peace, and the Woman’s College—were women’s institutions, as was her undergraduate alma mater (Hollins College...
in Virginia). Thus, Bush had a personal commitment to women’s education that was clearly visible, a commitment that extended to her junior women colleagues. But despite these selfless beliefs, her own road to promotion and tenure was troubled.

While a skeptic might point to Bush’s lack of scholarship as rationale for her lack of timely advancement in rank and pay, an archival reading of Bush’s situation highlights two issues that undercut this argument. First, a lack of publications would be a logical consequence of being assigned heavy administrative (and committee) duties in first-year writing and general education, on top of a 4/4 teaching load; unlike Jarrell’s notably lighter teaching load of two courses per semester, there is no indication that Bush had any reassigned time for her administrative work. Second, the fact that her English department chairs continually advocate for her advancement—but these words of advocacy fall on deaf ears at the level of the dean, who grants similar requests regarding Randall Jarrell—show that Bush’s department supported her promotion (and tenure), or at least articulated such support in chair’s reports, and thus held her in a position of some use value during her tenure at the Woman’s College.

Archival department records are thick with a long history of requests for Bush’s promotion (and tenure), articulated, in some cases, multiple times from department head Leonard B. Hurley to the higher administration. These requests are located in the papers of the chancellors and deans to whom the appeals were made, and are also alluded to in some departmental documents related to personnel matters and faculty accomplishments. The first notable request comes on March 23, 1948, as Hurley writes to Chancellor Jackson to appeal for two “urgent cases”—one of which was May Bush. Hurley categorizes these requested increases in salary as the two to be made “if any” should be funded for Fall 1948:

Dr. May Bush is completing her fourteenth year at the Woman’s College. Since coming here she has spent two years in graduate study at Johns Hopkins University and has been awarded her PhD degree with distinction by that great university. She is an extremely hard and conscientious worker and an excellent scholar. She is very highly regarded in the English department and throughout the College and the community. She serves as Chairman of the Freshman English work—a taxing job. She teaches Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors. . . . Dr. Bush is on the Board of Trustees of Hollins College and could go there to teach at any time she made known her desire to do so. (I know that there is an opening there for her next year). Dr. Bush wishes to stay at Woman’s College, but I think that she is becoming pretty thoroughly discouraged because she has had no promotion in rank during the past eight years.

This would be the first in many requests from Hurley, a staunch, classically-trained and traditional-thinking literature professor who (by alumna
accounts) kept a firm leash on the department and an even firmer leash on the women students and faculty, seeing himself as a kind of father figure to all. Despite Hurley’s predilections as chair, however, he defends Bush’s work and her value to the department and college, recognizing the personal toll the numerous denied promotions have taken on her. While Hurley, as gleaned from other department archival documents, seems quite conservative and even occasionally overbearing, his advocacy for Bush is undeniable.

On June 9, 1948, Hurley sends a follow-up memo to Jackson, noting that Bush receives $3360.00 annually, and that “if nothing more can be done at this time, [her salary] must be brought to at least $3500.00 . . . It will take only . . . $140.00 to do this.” In April 1949, Hurley reiterates his previous request word-for-word, and adds that “I have been urging [this] for four years”. He also re-articulates the need for promotion to full professor for faculty Rowley and Gould—women associate professors who had been at this rank for twenty-six and twenty-two years, respectively. At this point it seems prudent to ask: to what degree was the lack of promotion and advancement for Bush due to not only her lesser-status as a teacher and director of composition, but also her gender? Was the progressive view of the Woman’s College toward its students, and their intellectual advancement as writers, in fact not adequately reflected in its views toward women writing faculty? The answer seems to be that both gender and teaching/administrative area may have been a factor.

In an English department report for the year 1964-65, an accounting of current departmental faculty by rank is spelled out in detail by then-English chair Dr. Joseph Bryant for then-dean of the college Dr. Otis Singletary. In this report, May Bush is listed as one of the five full professors in the department, having finally achieved this rank in 1960-61. However, Bush and her colleague, Dr. John Bridgers—a faculty member whose vocal concerns for first-year and basic writing are noted in numerous department meeting minutes, and whose teaching was primarily at the freshman and sophomore levels only—are simultaneously singled out as those who “cannot be qualified to direct theses in the graduate program,” and are relegated as for “undergraduate” teaching only. Because, as noted in the report, Bush and Bridgers are not able to direct MA theses, this leaves only two (male) professors—Bryant and Watson—eligible to potentially do so at the full professor level. A third associate professor, Dr. Jean Gagen, is described as having published her first book through a “vanity press”; the report notes that she may come up for promotion concurrent with Dr. Watson, on the strength of a second book “now nearing completion.” However, Bryant’s November 1961 memo makes clear that Watson would be the preferred choice of the two, as “putting him [Watson] in competition for a position with Miss Gagen would [be] for many reasons . . . unfortunate” as his “value to the Department is considerably greater.”. This value is never articulated;
his only two distinctive qualities separating him from Gagen, however, are his gender, and his status as a creative writer and protégé of Jarrell. One may interpret this report to read that not only were composition-primary faculty valued less than literature-primary and especially creative writing faculty, as weighted by their perceived ability to direct graduate theses, but also that male faculty were being valued over women faculty.

A review of department standards for promotion and tenure during this postwar era reveals no specifics on these two cases, however—as such matters are typically not part of the public record and many comments on individual cases are never recorded. But the evaluation form is somewhat telling in its categories which may make the promotion of men—and creative writers—more likely. In addition to the rank, salary, and years in service, faculty are rated as “Excellent,” “Superior,” “Average,” or “Inferior” based on (1) Teaching Ability (with no subheadings); (2) Personal Traits, with the subheadings of Intellectual Integrity, Breadth of Interests, Emotional Balance, Cooperation, and Open-Mindedness. There are also two blank spots for additional write-in subheadings within this category; (3) Administrative Ability; (4) Professional Growth, with subheadings of Research, Creative Work, Professional Activities, and Further Study; and (5) Service to Campus, Community, State, and Nation (Faculty Evaluation form).

One notes that while teaching is first, “personal traits” is second—ranked above Administrative Ability, Professional Growth, and Service. It is hard to ignore that this nebulous category includes “emotional balance,” which surely could have been used to single out women. May Bush, by all indications, smartly resisted this “emotional” profile in her departmental work, and was implicitly rewarded for this resistance by Hurley, but faculty such as Nettie Tillett clearly did not. In addition, “cooperation” serves as an early term for the oft-contested current notion of “collegiality,” another point in which gendered power relations within a department could certainly result in a low ranking. It is hard to know how “open-mindedness” is to be read, but one possible interpretation is the acceptance of new (unwanted) duties without complaint. Within an institution that valued women’s abilities—as students—to enter into society with a range of knowledge and a keen sense of self and community, it seems ironic that such standards would exist in the review of women faculty.

Further, it seems odd that given the low status of “research” in this paradigm—a subheading under “professional growth,” low on the form—certain faculty would be singled out for their lacking scholarly production (such as Bush, barred from directing MA theses, and Gagen), while the creative writers would be lauded for their own publishing accomplishments. Here, we begin to see discordant evidence: even though the teaching load was quite high, and much scholarship thus not necessarily expected, the creative writing faculty were significantly—perhaps inordinately—valued for...
this production, work that was not only part of their “professional growth” but also public evidence of their standing as productive artists. Their high production level also allowed the department to excel in one corner of creative production—original poetry and fiction—and thus over-achieve within the typical framework of a teaching-centered, regional college for women, wherein the woman WPA had one of the highest work burdens of all faculty.

May Bush would carry the legacy of her WPA workload through her career at the Woman’s College, staying on faculty despite her disappointing road to full professor. In a memo dated April 12, 1957, from Dr. Hurley to Dean Mereb Mossman, Hurley outlines Bush’s venerable track record in his larger request for Bush’s promotion to full professor, the sole subject of the memo. He recalls her many accomplishments inside and outside the college, including her work as “chairman” of Freshman English (again labeled as “taxing”); and her departmental committee work; her university service on the College Chapel Committee, the War Bond Drive, and the Committee on Humanities in General Education. Hurley also notes Bush’s service to local organizations such as the Guilford County Mental Hygiene Society and her membership in the MLA, SAMLA, AAUW, and other regional professional organizations. He concludes that she is a “well prepared, scholarly, and most conscientious teacher . . . something of a leader in the intellectual life of the community. I think she deserves the promotion requested.”

But this promotion was not to be, as evident by Hurley’s subsequent memo to Dr. Gordon Blackwell, Chancellor, on March 5, 1958. Hurley articulates his past request for May Bush’s promotion, and later in the memo more fully spells out his underlying concerns, in institutional context:

The Department of English at the Woman’s College has had for many years at least one woman at full professorial rank (See attached material). In recent years we have had two women professors. Both retire this year. I think that in a women’s college, in every department staff that includes a number of women, as the English department here does, there should be at least one woman with the rank of Professor. Dr. May D. Bush will be the top ranking woman in the department . . . I hope that she may be promoted at this time.

Hurley’s archived material on rankings and gender indicates exactly the proportion that he here broadly describes. The latest year charted was 1951-1952, in which two of the nine full professors were women; in both 1943-1944 and 1946-1947, one of the eight full professors was a woman. In these earlier years of the college, before budgetary conditions and curricular impulses favored creative writing, there was consistently one woman full professor among the five to eight full professors listed. Such disparity is evident in one of the last salary comparison sheets for the Woman’s College
during May Bush’s employment. In 1960-1961, Randall Jarrell’s salary is $10,500.00. Leonard Hurley’s salary as head is only $9,200.00 by comparison. Bush, having finally achieved full professor in fall 1960, has a salary of $7,500.00, the lowest of all full professors. Robert Watson, an associate professor, has a salary of $6,700.00—just $800.00 behind May Bush, despite her service record extending sixteen more years. Add to this accounting the fact that Bush went with no raises of any kind from her appointment to assistant professor in 1940 through 1945, and one can see the demoralizing frame around her career.

The main two creative writing faculty in the department during this era—Randall Jarrell and Peter Taylor—were to be away on leave, quite frequently for one or more semesters at a time. The report thus deduces that given these conditions, neither could bear the administrative responsibility of day-to-day program tasks that May Bush did. Jarrell’s personal papers alone contain at least twenty letters from universities and colleges pleading for visits and public readings on their campuses to occupy his time. These requests were frequently lucrative; in 1956, Oglethorpe College offered Jarrell $750.00 for one day’s work—one-tenth of his then-yearly salary. May Bush would receive no such offers or public recognition, her past offer of employment from Hollins College notwithstanding. As a WPA and faculty member associated with service and, arguably, servitude, Bush would never be singled out as valuable to the prestige of the college—a factor important in promotion and retention decisions. Jarrell, in contrast, would spend his nineteen years at the Woman’s College living a celebrated life known only to prominent poets and fiction writers, at the college he would come to call “Sleeping Beauty.”

“They Leave you to Yourself Extraordinarily”: Randall Jarrell

Randall Jarrell’s collected letters illuminate his institutional standing and highlight the material differences between being a creative writing faculty and being a WPA, as well as being a male faculty member versus a female faculty member, during the postwar era. Jarrell was hired into the Woman’s College as an associate professor, despite having only an MA, while his first wife Mackie was hired as an instructor. Jarrell’s letters evidence that Mackie’s appointment was not based on any particular qualifications besides being his wife, and that Randall’s rank was barely justifiable, given that he had only taught for three years at the University of Texas at Austin, and for one year at Sarah Lawrence prior. This illustrates Jarrell’s critical material difference from May Bush, who had to wait eight years for a promotion to associate professor, even with a doctorate.

Indeed, Jarrell’s early correspondence with fellow writers such as Robert Lowell characterizes university teaching as an especially good “gig”
for a writer, with fairly light work expectations. Jarrell writes to Lowell in October 1947:

I have seven girls in my writing-poetry and fifteen in my modern poetry. . . . The classes are better than I thought they’d be—quite serious and over-joyed with the poetry . . . Wouldn’t you like to come next year to take my job for a year . . . ? You’d have a job with the rank of associate professor, a good bargaining point from which to arrange for another job; there’d be very little work and $3600; they leave you to yourself extraordinarily. . . .

Jarrell’s letter to Lowell evidences his low teaching load and lack of compulsory commitments to the college. The notion that the college “leave[s] you to yourself extraordinarily” right away signals a different expected work ethic between Jarrell and Bush. Whereas May Bush was lauded for her undying devotion to the department, and her students—an almost monastic existence, at least on paper—the creative writer, as represented by Jarrell here (or, potentially, Lowell) is allowed a fair amount of latitude in terms of expected departmental service/contributions as well as a notably small amount of students to teach. A comparative look at Jarrell’s load against that of May Bush shows a clear imbalance: in spring 1955, for example, Jarrell had 11 students total, all in upper-division courses, whereas May Bush had 80, 70 of whom were lower-division. Hurley’s own accounting for the “average” faculty load from this same semester indicates a figure of 79.5 students, nearly identical to Bush’s load, but far above Jarrell’s. Jarrell did not teach freshman writing, nor was he expected to do so. Jarrell’s differential teaching load status seems somewhat shocking in retrospect, especially considering other contemporary factors at the college, such as high enrollment caps of 25 to 28 students in first-year composition and heavy lower-division loads carried by Bush and other women and junior faculty in the department.

This is not to say that Jarrell did not enjoy his teaching. He once famously stated that “Teaching is something that I would pay to do, to make my living by doing it, here . . . with the colleagues I have and the students my colleagues have” (453). Upon his return to the college in 1953, after a two-year absence, he exclaimed, “Gee, I’m glad to be back here. This college is like Sleeping Beauty” (387). Of course, one might argue that it is relatively easy to enjoy teaching when one has fewer than twenty students per term, and is teaching elective courses that are highly attractive to students, particularly aspiring young women writers already personally invested in the arts. In fact, Randall Jarrell enjoyed semester and year-long teaching positions at several other colleges, and upon each of his returns, enjoyed a rewarding financial perk of some kind, to add to his already-revered status in the department and on the larger campus.

Jarrell’s starting salary, as noted by Dr. Hurley, was at the top of the associate professor scale: $3600.00. Still, Jarrell was wondering about future
salary increases and promotion in rank, as articulated in Hurley’s April 1947 letter—which is archived in Randall Jarrell’s personal papers at UNCG, and which also evidences Hurley’s explicit promise to make money no object in future negotiations:

You will note that those who fixed the salary for the newly created position which we have offered Mr. Jarrell fixed the salary at the top of the bracket for Associate Professors according to the old [contract] . . . it is pretty well fixed for next year . . . Hence I have attempted to see to it that the figure for Mrs. Jarrell’s salary is near the top [$2400.00] . . . so as to even this up as much as possible. I cannot make definite commitments for the future; all that I can say is that we are most eager to build up our writing group within the department and that I will do all within my power toward this end. (emphasis added)

As feverish as Hurley had advocated for Bush’s pay raises, his tone is clearly more laced with desperation in his pleas for Jarrell’s financial standing in the college. He even is willing to argue for a top-flight pay scale for Jarrell’s wife who, if archival records are any indication, brought nothing specific or special to the department other than her status as the spouse of a coveted writer. The archives reveal that Hurley made good on his promise to “do all within [his] power,” thereby safeguarding, in the department’s view, the future of creative writing at the Woman’s College. In the years between his 1947 appointment and his untimely 1965 death, Jarrell was wooed from the outside with great rigor, and the English department at the Woman’s College struck back repeatedly, at the expense of other personnel. One such strike from Dr. Hurley to Dean Walter B. Jackson comes in May 1949, as part of a dual-request memo for salary increases for both Peter Taylor and Jarrell. Hurley notes that “If $4200.00 could be provided for Mr. Peter Taylor, we could bring him back” next year, and that “Mr. Taylor was receiving $3500.00 . . . A 15% increase on this would bring the sum to $4025.00. An additional sum of only $175.00 would provide the necessary $4200.00.” It is notable that the salary increase is construed somewhat of a bargain, and granted; similar “bargain” requests for Bush during this same era were repeatedly denied.

Despite these pay raises, Jarrell secured a temporary leave from the college from 1951 to 1953, teaching first at Princeton University, and then at the University of Illinois. Following this leave, the most striking example of anxiety regarding Jarrell’s future at the Woman’s College comes in a lengthy handwritten letter from Leonard Hurley to Chancellor Gordon Blackwell on January 25, 1958, addressed to Blackwell’s vacation home in Ithaca, New York. The letter, excerpted below, details Jarrell’s offer from Kenyon College and exemplifies the frantic prospect of Jarrell’s departure from the Woman’s College, as well as the subsequent demise of the creative writing program:

"What Would Happen if Everybody Behaved as I Do?" 31
When Randall arrived at Kenyon a few days ago, he was told . . . that they wanted to offer [the editorship of the Kenyon Review]. The salary stated was $10,000—but I believe John Crowe told Randall that they might go slightly higher. He was to teach one class, to work with the young writers, and to edit the Review. Mr. Jarrell . . . felt that he must give the offer very serious consideration, but is apparently not too eager to accept it. He spoke of how much he liked his work and his associations here in Greensboro . . . I gather the idea, too, that he feels that desirable as it would seem in many ways to be at the head of the influential Kenyon Review [but] the editorial work involved . . . would leave him less free for his own writing than the work here has done. . . . I would like to emphasize: I think Randall Jarrell is in all probability the person of greatest national reputation and distinction in our teaching faculty, and one imminently suited to working in our faculty. He very much likes teaching young women, and his students like him . . . We should not lose Jarrell if any means can be found by which he can be kept here as a center around which we can rebuild our writing program.

As evidenced here, Jarrell was explicitly the present and future of the Woman’s College itself.

Hurley draws a portrait of a beatific writer and man who resists uprooting himself and his family, but is torn by professional opportunities. In today’s university, of course, careers are made and broken over competing employment offers. But Hurley makes it clear that Jarrell’s future is not simply his own: his national reputation is the cornerstone of the creative writing program itself. Ultimately, Hurley’s appeal was successful; Jarrell remained at the Woman’s College, with a substantial bump in pay. In retrospect, what was a coup for the Woman’s College, and for Jarrell personally, was the beginning of a successful narrative of creative writing at the college that exists to this day, and a local example of the pressing cultural forces that pushed Composition and Rhetoric out of the leadership role in college-level writing for arguably the better part of the remaining years of the twentieth century. This contrasts with our current conceptions of both Composition and creative writing as symbiotic sub-fields, growing and changing in harmony with one another and breeding similar pedagogies—such as the “workshop” model and the very idea of peer review—that both struggle to claim, but share amicably. This portrait of Bush against Jarrell also contradicts the notion that the disappointment of WPA work of which Micciche speaks, specifically for women, is a relatively recent, freestanding phenomenon independent of the trajectories of other fields of writing. Such contrasts and contradictions are critical to include in the histories of labor in Composition Studies, and in the still-evolving portrait of the twentieth century WPA.
Women’s Working Legacies: The Anti-Hero

In their introduction to *Women’s Ways of Making it in Rhetoric and Composition*, Ballif, Davis, and Mountford quote a survey respondent as remarking, “women in our field have been absolutely heroic...against significant odds” (3). In this book, several prominent women scholars of Rhetoric and Composition are profiled, such as Patricia Bizzell, Cheryl Glenn, and Andrea Lunsford. Certainly there is good reason to celebrate these extraordinary women and their many accomplishments. But the notion of the “heroic” woman who occupies the role of scholar/teacher/administrator in Composition Studies represents only one facet of the field’s history, and *Women’s Ways* profiles explicitly the most heroic of those heroes, so to speak, since Composition Studies emerged in the 1970s. Just as Jeanne Gunner, in “Iconic Discourse,” argued for a reconsideration of the basic writing teacher as hero, so, too, should we strive to more deeply contextualize what it means to “make it” (or not) in the historically contested field of WPA work. We should examine our narratives of failure just as closely as we seek to emulate our narratives of success, particularly when these narratives cause us to re-examine previous disciplinary alliances and historical conditions for labor, such as those facing Composition and Rhetoric postwar.

In my pursuit of this wider characterization of women’s WPA work, contradictions between women’s literacy education and the treatment of May Bush at the Woman’s College, including her own low-cost salary and denied promotions, complicated my own viewing of both the relationship between creative writing and composition in the academy and the real possibilities of women’s administrative labor within even specialized (single-sex) educational spaces. Of course May Bush’s story—of a local, shoulder-to-the-wheel nobody who would never aspire, or be selected, to appear in a collection such as *Women’s Ways*—might be argued as an isolated narrative in history, neither representative of the trajectory of women’s labor in Composition Studies nor the cultural valuation of creative writing over composition. This is an easy argument to make at the moment, since no other WPA narratives or histories that I have found contextualize this work in terms of the rise of creative writing in the academy. I would, therefore, call for other scholars to do similar readings of their local archives, to historicize their own institutions’ writing program administrators against their other programs in English, particularly those public institutions with MFA programs either past or present, and/or with histories of providing an education for women.

As a singular case study, however, the Woman’s College stands as a negative example of women’s advancement that both recalls and advances Micciche’s work, and troubles the master narrative of WPA work. What might this contrast between Jarrell and Bush’s intertwined careers teach us about the historical roots of interdepartmental relations between composi-

"What Would Happen if Everybody Behaved as I Do?" 33
tion and creative writing today—especially those units that have coalesced into independent departments of “writing” set against traditional English departments? The cultural valuation of “artistic” versus “academic” labor that put these two fields historically in competition is one we should consider further as we train, staff, and promote our writing faculty, and graduate students, in each of these disciplinary areas, but especially those who will do administrative labor in writing programs, or who will move from undergraduate or master’s degrees in creative writing to doctoral work in Composition Studies. Further, the exploration of local case studies of writing program administration, particularly at atypical/lesser-studied settings such as the Woman’s College, highlight the human dimension complicating any standardized notions of “labor” that might otherwise characterize the field, particularly where women’s labor is concerned. The Woman’s College cannot stand in for all mid-century writing program administration, but it can illustrate the local consequences that one extremely prominent creative writing program had on an arguably “average” composition program—one run by a literature faculty who was also a woman. These historical, material conditions surely exist at many other colleges and universities around the country; bringing together an aggregate of these cases would provide a much fuller perspective on both women’s labor in Composition Studies and the assumed-prototypical labor conditions of the WPA, particularly during the postwar era’s emphasis on “creativity” and creative writing, heretofore imagined as more of an ally than a competitor in the rise of Composition Studies as a field.

As sociolinguist Charlotte Linde affirms in her study of institutional remembering, *Working the Past*, singular and historical narratives can productively disrupt the dominant paradigms shaping any institution, including Composition Studies. Linde notes that “the highest ranked member of the institution” usually tells the story of that institution (203); in Composition Studies, this member is often the external teacher/scholar who narrates the history of a program or programs, or prevalent lore across programs. But that teller is speaking from an elevated external position, and is therefore unable to represent the local; that teller is also re-presenting the most dominant voices, whereas there are also “noisy silences” to be represented, or “silences in one situation about matters spoken loudly or in whispers in other situations” (Linde 197). These are what we commonly refer to as counter-narratives; in Composition Studies, these include the voices of women students and faculty whose stories have not been historically represented in WPA narratives, nor in disciplinary histories of creative writing versus Composition.

We need to hear more about what happened when these women’s professional agencies failed, or were sabotaged by circumstances beyond their control, or by otherwise-imagined allied fields such as creative writing which
put their scholarship and curricular or administrative work (and use value) in competition for valuable university resources. We are still more likely in our field histories to catalog individual stories of success than individual stories of failure and disappointment, particularly when they expose uncomfortable contention between seemingly overlapping, even friendly, fields such as Composition and creative writing. These “noisy silences” in the history of women’s administrative work in Composition Studies are what I represent here, through the long-forgotten tale of Professor May Bush.

Notes

1 See David Gold’s book *Rhetoric at the Margins* for a fuller discussion of the importance of recovering the local histories of public women’s colleges, as well as HBCUs, within our archival narratives of Composition and Rhetoric. I am indebted to Gold for being the first to call our field’s attention to this lack in representation within our scholarship; my larger book project, from which this article is excerpted, discusses Gold’s work in slightly more detail.

2 R. M. Berry notes that in 1990, “around 3,000 poets and fiction writers” were graduating from creative writing graduate programs each year, compared with 800 doctoral recipients in other fields of English studies (57).

3 See Sharon Crowley, *Composition in the University*, Chapter Seven, “You Can’t Write Writing: Norman Foerster and the Battle over Basic Skills at Iowa.” Notable, of course, in this example of an early creative writing program director is Foerster’s claim to fame: his vision that creative writing would be an organic outgrowth of the English department, rather than a separate (financial and philosophical) arm of the university, divided from department literacy initiatives and scholarly pursuits.

4 See for example collections such as Tom Grimes’s *The Workshop: Seven Decades of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop*.

5 Students at the Woman’s College were required, for example, to participate in closed study each evening; observe a rule of “lights out” at 11:30 p.m.; and adhere to strict policies against men in the dormitories. Each class wore the standard dress of a skirt and the “class jacket,” a blazer with a color combination specific to each year’s class. Dining hall meals were served “family style” with an appointed hostess for each table, who enforced proper table manners and was responsible for facilitating conversation within each table of diners. The social atmosphere was, by all accounts, designed to simultaneously promote equity and rotating opportunities for leadership *among* the women, while also promoting the college’s secondary mission of producing well-mannered, socially proper young women upon graduation. As such, the college uniquely combined, according to alumna accounts and as is evident in archival documents, the social atmosphere of a finishing school with the intellectual rigor of the Seven Sisters (or other highly selective) colleges.

6 The college was founded in 1892 as a normal school and reconstituted in 1931 as a public women’s general college, and since 1964 has been the co-educational University of North Carolina-Greensboro.
In the May 14, 1956 minutes, there is an extended statement by Randall Jarrell, which reads, in part:

“I spoke briefly about the problem of Miss [Nettie] Tillett’s habitual behavior in staff meetings. My tone was serious, objective, and troubled . . . I said that, for as long as I had known it, our department had been faced with an extraordinary problem: the problem of having one member who did not observe, in department meetings, the ordinary rules of social behavior, but who allowed herself to make intemperate or openly insulting remarks about the head of the department, the department as a whole, or individual members of the department . . .”

Tillett resigned from the Woman’s College at the end of the 1957-58 academic year; in a January 1958 memo from Mereb E. Mossman, dean of the college, to Chancellor Gordon Blackwell, Mossman ironically notes this resignation alongside Randall Jarrell’s return (from leave) to the college for 1958-59, at a projected salary of $7500.00—a salary equal to Tillett’s final salary for 1957-58. Mossman also asks, “how heavily would we be justified in drawing on [a reserve in Romance Languages] to add to Mr. Jarrell’s salary?”

Gagen’s book was published by Twayne Publishers (New York); whether this would be considered “vanity” is somewhat debatable. The press is now an imprint of Gale/Cengage.

The low load carried by Jarrell did not go unnoticed by higher administration, though it also appears to go unchanged—and in contrast, is sanctioned—throughout his career at the Woman’s College. In a memo to Chancellor Graham on April 21, 1955, Dean Mossman communicates that she “talked with Dr. Hurley about Mr. Jarrell’s teaching load and implications of such a small load. He is going to work on this problem with the thought that the poetry class might develop into a considerably larger class and also consider the possibility of a sophomore English section for Mr. Jarrell for the coming year.” Note that half of this proposed solution hinges upon Jarrell’s poetry class increasing in size—i.e., the growing of the creative writing concentration—rather than a load re-evaluation beyond the possible sophomore English section. His two-course (six-hour) load continued into the 1960s, as is noted in a November 1961 memo from then-department chair J.A. Bryant to Dean Mossman, in which Jarrell’s two-course load is referenced in relation to his offering of an advanced graduate seminar at the Chapel Hill campus. Hurley concluded that this seminar should be considered “overload” for Jarrell, and that he thus should be paid “an additional amount equal to one-third of his regular salary for the semester [and] should also be reimbursed for his weekly transportation to and from Chapel Hill.” Meanwhile, his fellow colleagues in the English department—those not in creative writing—were teaching a 4/4 load, with no extra pay.

Works Cited

Ballif, Michelle, Diane Davis, and Roxanne Mountford. Women’s Ways of Making it


“What Would Happen if Everybody Behaved as I Do?” 37


"What Would Happen if Everybody Behaved as I Do?" 39