The Historical Problem of Vertical Coherence: Writing, Research, and Legitimacy in Early 20th Century Rhetoric and Composition

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This article explores historical debates over the relationship of composition to rhetoric, arguing that these debates resonate with contemporary arguments about first year writing and undergraduate and graduate programs in writing and rhetoric. Analyzing early scholars’ articulations of the differing aims of undergraduate and graduate studies, this history outlines the challenges rhetoric and composition has faced in establishing a vertical curriculum (from first year writing to a major to a graduate degree). The conclusion provides a heuristic for program development that accounts for the ways institutional structures and cultural contexts shape curricula.

The fabric of institutions intervenes between the material exigencies of life and the speculative scheme of things.

—Thorstein Veblen, “The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View” (44)

A vertical curriculum is the hallmark of a discipline. It establishes curricular coherence by positioning a first-year course as an introduction to the discipline’s content, and culminates in a major. That major then serves as preparation for entry into graduate study, and graduate study produces new members of the discipline prepared to teach undergraduate courses, lead advanced graduate seminars, and conduct specialized research. This model of disciplinarity has persisted since the turn of the twentieth century—if not always in practice, then at least in the academic imaginary as the ideal for liberal arts subjects. Historically, rhetoric and composition has not fit this mold; however, recent arguments to reframe the field as ‘Writing Studies’ imply that the discipline might improve its status by positioning first-year writing (FYW) as an introduction to the discipline. For example, Ellen Cushman suggests that a vertical curriculum would mitigate unfair labor practices and improve the discipline’s status by “tap[ping] into the cachet that writing has in many university administrations” (123). More recently, Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle argue that teaching FYW as a “discipline with content knowledge” like any other introductory course might correct misconceptions about writing among the public and administrators, and allow the field to articulate “more realistic understandings of writing” congruous with current research (“Teaching” 553).

But disciplinarity is a tricky subject in rhetoric and composition,¹ and the questions raised by these curricular proposals reveal just how much the loca-
tion of FYW obscures a clear aim for the course. Is the course an introduction to a major, or does it still serve a purpose in general education? Does it teach disciplinary content or inculcate students into a way of knowing, such as critical thinking? Does it still “teach” writing, and, if so, is what it teaches transferable? The difficulty of these questions reveals how much our hopes hinge on FYW. In this essay, I show how our contemporary attempt to reconfigure FYW (and Writing Studies in general) according to a vertical model raises the ghost of a longstanding debate over the relationship between undergraduate and graduate education. Arguing that material spaces shape our intellectual work, I describe how the structural division of American higher education into undergraduate colleges with attached graduate schools fundamentally impacted the trajectory of rhetoric and composition.

As most historians have framed it, the emergence of graduate schools in American higher education signaled the decline of rhetoric because it failed to establish itself as a discipline (see Connors, Goggin, Kitzhaber). This narrative of decline assumes that had rhetoric been established in graduate schools, the status of FYW would have improved—a claim mirroring contemporary assertions. In fact, as I will show, some early scholars did attempt to define rhetoric as a subject suitable for graduate school by drawing on the discourse of science. However, this position, rather than consolidating the curriculum of rhetoric and composition, brought to the fore tensions over the nature and role of undergraduate education, inciting debate and revealing the tenets of cultural, civic, and practical training at work in undergraduate education. The ideological disjunction between undergraduate studies as preparation for life and graduate education as a research endeavor complicated attempts to define vertical coherence in the curriculum. Indeed, it challenged the notion that vertical coherence was a possible or desirable goal because many individuals resisted the imposition of the research model in undergraduate education. Furthermore, defining rhetoric as a science actually expanded the work of rhetoric across disciplines. This expansion occurred because scholars attempting to situate rhetoric scientifically adopted and mixed the discourse of the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities (the three major structural divisions of liberal arts disciplines). This dispersal of rhetoric limited its ability to serve as the end point of a vertical curriculum from first-year to graduate school.

This history provides a framework for understanding contemporary challenges with definition. How do we connect the curriculum when undergraduate study serves a vastly different purpose than graduate study? How do we establish a distinct space for the discipline when it claims to encompass and draw from a variety of knowledges? One problem is that we tend not to discuss graduate and undergraduate education in rhetoric and composition together. Even discussions of a vertical curriculum often end with a major. I argue that we need to consider the relationship undergraduate education has to graduate study, and how that historical development has constrained and enabled particular curricular and disciplinary visions.
Curricular Coherence: The Relationship of Graduate and Undergraduate Education, 1870–1930

From 1870 to 1915 universities experienced what Louis Menand calls “the big bang of American higher education” (97). During this time, American institutions adopted graduate schools modeled after the German model of higher education implemented at The Johns Hopkins University in 1876 (followed closely by Clark University, Stanford University, and University of Chicago). This transformation profoundly impacted the structure and credentialing process of American universities by expanding and popularizing graduate education focused on specialized research. Although many composition histories point to the impact of the German model, most reduce it to a philosophical bend toward positivistic research in the natural sciences. However, German higher education approached scholarship with an ideal of continual investigation, without restrictions or market-concerns, for the sake of expanding human knowledge (see Veysey, Rudolph). Because it valued scholarship, the German model institutionalized continual research through publication and the credentialing of the PhD.

American higher education quickly revolutionized in the two decades after Hopkins founding. The impact of this revolution has been well documented: the PhD became a requirement for faculty at major universities; publication became a part of faculty responsibilities; graduate schools were added to undergraduate colleges; and the university underwent massive reorganization as existing departments split or new departments came into existence and formed an increasingly segmented body in need of a new class of administrators. Intense competition for resources encouraged standardization across universities, and as departments standardized, they pushed forward the formation of larger professional organizations that we now associate with disciplines (the Modern Language Association, MLA, being one example).

The primary influence of the German model was structural. As Frederick Rudolph explains, the German model brought to American higher education “a fundamental attachment to the graduate faculty of arts and sciences, to the idea of a body of scholars and students pushing forward the frontiers of pure knowledge” (334). What is particularly significant in this history is that graduate schools were often built on already existing undergraduate colleges with particular missions, constituencies, and trustees. In effect, this arrangement created the conditions of possibility for a vertical curriculum as departments organized around content areas, undergraduate majors developed, and those majors and departments were connected structurally to graduate studies. Before Hopkins initiated this change, undergraduate colleges constituted a collection of decentralized and largely sectarian institutions in the United States organized around a required curriculum in classical languages and moral philosophy (the latter course often taught by the college president). After Hopkins, those institutions remained varied,
but the dynamic growth of graduate schools catalyzed the introduction of the modern languages and sciences.

Expanding the range of academic subjects prompted the need for an increasingly segmented university structure. As Patricia J. Gumport argues, the emergence of graduate education correlated with the departmental expansion in the final decades of the nineteenth century. This model created a central dilemma: “If Ph.D. programs were integrated organizationally as a separate level from the liberal education of undergraduate colleges, they also were made parts of departments responsible for undergraduate instruction in a discipline” (229). That is, graduate education served entirely different purposes from, but was organizationally linked to, undergraduate education. Undergraduate departments provided a base for research faculty, supporting their work financially through tuition, but universities desiring increased status lured research faculty with the opportunity to research and work with graduate students. Furthermore, the reproduction of disciplinary specialists in graduate education became a prerequisite for teaching undergraduates, and the undergraduate degree became the prerequisite for entering graduate or professional school.

The impact of this system was profound. The pull of the undergraduate system compelled Hopkins and Clark to add undergraduate programs to their institutions after their founding (Gumport 229). But the system was also complicated. Unlike the German system, American universities received little (if any) state or federal funding, so financial problems impeded institutions’ ability to value research and graduate education. Indeed, by 1910 Edwin Slosson, editor of The Independent, only identified fourteen “great American universities,” excelling at the university mission (see Slosson). Because many undergraduate colleges preexisted graduate schools, they already had funding sources, institutional aims, and constituencies whose expectations they needed to balance with university expansion to attract students and philanthropists.

With the expansion of graduate education, increased stress on faculty credentials (the PhD) and productivity (publication) became normal operating procedure in universities. These notions extended into English, and were the subject of debate and controversy. Harry T. Baker, in 1928, wrote, “At one great university in the cow pastures of the Middle West, the attitude to young professors has been informally but accurately phrased as ‘Get a Ph.D. or get out!’” (824). The next year, Edwin Berry Bergum remarked, “The contemporary scholar in English studies is a business man. In proportion he is successful, at the top of his profession, he becomes a director of research among subordinates, a bureaucrat on the business model, always tempted to measure success in terms of output” (468). Indeed, Baker and Bergum’s comments indicate both the encroachment of specialized research on faculty demands, and the simultaneous resistance to this encroachment, as if it violated certain ideals about intellectual life by measuring it in terms of credentials and publications.
Although it manifested differently across institutions, resistance to the research model revolved around the undergraduate curriculum. For example, Baker argued that graduate study in English led to questionable composition instruction, in which first-year students “adorn their pages with innumerous footnotes, as preparation for writing a future Ph.D. thesis or a learned article for one of the scholarly periodicals which never pay for contributions! It is difficult to see what relation such training has to the writing of plain English for sensible purposes” (822). That graduate education actually transformed the undergraduate curriculum into a kind of disciplinary training seemed problematic to Baker because undergraduates wanted the practical education:

In only one college for men, Harvard, does [English] stand at the head of the list [of most popular majors]. It is generally eclipsed by economics and by social science. The great manly course in most men’s colleges is money and banking. And I shall merely say that this is true to note of our American life. The university is 100 per cent accurate in registering American interests. (824)

Although the comment applies to a gendered context, it expresses fear that the research model would remove what the public valued from English: writing instruction. Its role in the undergraduate curriculum seemed to demand something more than an introduction to advanced research methods.

Baker’s comment also points to the key role undergraduate education played in building and popularizing the university. As John R. Thelin argues, “Although the university-builders’ public pronouncements tended to disparage the historic college as obsolete, in private conversations they acknowledged that their universities were dependent on the colleges’ resurgence” (156). Graduate schools needed undergraduates for courses, tuition, and future enrollment in graduate programs. Undergraduates became alumni and incentivized charitable donations to the university (156). Furthermore, between 1880 and 1930, the demographic of boards of trustees changed radically, becoming dominated by individuals with corporate, not academic, backgrounds (238). All of these material constraints impacted (and still do) the range of intellectual possibilities for undergraduate courses. Simply put, the value placed on the undergraduate curriculum necessarily affected the curricular goals of rhetoric and composition.

Science, Rhetoric, and Writing in the Scheme of Modern Subjects

The disconnect between undergraduate and graduate curricula became particularly apparent in universities’ championing of ‘scientific’ discourse, defined vaguely. With the impact of natural scientists like Charles Darwin, inventers and entrepreneurs in various applied sciences, and the advocacy of research as ‘pure science’ by those returning from Germany, the meaning of the term became increasingly varied. Danette Paul and Ann M. Blakeslee argue that science relied on its connotations of “utility, progress, and indi-

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viduality” to enter the university (248; see also Wolfe, Gumport). Indeed, an 1890 article in the Philadelphia Inquirer indicates the connection of science at the undergraduate level to practical and civic training. Commenting on Columbia President Seth Low’s inaugural address, the article asserted, “This is not an age of monasticism, but of hard, earnest work, of material development and of a liberal scholarship that pervades every stratum of society” (122). The article remarked that college provides “a necessary foundation for [students’] duties as a citizen in the ordinary callings” and preparation “to launch upon a successful career”: “the young man of to-day wants to fit himself for an active business life. He wants the latest scientific knowledge” (122). Training in the sciences prepared students for citizenship and business insofar as it abandoned the “monastic” education of the past.

The ideal of scientific research was in a period of transition around the turn of the twentieth century. Associated somewhat with the older terminology of natural laws and empiricism, scientific methodology also became linked with the work of natural scientists. To add to the confusion, scientific study was not limited to the outside natural world, but increasingly included the human mind and society (Veysey 134). With new aims for science and the addition of modern subjects to the curriculum, universities underwent structural changes that impacted the curriculum. John Guillory notes that the eighteenth and early nineteenth century educational system based on the division between moral and natural philosophy shifted to a three-part system in the late nineteenth century, dividing modern disciplines into the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities (26). Thus, science was more than an intellectual issue; it was a structural problem. Where would disciplines be located as they transitioned to this schema or entered the university for the first time?

The confusion over science was exacerbated by administrators’ inconsistent attention to research. Roger L. Geiger notes that, even by 1920, research represented an important ideal, but “the manner in which [American universities] sustained their commitment to research was inchoate at best. The major universities thus had a philosophical commitment to the advancement of knowledge but lacked a secure institutional means for meeting that commitment” (2). The impact of this gap between philosophy and institutional resources meant that the undergraduate program, as the financial base of the university, constrained research. In 1908, Gustaf E. Karsten made a similar observation, comparing German and American universities. He argued that the vast American administrative system had not “sufficiently safeguarded and encouraged” scholarship because it was too concerned with the its financial well-being (29). As he explained,

And when some multi-millionaire gives millions to or for some institution, we see, with rarest exceptions, the old story repeating itself: a big undergraduate teaching establishment is founded . . . and by the time that is done the money is gone and practically nothing is left to build up the greatest work. (29)
Implicit in this account, is that undergraduate education served as the focal point for pressure to meet particular public demands. What emerged in American higher education was a system that forced correlation between two units with different aims.

This structural arrangement of universities prompted changes in rhetoric and composition as it attempted to weather the transition from the collegiate to the university model. Before the introduction of modern disciplines in the university, the collegiate structure revolved around subjects like rhetoric, logic, and moral philosophy, which served to discipline students’ mental faculties. Toward the latter half of the nineteenth century, academic reformers increasingly criticized the idea that college taught students mental discipline, arguing instead that college should provide professional training and instruction in the modern languages, arts, and sciences. As the mental discipline model faded slowly from higher education, modern subjects were increasingly added based on content knowledge. Vocational and professional studies were added as well, particularly at land-grant institutions, but were usually structurally separate from colleges of arts and sciences (colleges of education, engineering, etc.). University of California president Daniel Coit Gilman (later the first president of Hopkins) defined the university in 1872 as “the most comprehensive term that can be employed to indicate a foundation for the promotion and diffusion of knowledge—a group of agencies organized to advance the arts and sciences of every sort, and train young men as scholars for the intellectual callings of life” (qtd. in Rudolph 333). With the emphasis on content knowledge and the imposition of new areas of study to replace the classical college curriculum, departments underwent a period of rapid development, emerging or splitting to create a much more compartmentalized system of units (Veysey 23–24). Departments provided a convenient location for linking undergraduate to graduate education, so that the same faculty controlled both areas. But this arrangement also forced a correlation between undergraduate and graduate education that was not immediately obvious. Undergraduate education served to inculcate cultural and civic values and to prepare students for professions, while the new graduate studies in the arts and sciences connoted specialized research. Thus, a fundamental question was how to construct continuity in the curriculum when the educational motivations of undergraduates often vastly differed from the aims of graduate students.

The transition from mental discipline to knowledge discipline precipitated a move from rhetoric as a methodology to rhetoric as an object of study. After 1880, Albert Kitzhaber argues, American rhetoricians abandoned attempts to “indicate the place of rhetoric in relation to other disciplines” in training students’ mental faculties (81). Elaborating on this claim, he writes, when rhetoric was usually thought to be a separate ‘mental science,’ a distinctive field had to be marked out for it and bulwarked against the encroachments of such other disciplines as logic, grammar, psychology, and ethics. The most plausible way to do this was simply to show in what ways rhetoric is indebted to these other subjects, yet manages to preserve its own identity and function. (81)
Kitzhaber demonstrates little concern for what happened after 1880 because he, like most historians, views it as a period of reducing rhetoric to composition. However, because the early focus on demarcating rhetoric from other mental disciplines correlated with the tendency to view rhetoric as constitutive of a variety of knowledges, rhetoric was not in a position to transition easily from informing knowledge to establishing a disciplinary territory. This expansiveness was complicated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by difficulty correlating undergraduate and graduate studies in composition and rhetoric.

The problem of rhetoric’s past as a mental discipline is exemplified in David J. Hill’s 1877 The Science of Rhetoric. Hill rejected the Aristotelian notion of rhetoric as the study of the five canons. For him, rhetorical science consisted of both a set of laws and a method for effecting mental change. He described rhetoric as comprising “laws of the mind, the idea, and the form” and seeking to act on the mind through language (39). He carefully articulated the differences between rhetoric and other “mental disciplines” such as aesthetics, ethics, and logic—components of the collegiate curriculum in moral philosophy, but saw rhetoric as informing “the methods of investigation . . . in the various departments of thought” such as law, theology, and criticism (3–4). As such, Hill delineated an expansive role for rhetoric. Defining rhetoric methodologically thus positioned it as informing the emerging disciplines and professional vocations, not as its own area of study.

Although Hill’s theory did not become as popular as other, more reductive rhetorics, a prominent current of thought arguing for rhetoric as a science persisted into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These voices struggled to adapt a methodological rhetoric to the changing understanding of discipline. Take, for example John F. Genung’s² argument in 1887 that educators should see in “the art” of rhetoric “a practical value, immediate and universal” as well as a study “large enough for any elaborateness of discipline” (3). Genung attempted to reconcile the practicality and artistry of rhetoric and composition with the concept of ‘discipline,’ a term connoting, for him, abstract “facts, principles” (4). He did not deny the role of principles in rhetoric, but he favored artistic “construction, creation,” as its principle object (4). In fact, Genung wanted discipline to include the production of creative texts as a stated objective. He thus argued that the study of rhetoric might be taught scientifically by having students observe what works well in literature to foster writing ability: “This is not speculation out of some one’s head; it is scientific method. Rhetoric is the constructive study of literature, as distinguished from the philological and the historical study” (10). For him, rhetoric represented a particular methodology for studying literature in order to produce it, but also a knowledge base. The resulting vision situated rhetoric as overlapping with literature in content, but providing different methods for its study—methods geared more toward training professional writers. This approach saw investigation as a means not an end, a view that would increasingly seem incongruous with the goals of graduate education.
in the arts and sciences as primarily the reproduction of an intellectual class (university faculty) not the production of a professional class. Was rhetoric a vocational study or a research subject? If a vocational study, the location of rhetoric within the liberal arts would need to be rethought, especially at the graduate level. If a research subject, then the relationship between rhetoric and composition would need to be more clearly articulated, as would the distinction between rhetoric and literature.

A 1901 survey by the MLA Pedagogical Section on graduate education in rhetoric highlighted rhetoric’s territory problem. William Edward Mead, the survey editor, emphasized that the responses at the time were largely in favor of graduate study in rhetoric (xxi). As outlined by respondents to the survey, such a graduate program would involve “historical, psychological, or philosophical, and pedagogical” investigations (xxv). Individual responses elaborated on the variety of content rhetoric comprised. One respondent, for example, defined rhetoric as “a composite of parts of grammar, logic, literary criticism, and perhaps other studies” (xxv). Another respondent indicated that rhetoric encompassed both multiple subject matters (“literature and linguistics”) and research methods (“psychology, aesthetics, and sociology”) (xxvii). One respondent concluded:

The relation of Rhetoric to Psychology deserves exhaustive investigation; is full of problems of interest and practical significance. The relation of Rhetoric to Logic, the history of Logic and Rhetoric, the philosophical implications of Rhetoric, are all crying for treatment and discussion . . . A study of Rhetoric on liberal lines I believe may have the highest disciplinary value for graduate learning and does offer problems of profound interest for research. (xxx)

The responses indicate that rhetoric overlapped with a range of departments and disciplines—literature, history, psychology, sociology, linguistics, pedagogy, in addition to encompassing mental disciplines, including logic, grammar, and aesthetics. These articulations reflect rhetoric’s transition from a discipline associated with mental training and textual production to a liberal art suitable for graduate study—that is, from mental training to research subject. In order for rhetoric to fit within the structure of graduate training in the liberal arts, it had to be reframed as a research subject with legitimate content—an assumption that continues to inform our conception of the field.

The expansion of rhetoric’s content raised questions about its position in the scheme of English and other emerging disciplines. As Mead explains, some respondents felt that giving rhetoric “the false dignity of isolation’ would be to diminish rather than to increase its importance” (xxv). The importance of isolation and independence was stressed in other comments. One respondent defined rhetoric as a science, worthy of graduate work, but added the caveat that it is not “equal in importance to those subjects that have an independent existence, and if it is to be pursued as a graduate study
its relation to other branches of knowledge must be fully realized” (Mead xxvi, italics mine). Another suggested, “There should be no separate curriculum of graduate study in rhetoric,” because it already existed as part of literary study (xxx). These respondents perceived rhetoric as a field lacking a natural or obvious object of study or reason for existence, and composed of other more clearly defined disciplines.

Thus, what Guillory has claimed for philology’s history also proved true for rhetoric: rhetoric and composition was disadvantaged because it “straddled the new spectrum of the disciplines” (36), always subject to critique for not quite fitting any single “norm of scientificity” (24). Rhetoric retained and repressed prior views of its role as a methodological mental discipline (as Crowley has extensively argued), and that role never integrated well into the content-model of modern disciplines. Thus, the division between rhetoric and composition was forced primarily by structural shifts rather than epistemological shifts. However, scholars who focused on defining rhetoric as a science tended to push organizational challenges into the background, an historical tendency that has complicated our ability to articulate the relationships among rhetoric, composition, and literature.

“Culture and Efficiency” in Undergraduate Composition

Even as scholars of rhetoric struggled to articulate its content and suitability for graduate study, the pressure placed on the undergraduate curriculum to resist scientism impacted the relationship between rhetoric and composition. In fact, the scientificity of the humanities—which legitimized graduate study—became the object of criticism in undergraduate education. Speaking of both philology and rhetoric, Morton W. Easton cautioned in 1889 that the “science of language . . . is not an exact science” (21). He noted that comparing ‘linguistic sciences’ with the hard sciences “is but little to the advantage of the former” (21). Rather than diminish its significance, he argued that the lack of correlation actually provided language studies with a unique role:

What should we say of the teacher of psychology who should confine his work to the anatomical tissues of the brain and nerves? No! to stop here is to relinquish our distinctive claims to respectful attention. Language is an art; it is not merely the product of certain historical factors, it is an art, and the study of its application as an art is worthy of our best energies as educators of undergraduates. (21, italics mine)

Easton connected the artistic study of language with the undergraduate mission specifically. In fact, Easton suggested that an analogy with the hard sciences would diminish the legitimacy of those studies, perhaps because it dismissed the practical application central to the undergraduate mission. Indeed, the undergraduate study of rhetoric and English provided “the only source of culture in the academical course,” mitigating the “tendency of the scientific departments . . . to convert men into mere wheels in the social
machine” (22). Undergraduate instructors should be “of a different, and in some respects, of a higher order. To use the terminology of college faculties, he should be, preemminently, a teacher in the ‘Department of Arts’” (20). Only in the arts, could the study of language create a “well-rounded man” capable of dealing with “literary wholes” (22) rather than specialized periods or other divisions. Easton’s remark reveals a crucial tendency—for the undergraduate course to push back against the specialization the graduate schools encouraged. This tendency would return in twentieth century general education movements, in which reformers proposed courses in common knowledge and American values requisite for properly cultured undergraduates (see Menand). Yet paradoxically, the structure of graduate education made specialized research the credential for teaching undergraduates.

Some individuals strove to connect undergraduate and graduate programs in rhetoric through a vertical research track. For example, Frank W. Scott began his discussion on “The Relation of Composition to the Rest of the Curriculum” by noting that composition did not fit the curriculum, nor represent the wider study of rhetoric. Scott argued that this lack of correspondence resulted from the competing aims of the course to improve students’ literacy on one hand and to inculcate literary and cultural sensibilities on the other hand (512). The practical orientation of composition positioned it as a “handmaiden” to the rest of the curriculum” through “a sincere but mistaken attempt to make Freshman rhetoric meet immediate social and industrial needs” (513). Scott argues that the proliferation of specialized writing courses suggests a curricular confusion:

we have courses in ideas, in the evolution of the Darwinian theory since the death of Darwin, in current events, in advertising, in journalism, in engineering English, in agricultural English, in technique of the short story and of the play, and many other fads and specialties that promise to make competent writers out of students who know no rhetoric. (513)

Scott’s understanding of these courses was shaped by his assumption that language is merely a container for thought, and “good English . . . is English for engineers as well as for all the rest of us” (516). Despite this limited perspective on writing, Scott made an important observation: composition was dispersed because it “leads nowhere, in the matter of [instructor] promotion, and, so far as our curricula show, has no scholarly relationships” (518). Scott wanted to return rhetoric to the content of the composition course, and to establish a scholarly agenda. Rhetoric provided “opportunity for graduate investigation and scholarly research” in history, theory, aesthetics, and criticism, which would lead to an advanced degree (519). His observation assumed that verticality would give value to faculty teaching introductory courses, while a myriad of horizontal writing courses would not. Thus, the purpose for the course that imbued rhetoric and composition with disciplinary content indicated underlying concern over the labor pool and status of the course.
In contrast, Fred Newton Scott articulated diverging purposes for undergraduate and graduate courses in rhetoric. As he explains in “Rhetoric Redeviva,” rhetoric was a science worthy of “advanced study” (413). Concerned with justifying this scientific definition, Scott argued that rhetoric had too long been dominated by Aristotle’s “closed science” approach, which conceived of rhetoric as predefined rules with no possibility for original investigation (413). Scott thus viewed the older taxonomic perspective as limited, and attempted to outline possibilities for original investigation in rhetoric for graduate students. However, for Scott, undergraduate students still needed rhetoric to be a “cultural discipline”; only graduate students could “grapple with weighty and complex problems and . . . make independent investigation” (413). Outlining the elements of the rhetorical science, Scott argued that rhetoric required a “unified subject-matter” and a research methodology based upon empirical observation (414). Despite calling for unity, he emphasized the range of fields that rhetoric encompasses—notably aesthetics, sociology, and psychology. Although historians have lionized Scott for validating rhetoric, his own justification for rhetorical study—like that of Hill—defined rhetoric as a compilation of various subjects, while simultaneously relying on a tenuous analogy between the natural sciences and rhetoric. Scott grappled with the issue of relating undergraduate and graduate studies. As he explained,

In this subject [composition], as in most others, the general educational principle holds good that elementary practice and advanced research are mutually dependent . . . Illustrations of this truth in mathematics, biology, medicine, and other sciences, will occur to everyone. (413)

Scott tries to correlate rhetoric with the vertical curricula of the hard sciences, even though he already distinguished introductory rhetoric courses as serving a cultural purpose. Thus, Scott reproduces the very tension over verticality that still troubles our discussions of it today.

Respondents to the MLA Pedagogical Section’s 1901 survey also debated whether composition, as distinct from rhetoric, had any place in a graduate program. A few deemed composition appropriate graduate study if defined as a pedagogical science. One respondent remarked that rhetoric could provide “a scientific base for teaching an efficient use of the mother tongue,” specifying that the ultimate aim of graduate study in rhetoric should be “pedagogical,” and suggesting like others, numerous areas of study for this pursuit: “the aesthetics of prose, the history of language, and the history of Rhetoric” as well as “the psychology of childhood and youth as related to the problems of language-teaching” (xxviii). Yet because newly founded colleges of education focused on the latter, while the arts and sciences tended to the former, this approach to composition and rhetoric also spanned educational divisions.

Other respondents to the survey thought that including rhetoric in graduate study meant teaching writing at the graduate level; they emphati-
cally discouraged such a trend: “Mere theme-writing, however sublimated or raised even to the $n$th power, ought never to be a part of the credits for a higher degree” (xxx). The problem, as one respondent mentioned, was that Rhetoric might “simply continue the mixed lessons given under that name in elementary text-books” (xxvi)—a comment that implies both that rhetoric lacked coherence and that rhetoric differed in purpose at the graduate level. Composition might merit place in graduate education if focused on training teachers, but not if focused on writing itself. Thus, composition’s relationship to rhetoric posed a fundamental problem. If pedagogically focused, it seemed more appropriate for colleges of education, but that would split it from the work of the liberal arts and sciences where it was currently located. If practically focused, it seemed more appropriate for professional training or undergraduate courses than graduate school. In short, the location of rhetoric and composition within the liberal arts fundamentally shaped its credentialing process and curricular content. Instruction in rhetorical practice—that is, composition—was pushed from graduate curricula to undergraduate courses, where it could more easily incorporate vocational and cultural values, and the distinction between the study of rhetoric and literature thus became increasingly unclear.

However, some respondents challenged the definition of graduate education as disinterested investigation without practical application. According to Mead, many indicated that “a graduate school might be made to serve as a school for critical or creative genius; but their plans for the conduct of such a school were not very definite” (xxiv-xxv). One comment in particular elaborates on this point:

If regarded as an art there would need to be a change in the interpretation of the advanced degrees. For the Oxford doctorate in music the candidate must present a musical composition as part of evidence of proficiency. I do not see why a rhetorical composition, an essay, a novel, a poem, or other literary kind, should not count toward a degree in literature. (xxix)

As this remark indicates, the system of graduate school adapted by American universities discouraged connections between rhetoric and composition, a fact that also lead rhetoric, literature, and creative writing to become increasingly delineated in subsequent decades.

Glenn E. Palmer summarized the conflict between undergraduate and graduate rhetoric in his 1912 essay, “Culture and Efficiency through Composition.” Palmer concurred that a scientific investigation of rhetoric, including historical philology, literature, psychology, philosophy, could inform composition. However, this knowledge should never be the sum of composition at the undergraduate level (490). Palmer’s motivation for this assertion emerged from his particular perspective that undergraduate education should unify culture and efficiency. As he explained, “After all, is not the purpose of education to enable us to live, and are we not safe in concluding that in the last analysis the most efficient life is that which is cultured, and the
most cultured life that which is at the same time efficient?” (488). What is particularly interesting about Palmer’s desire to unite culture and efficiency is the implication that undergraduate instruction should mitigate problematic tendencies in American culture. A focus on liberal culture in education could become “dilettantism” while efficiency could be “carried to the extreme of impersonal system and administrative machinery that is rife in many of our state institutions today” (488). Composition thus served as the locus for a number of competing social desires—both public and academic. The fact that an argument for something as simple as changing the content of the FYW course could be perceived as altering perceptions of the discipline among the public and administrators reveal how persistent these desires are still. The potential for a vertical curriculum to improve the labor and status of a course has historically been complicated because FYW exists at the intersection of differing cultural and academic purposes. How we negotiate its location is a question that we still struggle with both because American higher education maintains the structure of undergraduate and graduate education that emerged more than a century ago, and because rhetoric and composition has always had difficulty fitting that structure. These historical debates reveal contemporary challenges we must negotiate—challenges not just of content, but of structure, location, and labor.

Implications for the Present

Ongoing challenges with definition and verticality persist because disciplinarity has always been a messy construct in practice. This is particularly true in the humanities, where many subjects retain traces of the early collegiate curriculum and seem to resist the specialization we associate with majors and graduate programs. This messiness has resurfaced recently in the slippage between defining our work as a discipline or an interdisciplinary field, a trend that recalls the history of debate over whether rhetoric and composition is an independent or composite research subject. We might confront the tension surrounding our knowledge base—and its impact on FYW, minors, majors, departments, and various other writing programs—by considering how articulations of disciplinarity shape the location and content of writing and research at all levels.

To that end, institutional histories can provide a heuristic for considering curricular issues. In curricular development, we might think beyond the vertical alignment of courses—following a track from FYW to a writing and rhetoric degree. Instead, we need to think vertically, horizontally, and institutionally about how to create courses and curricula. In other words, minors, majors, and graduate programs increase the field’s legitimacy by shaping it into a model discipline, but our work might also operate outside the vertical model to engage other disciplines and communities in writing instruction or interdisciplinary programs of study. As we engage in building programs and courses, we might consider the following issues:
• **Vertical legitimacy:** Does the structure of a course or program reinforce our claim that writing and rhetoric are legitimate areas of research and knowledge at all levels—from the first year to advanced undergraduate level courses and graduate studies? Do advanced undergraduate courses provide opportunities for undergraduate research and theoretical engagement in addition to courses oriented toward training students for relevant professional work? How can our understanding of the purpose of undergraduate majors in writing and rhetoric reshape our graduate programs?

• **Horizontal outreach and engagement:** Does the structure of a course or program support our contention that writing is the province of all disciplines and professions? Do our FYW programs and undergraduate writing majors have substantial and sustainable connections to the writing that happens in other disciplines, even if those courses do not feed back into a minor or major? Can minors, majors, and graduate programs accommodate writing and rhetoric-focused coursework from other disciplines and departments? Do programs, courses, and community outreach opportunities actively work to engage public values and knowledge? Do graduate programs account for the range of professional as well as academic careers students might pursue?

• **Institutional values and contexts:** Does the structure of a course or program operate persuasively within a particular institution’s culture and history? Do outcomes and assessment practices employ research in rhetoric and composition while engaging local audiences and attending institutional values? How can we adapt program and professional development (FYW, graduate training, etc.) to improve the labor structures unique to our institutions?

The questions I raise here acknowledge that verticality is an important but limited argument for resources. For example, we might consider how the structure of the PhD shapes research and curricula, not just in introductory composition courses, but also in subfields such as technical and professional writing. If that structure prioritizes research, we may need to be more explicit about including and valuing opportunities for community engagement and professional experience as part of graduate training. And how do we balance disciplinary and institutional values? Teaching introductory writing courses as an introduction to writing research—an approach that has influenced my own teaching—provides a sense of vertical coherence by modeling the approach of other disciplines. However, my course still operates within—and must support the assessment of—general education goals outlined by my university. Those goals range from discussing diversity in American culture to teaching “expository” writing and critical thinking. Furthermore, writing instruction in general education is complicated as we involve faculty across disciplines—particularly when a writing program or department has no central administrative control over Writing Across the Curriculum or Writ-
ing in the Disciplines (WAC/WID) courses, or when WAC/WID programs replace FYW entirely. We all must draw from values embedded in our local contexts in ways that strengthen writing in its institutional environments. Only by attending to the ways institutional structures shape intellectual work—at both local and global levels—can we articulate how both to work within and expand beyond vertical disciplinary structures.

Notes

1. I use rhetoric and composition throughout this essay because the terminology is more historically appropriate for the texts I discuss than Writing Studies. The moniker writing studies intentionally attempts to distance the field from composition as a delegitimized subject (see Cushman). The debate over terminology is outside the scope of this essay, but it is worth considering whether the change in name removes the historical pressures I describe from undergraduate courses, or, for that matter, graduate programs.

2. John C. Brereton describes Genung as “the perfect transitional figure” given his doctoral training in the German educational system and his background as a minister (133).

3. See, for example, the interchangeable use of interdisciplinary and disciplinary in Downs and Wardle, “Reflecting.” For another example of the slippage between discipline and interdisciplinary, see Robert R. Johnson’s “Craft Knowledge: Of Disciplinarity in Writing Studies,” which argues that to be interdisciplinary rhetoric and composition needs first to establish a disciplinary knowledge base.

Works Cited


“President Low on College Work.” *Philadelphia Inquirer* 5 Feb 1890. 122. Print.


