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With local historians heeding Linda Ferreira-Buckley’s call to “rescue the archives,” our historical depiction of Composition grows increasingly varied and complex. We now know more about institutions where composition instruction survived, and even thrived, at times when a prior generation of historians assigned it a dismal fate. Continuing this trend of local archival research, Kelly Ritter’s To Know Her Own History: Writing at the Woman’s College, 1943-1963 addresses two historical oversights: first, the relative dearth of information on women’s education in composition, especially at public women’s colleges; and second, the lack of attention to the interwoven histories of composition and creative writing. To do this, she provides an extensively documented, multi-frame picture of the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina (W.C.), today the University of North Carolina-Greensboro (UNCG). Ritter’s overarching argument is that the W.C. balanced the local desires of students and faculty with national trends in composition, creative writing, and general education as it maintained a commitment to rigorous and progressive composition instruction.

To Know Her Own History begins in chapters 1 and 2 by connecting the normal school origins of the W.C. to its later curricular focus on writing. Founded as the State Normal and Industrial School in 1891, the institution later transformed into the W.C. in 1931, finally becoming the coeducational UNCG in 1964. Ritter contextualizes the role of English—and writing instruction specifically—within the history of normal schools’ concern for training teachers to address the literacy needs of primary and secondary school students. In contrast to elite women’s colleges, normal schools valued writing and rhetoric courses for the professional preparation they offered women. But Ritter contends that institutional type did not solely determine pedagogical focus. Within its larger mission to train white women as appropriate model teachers in Southern culture, the State Normal and Industrial College provided extensive writing instruction, emphasizing the value of student writing and creative and expository assignments.

After transitioning to the W.C., these past practices informed the college’s commitment to writing in the postwar era that is the focus of the remaining chapters. Ritter’s assessment is supported by her reading of the W.C.’s first-year writing student publication, the Yearling (1948-1951). Showcasing student writing from the first-year course, the Yearling reveals the interconnected threads of creative writing and composition at the W.C. Often blurring expository, argumentative, and creative genres, students’ texts consider literary, personal, and political topics—from nature poems to
stories exploring race and gender constructs. To fill out this picture, Ritter interviews three women who published in the Yearling, noting they valued the W.C.’s investment in creative writing and student leadership, even though they encountered restrictions there. One anecdote, from Elizabeth Poplin Stanfield-Maddox, about a male professor blocking her library request of a risqué Mark Twain story is humorous, but also hints at the complex gender dynamics these students confronted. Their perspective challenges us to acknowledge what students, past and present, appreciate in writing courses, and the interviews provide a model for supplementing historical material with individuals’ narratives.

Maintaining focus on how the institution adapted to national trends, chapter 3 provides a history of general education reform, arguing that in the heyday of such reforms nationwide the W.C. resisted abstract recommendations in favor of local considerations. Ritter contrasts the 1945 Harvard publication, General Education in a Free Society (“the Redbook”), with a failed attempt to apply its recommendations at the W.C. from 1951-1953. Her analysis employs committee reports, meeting minutes, and surveys to show how the Redbook overlooked perspectives from different disciplines and institutions in its vague recommendations for curriculum reform. In doing so, the Redbook also devalued the content of composition and the arts—both central to the W.C. The W.C. faculty resisted Redbook-inspired reforms; instead the English department conducted an independent review of first- and second-year sequence, integrating the courses’ content and reasserting their merit, rather than—as Harvard suggested—subordinating writing to other general education approaches (e.g., “Great Texts” or Western civilization). The W.C.’s resistance to Harvard demonstrates why that university should not be the barometer for historical composition. Instead of adopting sweeping reforms, the faculty assessed courses locally in the context of their institutional approach to writing—a desire that may feel relevant for writing program administrators negotiating state and federal mandates impacting writing programs today.

The final two chapters of the book turn a critical eye on Ritter’s earlier, largely positive, narrative of the W.C. Chapter 4 complicates her earlier depiction of creative writing and composition as symbiotic by detailing the disparate career paths of writing program administrator May Bush and esteemed poet Randall Jarrell. Ritter argues persuasively that the W.C.’s multiple attempts to retain Jarrell on faculty and boost its creative writing program inadvertently resulted in Bush’s delay of raises and promotion several times. Ritter astutely calls attention to the disparity between Bush’s and Jarrell’s careers because of gender differences and the power differential between creative writing and composition. Significantly, this history offers a way out of the literature/composition binary dominating the portrayal of composition as “the sad women in the basement,” always subordinated to English literature. Ritter instead posits that, in this case, composition’s
relationship to other writing pedagogies and programs impacted its prominence in the college.

Then, in chapter 5, Ritter troubles her initial assessment of the W.C. as a progressive force in women’s education, discussing the institution’s transformation into a comprehensive, coeducational university. She asks, “What, indeed, does it mean to see such a dedicated plan for writing and the arts for women students collapse into the background of yet another large, generic university?” (195-96). How do we interpret this history, when the institution dismissed its special mission for women, yet maintained strong creative writing and composition and rhetoric programs? Ritter’s analysis of alumni letters and administrative statements regarding the W.C.’s fate highlights differences between administrative visions for a coeducational university and student and alumni attachment to the institution’s unique identity. Institutional decisions emerge from a cacophony of student, public, and administrative voices and resist easy labels like progressive or conservative; institutional histories, too, must recognize this complexity.

Ritter’s major contribution, I would argue, is historiographical. In exposing dissonances among archival documents, Ritter reminds us that history is narrative imposed on messiness. Frequently, to end a chapter or section, she offers multiple interpretations of her documents. For example, in understanding the intersection of creative writing and composition at the W.C., she suggests we might view creative writing either as an extension of the university’s attentiveness to writing instruction and student desires, or as ultimately limiting the composition program (or, likely, as both). This rhetorical move avoids reducing local history to mere lessons, polemic, or unqualified recovery—an important step for scholarship in the field. However, Ritter’s discussion of historiography, while generally engaging, did lose me toward the book’s end when she suggests that we view archival research of writing programs as an “ethnographic practice” (209). Given the larger disciplinary debates over ethnography, I thought the term, which seems to be used metaphorically, deserved additional definition to seem justified in this context.

Additionally, one gap in the text might suggest further work for composition historians. As I read, I noticed that community and public perspectives of the W.C. lurk unexplored in the book’s background. At one point, Ritter hypothesizes that some may have viewed the W.C. as “a step removed from a finishing school, or a training site for wholly domestic careers” (205). Yet those opinions are largely absent from her analysis, as they are from many composition histories. How might public voices be included in our archives to help us better articulate the history of public and academic relationships?

These criticisms are relatively minor, however. Ritter’s book articulates the value of history to disciplinary, administrative, and pedagogical concerns. For me, her point hit home when I recently heard Kevin Carey, director of Education Policy at the New America Foundation, discuss rising college tuition costs on NPR’s Fresh Air. Carey rehearsed the history of higher education
through the lens of Harvard and Johns Hopkins, arguing that college tuition was doomed from the moment it adopted the German research model, and privileged expensive research over teaching obligations. Carey’s argument relies on more than just poor history, but his failure to acknowledge various institutional types and their responsiveness to local communities seems inexcusable. Acknowledging the complexity of institutional life, Ritter’s analysis nevertheless proves the point that Carey misses—that institutional history is varied and important. Education means more to teachers and students than simply an “exchange of information,” as Carey puts it. Ritter’s book demonstrates how composition, aware of its local histories, might be well positioned to fight such reductive claims.

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Works Cited