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WRITING MAJORS INTRODUCTION

Jim Nugent

In the absence of historical reflection, it's easy to presume that our curricula, our programs, our department configurations, and even our disciplines have always been the way they are today. Conservatives, in particular, like to depict higher education as an unchanging monolith and a creaky institution that is unable to adapt to new developments on the economic, political, and global scenes. They suggest opening higher education up to the free market, encouraging private ownership and profit, and "making higher education accountable" through quantifiable metrics. However, historical reflection shows us that the millennia-old enterprise of academia is surprisingly adroit and has consistently evolved in the face of shifting societal needs.

Higher education in the United States has proven its versatility and adaptability in remarkable ways over past centuries. American higher education has created entirely new forms of scientific, agricultural, and technical institutions to meet the needs of an industrializing nation. It has overhauled its curricula, shedding the medieval trivium and Renaissance quadrivium in favor of a German model of electives. It has embraced the academic major and minor as curricular structures to meet new demand for specialized graduates. It has undertaken numerous bureaucratic, technological, social, and pedagogical transformations in the face of ever-changing student populations. It has evolved to be more equitable, more accessible, and more diverse.

And yet, it is quite easy to look at the modern university and think that things have always been this way. It's easy to forget that undergraduate majors and minors as we know them today have been prevalent for scarcely over a century (Adams 1993, 8–10). It is easy to forget that American universities and colleges once served only a fraction of the students they do today, and that baccalaureate degree attainment has grown fivefold over the past seven decades (US Census Bureau 2012, 1).

Over time, new disciplines have sprouted into being (biochemistry, computer science, and women's studies) while older disciplines have withered (agriculture, the classics, library science, and home economics) (Basterdo 2011, 420). Even one small but seemingly immutable feature of higher education—the syllabus—only took its contemporary form around the turn of the twentieth century (Snyder 2010). The most cursory historical reflection shows us there is remarkably little about higher education that has remained unchanged through the years.

The present collection seeks to document one particular piece of the unceasingly dynamic landscape of American higher education: the undergraduate writing major. Such majors are, at this historical moment, experiencing tremendous growth in their numbers and evolution in their character. Christian Weisser and Laurie Grobman term the first ten years of the twenty-first century the “decade of the writing major” and note that “no other curricular movement within writing studies has proliferated at so rapid a pace” (Weisser and Grobman 2012, 39). As Greg A. Giberson and Thomas A. Moriarty observe, “The growth of undergraduate majors in writing and rhetoric is unmistakable. They are appearing at big research universities, small liberal arts colleges, and every kind of campus in between, from independent writing programs to those housed in traditional English departments” (Giberson and Moriarty 2010, 2). The field of writing, they note, is currently “moving toward a ubiquitous major” (2). Put simply, the writing major is one of the most exciting scenes in the evolving American university.

This volume has gathered firsthand stories of growth, origin, and transformation from eighteen writing programs in order to document this exciting moment of change. In doing so, this volume serves at least two goals. First and foremost, this collection is intended to serve as a practical sourcebook for those who are building, revising, or administering their own writing major programs. This project originated in part from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) 2010 annual convention. There, contributors to the collection *What We Are Becoming: Developments in Undergraduate Writing Majors* (Giberson and Moriarty 2010) participated in a roundtable discussion about the growth and future of undergraduate writing majors. As the floor opened for discussion, almost every question posed by the standing-room-only group of participants was some variation of “How do we do this?” This collection is designed to provide a variety of perspectives on—and answers to—this vital, practical question. It is designed to respond to the clearly evident demand from the field for administrative insight, benchmark information, and inspiration for new curricular

configurations for writing major programs. Toward these ends, each of the eighteen profiles in this volume includes a detailed program review and rationale, an implementation narrative, and a reflection and prospection about the program.

Second, this collection is intended to serve as a historical archive of a particular instance of growth and transformation in American higher education—it offers a contemporary history of the writing major movement, written by its immediate participants. Recognizing this collection’s archival function, we resist the urge to broadly narrativize or overgeneralize from the accounts presented within. As Kelly Ritter argues, historians should fight against the pressure to push “on historical texts, artifacts, and objects to get us to a satisfying ‘plot’” and instead understand “archival spaces as sites of communal representation” (Ritter 2012, 464). As she notes, “The archival history of composition studies, at backward glance, often makes little narrative sense” (461), so we will try to refrain from fashioning overly tidy, sweeping stories of cause and effect from our contemporary vantage point. Instead, this collection will allow the eighteen voices to speak from their individual contexts as “sites of communal representation.”

As a result of this approach, we have found that the profiles in this volume frequently have as much to do with bureaucratic, practical, and institutional matters as our ideals and ideologies—they carry what James E. Porter et al. (2000) describe as a “material punch” (612). We believe this focus on the local and material is of critical importance. As Richard E. Miller (1998) notes, “sustainable educational ventures have always worked *within* local, material constraints,” but we have frequently “papered over their involvement in such bureaucratic matters with rhetoric that declares education’s emancipatory powers” (9, emphasis in original). He reminds us that “To pursue educational reform is to work in an impure space, where intractable material conditions always threaten to expose rhetorics of change as delusional or deliberately deceptive; it is also to insist that bureaucracies don’t simply impede change: they are the social instruments that make change possible” (9).

With this in mind, the present collection seeks not just to document eighteen stories of writing major programs in various stages of formation, preservation, and reform, but also to reveal the contingencies of their local and material constitution. We believe this volume can speak as much to the “how to” of building writing major programs as it does the larger “what,” “why,” and “how” of institutional growth and change.

This book is divided into two parts. Part I contains profiles from writing major programs that are housed within independent or combined

department configurations, while Part II contains profiles from programs housed in traditional English departments. We should note that this organizational scheme is not intended to be rigidly taxonomic; we believe that the profiles contained here are most usefully interpreted by considering their respective institutional locations along with information about those institutions' local and material contexts. For this reason, we have included a table at the beginning of each chapter that describes the institution type, its size, the nature of its student population, the number of writing specialists on its faculty, etc. Each profile is also followed by a brief curricular summary that provides an "at a glance" view of the writing major program requirements.

Even while resisting the impulse to overgeneralize or over-narrativize the profiles presented here, a number of themes become apparent throughout the collection:

- *Almost uniformly, these writing major programs situate themselves somewhere between the binary extremes of liberal arts education and vocational training, analysis and production, and theory and practice.* Even though there is a tremendous diversity in these programs and the intellectual justification they provide for their work, almost all of them aim to furnish students with a combination of marketable skills and the insights of a traditional liberal education. The discipline of rhetoric has always confounded such binaries, of course, but the common approach of these programs may reflect the kairotic opportunity the discipline now faces to differentiate itself against other liberal arts disciplines; it may also reflect how writing majors are marketed in an economically tenuous time.
- *Program building is local work.* Since the blueprints for a standardized writing major program cannot simply be pulled off a shelf, all programs are necessarily shaped by the local resources available to them at the time of their creation. A pervasive theme in the implementation sections of these profiles is that program creators found ways to take advantage of immediate infrastructure, courses that were already "on the books," and the expertise of existing faculty to launch their majors. Several profiles attribute a share of their program's success to the fact that their curricula emerged from and complement their respective institutional cultures—presumably as opposed to being an outwardly-imposed, discipline-mandated design.
- *Within the local contexts of program building, defining who you are is sometimes as much about defining who you are not.* The politics of maintaining academic turf become quite evident at the onset of a major program, both within

departments and across campus. In some of these profiles, the realities of turf politics meant forging strategic alliances with existing programs and shaping the major to occupy the gaps between other disciplines. In other profiles, turf politics meant fostering new distinctions between programs and creating entirely new curricular spaces and claims to institutional resources. Naming plays an important role in the politics of self-definition—not only the names of the programs themselves, but also the names of individual courses and even course classifications.

- *Technology is vital.* Almost all of the programs profiled here recognize the changing nature of writing in the twenty-first century and have made at least some room in their curricula for digital, multimodal, and new media composition. This reflects developments in the field and the desire of program builders to keep their curricula fresh. However, there is an additional kairotic dimension in that the creation of a new program frequently presents an opportunity to request and develop new technology resources.

- *Programs must be assessed and continually revised.* For many of the writing majors profiled here, program assessment was carefully considered and planned before the major was established. Further, many programs were revised surprisingly soon after they were established. These revisions tended to be not so much about advancements in the field as they were about shifting political realities at each local institution. Programs that were established using whatever political means available at the time quickly found that with new majors, more faculty, and greater resources came new political agency and the ability to do more than just passively respond to institutional happenstance. Neither the vision nor the reality of these major programs has remained static since their establishment.

- *The first-year course can be instrumental to program building.* Several of the chapters in this volume describe the strategic importance of the first-year composition (FYC) course as a source for cross-institutional ethos, as a required course in their major, or even just as a platform for program recruitment. Several profiles also draw attention to the fact that the first-year course serves very different institutional and disciplinary needs than a writing major program, and that pedagogies suited to students in an introductory course must be adapted to the needs of students within the major.

- *The challenges presented by recruitment and growth are not trivial.* One of the most immediate measures of a program's success is the number of majors it serves, and several of these profiles speak to the institutional

“strength in numbers” that can accompany a popular major. Drawing in new students and persuading them of the value of a writing major is not always easy. Still, excessive growth can present its own challenges and leave programs struggling to staff courses and provide a quality student experience.

- *In establishing a new writing major, failure sometimes precedes success.* At many institutions, the process of inaugurating a program requires tremendous rhetorical legwork and engagement with many stakeholders across many lines of institutional division and hierarchy. This process can present several openings for territorial squabbles, procedural logjams, “personality issues,” and institutional politics to block the progress of hopeful program builders. As such, early failure is not uncommon—nor, obviously, is it always fatal.

It is apparent from these profiles that there are many ways for writing major programs to be cultivated. They can germinate, take root, and grow in a wide variety of local soils. Some form unique hybrids with existing programs, while others form lasting new strains on their own. If there is one takeaway from these profiles, it is likely this: the story of the writing major is, at this moment, multiple, fragmented, and unfinished. As a practical sourcebook and contemporary history, this collection is not meant to reduce a complex national movement to a simple, unified narrative or serve as a strict “how to” guide that can provide guaranteed success in every institutional context. Rather, we hope the stories presented in this collection illustrate how this important moment of growth for writing major programs has its origins in many diverse, local contexts.

Acknowledgments

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