The Unpromising Future of Writing Centers

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I wish to offer a paradoxical argument here: that the least promising future we can imagine for ourselves and our writing centers is the very one we long for; that our pursuit of success and stability, as conventionally measured, may be our undoing.

I am aware that such an argument must seem insensitive at this point in our history, when many writing center directors are struggling just to keep their rooms open for another semester, and while many more must generate a steady stream of explanations, objectives, and progress reports to counter the skepticism of the university culture. It would seem more appropriate to rejoice in the national recognition of our professional organizations, the appearance of books and dissertations on writing center pedagogy, credit-bearing classes in tutoring in the college catalogues, and tenure for center directors. All these bespeak a level of academic credibility largely unimaginable fifteen years ago, and both those who are struggling and those who have more or less arrived can hope to draw on this credibility to claim an untroubled corner in the university.

In short, the time is wrong for self-criticism. But if I am correct, we may be approaching the last time we are able to make a choice about the sort of future we want to inhabit.

We still pride ourselves on our capacity for providing an alternative to mass education: to epistemological conformism within disciplines and courses, to teacher (expert) centrality, to assessment by measurable outcomes, to replicable pedagogies, to the thorough fixation on the isolated mind that above all characterizes the modern philosophy of education.

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When writing centers work like they’re supposed to, they encourage the intellect of the undergraduate writer in ways that either ignore these principles or subvert them: expertise is less important than personal engagement, for instance; cognitive “measurements” are usually abandoned entirely. Because our principles are different, the established university culture has difficulty recognizing what writing centers do. Thus we are often regarded with suspicion by alert traditionalists and by administrators who are unable to rethink the notion of “productivity.”

But our most visible advances in recent years—the signs of progress noted above—do not serve to strengthen what we pride ourselves on; rather, they simply make our territory look less foreign to academic xenophobes. And as we try to look more familiar, we inevitably move closer to the mass education model.

This claim is liable to strike most of us as simply wrong. Over the last decade, at least, writing centers have set themselves against epistemological conformism and on the side of communities of learning. We are more inclined to understand professionalization as a political move for consolidating the gains of our alternative model and spreading its message, and if we act like the mainstream scholars at times, that is simply a stratagem for accruing the respectability necessary to function as we wish within the university system. Precisely because we believe that some degree of resistance is built into our collective enterprise, we feel capable of playing the hierarchical game and maintaining the project of countering the hierarchy. Because we are a new group and a group that considers itself uniquely marginalized, we write a history of ourselves that stresses our outsider status and overlooks our similarity to other, once excluded groups.

But we are hardly the first outsiders to kick at the university doors, nor the first to believe that our fresh ethical perspective could revitalize academic traditions, nor the first to encounter narrow-mindedness, skepticism, and outright rejection. On the contrary, these are the usual conditions of the interest group seeking a place in the university, and the subsequent stages in the evolution of academic respectability follow a predictable pattern as well: high idealism and frustration with institutional inertia result in the attempt to reform and renew the parent discipline from within, an attempt which gradually but surely gives way to a series of compromises in which the original packet of revolutionary energy is tapped off into academic business as usual.

I want to recollect the history of three groups now firmly established in the university—American literature, literary theory, and composition studies—whose emergence in the English establishment followed this pattern. The conclusions I hope will materialize are that the power that accompanies a rise in professional status is partly illusory; that both power and status are purchased at great price; and that if those of us devoted to the writing center concept follow the example of other groups, seeking stability in
professionalization, we will jeopardize the values that make our work meaningful.

**American Literature**

One hundred and twenty years ago, American literature appeared in the college curriculum only as the occasional special topics course, offered by a senior faculty member with an interest in the area. A regular place in the catalogue was out of the question, for only a handful of professors could imagine what one would do in the classroom. What specialized knowledge was necessary for studying and interpreting works written in our own language by a (nearly) contemporary author? What body of scholarship would the course convey?

That university English departments neglected native writers in favor of the British and the classics was a source of minor scandal in the world of the public intelligentsia, and university professors who advocated a place for American literature in the curriculum were able to draw on the indignation of figures like Horace Scudder, who wrote in 1888 that the study of one's own literature was the "most serviceable means for keeping alive the smouldering coals of patriotism" (47). The professors cited other noble ideals as well: moral growth, and a citizenry possessed of its cultural inheritance. Newton Marshall Hall of Iowa College argued in 1892 that the study of American literature

> should be for every student the coming into an inheritance of truth and beauty, without which his life must be barren and meagre. . . .

> It should inspire in some that enthusiasm for letters, that devotion to truth, and pride of patriotism necessary for the wider and more complete development of our national literature. (162)

But neither the nationalistic nor the truth-and-beauty argument carried much weight with English department classicists, to whom American literature still looked hopelessly shallow beside the profundities offered by Indo-European or the Greek polity. Therefore, by and large, the Americanists kept their enthusiasm and their advocacy in the background of their work and sought a foothold in the academy by modeling themselves on the classicists. They wrote histories and biographies; they corrected the well-known texts and discovered new ones; the most devoted among them applied accepted philological and rhetorical analyses to contemporary writers.

Together, they slowly and painstakingly constructed a place for American literature in the university which the journalists could approve and the classicists could at least tolerate. Our culture, the argument went, was no longer European, and our literature was increasingly un-British. But our literature was still rough, intolerant of authority or order; it needed cultivation, or "more complete development," as Hall put it. Scholarly inquiry
could serve that end, to refine and organize, and especially to temper the more dangerous tendencies of democracy. Barrett Wendell and Chester Greenough’s 1904 *History of Literature in America* makes such a case.

The spirit of European democracy has been dominated by blind devotion to an enforced equality. In many American utterances you may doubtless find thoughtless assertion of the same dogma. Yet if you will ponder on the course of American history... you must grow to feel that American democracy has a wiser temper, still its own. The national ideal of America has never denied or even repressed the countless variety of human worth and power. It has urged only that men should enjoy liberty within the range of law. (434)

Clearly there’s something for everyone here: a nod at once to the patriot and the philologist, both of whom still spoke the language of national character, but something for the classicists too—a counterforce to enthusiasm and egalitarianism in which the energy of “countless variety” is dissipated “within the range of law.”

By 1930, the Americanists could claim a conventional sort of success: a permanent place in the curriculum; acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the Ph.D. in American literature. But with respectability came a pronounced narrowing and limitation, for the scholarship with which the Americanists had purchased credibility was deeply at odds with their populism and their advocacy role. The nationalistic and the truth-and-beauty arguments (themselves at odds, of course) had in common the assumption that literature could serve to provide many Americans with representations of their cultural heritage. But the scholarly justification moved in exactly the opposite direction—toward removing literature from the public, and removing from literature any immediate political or intellectual value. Where a book or poem questioned the dominant ideologies of race or gender or religion, Americanists worked to depoliticize, decanonize, or ignore. The respectable scholarly conception of American literature was, precisely, that it was not popular; it was elite. The advocacy of Scudder, Hall, and others had imagined wide dissemination to a lively audience; but by 1929, the founders of the journal *American Literature* saw fit to add this clarification “To our contributors” in the first issue:

>“American Literature,” as we stated in our preliminary announcement, “will not . . . be a pedagogical journal or a journal of contemporary letters; it will be a scholarly publication, not a popular magazine.” Only rarely do we expect to print articles on living authors. . . . Ordinarily we shall not publish articles bearing directly upon teaching problems. (75)

So much for living issues and controversies, not to mention living authors. But this was exactly the sort of exclusion that all the other established
university disciplines, including English classicism, had grown strong on.

**Literary Theory**

The same interior tension—a populist orientation irresistibly drawn to the prestige of academic purity—forms the development of literary theory. In part because it was not central to scholarship, but was rather in service to other cultural and pedagogical goals (“ranking” authors, nurturing taste), most academic critical theory at the turn of the twentieth century was exploratory and speculative; though not intended for the general reader, it maintained the unspecialized style found in middle-brow periodicals. And though the early theorists usually had one or another axe to grind—classicist, humanist, aesthetic, impressionist, psychological—they were on the whole remarkably pluralistic. Thus George Woodberry in 1913 notes that literature can be approached through several intellectual venues because literary works, as part of “the world of phenomena,” are

subject to the order of time, to current human conditions, to changing judgments intellectual and moral, to varieties of fortune; in short, they are . . . part of a larger world . . . and however isolate and absolute may be their aesthetic value, they offer, to say the least, other pertinent phases of interest, when taken as a development in time. (47-8)

This passage is part of a generous argument which would put some creditable means of criticism into the hands of many, creating a republic of approaches. All that is necessary is some serious attention to one or another of the “phases of interest” which literature offers. Presumably, then, the sociologist could be as qualified to find something of value in a literary work as the philologist or the rhetorician.

In something like a spirit of fair play, Woodberry makes a full and eloquent case for pluralism. But it is clear that his theoretical sympathies do not lie with inclusiveness when he turns, in the same essay, to represent the alternative. Considering the proliferation of philosophical, psychological, and sociological approaches to literature, he writes:

It is plain that in all such labors, ancient or modern, criticism gets ever farther away from the work of art itself; it leaves the matter of life, which art is, for the matter of knowledge; and when we consider the extraordinary variety of the tasks which criticism latterly has set for itself . . . it certainly seems time to ask whether there be not a more defined sphere, less confounded with all knowledge, for criticism to move in . . . (51)

The critique of pluralism has not changed much since Woodberry’s day: extrinsic theories draw the critic “ever farther away” from the text; and as we admit the application of “non-literary” principles, criticism loses its disciplin-
ary character, becoming, as Woodberry says, “confounded with all knowl-
edge.”

It was in the passage away from pluralism and toward a “more defined
sphere” that theory became an area of contention. Nearly all the critical
manifestoes of the early twentieth century—one thinks of Croce, Spingarn,
Richards, Eliot—assert one imperial principle or another intended to unify
criticism and to distinguish it from other divisions of intellectual work. From
the outset, then, one might have predicted the course of American critical
toward formalism, for only formalism—primarily the New Criticism
of the 1930s and ’40s—could offer the characteristics of a true discipline: it
was unmixed with other genres of knowledge and thus could develop its own
terms and traditions, so that ultimately only a trained professional would be
able to pursue it; and it held out the promise of a familiar sort of scholarly
specialization. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s announced
intention in Understanding Poetry (1938) to attend to “the poem as a poem”
(ix) assumes the superiority of serious, professional reading over the mixed
and contradictory reading of amateurs. At nearly the same moment, John
Crowe Ransom was taking the next step, calling for the creation of a network
of professional critics (albeit with his customary irony; the essay is “Criticism,
Inc.”). “There are many critics who might tell us” what criticism is, Ransom
writes, “but for the most part they are amateurs. So have the critics nearly
always been amateurs; including the best ones. They have not been trained
to criticism so much as they have simply undertaken a job for which no
specific qualifications were required” (327).

In retrospect, it seems clear that establishment of any strict critical
orthodoxy would have suppressed the expansion necessary for disciplinary
health. What American formalism accomplished was not the lasting preemi-
nence of formalism, but, more broadly, the ascendance of critical monisms
over pluralism—that is, the superiority of expert forms of reading over
amateur reading. Thus literary theorists today need not trouble themselves
overmuch about the substantive positions taken by their theory. Only purity
and exclusivity are crucial.

Composition Studies

I will take time only to glance at my final example, since the history of
composition studies is well known to most of us. Indeed we are all still writing
that history, though we have reached a consensus on much of it. We have
agreed, for instance, that we will have no nostalgia for the 1940s and ’50s; for
while composition teachers, especially those “stuck” there without tenure,
were beginning to recognize themselves as an interest group, no prestige and
certainly no sense of permanence attached to the role. College Composition
and Communication, founded in 1950, immediately took up the sorry
condition of the basic English teacher as a central theme. But if we look at
the journal again we find something else among those writers—an excitement in the newness of the field at least as strong as the malaise of professional nonidentity. A recent *CCC* article describes the early audience of the journal rather ruefully as "literature specialists with a second common concern: student writing" and calls this audience "homogeneous" (Phillips et al. 443). The characterization is surprising if one thinks of the diversity of background and education and pedagogy all those modernists and Miltonists and medievalists brought to their "second concern." Even Brooks and Warren wrote a composition textbook; so did John Crowe Ransom and (famously) Barrett Wendell. One has to imagine a J. Hillis Miller or a Stanley Fish writing a composition textbook today to feel how airtight our subdisciplinary compartments have become—and how professionally homogeneous the readership of *CCC* is now compared to the 1950s.

Its status as a secondary interest in no way limited the scope of composition studies in the 1950s. The May, 1956 issue of *CCC*, for instance, published articles on the use of technology, the conditions of graduate assistants, the provision of audiences for student writing, the role of the "term paper," "avoiding superficiality," and high school/college cooperation. Certainly all of these topics are still with us. Gone, though, and perhaps not enough missed, is attention to workaday matters like making and grading assignments, interpreting test scores, teaching grammar (and not just how to, but whether one ought). The many reports of this or that classroom ploy or "successful" assignment in these early issues seem unsophisticated now. But the occasionally quaint enthusiasm with which early compositionists treated classroom practicalities has a vitality almost entirely absent from contemporary theorizing.

Like writing center people today, the composition advocates of the 1950s were tireless in their search for an institutional niche. But setting the boundaries of a newly self-conscious field is an uneasy to-and-fro sort of business. Thus Glenn Leggett in February, 1956: "Freshman English in a large state university ought to be primarily a service course, but not exclusively so; in a small but very real sense, it is also a 'liberal arts' course" (19). And in a Board Report from the 1955 Conference entitled "Communication Theory and the Study of Communication" (May 1956), the anonymous secretary records a set of themes that appear over and over in the work of the early composition professionals:

Why is a theory of communication needed? We agreed that present theory in communication is scattered among many disciplines: linguistics, semantics, social psychology, cybernetics, acoustics, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, etc. We agreed that much of the theory commonly applied to the problem of teaching communication skills is of doubtful, or untested, value and that our understanding of much of this theory is poor.
We felt that since communication is an inter-disciplinary discipline a suitable framework is needed to give it form, content, and direction. We felt that this theory cannot be taken whole from other disciplines, but that a new discipline is needed which will borrow from many others. (133)

The enthusiasm with which this comprehensive theory is imagined gleams through the committee-report prose; so does the confusion over whether composition is to be a plural or a monolithic discipline; and so too does the confidence with which the monumental project is set out: a "suitable framework" to provide "form, content, and direction." We may not lament the passing of articles on Monday-morning practicalities, but we ought to regret how infrequently it occurs to us to question, in this way, the foundations of composition as a discipline.

It was at first primarily through calls for "frameworks" and for research that the discipline took shape through 1975, but as the best research appeared, its reception was tinged with disappointment. Because it was careful, the work of Lloyd-Jones, Emig, Britton, and Shaughnessy sounded no clarion of professional unity; it remained interdisciplinary, untidy, its borders permeable. Disenchanted by the inelegance of research into students and classrooms, many composition specialists turned away from pragmatics in the late 1970s and early '80s, and toward theories of composing. The elaboration of conceptual frameworks provided the energy required to drive the college composition specialists up nearly to the institutional level of the literary and critical specialists. The mundane questions which had invigorated the dialogues of the 1950s—What do grades mean? Why is one essay better than another? What should writing students read?—were abandoned.

Teaching writing became composition theory—at great loss, I would argue. In its beginnings, modern composition theory was eclectic, taking whatever materials came to hand and continually returning to classroom pedagogy; theory served the classroom as, earlier, critical theory had served literature. And yet, like the other subdisciplines we have recalled, composition studies had from the beginning an understandable yearning for the kind of permanence and respect which could only be had by way of conventional scholarship—a scholarship, that is, which would establish a professional ingroup, close the intellectual borders, and develop a rhetoric designed at once to distinguish and to exclude. The result today is at least that composition specialists are tenurable. The result is also that only "composition people" know or care much about what goes on in the first-year class and that composition is very rarely anyone's "secondary interest."

Writing Centers

I have inevitably misrepresented the history of these subdisciplines by reducing them so and by picking and choosing points of emphasis; a few more
comprehensive and perhaps objective accounts are listed below. But anyone wishing to study the phenomenon of professionalization in all its marvelous complexity need only look to the living example of writing centers in the last few years. For writing centers made the turn toward professionalization some time ago; indeed, we are far along that road, though not so far that we cannot easily see where we were, and not so far that we can call ourselves fully established. If, as is often suggested in the pages of this journal, our most exhilarating successes derive from our intermediate, outside-the-mainstream status vis-a-vis the university, so too do most of our major problems. There is no institutional mechanism for recognition of successes which occur outside the structure; but there are powerful and nearly immediate sanctions already in place for academic programs which fail, and for individuals who do not do what they promised or who fail in the promises that were imposed on them. Therefore, like the other interest groups before us, we begin to manage the possibility of failure by redefining the criteria of success. This was the strategy of the three groups considered here: they modeled their activities on disciplines already in the mainstream; they demonstrated that what they were doing was not being done by any other department or discipline; they evolved theories and discourses that highlighted their differences from other areas, and increasingly wrote only for members of the network; they amassed a body of scholarship which looked a good deal like what everyone else was producing; and on these bases they claimed a professional status often and loudly enough that they were listened to. Unfortunately, their cultural and pedagogical ideals did not survive the transition intact.

But let me stress the ethical complexity of these histories. American literature deserves a place in the curriculum. Theories of literature are useful. Composition ought to develop its own pedagogical traditions. All of these goals are worthy now, and they were worthy forty or eighty or one hundred and twenty years ago when they were first proposed—proposed most often by individuals of broad learning and curiosity, and an innovative, boundary-breaking, interdisciplinary frame of mind; individuals so frequently and maliciously stigmatized as amateurs who merited no place or permanence or respect in the academic hierarchy that their goals were inevitably colored by their need for acceptance and security. These they attained eventually not by making a direct case for bringing their fields into the academic mainstream, but by a kind of end run—by a professionalization irrelevant to their ends, and often at odds with their expressed ideals.

The record establishes a consistent formula: professional success is proportional to the degree to which a discipline can overcome its mixed descent and claim a purity of purpose, while creating an environment in which its members can measure themselves according to criteria internal to the discipline.

Written centers in the 1990s resemble these earlier groups as they moved
though their later, yet still uncertain, stages. We are often still called “unscholarly” (what we do seems too easy to some, as American literature once seemed too easy). Like the early literary theory, our work seems too mixed, too heterogeneous to merit the same standing as the work of traditional disciplines. Like composition professionals of the 1950s, we carry the presumed stigma of “remedial” and “basic” (and often “temporary”). Therefore the temptations are great to stick to the road that’s been walked before, to assert our status by professionalizing. We already identify ourselves as a group with insiders and threatening outsiders. We have begun construction of a history containing our founding theoretical writers and works, and this history will become more elaborate as we grow. We have networks, both new- and old-fangled; we have two national conferences (the National Writing Centers Association and the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, now in its eleventh year). We have a journal and a newsletter—both remarkably accessible, so far. And we have the two absolutely essential marks of the established English subdiscipline: dissertations, and positions in the MLA Job Information List.

These developments must seem modest to us, especially given the daily trials faced by many writing centers. And, as I noted at the outset, most of us are able to maintain a salutary irony in the game of university power. But we would be politically naive to believe that we can play the game for long without entering into commitments that we will end up regretting.

Ransom’s figure of “incorporation” applies literally to departments as they act out their role of guardians of the professions’ integrity. A “professional” today is one who can repeat the form and substance of the field, and usually one who promises to do so. But the new professional group has no form or substance. There was, at one time, no academic stuff of American literature; many individuals, collectively and over a period of decades, constructed it. So also in literary theory and composition studies: the subject matters of those professions were forged, not found. As we professionalize, less and less are we able to assert that our philosophy is liberatory and contrarian; we cannot say, “Peer tutoring removes the impediment of the authority structures of the traditional classroom.” Removing impediments is not enough; we must do something. And therefore in dissertations and publications, and on the job, we are forced to act as if our “subject matter” had natural, discernible borders, specific research goals and methodologies, and a replicable pedagogy—and where these do not come easily to hand, we have to create them. University administrations and faculty committees, themselves thoroughly incorporated, react favorably to curricular and procedural outlines, and to lists of publications and professional organizations; in fact, they react to little else—certainly not to anything so immaterial as “removing impediments” or “liberating.”

It is part of the groundbreaking work of a new discipline to envision
positive accomplishments: position statements, educational rationales, bibliographies of supporting material. Without these, no program—traditional or otherwise—can be admitted to the curriculum. A doctoral program, by long-standing tradition, uses the statements and rationales and bibliographies to promise conformity to some already accredited model of instruction. Thus when an institution certifies a Ph.D. candidate and when the young professor takes a job—say, writing center director—the negative sanctions are already in place ensuring that the professor knows what all the other people in the same job know, and that she is capable of doing what they all do; she knows too, by this time, that she violates these implied contracts at her peril.

The same political dynamics tend to impose uniformity as a condition for membership in the new discipline. The founding members of the interest groups recalled above (like those in women’s studies and post-colonial literature today) were interdisciplinary thinkers. The early Americanists, for instance, were for the most part trained as classicists of one variety or another—philologists or Latinists or scholars of Anglo-Saxon. The early twentieth-century literary theorists often spent years in the study of philosophy or psychology or sociology. But within two or three generations, their success in reaching mainstream status forced both groups to abandon their interdisciplinarity. Beginning in the 1930s, English department positions in American literature required a Ph.D. in American literature; by the late 1970s, theory positions required theory credentials. (Composition program directors are still something of a mixed group, but certainly no new positions of responsibility are available today for individuals without a dissertation in the area.)

Again, the logic of this movement from interdisciplinary to monolithic makes a kind of twisted sense if we consider the current conditions of writing centers. We wish to assert that what we do is worthy of traditional academic rewards, and we can claim that worth only in the terms the university recognizes: advanced study and professional activity. The granting of a Ph.D. in “writing center theory” is in everyone’s interest; everyone’s status moves up a notch, and the work we do, which we all believe to be of enormous value, is that much more secure.

But the work is changed slightly, with every Ph.D., even with every article like this one. Each conventionally-measured advance in our professional status, every move closer to the mainstream, reduces our variety and our breadth of vision. Consider, for instance, the professionalizing of peer tutor training. The one-semester tutoring course (the preferred approach) ought to attract the best prospective tutors from all across the college, but few devoted physics or history majors will actually risk credits and a grade for a chance to work in the writing center. The course is an attractive option only for English majors, and this tends to keep the writing center in the English
department, where most people think it belongs.

On the model of graduate training in rhetoric, the tutoring course covers major theoretical figures; the beginner develops enthusiasm for the larger enterprise. The students contemplate our professional principles: no gainsaying the teacher, no talk about grades, no appropriation of text—in short, no overlapping onto other people’s territory. We may even wish to imbue our prospective tutors with something of the glamour of working contrary to the educational mainstream. But all of that goes by the boards at the end of the course, when those with the highest grades take the inside track for next year’s tutoring positions. Thus we create a second exclusion: only those who excel in that most conformist art—getting a grade in a conventional class—are worthy of trying the unconventional. But by this time, the writing center is no longer unconventional; it is close to being simply another academic unit, not unlike Composition I.

Thus generally it will go, I fear. In an attempt to secure something of value, we will end up recreating most of the debilitating hierarchies that we wished to escape. The peer relationship, collaboration, spontaneity, freedom, equality, courage; the excitement of interaction, the energy of student culture—these replaced by constructions of expert and amateur, of protocol, instruction, and tradition. It will be objected (I hope) that this cannot be. We are too involved in the tussle of campus politics and in maintaining our connections to all departments. Negotiating interdisciplinarity is what we do, daily; our very theories centralize struggle. It must seem to us impossible that we could ever lose this edge. But just so it might have seemed to Newton Marshall Hall impossible that the scholar of American literature could ever lose interest in the democratic experiment, or to George Woodberry that “pluralism” would become a term of abuse.

It is not only possible, it is likely that the future of writing centers is exactly in the mainstream of the university—that is, as another academic unit, justifying its existence not by the growth of the students who encounter it, but by publication, professional activity, and course work in the graduate and undergraduate curricula. Every assertion of our professional status renews the promise that we all do the same thing and will continue to deliver the same goods—that writing center people can be trusted to do pretty much the same things in one place as another and to treat all students the same way every time. In this way we will assure the rest of the university that we can be generally trusted, for we are not doing anything outside the mass education model, except that we’re doing it one student at a time.

It is beyond what I have intended here to offer a full vision of a more promising future, and I don’t think it’s necessary. The lessons of history are fairly clear. But they are hard lessons. Fall out of love with permanence; embrace transience. Stake your reputation on service rather than on publication. Acknowledge that directing a writing center does not involve
the kind of difficulties for which advanced degree preparation is necessary. Stay impure: welcome mixed descent and cross purposes. Let last year’s tutors handle the training. Allow that students may know what they need better than we do.

“Hard” is perhaps understated. But if we want to offer an alternative to mass education, we must reject its mythology of expertise and permanence. Our energy at present derives from what we have left of happy amateurism, and from our sense of being in transition, our extroversion of purpose, and our interdisciplinarity. If we find a way of publicly rejoicing in our impermanence, we may preserve the energy and the purpose. If not, we will almost certainly become, like everyone else, introverted and disciplinary. And that will be our success.

Notes

1 Much important work has been done on the history and professionalization of English, a good deal of it inspired by Arthur Applebee’s Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History and especially by Richard Ohmann’s English in America. Other helpful historical surveys listed below are by Gerald Graff, Graff and Michael Warner, Warner alone, Brian McCrea, and Kermit Vanderbilt.

2 Among Warner’s many insights into professionalism in English is that already by 1900 the consequence of the Ph.D. was to shift attention away from what the professional could do (teach or write or explain) and onto the certification. Warner’s remarks here on “the critic” extend to all the subdisciplines: “The professional’s commodity is himself. He is himself certified and accredited by processes that can be said to have produced him as a critic” (22). In other words, it is his training that the critic “sells,” not his ability.

3 In 1990 Irene Lurkis Clark wrote, “I am . . . a bit wary of the possibility that writing centers will soon take on a ‘common form’ in the profession, a common form verging on dogma, and it is in response to this idea of a ‘common form’ that I advocate the maintenance of chaos” (81). My argument differs from Clark’s mainly in suggesting that the danger of a “common form” is far greater—deadly, in fact—and more pervasive; but dogmas are indeed part of the problem, and I cheerfully endorse “chaos” as a healthy alternative.
Works Cited


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