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Concentrating English: Disciplinarity, Institutional Histories, and Collective Identity

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Chapter Ten

Concentrating English
*Disciplinary, Institutional Histories,
and Collective Identity*

Amy Goodburn and Deborah Minter¹

Universities are increasingly pressured to model themselves after corporations. This chapter represents one effort to identify pressures that were formative in the work of a group of faculty working to develop a concentration in “Writing and Rhetoric” as part of a larger departmental initiative to revise the undergraduate major at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UN-L). By examining some of the conversations associated with the process of creating the concentration, this microethnography suggests that while the formation of curriculum can be read in terms of corporate influences, faculty can and do intervene in administrative structures that press toward increasing corporatization. While it is true that corporate pressures represent the effects of one very powerful discourse of value and collective identity in contemporary American culture, postsecondary curricular reform can be usefully understood as a site of multiple discourses of value and identity that faculty negotiate in the process of making curricula. The point of this essay is not to provide a model curriculum, but to show how reflecting on group processes can build a collective consciousness about the multiple pressures on curriculum in one’s own institution and make visible opportunities for intervening, rhetorically, in the press toward corporate management of teaching and learning.

Pressures on Curricular Work

In their study of university administration, Currie and Vidovich define features of *corporate managerialism*, a term they use to describe a particular orientation toward decision making in higher education. They argue that corporate

managerialism takes its name from the institutions on which it is modeled, emphasizing “efficiency (minimizing costs) and effectiveness (maximizing outcomes)” (114). A recent UN-L planning document that outlines criteria for evaluating and prioritizing academic programs offers an example of such emphases. Among the nine criteria presented as “the framework within which each campus will reach holistic judgment about programs and set priorities that will guide resource allocation and program development” is “Need and Demand.” In responding to this criterion, faculty are asked to assess their programs in terms of “distinctive market niche,” “special strength in the market,” and “number of competing programs in the state, region, and nation” (Commission for Development of Criteria for Evaluation and Prioritization of Academic Programs).

This internal UN-L planning document reflects the codification of corporate managerialism as a means of academic planning. Public discourse surrounding our institution reflects the kinds of critiques of higher education that press for market-driven, corporate models of efficiency. One of the state’s most widely circulating newspapers recently ran a four-part expose on the status of UN-L in comparison with other research institutions. While some have suggested that the criticism was politically motivated, headlines, such as “State’s Flagship Mired in the Middle,” “Low Research Rating Self-inflicted,” and “Campus Culture Keeps Best from Shining,” nonetheless provide an example of a common rhetorical trope: Identifying an institution’s research ranking as the only “product” worth maximizing and citing inefficiency to explain rankings that disappoint (Cordes and O’Connor).

This larger institutional discourse of market-driven efficiency as well as public and institutional anxiety about the university’s research profile emerges at a time when our department wrestles with some of the same kinds of shifts that North and colleagues have recently documented for English studies as a field. As North’s account of English departments would suggest, our department has recently experienced considerable turnover of faculty (several left for “greener pastures of higher salary,” in the words of one local newspaper, as well as many faculty retirements). Recent hires with research specializations reflective of current trends in English studies (hires, for example, in postcolonial literature, theory, and composition) as well as shifting research interests (into areas such as gay and lesbian studies or disability studies) of long-time faculty resulted in course offerings that reflected disciplinary shifts by the accretion of new courses, rather than by comprehensive review of the curriculum. The department had, for some time, grappled with slight declines in enrollments (a frequent measure of “demand” for a particular program).

A 1997 external review of the department provided the institutional exigency for curricular reform. The review, supportive of the department overall, was critical of its course offerings. The reviewers asserted that the curriculum represented “a list or bank of 177 separate courses rather than a sequence formed in response to an educational vision,” invoking the imperative of an educational vision while also signaling (perhaps unintentionally) a kind of curricular inefficiency (Morris

et al., 5). The reviewers also took up the department’s commitment to smaller class sizes, which, to their understanding, results in a leaching load that “makes it difficult for faculty to maintain sustained research, hinders the department’s ability to compete with other Research I departments for excellent new hires, and puts the department’s teaching load out of synch with university norms” (5). The reform process, described by many as “closely managed,” began almost immediately on the heels of this review.

By Spring 1999, a structure for a revised major had been approved by department vote. In addition to retaining what department documents term “a historical literature core,” the major would now include two majors-only courses (an introduction to English studies and a senior capstone course) to address concerns for coherence and community-building that surfaced both in the external review and in the Department’s annual survey of graduating English majors. Second, majors would now be required to take one course in each of three designated areas:

Linguistics, Writing, and Rhetoric; Literary/Rhetorical Theory; and Culture, Ethnicity, and Gender. Finally, the major would now require a twelve-credit hour concentration in one of the following areas of English studies: Gender and Textuality, Writing and Rhetoric, Creative Writing, North American Literatures, British/Commonwealth since 1789, Film Studies, Early Literatures in English, Theory/Criticism, Preprofessional, and/or Ethnicity and Race.

Processes of Developing the Writing and Rhetoric Concentration

Within this reform process, the six rhetoric and composition faculty (ourselves among them) began negotiations to develop an undergraduate concentration focusing on composition and rhetoric. Four were untenured assistant professors and two had tenure. We chose to develop this concentration by meeting together (about once a month). Between meetings, we corresponded via email and talked informally. What struck us initially were the ways in which the six of us struggled to work together as a group—a discovery that was all the more surprising given the general commitment to collaboration that we shared, and our groupwide interest in making our research and teaching commitments visible to students and colleagues. One member described the process as “bizarre and contentious.” Another wrote that it was “disheartening and painful.” And a third said, “I was always a little on edge when we would come together. I sort of looked forward to it and dreaded it at the same time.... At times there would be overt flare-ups, or just some tension beneath the surface.”

This discomfort surfaced almost immediately when we shared our dream plans for the concentration. Some argued for various versions of a “rhetorics and poetics” model to speak across the disciplinary distinctions of literature, rhetoric, and creative writing. Another hoped to build in more opportunities for students to study the uses of literacy in their lives. A third hoped to maintain the workshop

model that informed the existing composition courses. The challenge was not the irrelevance of any proposals. In fact, each one invoked a whole set of respected scholarly conversations surrounding the key terms. Rather, we debated how these various visions might play out in the local contexts of our classrooms. Perhaps the best example of these discussions surrounded the required first-year writing courses and their relationship to the intellectual work we could imagine for the concentration. The first-year courses became a visible illustration of what was possible (and problematic) about the workshop method. They also served as touchstones to the complex economies of writing instruction. A concentration in our area would likely draw more of us out of the first-year courses, moving at least one member of the group to argue for a serious reconsideration of the first-year writing requirement while others pressed its defense. Writing later about these conversations, one group member explained:

There were... outspoken critics of some of the most visible aspects of the writing curriculum.... On the one hand, their critiques were compelling. On the other, they were dispiriting—partly because I felt... really involved in the very courses and orientations they found wanting.

In retrospect, the dynamics of our conversations mirrored those that John Ramage described in his recent account of establishing a writing certificate program at Arizona State University. Ramage argues that insofar as major theorists (in the field of composition especially) have already constructed particular curricular features (such as the abolition of first-year writing) as logical extensions of the move to program-status, faculty undertaking the collective establishment of a concentration in writing should be prepared for the likelihood of such debates (137). While Ramage's observations help us to identify one source of the tensions that surfaced, our interviews with faculty suggest that the administrative directives for the concentration contributed to these tensions.

While developing this concentration, administrative pressures on the process seemed to shift. Initially, faculty were directed to develop concentrations using only those courses that were currently in the course catalogue. The directive to work with existing courses had specific effects on our conversations. The writing and rhetoric courses already "on the books" were created before four of the group members had begun working in the department and did not necessarily represent all of our conceptions about how a sequence of writing courses should be organized. For others, the courses that they could most imagine teaching were not present in the curriculum at all. As one group member described the process: "We had been asked to list our investments, our dream plans, but I couldn't see myself in the courses already on the books."

"Being faced with this task seemed kind of strange, "another member responded when interviewed. "We aren't going to re-envision courses as we redo this major, we're just going to shift the courses around ... I kept on thinking, 'OK. So why am I here?'"

Beyond grappling with administrative mandates, our group processes were also profoundly shaped by the different institutional and disciplinary memberships that defined each of us individually. These differences in perspectives affected the process when we collectively determined which courses might count for the concentration. The group had several discussions about the role of creative writing courses. Initially, most members relied on their teaching experience to identify courses for the concentration—courses that were, for the most part, specifically named as composition or rhetoric courses in the existing curriculum. The effect of this "first pass" at identifying courses was an emerging concentration focused primarily in terms of nonfiction expository writing, preserving some of the preexisting norms (within the department and across the field of English studies, more generally) that separate creative writing from composition.

In one discussion, a newer faculty member asked about the absence of creative writing in the concentration.

It's still not clear to me where, if anywhere, do creative writing courses (or courses that may include creative writing) fit in?... I would want students taking a writing concentration to learn about how poetics figure in all of these activities—culturally, institutionally, disciplinarily, academically, professionally, personally.... The language used in our last meeting for the kind of writing we'd have students do was "nonfiction"... Now, if that's what we want, OK.... But I do want to be clear on what we're after here—a writing studies or discourse studies approach... or a more narrowly defined persuasion and exposition deal? (2 February 1999)

Another group member responded via email:

I think the connection between rhetoric and poetics is extremely important. especially for undergraduates.... Additionally... I'd like to add (like you couldn't see this coming) just a whisper of my favorite word—history.... I am, like [the speaker quoted above], willing to live with the more narrowly defined persuasive/expository focus... for a while... and always with the explicit knowledge that it's something I'd like to see changed. (2 February 1999)

Both group members in this exchange delineated subtle but discipline-significant distinctions ("exposition" as opposed to "writing studies" in the first case: a call for more attention to the history of rhetoric in the second) as a means both of locating themselves in relation to the emerging concentration and articulating its limits. The willingness to name such distinctions allowed us, as a group, to discuss what was at stake in these subtle departures from a concentration that might otherwise reflect only the list of existing composition and rhetoric courses that most of us were regularly assigned to teach.

One of the stakes involved was resources: Department administrators had framed the concentrations as an important means for determining course rotation and arguing for additional hires. Theoretically, then, thinking intradisciplinarily (or including courses from “outside” the discipline of rhetoric and composition, narrowly conceived) meant risking some access to these kinds of resources. Ultimately, we agreed that including some creative writing courses in the Writing and Rhetoric concentration offered a Way to figure the term “writing” more broadly, shifting away from discrete boundaries between genres and focusing instead on the rhetorical purposes that prompt writing.

Like the task of choosing courses relevant to the emerging concentration, the process of naming the concentration involved similar negotiations of professional commitments. In many ways, the process tapped our desires to name ourselves in terms of our disciplinary interests and the type of connections we hoped to eventually create across the department. For instance, one faculty member suggested the title “Writing, Rhetoric, and Literacy,” understanding that the inclusion of the word “literacy” in the concentration title might announce (to students and faculty) possible connections across writing and literature courses and create opportunities for additional literacy-oriented courses. For this faculty member, the term “literacy” carried out important cultural work—connecting reading and writing in the academy to school (K–12) and community literacies. Another member forwarded “Writing, Rhetoric, and Culture” for many of the same reasons that “literacy” was championed. Our shared commitment to the pedagogical force of this work led us toward terms that would best name *for undergraduates* the work they could expect to do in this concentration and a desire to know more about how students might name their own interests. As one group member wrote in an email to the group:

“Do we have a sense of how many students are currently interested in the Writing and Rhetoric concentration?... I think it would be productive to discuss with interested students what their hopes/goals for such a concentration are and to develop our curriculum with this feedback in mind” (11 November 1999).

Though our polling of interested undergraduates was limited to informal surveys of our own classes, we sensed some mismatch between how we might name our disciplinary interests and how undergraduates might see themselves in those names. While the department frequently referred to us as the Rhetoric and Composition group, we believed that the term “composition” might not have much meaning for undergraduates beyond their first-year writing courses. In the end, we settled on the title “Writing and Rhetoric” because these two terms seemed the most recognizable to undergraduates at our institution, and we believed that they signaled both the content and practice at the center of this concentration. In this way, pressures to create a more marketable major or concentration that could have

driven us to different kinds of conversations about titling the concentration were overshadowed by our collective sense that the work of developing this concentration—identifying and imagining the courses that would comprise it, naming it, and so on—was important professional and pedagogical work. At the same time, our different understandings of the professional and pedagogical significance of this work led to strained and sometimes frustrating conversations.

Clearly, managerialist tendencies were at work in the administrative directives to do this work quickly. Each of us, however, came to this work with various discipline-specific commitments and a desire to establish composition and rhetoric as a vital area of study for undergraduates in ways that would also speak to our colleagues in the department. This collective desire required us to contend with the range of discourses about writing and writing instruction available to our students, our colleagues across the department, and to those who specialize in composition and rhetoric. To some extent, then, the corporatizing pressures were negotiated through our range of professional commitments and the multiple discourses through which we carried out that work. Our point is not that disciplinary discourses and pedagogical commitments are somehow outside of or immune to such pressures. Rather, each discourse ascribes value differently, and the task of developing a concentration in Writing and Rhetoric as part of a larger departmentwide initiative required us to confront those differences and make choices about how to represent writing and rhetoric as an area of undergraduate study.

Researching Curriculum: An Opportunity for Reflection and Intervention

If disciplinarity was one of the discourses in play, offering alternatives to the values of efficiency, our research into this curricular work revealed that disciplinarity, alone, could not account for the struggles we faced in our group. This moment of curricular revision foregrounded, sometimes in painful but ultimately important ways, the importance of attending to group identity as faculty engaged in representing our shared intellectual commitments. To understand why our group operated as it did, we interviewed other members about how the process of developing the concentration shaped their notions of group identity. It was surprising to see the variations in experience and perspective that emerged during these conversations:

I don't believe there is (or ever was) a “six of us”... But I do believe that forging a workable “six of us” would force us to confront some serious intrafield differences. Which would be fine, except... I wonder why, with the current constraints on our work, we'd want to put ourselves through that. ... We certainly share enough commitments—to teacher education, to the composition classroom ... to do some good work together.

Another member agreed that there was frustration among the faculty working together to develop the concentration:

[P]art of the difficulty in coming together... is that I assumed a group identity but others didn't. Because we never articulated these differences in our thinking about our roles, they didn't come to the fore in a way that might have been productive for helping us think through what, exactly, a writing/rhetoric concentration might mean.

This member searched for a way to articulate the ways that this process of curricular reform felt different from earlier curricular work in the department:

I ... felt that I was being socialized and welcomed into a group—and it was a socialization that I valued, even [as] ... an outsider and sometimes critic of the work ... I don't think we need to necessarily hold the same values or even have the same research interests as long as we are willing to come together and work to negotiate, articulate, represent the work of composition and rhetoric as a discipline/field that is worthy of study and research.

Another member located her reading of the group dynamics in terms of disciplinary memberships and the role that the arrival of three new faculty played:

The process of constructing the concentration... came at a very interesting time in terms of the composition and rhetoric faculty... I think it was crucial having an infusion of new faculty at that moment, and it has taken us almost two years to get around to really talking more—or understanding more about people's ideas of what it [the concentration] should be.... It starkly pointed out... the ways that my own education had been shaped in different ways.

As this member notes, generational differences within the group shaped disciplinary memberships in difficult but also generative ways. A year later, another group member said: "Even as late as the end of last year, I really wouldn't have said we were a group. I think I feel more like some of us are a group and some of the others are invested with the idea that we are a group. That's what makes it so hard." In retrospect, though, this faculty member came to consider the six to be a group distinct from the rest of the department:

Who we are as a group does represent a very different view of English studies than the department is necessarily comfortable with.... We are all in that flexible, extended position.... Interested in theory and the text and writing and I think that's very different from the department's identity, although that seems to be shifting as well.

As this faculty member notes, the ongoing flux in the departments faculty research interests and approaches makes it difficult to pin down a monolithic "de-

partment identity." The transitional state of our faculty, with many retirements by colleagues who specialized in a literary period (eighteenth-century British, for example), coupled with the hiring of faculty who name their research interests in terms of methodological approaches (e.g., postcolonial theory or rhetorics and poetics) has created generational differences in how faculty name and view their work. This flux further complicates the task of constructing concentrations designed to "pin down" areas for undergraduate study.

Researching this curricular moment has offered us important insight into the variety of disciplinary understandings and institutional experiences that we represent as a group of faculty in the field of rhetoric and composition. In our interviews, we came to see how specific institutional and historical contexts (different for each group member) inflected individual understandings of composition and rhetoric as a discipline in relation to other areas of study in English. The emergence of composition and rhetoric as a respected area of scholarly work, its institutionalization in our particular department and in the variety of graduate programs through which we were educated, means that all of us have lived through very different trajectories of the field. This increased awareness, while it does not necessarily reduce our differences, helps us value and take account of them.

Perhaps any work in curricular (re)formation involves an accounting for the varieties of ways in which the work *could be* carried out, and for the significance of the choices that are actually made. Our experience with writing an undergraduate concentration in writing and rhetoric, and our research into that group effort, has led us to believe that one reason so few extended discussions of actual curricular development exist is because of the rhetorical challenges posed by writing about difference and group negotiations among departmental colleagues with whom one is continuing to work. In fact, in writing about our group's processes, we believe it is important to note that our version of this curricular reform is necessarily situated from our own perspectives. While we have tried to honestly represent the process through which our group worked, we acknowledge that others involved in this process might not have experienced it in the same way. Ethical issues of representation, a central concern in any ethnographic inquiry, remain equally vexing when one is writing about one's own community. However, we also view this chapter as an important rhetorical intervention in a professional life that hinges on our separate accomplishments and individual work profiles.

Although our process in constructing the Writing and Rhetoric concentration was painful and sometimes contentious, we are ultimately hopeful about how reflecting on and understanding this experience can impact our future work together. In their recent *CCC* essay, "Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change," Porter and his colleagues describe institutional critique as a rhetorical practice that can mediate "macro-level structures and micro-level actions rooted in a particular space and time" (612). They describe such critique as both a method and a practice that "insists that institutions, as unchangeable as they may seem

(and, indeed, often are), do contain spaces for reflection, resistance, revision, and productive action” and thus can be rewritten through rhetorical action (613). Taking up these authors’ charge, we have begun to consider how reflecting on the process of constructing the concentration has been such a form of intervention for the six of us. This chapter concludes with a more detailed discussion about how our efforts as a group can be read as rhetorical intervention and the ways that this work has supported continuing rhetorical interventions in our work together.

First and foremost, our group created a concentration that represents and values the work that we do as teachers, writers, and researchers and that invites undergraduates into this work. This curriculum intervenes by positioning composition and rhetoric as a primary space for undergraduate study rather than simply a prerequisite for an English major as defined by traditionally literary fields. Although the current concentration may not be the dream plan for any of the six of us, we generally agree that it provides a starting point for conceptualizing what writing and rhetoric might make possible for students.

Second, the energy and spirit that went into constructing this concentration can be read as an intervention into commonplace attitudes toward the role of curricular work as “just service” within department culture. Although our group negotiations were rocky at times, we chose to work together as a group, while many faculty working on the other nine concentrations did not. The administrative procedures for this curricular reform were designed to keep the process streamlined, efficient, and to minimize divisive conflict and reduce workload. The procedures, perhaps unintentionally, marked this work as “service” and as an extra burden. The fact that our group met frequently and spent so much time conceptualizing and talking through issues related to the development of this concentration suggests that we viewed this work as more than burdensome service. While the resulting concentration might be read simply as a conservative response to administrative directives (because we followed the mandate to organize existing courses rather than create a whole new set of courses, for instance), the six of us did subvert these assumptions by meeting regularly, negotiating language, developing dream plans, and working to articulate the terms of this first consensus. Perhaps one reason we never chose to resist the administrative directives wholesale—to explore any radically subversive enterprise—is because we needed to learn more about each other. Our dream plans, for instance, functioned as opportunities for self-representation and positioning our commitments more than they functioned to build a group consensus about what a concentration in writing and rhetoric might mean for undergraduates. We needed to build a collective group identity through such work before we could begin imagining how to represent the value of such work for others.

Perhaps the most visible benefit of going through the process of constructing the concentration is group members’ current commitments to continue such curricular reform at both the graduate and undergraduate level. In the past year, the six of us have met several times to discuss how we might revise mission state-

ments, develop rationales for new courses, and reconsider the entire first-year writing program. We have begun to turn our eyes to the daily documents that figure our intellectual work and to consider how we might reframe them to better represent who we are. And beyond curricular development, we have begun to consider how we might rhetorically intervene in other institutional spaces to articulate and make public the work of composition and rhetoric. For instance, we have begun to develop a Web page that describes our pro-cram in rhetoric and composition—a process that has invited us, again, to think hard about how we want to represent ourselves and our collective interests while, at the same time, representing our individual differences and approaches. We have also begun discussions about how to better represent our intellectual work collectively in more nationally visible ways. We’ve brainstormed ideas for a regional center for the study of literacy, for instance, and discussed ways that we, as a group, might become more active in shaping public discussions of K through 12 educational issues such as standards and assessment in Nebraska.

Finally, and perhaps most important, we’ve become more conscious about how we need to put on the table our assumptions about the nature of our work, not only in terms of preserving and maintaining a collective identity to get our work done but also in terms of imagining our future faculty lives. As one group member said:

Our whole cycle of talks about the concentration... have helped me see where I can be helpful on down the road ... They’ve also given me ideas about how to reconnect, like with those writing courses.... Those talks have helped me to see that there is going to be a moment where I can see myself in those courses in ways that are more manifest than they are now.

Ultimately, creating the concentration meant that we needed to forge, for ourselves, a group identity, a way of being together that would enable us to speak across our experiences in a “unified” voice while also seeking to name and preserve the valuable differences in our beliefs, philosophies, generational perspectives, and disciplinary identities. While corporate pressures to shape curricular reform inevitably deflect our discussions, through the process of constructing the concentration we’ve come to realize the power we do have to intervene in conversations and spaces that are important to us. This curricular work has meant concentrating our different disciplinary affiliations, institutional histories, generational perspectives, and social and political commitments into a flexible and provisional vision.

Note

1. We appreciate all our colleagues’ goodwill in their generous support of our research and in their multiple readings of and responses to this manuscript.

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