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# A Home of Our Own: Establishing a Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State University

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On May 11, 1993, the Senate of San Diego State University (SDSU) approved a proposal to create a Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies. The university president's subsequent approval of the Senate's actions ended a process of debate, negotiation, and decision-making that took three years and involved ten stages of review, and in Fall 1993, the new department was established as a formal entity. This review process fostered campus-wide discussions of a number of complex questions about the role of writing in the university, appropriate institutional structures for writing programs, and the changing relationship between composition studies and English studies in general. These same questions are being asked at other campuses across the country and are the subject of professional discourse and research for composition specialists across the country (Little, "Separate Writing Departments"; Russell). For faculty and administrators at SDSU, as for those at Colgate University (Howard; Jamieson and Howard), the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and the University of Texas at Austin, the answers have led to establishing fully autonomous writing programs.

Anytime anyone discusses separate writing programs or departments, the inevitable metaphor of "divorce" emerges (Rose, "Metaphors"). This metaphor for separating composition and literature (the metaphorical couple) brings with it all the baggage of a literal divorce, including division of assets (courses and curricular content as intellectual property), battles over child custody (graduate teaching associates), and attempts to assign blame. The choice of this metaphor projects images of painful endings, recriminations, and severed family ties onto a pattern of academic alliances and activities. We prefer another metaphor—one we borrow from Louise Wetherbee Phelps: the grown child (some have said "stepchild") who needs a home of her own.<sup>1</sup> She is still a member of the family, and always will be of course—but as a separate and equal adult, she is now ready to forge relationships with other families within the university community (Little, "Home").

We are not suggesting that all writing programs need department status to forge these relationships, nor do we wish to imply that all writing programs should become separate, autonomous units. Regardless of where (or why) an individual may stand on the issue of autonomy for writing programs, however,

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most WPAs are likely to discover at some point in their careers that they must choose and articulate a position on appropriate structures and roles for the writing programs they direct. WPAs must be prepared to consider some of the issues and concerns that we present here. What we have learned from our own experience at SDSU cannot be applied in all cases or to all circumstances, but it can inform planning and decision-making for a great many writing programs across the United States.

What you will find here then is our story: first a description of what our situation was, a description of changes effected by establishing the new department, and a review of the issues raised by the opponents of our proposal and our responses to those issues—that is, our defense for the position we have advocated and won. Now that our proposal has been approved and we have reviewed and reconsidered our experience, we can also offer our reflections about another dimension of our successful argument for a separate department of rhetoric and writing studies. We learned that we needed more than the force of good reasons; we needed the power of good reasoning, the ability to exploit our understanding of campus polity, policy, and politics.

## Previous Situation at San Diego State

San Diego State University is a large comprehensive public university serving over 35,000 students. Ordinarily around 120 to 150 sections of basic composition are offered each semester, although several recent budget cuts have resulted in this number shrinking to 90 by the Fall of 1993. If we were to meet the demand for composition classes that we create by requiring two semesters of composition for our general education program, we would have to offer far more sections than our budget has allowed. Judging from what we have heard from colleagues elsewhere, the situation at SDSU is very like the situation at a number of other universities.

As Figure 1 shows, the composition courses at SDSU had been isolated and separated, resulting in a fragmentation of writing instruction among different departments on campus. The general education composition courses had been offered through the English and Comparative Literature Department (which offered the lion's share), the Mexican-American Studies Department, the Africana Studies Department, and the Linguistics and Oriental Languages Department. The English and Comparative Literature Department had also offered several of the advanced general composition courses that satisfy the university's upper division writing requirement, a technical writing certificate program, and an MA emphasis in rhetoric and writing (15 of 30 units). The Academic Skills Center, which had been a separate administrative unit, had offered the developmental or pre-baccalaureate courses, WAC programs, and some of the ESL writing instruction.

This fragmentation of the writing program was among the factors that, in the Fall of 1990, led seven faculty to draft and send forward to the Paul J. Strand,

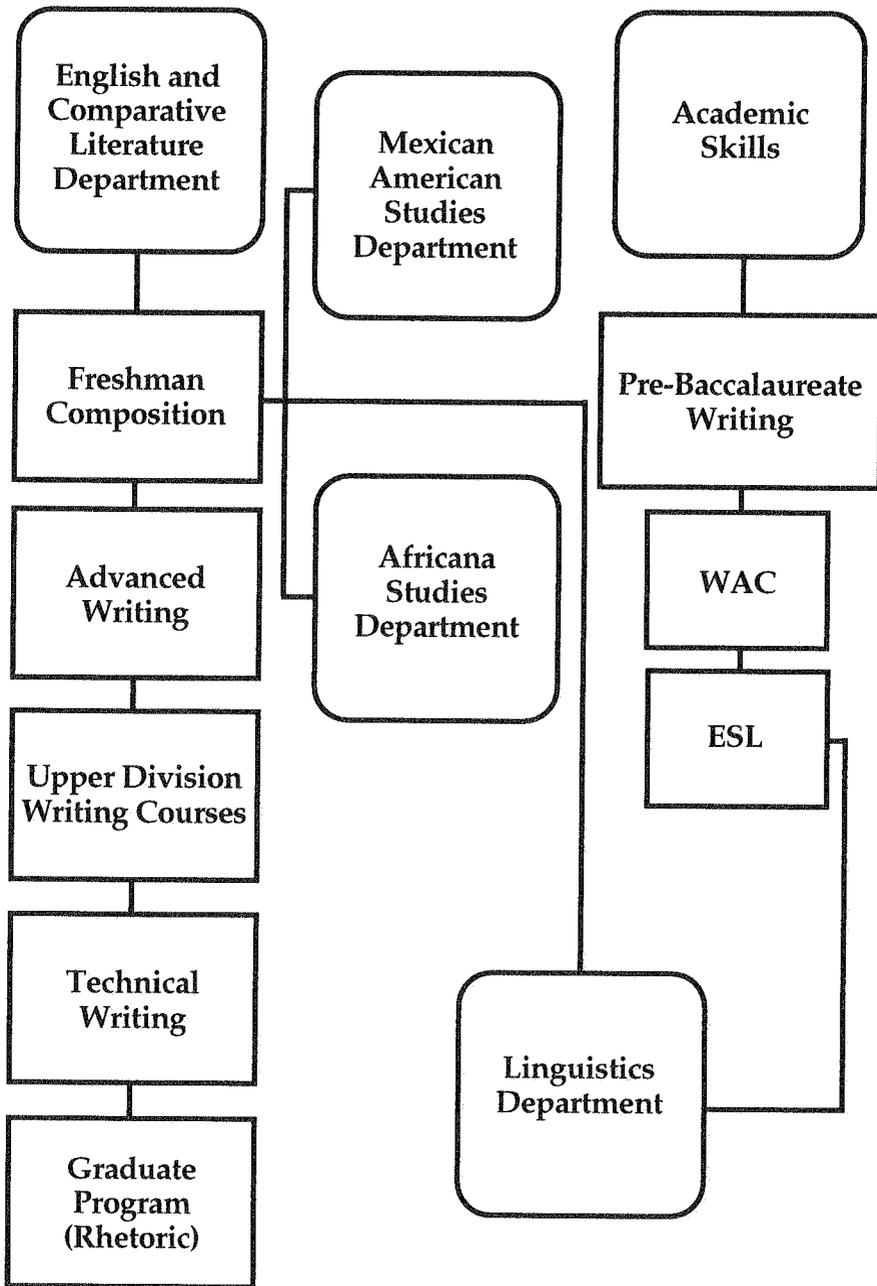


Figure 1: Previous Structure of Writing Programs

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Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, a proposal for developing a new department of rhetoric and writing studies.

## Description of New Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies

One of the major goals of the new department is to organize into a single entity writing specialists with the shared mission of planning and implementing a comprehensive writing program for the university community. The writing program faculty and courses previously offered within the English and Comparative Literature Department and the writing program faculty and courses offered by Academic Skills have been merged to form the faculty and curriculum of a new Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, creating a department that unifies the study of writing from the pre-baccalaureate to graduate level.

This centralized unit can better articulate courses previously offered by separate departments and resolve problems such as placement and assessment that the separation of the programs had created. However, we have established not merely a centralized writing program, but a separate *academic department*. Our department status acknowledges a disciplinary identity for composition studies, institutionalizes that identity in a familiar organizational structure, and gives the composition program an autonomous budget, curriculum, and faculty. It provides an organizational structure that recognizes an already existing community of specialists—"faculty who are identified by their demonstrated scholarly interest in the act of writing as a complex social activity and medium for intellectual development and who are also united by their commitment to practice education for creative and critical literacy" (Proposal, 19).<sup>2</sup> Such a supportive environment is vital to encouraging the creativity and innovation necessary to transform the present curriculum, to contribute to as well as anticipate and respond to the change in the university community's perceptions and expectations of its writing program.

In the process of review of our proposal, we did encounter resistance. The most formidable resistance came from the Department of English and Comparative Literature. We will focus our discussion on those issues that were first raised by the Department, then raised again at subsequent stages of review.

*Issue #1: "Writing has always been in English."*

Many faculty objected to the idea of a separate writing department because, they claimed, traditionally composition has always been taught in English departments and for the most part still is throughout the United States. This claim is not true, of course. The historical facts are that composition has not always been taught in English departments. According to William Riley Parker, English Departments have only been around for about 125 years, since the last half of the 19th Century, but the first American professorship in English (the actual title for Ebenezer Kinnersley was Professor of the English Tongue and Oratory) was established in 1755, over 200 years ago, at what was to become the University of Pennsylvania (342). Parker states that the education in the "English

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school . . . normally included composition or 'rhetoric' in the mother tongue" rather than in Latin (342). Historically then, when composition was beginning to be taught in the United States, English departments did not yet exist.

The contemporary facts are that in at least twenty institutions, writing is offered by a program outside the English department, although very few include all writing programs from pre-baccalaureate to graduate level as the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at SDSU does. For example, separate departments exist at the University of Minnesota, Colgate University, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and Stonehill College. Some separate departments of more specialized areas, like technical communication at the University of Washington and Clarkson, have also been formed. Teaching composition outside the English department is being done and may be increasingly done if arrangements at these institutions are indicators of the future, for, as Parker notes in his discussion of the historic splintering away of speech and linguistics from English, "Splinter groups form when their founders feel their interests neglected" (340). Such a condition exists now for many writing programs.

*Issue #2: "The study and teaching of Writing can't be separated from the teaching of reading Literature."*

Some people assert that the teaching of writing and reading should not and indeed cannot be separated, because teaching writing alone has no content or substance. The teaching of writing cannot be separated from the study of literature, so that argument goes, for to do so would relegate it to the teaching of technical skills and would eliminate its humanistic base. However, the logic of this line of reasoning depends upon accepting "study of literature" as equivalent to "teaching of reading," or, as one professor at SDSU wrote in the flurry of memos that has accompanied the proposal's review process: "I abhor and distrust divorcing the forms of language from the content of literary tradition . . . [with] no sense of full literacy as a glorious component of civilization." Clearly, this argument equates reading with reading only the *belles lettres*, assuming that the study of literature alone guarantees full literacy or a humanistic education. This assumption is false and, we suggest, arrogant. In fact, arguments implying that literature faculty and students enjoy a monopoly on humanistic values or have exclusive rights to reading culturally significant texts were not particularly persuasive to faculty from other departments who identified their own disciplines with humanistic values.

As we wrote in our proposal, "Developing writers learn by examining texts from many different writing communities. Rhetoric, the parent discipline of writing studies, is central to humanistic studies; it does not privilege one text (e.g., the literary text) over another (e.g., the scientific essay)" (20). Recent scholarship in the history of composition studies reviews the impact that the writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines movements have had on the teaching of writing in the United States (Russell; Nystrand et al; North). The realization and growing acceptance of the interdisciplinary nature of composition studies has resulted in a questioning of the shape and content of writing classes at all levels.

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Students will still be reading when writing is taught in a separate department—but the texts they read need not be so narrowly defined. Creating a separate writing department does not, then, separate reading from writing, but terminates the exclusive relationship between writing studies and literary studies.

*Issue #3: "The writing program needs the protection of the English Department."*

Other opponents of moving the general education composition program out of the English department feared for the "safety" of the writing program if it lost the protection of the English department. The English department is large; in many institutions, this size gives it both power and prestige. If separated from this power and prestige, the writing program could be viewed as isolated, easy to attack, vulnerable. This is a legitimate if patronizing concern, as the experience of the formerly autonomous Academic Skills Center demonstrates. The Center's independent status made it vulnerable to attack from members of the university community who undervalued the importance of a pre-baccalaureate writing program, considering it unacademic; however, its autonomy allowed its faculty to develop strong relationships with other departments across the university and to pursue innovative instructional programs with those departments. Although a separate writing program might indeed be more vulnerable, the SDSU composition program's former position within English isolated it from the rest of the university and limited its opportunities to explore the interdisciplinary nature of composition studies.

The validity of the argument about the "safety" of the writing program depends, then, on what role such a new department assumes. The new department at SDSU will create new connections similar to those we now share with the English department; thus, instead of being isolated and vulnerable to attack as some fear, our centralized program will develop relationships with other disciplines that ensure a more general awareness and appreciation of writing as an integral part of all disciplines. Creation of this new, highly visible, autonomous academic department will place writing studies in the context of the university at large, not just in relation to one discipline.

*Issue #4: "Composition studies is not a legitimate academic discipline."*

Underlying the arguments that writing has no content or substance and that a writing program needs the borrowed respectability of literary study to be safe is the assumption that writing is not a discipline. However, no one can refute the signs that the study of composition and rhetoric has been growing as an area of academic inquiry: many institutions are offering advanced degrees in rhetoric and composition; scholarship in composition studies has proliferated; and scholarly conferences and journals have been established, responding to this growth and further encouraging it.

While it is a recognized area of study, there are reasons why faculty have doubts about the "disciplinary" status of composition studies, for the field

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cannot be defined within the terms of what is traditionally thought of as a discipline. Traditionally, a discipline has been defined as a community sharing a single methodology to develop a discrete and independent body of knowledge. But, as Stephen M. North has demonstrated, composition studies currently embraces a number of possibly epistemologically incompatible methodologies. And as many have argued, composition studies has interests that are interdisciplinary in nature.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways it is a metadiscipline challenging conventional notions about what actually constitutes a "discipline." Calling composition studies a "metadiscipline" does not imply that we do not consider it an identifiable academic discipline; rather this discipline does not conform to traditional definitions and will not exhibit the familiar distinguishing features that are usually associated with the term "discipline." This metadisciplinary nature of writing studies might seem to argue against establishing a separate department of writing studies. In fact, it calls into question the customary practice of institutionalizing disciplinary communities as academic departments. However, for the time being, the basic organizational unit of the modern university is the department. Until actual university structures change enough to reflect the most recent theorizing about disciplinary borders, only department status for the writing program will guarantee the access to and control of resources necessary for a vital academic program.

*Issue #5: "The English Department does not marginalize the writing program."*

Many opponents of our proposal objected to our assertion that writing had been marginalized in the English department. They claimed not to see any marginalization of writing programs, no hierarchy at work within the English department that placed the teaching of composition in an inferior position to the teaching of literature. People in this category rarely teach writing where we come from, however. Though they are quick to assert they would if they could, they are "needed" for courses for the majors and minors, the department's primary mission, and those courses are literature courses. These people rarely saw the non sequitur elements in this logic or the irony of this argument, considering the issues they raised about the "non-academic" nature of the writing program and its need for the protection of the English department.

Robert J. Connors' study "Overwork/Underpay: Labor and Status of Composition Teachers Since 1880" and Sue Ellen Holbrook's "Women's Work: The Feminizing of Composition" among others have begun an historical chronicle of what writing program administrators already know: the teaching of composition holds an inferior position in the hierarchy of English departments. The teaching of composition is regarded as "an academic sweatshop," to use Connors' term, wearing out people until they need to be replaced. It is a task to be disdained as "women's work." If one must teach it, it is regarded as an odious task, to be taken on with expressions of regret and signs of resignation.

Its lack of status is so widely assumed among faculty of English departments that we are not surprised by two stories in Lad Tobin's 1991 *College English*

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article. Tobin relates how Toby Fulweiler's English department colleagues find it hard to believe him when "he gloats that Freshman Writing is the 'Best Course in the University to Teach'"; and someone as venerable as Donald Murray suggests that there must be something wrong with him if he can continue to look forward to student conferences (Tobin 339). The message is clear: English teachers are supposed to dislike teaching writing.

Few of our English department colleagues believe that professional WPAs feel genuinely and intensely positive about teaching writing and really would not rather be teaching literature classes; these colleagues would rather believe that we are lying in wait for our real interests (literature) to emerge. This belief helps explain and justify what we all know: generally, if not universally, writing programs are marginalized and under-supported intellectually and materially in our academic institutions. When these same institutions acknowledge, encourage, and even promise to address our society's widespread concern for literacy in the multicultural, global world that is slouching toward the twenty-first century, this marginalization seems especially duplicitous.

As a unified, autonomous writing program, the new Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at SDSU can make composition its primary departmental mission, rather than a secondary "service" dutifully offered by the English department. The autonomous department's concentration on the study of writing will focus the research and teaching efforts of colleagues with the same interests and goals, creating an environment that will allow writing to receive the attention and resources necessary to improve both the students' writing abilities and their understanding of the significance of writing to their studies.

*Issue #6: "Money is not an issue."*

Very few opponents of the proposal to establish a new department gave voice to concerns about money, though material concerns have been very important to the faculty involved. Because the teaching of composition in many large universities is delegated to graduate teaching assistants and part-time lecturers, departments can generate many full-time equivalent students (FTES) without great expenditures. In a recent academic year at SDSU we calculated that the English department brought in 61% of its enrollment-based allocation through its composition program at an expense of 30% of its total budget. Obviously, concern about money must be taken seriously. Certainly, when negotiating for a separation of composition and literature, knowledgeable faculty and administrators must plan resource allocation so that the most good is done with the least harm.

These negotiations can be complicated, as they were at SDSU, by the faculty's reluctance to address material concerns in open debates and discussions. This reluctance may derive from a number of sources: the faculty's relative ignorance about the mechanics of university budgeting; their desire to be "above" such venal concerns; or their belief that while faculty are best qualified to address the pedagogical and intellectual issues, financial issues are best left to administration.

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WPAs need to know that colleagues at their own institutions may likewise be reluctant to openly discuss material resources in specific and concrete detail. Arguments and rationales for change based on financial savings or gains will not, therefore, be particularly persuasive for the faculty involved in making decisions about change.

*Issue #7: "Without Teaching Assistants, the English Department will lose its graduate program."*

Another serious concern as well is the loss of control over graduate teaching assistantships. Because GTAs are allowed to teach composition, graduate students can be supported with teaching assistantships. When composition is taught in a separate department, English departments cannot fully control to whom or how many assistantships are awarded for teaching composition courses, which may damage their abilities to attract and support graduate students. Indirectly, those who select the staff for composition classes determine who the graduate students will be. And as one English department professor at SDSU wrote in a memo, "What academic department in its right mind would willingly cede supervisory control over its own apprentice scholars to technologists and writing consultants?"

Consider the corollary, however: graduate admissions decisions determine the quality of the faculty for many composition courses, and in some universities this number includes the entire writing program at the lower division level. Here then is another serious concern that must be negotiated. Our solution at SDSU has been to guarantee that for the next five years a certain number of the GTAs assigned to teach composition will be appointed from among applicants who are English department graduate students. This solution won't solve the problem of who chooses them, however; we've established a GTA selection committee with members from both departments to develop selection criteria and procedures for making appointment decisions.

*Issue #8: "Without composition to fall back on, faculty will not have anything to teach if the number of English majors decreases."*

Another concern we've heard is that, should the number of majors in English start declining as it has done more than once in the past, composition courses won't be there as a back-up for teachers of literature to "retreat to" when too few students are enrolling in their literature classes. Since the English and Comparative Literature department at SDSU is currently straining to accommodate its large number of majors, this concern does not seem to be realistic. However, given the recent uncertainties arising from budget cutbacks at SDSU and other universities across the country, this concern may eventually be a serious one. Even if the anticipated, catastrophic loss of English majors never occurs, the literature faculty's worry over this issue must be acknowledged and taken seriously. Our solution has been to guarantee English and Comparative Literature faculty retreat rights in the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies should the number of majors ever drop so low that the literature faculty would have too few students to justify their faculty positions.

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## Polity, Policies, and Politics

At each stage of the proposal's review, proponents and opponents presented the arguments discussed above—arguments that we expect will have a certain resonance for other WPAs. We're sure there are other issues and concerns that our fellow WPAs could raise about separate, centralized writing departments, but these are the issues, the reasons for and against, that emerged during the debate at SDSU.

Now that the proposal has successfully made its way through the many levels of approval required by SDSU's faculty self-governance system, we can reflect on another dimension of this debate: the process of debate itself and what we've learned about "good reasoning." These are lessons that will be useful to any WPA, whatever project she undertakes.

We can summarize these lessons about the process of debate in three words: *polity*, *policy*, and *politics*. First, we've learned the value of knowing and understanding university *polity*—the organizational structure and governance of the institution. There is a university out there beyond the English Department, beyond the College of Arts and Letters, beyond even the Division of Academic Affairs. This university is inhabited by people who have values, goals, and information that differ from our own. Representatives from these communities within the university had, at various stages, the power and the responsibility to approve or disapprove our proposal. It was imperative that we discover and understand the interest of these members of the university community and our relationship to them. Only a few of these people were administrators. At SDSU, the Senate includes faculty from all of the colleges and staff from all of the non-academic divisions, as well as student representatives.

In addition to understanding university polity, we've needed to know university *policy*—the principles, procedures, and processes for getting things done. At SDSU, we have a 150-page document called the SDSU Policy File that describes policies and procedures for everything from using university stationery to establishing, eliminating, or merging departments. It was essential for us to study this document to know what we could and could not do and how to do it, because a number of people were ready with bad information and wrong advice about how to proceed. For example, the Policy File clearly specifies that

Proposals for the creation, merger, transfer, or abolition of departments may be initiated by departments, faculty members, or administrative officers of the University. . . . Every proposal must be reviewed by the dean or deans of the colleges concerned. . . . If the dean or deans feel that the proposal does have merit, the dean or deans shall then form a special ad hoc committee to give the matter full and serious consideration. (226-27)

This procedure explicitly allowed the proponents to advance the proposal without the endorsement or review of the English department. Many opponents

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of the proposal assumed that department approval would be required before the proposal could be advanced for review. As a result, they initially miscalculated their need to respond to the proposal in a serious way and were ill-prepared to argue a consistent and coherent position against the proposal at the earliest stages of its review.

In addition to needing to know which committees would review the proposal (polity) and the procedures for getting on a committee's agenda (policy), we needed to be able to identify whom to talk to behind the scenes to ensure, for example, that we were not the last item on that agenda (politics).

*Politics* includes partisan and factional intrigues, or what one literature professor threatened our dean with: "guerilla tactics." At the university, politics is not a smoke-filled back room activity; it happens over lunch on the Faculty Center patio, in e-mail conversations, or on the campus mall. It often has less to do with the power inherent in governance roles than with the personalities and persuasiveness of the individuals in those roles. We've had to be aware of which committee members sway decisions by asking good questions, which committee members bore their colleagues, which ones have so offended the others in the past that no one will vote for anything they support, and who isn't on a particular committee but has lunch with its chair once a week.

We also had to develop patience and compassion. Though other recent events at SDSU have called our governance system into question and rather painfully brought our decision-making process to the attention of the campus community, most faculty committees had not been accustomed to making really controversial decisions.<sup>4</sup> These committees proceeded very slowly and carefully, for they were certain to make someone unhappy no matter what they decided.

We would have learned none of this if we hadn't ventured beyond the English Department, and we urge other WPAs, whatever their visions for their own writing programs, to get involved in their university's governance system and get to know people in other departments and colleges. If we'd listened only to our literature colleagues, if we'd allowed them to contain the debate as a domestic squabble in the English department family, we never would have begun our project of building a home of our own.

The conceptual and administrative work that project requires has indeed only begun. The Senate's approval and the subsequent formal establishment of the new department were only the first stage of the process of *creating* an autonomous department of rhetoric and writing studies. Our department now includes 119 instructional staff responsible for developing and offering a coherent university writing curriculum. We have 6 tenured/ tenure track faculty, 28 temporary lecturers, 55 graduate teaching assistants, and 30 tutors. Our programs include developmental writing, ESL instruction, general education composition, advanced composition, a certificate in technical and scientific communication, and a graduate specialization in rhetoric and writing studies (12-15 units of an M.A. in English).

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It is far too soon to describe and analyze all the issues of transition these faculty and programs now face. As we write this ending, in the middle of our first year as a department, we are struggling to meet competing demands to keep programs going while reinventing them. Existing curricular offerings must continue to be available even as we are reconceptualizing them. Sections must be staffed even as we reconsider past hiring practices. The daily responsibilities of program leadership and administration must be fulfilled at the same time we're creating a new organization. The university community's expectations of us must be reconciled with our own vision and commitments. As a new academic department, we negotiate a difficult path, trying to situate ourselves as an administrative unit in an established bureaucracy at the same time we are finding our footing with one another—working, thinking, and writing together to build intellectual and ethical community.

## Notes

1. Louise Wetherbee Phelps suggested this metaphor when she visited the SDSU campus in January 1991 to consult with the proposal's faculty proponents and opponents, and university administration. Paul J. Strand, Dean of the College of Arts and Letters, elaborated on this metaphor in a memo which referred to the writing program's separation from English as "leaving the nest."
2. This language is borrowed from the Syracuse University Writing Program's "Guidelines for Promotion and Tenure in the Writing Program." (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University, 1989.)
3. See Nystrand et al for a recent review of discussions of the interdisciplinary nature of composition studies.
4. In June of 1992, 111 tenured faculty and 35 probationary faculty at SDSU received notice they would be laid off effective October 7, 1992. Although these notices were later rescinded, faculty members requested an investigation by the American Association of University Professors. The investigating committee's report questioned the university's governance and consultation process. For a full report, see the March/April 1993 issue of *Academe*, a publication of the American Association of University Professors.

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