

Reinventing First-Year Composition at the First Land-Grant University: A Cautionary Tale

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The major questions facing our institutions revolve not around whether they will change, but by how much. The organization of academic life that served the nation well in the 20th century is unlikely to be adequate for the 21st. (1997 Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities)

Absorbing the values of corporate America and adjusting to the post-cold war mentality, universities and colleges across the country are being restructured and reinvented. First-year composition, because it is often the largest undergraduate program, is especially vulnerable to restructuring and reinvention. At the 1997 WPA Conference, Ira Shor gave an impassioned speech asking WPA to address the situation that occurred when the writing program at the University of Minnesota was restructured while its director was out of the country, and WPA administrators across the country have used on-line forums to discuss the political and economic stresses their programs are facing. Commenting on the vulnerability of academic programs to restructuring, Jim Perley, President of AAUP, argued that WPA has a responsibility to take an active political role in the future of composition programs.

The purpose of this research is to examine the restructuring of first-year composition that is taking place at one land-grant university, Iowa State University. We have used a case study approach to our research because naturalistic inquiry allows us to examine in detail a moment when the practice of composition instruction at one site has ruptured and a new institutional practice appears to be emerging. Thomas Lindlof in his book on qualitative research argues that naturalistic inquiry is an appropriate methodology to examine organizational practices. "A practice," Lindlof writes, "constitutes a *way of doing things* that is sanctioned by a social collectivity" (16). He continues: "Practices inform us about how the role requirements in a social system are enacted in specific contexts. . . . They do not change easily over time, but *will* change if a performance can be considered to have solved a problem, created a problem, or opened possibilities for changing practices" (18). In the current political climate at Iowa State University, the absence of tenure-track faculty in the first-year composition classroom has emerged as a problem, a problem that has required faculty to reconsider their practices as faculty of English Studies.

In 1996, at the behest of upper administration, the Department of English at Iowa State University began a new initiative whereby tenure-track faculty

from all areas of the department—creative writing, literature, linguistics, and rhetoric and professional communication—would regularly teach first-year composition. This essay traces the political, economic, and disciplinary factors affecting this change—specifically, why tenure-track faculty left first-year composition two decades ago; why upper administration wants them to return; and why faculty are complying in spite of political risks to English as a department and a discipline. To identify the factors affecting change, we interviewed administrators, faculty, and teaching assistants. Interviews with administrators included Provost John Kozak, Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences Elizabeth Hoffman, Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence Steven Richardson, retiring chair of the Department of English Dale Ross, and incoming chair of the Department of English Thomas Kent. We also interviewed from the Department of English sixteen tenure-track faculty, five adjunct instructors (permanent staff without tenure-track status), and thirteen teaching assistants. These members of the English Department included people who voiced support for the change as well as those voicing opposition. In all, we interviewed 39 people.¹

Although Iowa State University's situation is unique in some ways, the unfolding story demonstrates the complex motives and factors that influence the shape of composition programs. Such complexity makes faculty resistance difficult yet offers them a contested space within which to insert their own ideas for change.

Exodus from First-Year Composition

Steve Richardson, Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Iowa State University, identified "two great events of the last century" that created the university system. One of these, he said, was "the development of the department in the late nineteenth century which came from the German research model." The second was "the move toward general public education, as opposed to the previous system which educated an elite." This populist impulse led to the Morrill Act of 1862 to establish land-grant institutions, and Iowa State University became the country's first university to accept the terms of the Morrill Act.

These two competing value systems, populism and elitism, help to explain why tenure-track faculty at Iowa State used to teach first-year composition regularly and why they later abandoned that role. As others in English studies have argued (e.g., Gere; Crowley; S. Miller), first-year composition was a response to the populism movement that produced, for the first time in our country's history, an influx of students who were not necessarily from more affluent or better educated families. The effects of this populism were especially pronounced at land-grant institutions. For much of its history, the English department at Iowa State was defined almost solely by first-year composition. When Dale Ross, our retiring chair, began teaching at Iowa State in 1966, "we all taught it, we all talked about it, we all met together, we all argued about it . . . and in spite of the fact that it was a hell of a lot of work, there was a kind of esprit that grew up around this program." Even then, though, first-year composition

was marked as having a lower status than other courses because it was seen as a service course, and service courses, although they embrace the populism mission of land-grant institutions, do not fit the specialization model imported from Germany. English faculty in the 1960s studied literature as an area of specialization; first-year composition, despite efforts to bolster it with literary texts, did not fit into that discipline (Friend; Salvatori).

Faculty at Iowa State responded to the political reality of service courses by creating a hierarchy in which faculty with high status taught first-year composition less frequently than did faculty with low status. Dale Ross reported that junior faculty taught three sections of composition a term, but senior faculty might teach one section of composition and two of literature. A woman teaching for over 30 years observed that women in the 1960s taught more sections of composition than men did. The disparity, she noted, ended in 1972, when a committee of women presented data to a new chair documenting the gender disparity. But first-year composition remained marked as low status.

Although the impulse for tenure-track faculty to abandon the composition program was in position early on, at Iowa State they did not flee until the late 1970s and early 1980s. Dale Ross, the retiring chair, cited two conditions that prompted the exodus: "One [was] the expansion of the graduate program [and] the recognition that we needed to support graduate students with graduate teaching assistantships. The second, frankly, was the need to recruit faculty, new faculty, young faculty, at a time when other departments were turning out Phd's, training them increasingly in a narrow fashion for doing research and focusing on specialization. The argument that they would also be expected to teach composition put you at a disadvantage if you were recruiting." Both of these conditions stem from a disciplinary shift within English studies where specialization, following the German model, became essential. Generalists were no longer valued, and graduate programs were seen as increasingly necessary to train future faculty in a specialization and to provide current faculty with the courses they were trained to teach. An associate professor in literature who came to ISU in the late 1970s did not fondly recall composition instruction and rejected the idea of returning to such teaching: "Some people still have a sort of nostalgia that I don't share for the good old days when the one thing we all did was freshman English. You know we could swap our stories of the most outrageous error over coffee in the lounge . . . I'm wasted in the freshman English classroom."

Ironically, the emergence of composition studies as a disciplinary field, which people often date as beginning in 1963 and reaching full status by the mid 1970s (e.g., Corbett; Gebhardt), hastened the flight of faculty from first-year composition. If composition were a valid specialization, then faculty in other areas of English studies were not qualified to teach it. A full professor who published a well-cited article on composition in the early 1980s remembered how he felt forced to leave that area of English studies:

I was real excited to go to 4Cs in the mid-70s when I first started to go to read papers. . . . People felt like they were on the cutting edge of something new. . . . We literature people sort of had mixed feelings about it

because we had always been taught that freshman English was a burden and not something we should get terribly excited about. . . . But you could tell some people were just inventing themselves, reinventing themselves, inventing a discipline. So it was sort of exciting. . . . But by the early 80s it had gotten too complicated. You couldn't do both [literature and composition].

In spite of his interest in composition studies, he chose literature, the area his doctorate degree had prepared him to teach.

The increased emphasis on specialization and research meant that even some faculty in rhetoric and composition did not feel qualified to teach first-year composition. A member of the rhetoric and professional communication area who has specialized in professional communication theory admitted, "I don't really know how to teach it [composition] any more." Another full professor in literature summed up the irony that became part of the professionalization of composition studies:

It was crucial for the life of the department that we be able to say that just not anybody can teach freshman writing because there is a body of theory and knowledge here that is enabling, and that is part and parcel of the tendency toward increased professionalization of the department. And we turn right around and dump most of the teaching of freshman writing on the least professional group [teaching assistants] we could imagine.

Why Upper Administration Is Mandating Tenure-Track Faculty's Return to the First-Year Composition Classroom

For political and disciplinary reasons, tenure-track faculty at Iowa State left composition in the hands of teaching assistants and temporary instructors. Now at Iowa State new factors have prompted a reconsideration of first-year composition. This reconsideration began approximately five years ago when administration at the dean and provost level began asking tenure-track faculty across the university to teach "frontier courses"—courses that first-year students take or that introduce undergraduates to a specific discipline. Reasons that are both economic and political have prompted administrators' attention to who teaches these frontier courses.

Tuition is an economic incentive. From 1986 to 1995, the annual number of incoming undergraduate students at Iowa State dropped by approximately 2,300. In terms of current tuition rates, that decline equals a loss of nearly 2.7 million dollars in tuition per semester. Administrators speculate that one reason for this loss of revenue is that the public is disenchanted with universities where the research mission is perceived to dominate at the expense of educating undergraduates. Certainly, private colleges in Iowa are using as a selling point the attention students will receive from tenured faculty. This claim is not lost on students and parents, nor has it been overlooked by the state's Board of Regents. The recent Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universi-

ties, a group of twenty-five university presidents including Iowa State's Martin Jischke, highlights the problem of the public's view of universities: "A skeptical public appears convinced that students are ignored, that research is more important than teaching, and that we have built a research-driven faculty that knows more and more about less and less." Iowa State is particularly vulnerable to criticism that it has abandoned its undergraduate mission because recent years have been dedicated to obtaining Research I status, which was granted by the Carnegie Foundation in 1994.

Dean Elizabeth Hoffman justified the new emphasis on having tenure-track faculty teach frontier courses: "Freshmen [will] get better connected with the university if they take courses from regular faculty as soon as possible . . . This is not to put down TAs . . . but the fact is students and their parents don't view them in the same light as they view the tenure-track faculty." The Dean argued that "when word got out that this was the way university faculty felt about teaching [that it "didn't count"], people got really angry and they went to their state legislatures, and they went to their boards of regents, and they said this is not acceptable." Provost John Kozak concurred: "In the private institutions these students are exposed to the best, the brightest of the faculty. You are really placing our kids at Iowa State at a competitive disadvantage. . . . I think that we do not market as well as we should."

Because composition is one of only two university-wide required courses (the other is a one credit course in library science), it is an obvious place for the university to make a statement about commitment to undergraduate education. However, some faculty are highly resistant to the efforts of the Provost and other top administrators to "market" first-year composition specifically or higher education in general. Dale Ross, for example, stated, "The notion of the student as a consumer is crazy. When consumers buy a car, they have a notion of what kind of car they want. But when a student comes to college, she's not in a position to say what a baccalaureate degree should be. We now find ourselves catering to what students want, rather than teaching them." Thus, the struggle over first-year composition is part of a larger struggle over the very nature of the university: Is the university a corporation following capitalistic practices, a humanistic enterprise practicing the principles of progressivism, a combination of the two, or something else?

Fiscal responsibility and an accompanying utilitarian emphasis, characteristics of the corporate model of higher education, have also influenced the new attention to undergraduate teaching. Retiring department chair Dale Ross confirmed "a greater demand for accountability through legislative mandates of one sort or another," while Provost Kozak acknowledged that university administrators must make decisions based on interaction with a "wide constituency. . . tak[ing] the temperature of regents, legislators, and parents." The political climate surrounding universities' relationships to the public and legislatures has, according to Steve Richardson, Director of the Center for Teaching Excellence, a "dark side" because "when people call for accountability, it means they don't think we're doing a good job."

One reason the public may think we are not doing a good job has been recently articulated by J. Hillis Miller. The political climate has shifted as the West has moved away from the cold war mentality to utilitarian and capitalistic concerns. In this new climate, corporate officers who are increasingly involved in the funding of universities "as well as university bureaucrats who govern for them may have a predisposition to think that the humanities are primarily of use to teach 'communication skills'" (12). Only those English departments that can prove "indispensable utility" are "likely to flourish in the new conditions" (13). Although Miller is more interested in finding ways to prove the utility of *Beowulf* and Toni Morrison, a new attention to first-year composition is an obvious way to demonstrate utility.

Dean Hoffman argues that the new direction administrators are taking is an ethical one because it is in the best interests of our students. She talked at length about her own commitment to teaching in the field of economics and her push to have full professors, including herself, teach frontier courses in the Department of Economics. She stated, "It's important to establish the ethic that a faculty member has responsibility to teaching at all levels." An associate professor in the English Department voiced her support for upper administration's actions: "[Some faculty would] like to think that they [upper administration] had some nefarious, darker motive. . . . Could it be that possibly they think this is a good idea? That teaching is important? . . . Maybe I'm being duped, but maybe they could have good motives for it." Other faculty in the English Department are more skeptical, referring to the new initiative as "purely political" or "just some sort of publicity stunt."

Why the Department of English Is Cooperating

Although for several years the Department of English has resisted upper administration's plan to return tenure-track faculty to first-year composition, change is at long last occurring. In a time of declining enrollment and decreasing budgets, there are economic pressures that Tom Kent believes the chair of the English Department can no longer ignore: "There are realities to running a department; you've only got so much money. . . . I think that by appearing to be and trying to be cooperative . . . it opens up gates instead of closes them." Kent's observation seems to confirm Zack Bowen's point in *ADE*: "though commonplace and mundane, the budget is as fundamental to the psyches of department administration as the mirror image to Lacanians, or dialogics to the Bakhtinians" (11).

Dean Hoffman suggested the consequences to the English Department if compliance was not forthcoming: "Frankly, by refusing to teach freshman English the department was putting itself in *severe* political jeopardy in the long term" (emphasis hers). Departmental resources that upper administration control include travel allowances, new hires, and salary increases. Although Kent acknowledged the political situation between the department and the university, he objected to seeing departmental cooperation as a kind of surrender. To the contrary, he asserted that "we fall too easily I've discovered into this kind of binary thinking—that's us and them, that's administration and the department,

and somehow how there aren't mutual goals."

Faculty in the English Department are more willing to pursue these mutual goals in a time of economic difficulties. The lower enrollment at Iowa State has affected the English Department, resulting in the cancellation of courses for undergraduate majors and graduate students. Faculty members cannot easily resist teaching first-year composition when their courses do not make enrollment.

Disciplinary shifts within English studies also seem to have played a role in moving tenure-track faculty from all areas of the department back into the first-year composition classroom. Kent, himself a member of the Rhetoric and Professional Communication area, does not define first-year composition as the exclusive turf of rhetoric specialists: "Maybe . . . we take it to be an academic writing course, an introduction to academic writing. Some other universities don't take it that way. They take it as an introduction to critical thinking, or they take it in some cases as an introduction to cultural studies, or . . . an introduction to literary studies. So that first-year writing courses can be made into lots of things, I think legitimately so."

Kent also observed that he can accept the inclusion of all English faculty in the first-year composition classroom because he can separate research from teaching: "I would make a distinction, perhaps, between teaching and conducting scholarship in writing. . . . I don't think necessarily that you have to be a composition scholar in order to be a good undergraduate teacher of writing. . . . I know I could teach courses in nineteenth-century American literature . . . although I'm not a scholar in nineteenth-century American literature."

In the 1960s and 1970s, when composition and rhetoric studies seemed defined exclusively by pedagogy, there was an important need to stake out the first-year composition classroom as belonging to composition experts. Kent's comments on the difference between teaching and doing research suggest that need may no longer exist. Today the vitality of research in rhetoric (e.g., dialogism, narrative studies, hermeneutics) extends far beyond the composition classroom. In fact, Kent stated that he thought the proposal to have faculty from all areas teach composition could help end the turf wars in the English department because it would help "the distinctions between discourse production [composition] and discourse reception [literature] close." Kent's argument has carried weight in departmental debates about first-year composition because of his rhetoric expertise. As editor of *Journal of Advanced Composition* and author of *Paralogic Rhetoric*, which won a NCTE award for best book, Kent can not be dismissed as an administrator who does not understand the disciplinary issues involved.

Other members of the English Department share Kent's inclusive view of rhetoric. One TA working on a master's in literature identified rhetoric as the core of all of English studies: "Rhetoric is the taproot all the rest springs from. That's the core of how we make language and literature. . . . The main point ought to be . . . to give our students the tools they'll need to communicate, the

most important of which is rhetoric." Similarly, an associate professor specializing in writing-across-the-curriculum identified "rhetorical issues" as the main emphasis of composition, an emphasis that faculty in each area of English studies can contribute to: "One of the great virtues of bringing people together and having them see what the others are teaching and what the students are writing and reading [is that it] will help to sort of demystify the [act of] writing . . . potentially."

Potential Risks in Cooperating—Or Not Cooperating

At the same time that there are advantages to bringing tenure-track faculty back into the first-year composition classroom, there are also political risks. Tenure-track faculty's escape from first-year composition two decades ago was seen as symbolic of the professionalization of English studies. Thus, to focus on first-year composition may be to redefine English as a "service department," a designation identified by many as low status. An associate professor in literature commented, "I feel like the attempt to re-emphasize it [teaching first-year composition] is an attempt to return us to a service department. . . ." Sharon Crowley makes a similar point in her essay, "Composition's Ethic of Service," where she argues that a program whose mission is to provide "continued surveillance" for "the unentitled" (229) will not garner status within the academy.

Faculty also commented on the risk individual faculty might take because teaching first-year composition would divert them from other enterprises—research and graduate teaching—that are more likely rewarded in the academy. An associate professor of rhetoric and professional communication commented, "There has to be some professional reward—some intellectual and human reward—for doing this." An adjunct instructor noted, "Classroom teaching, particularly undergraduate, in-the-trenches kind of work, hasn't been seen as all that important."

Dean Hoffman refuses to accept these arguments. She asserted that being a service department is not necessarily negative. In fact, because in a university of science and technology like Iowa State, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is often called to play a service role, she believes "service" has a positive designation: "Let's look at the great departments of this college. Chemistry is a service department. More than ninety percent of chemistry student credit hours are service courses . . . service to [the College of] Engineering, to the biological sciences, to the College of Agriculture . . . and they have full professors teaching all of those courses. . . . [The Department of] Statistics too . . . almost all of their student credit hours are service." Dean Hoffman further argued that being designated a service department has granted the English Department advantages rather than disadvantages: "The reason you have sixty-two tenure-track faculty members is because you're a service department. If you weren't a service department, you'd have ten faculty members, let me guarantee it."

An associate professor who has held administrative positions shared this reasoning: "I don't know how that [offering service courses] hurts English studies, *per se*. For example, in our department it only helps them because if we didn't have the composition program, we wouldn't have TAs. If we didn't have TAs, we wouldn't have a graduate program. . . . It would be a much smaller, downsized operation."

Indeed, in a time when decisions about the academy are driven by data and dollars, the service designation, although traditionally troublesome, may become increasingly beneficial. Ross observed, "If numbers are going to drive [the academy], then departments with more numbers are going to do better than those with lower numbers—in terms of enrollment and dollars generated and credit hours and research grants." The "ethic of service" that Crowley laments may be transformed into the "economics of service."

Kent said he understands the historical reasons "service" has been problematic to composition specialists and described the "political position of writing programs" as being "relegated to the basement." He insisted, however, that service should not require a loss of disciplinary status: "We [the Department of English] are professionals, we are the experts, I think, about composition and writing. We should be calling the shots." Still, he accepts the role service courses offer in the university. "I'm not adverse to the idea that somehow the English Department should be 'serving' the rest of the university. I see it as an ethical task . . . to help in the liberal education of students."

Dean Hoffman admitted that universities have traditionally undervalued teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level, but she believes that has changed. She suggested, "Participating in the teaching of freshman English should be viewed as a positive part of your [tenure-track faculty's] teaching portfolio. . . . As we recruit new faculty, as we go through the promotion and tenure process, we ought to be looking to the long-term goal that every faculty member can and does participate in the teaching of freshmen." Although research is still necessary, Dean Hoffman has encouraged and supported cases for tenure and promotion to full professor where the primary criterion is excellence in teaching.

The quality of instruction to students in first-year composition is another potential risk. One associate professor in rhetoric and professional communication observed: "I view this program [i.e., the plan to have faculty from all areas teach first-year composition] as simply a departmental administrative response to an uninformed demand by central administration. We're kidding ourselves if we think otherwise, since the program itself is based on a cynical if not degrading perception of what the teaching of writing is all about." TAs are also skeptical that tenured faculty will address upper administration's concerns about retention, recruitment, or better service to our undergraduates. One TA wondered about the value of having first-year students taught by "unwilling or uninvolved or bored or smug tenure-track faculty." Another said, "I don't think tenure-track people teaching comp will necessarily increase retention. . . . Maybe

they're better teachers and maybe not." A third TA agreed: "It blows my mind to hear people talking about the importance of getting tenured faculty back into the composition classroom because I start thinking, what if they don't want to be there? What parents would want their children taught that way?"

Other members of the English Department, however, are more sanguine about faculty from all areas teaching first-year composition. An associate professor in creative writing noted, "It's not brain surgery. . . . If people don't do a good job, nobody dies." An adjunct instructor, who described composition instruction as "central to her career," had a similar response when asked about non-specialists teaching composition: "We're not teaching rocket science here. I do feel that it's important for the people who take on the job to educate themselves about composition pedagogy. . . but I think [for] lit people that's not a very big step." As this and another adjunct instructor who teaches first-year composition regularly pointed out, tenure-track faculty in the area of rhetoric have rarely taught first-year composition, so it is difficult to defend the idea that the plan deprofessionalizes first-year composition instruction.

Looking Ahead

In the fall of 1995, only one of the sixty-eight instructors teaching regular first-year composition was a tenure-track faculty member. One year later the proposed change went in effect, and nine tenure-track faculty (from creative writing, literature, rhetoric and professional communication, and linguistics) taught first-year composition. In the fall of 1997, the second year of the tenure-track faculty's regular participation has begun.

As a case study, the specifics of this research cannot be generalized to other universities. Nonetheless, the political and economic factors that precipitated the changes at Iowa State University are national, and English faculty at other institutions should heed the warning implicit in this statement by the university presidents who wrote the Kellogg report on state and land-grant universities: "In the next century, a new kind of university will be in place. Most of us are already in the process of inventing it."

Thus, one lesson of this cautionary tale is that departments of English must be sensitive to economic and political pressures if they are to address potential problems before someone outside the department does it for them. Despite faculty's complaints about upper administration's intervention in curricular matters, the fact remains: By abandoning first-year composition to teaching assistants and temporary instructors, the Department of English at Iowa State became vulnerable to intervention. The department could not reconcile the need to have a large number of tenure-track faculty because of service responsibilities and at the same time turn over those responsibilities to others. The English chair and Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences believe this vulnerability exists at other universities as well. "Rethinking what the role of the English department should be," Kent noted, "is a national phenomenon." Dean Hoffman put it more bluntly: "Somehow, at some point, English departments, frankly in

my opinion, started to get away with murder. . . . English departments that don't take back freshman English will find themselves getting downsized."

Another lesson is that cooperating with upper administration may lead to other benefits. At Iowa State, agreeing to upper administrators' request has garnered their cooperation in restructuring our TA training program. For the past several years, TAs were required to teach two courses in their first semester of their masters program, a condition faculty objected to as exploiting new graduate students. Because of department's cooperation, upper administration worked with the department to restructure the number of courses taught in the fall so that TAs no longer teach until their second semester of graduate school. The Center for Teaching Excellence also awarded the first-year composition program a \$25,000 grant to improve our TA training program, and Dean Hoffman grants an honorarium to tenure-track faculty who teach first-year composition and work with new TAs.

This newfound cooperation between the department and upper administration does not necessarily mean a happy-ever-after-ending. For example, we cannot yet determine how the curriculum is changing now that tenure-track faculty are regularly teaching first-year composition. Faculty are provided some of the same materials (e.g., readings on theory and practice, and descriptions of course objectives and assignments), but they expect and receive much more autonomy than graduate students and temporary instructors do. We do not yet know if this autonomy will produce a better and more vital first-year composition program or lead to a program in disarray. It is also too soon to judge the department's status within the university or the reaction of students, parents, and legislatures. And it would be naive to ignore the possibility of future mandated changes for departments across the campus or the English Department specifically.

In this time of restructuring and reinvention, administrators and faculty in English departments and first-year composition programs who recognize how political and economic pressures affect departmental and disciplinary structures may be best able to position themselves to shape or contest the changes that are coming.

Notes

1. Subjects were asked to discuss what advantages and disadvantages they perceived in the new program, why they thought the new program was created, and what effects the new program might produce. Interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. We are grateful for the interviews granted us, and we especially appreciate the administrators' permission to use their names.

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