

Stephen M. North with Barbara A. Chepaitis, David Coogan, Lale Davidson, Ron MacLean, Cindy L. Parrish, Jonathan Post, and Beth Weatherby. *Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies: Writing, Doctoral Education, and the Fusion-Based Curriculum*. Urbana: NCTE, 2000. 319 pages. \$28.95

*Their [the universities'] basic mission was the making of knowledge, and their primary credentialing function—a matter, really, of self-perpetuation—was to produce more researchers, holders of what had come to be called Philosophiae Doctor. (5)*

Stephen M. North's contribution to the growing body of literature<sup>1</sup> addressing the *refiguring* of English Studies is both a discipline-wide and an institution-based history of that discipline's doctoral education in American universities. North, most noted to-date for his controversial *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* (Boynton/Cook, 1987), pulls no punches in his often glib, occasionally brutal, discussion of the sporadic growth, frequent decline, and imminent demise of Ph.D. programs in English.

"College English Teaching, Inc.," North's metaphorical name for the American model of doctoral education, has essentially created a corporate economy with graduate students at the center; because the graduate students generate credit hours both as students and as teachers, professors can maintain free time to continue their research which, in the tradition of the German model, was the sole enterprise of the professoriate. In other words, the workers do the grunt work (teaching) so that

# *From Laborers to Knowledge- Makers: Graduate Students at the Center of the Doctoral Curriculum*

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the managers receive support to do the real business of the university (research).

In the current system, graduate students serve two functions: (1) they teach classes the professors do not want to teach at less cost to the university; and (2) they are the clay of which the professoriate clones itself. Such a system of self-perpetuation, however, cannot survive in American universities. Future generations of Ph.D.s cannot expect to secure positions in Research I institutions; their enterprise will be teaching, not research. Unfortunately, this means that a professoriate trained in research must train its students in teaching, if it can be convinced to make the change. In other words, those charged with making the changes are ill-prepared and disinclined to do so.

The solution, according to North, is a *fusion-based curriculum* for which Albany's *Doctor of Philosophy in Writing, Teaching and Criticism* is the model. The fusion metaphor seems appropriate; fusion, most simply explained, is the combining of light nuclei into heavier nuclei resulting in a reaction (release of energy). In the case of English Studies, the light nuclei are the various fractures in English departments (in Albany's case, e.g., writing, teaching, and criticism) which, when fused, become a stronger, though variegated (North's word), curriculum. Instead of the fractures becoming separate entities because of their differences, "the object would be to harness the energy generated by the conflicts in order to forge some new disciplinary enterprise altogether" (73).

Interestingly, in North's model for future doctoral studies in English, graduate students remain at the center. Their role, however, is curriculum based, not economy based; North argues that programs should allow the graduate students to determine their needs and interests as well as what should be the subjects of their writings; for such change to occur, however, "the graduate faculty must be willing to renegotiate their disciplinary and professional status vis-à-vis the doctoral students in their programs" (75). Graduate students would not be limited to learning the knowledge made by their predecessors; they would themselves become knowledge-makers. Or, in the vein of North's corporate metaphor, the graduate students become managers working along side their professors.

*Refiguring the Ph.D. in English Studies* is a comprehensive analysis of where we have been and where we are going, or at least where North thinks we should be going. Even if one disagrees with the conclusions of his

argument or the primacy of the Albany model, North's analysis provides a framework for re-conceiving doctoral education in English. I do recommend North's book, especially for those new to English Studies (or those who want to better understand the fractures that divide English departments across the nation); while some scholars (I suspect North among them) may argue his rendering is biased, North offers a convincing argument and critical detail to support his claims. The value of North's contribution is that he compels us to rethink our assumptions about doctoral education in English Studies and to consider innovative alternatives. And, if we don't? According to North, the result is simple: we won't survive.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Peter Elbow's *What Is English?* (New York and Urbana: MLA and NCTE, 1990), James Berlin's *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies* (Urbana: NCTE, 1996), and Robert Scholes's *The Rise and Fall of English* (New Haven: Yale, 1998).

