

Letter from the Editors of the Special Issue

NEW PROGRAM DESIGN IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

In our day-to-day development, reform, and administration of first-year and undergraduate writing programs, we often focus on the immediate and local idiosyncrasies of what we do. Our program administration therefore is often responsive to institutional imperatives such as assessment mandates and constraints, particularly the allocation of resources determined at upper administrative levels. Because of a myriad of pressures, writing instruction and program administration have become, in large part, technocratically defined and managed. In response to these conditions, calls for rethinking and diversifying our approaches with more attention to a broadened scope of the rhetorical tradition, interdisciplinary methodologies, and an understanding of the implications of teaching rhetoric and composition beyond the classroom have increasingly shaped our thinking about new and innovative approaches to our writing programs. Heeding the insightful analyses and critiques offered by people in the field such as Sharon Crowley, Thomas P. Miller, and Michael A. Halloran, the articles in this special issue offer new and innovative approaches to writing program development and curricular design.

Each of the articles in this issue seek to question and disrupt dominant technocratic tendencies in program administration by actively asking: What is the potential to create or revise programs based within the liberal arts ideals of critical engagement, within the rhetorical tradition of public engagement, or within a philosophical inquiry about writers and writing? What are the socio-political and economic factors that thwart such alternative program development and how can those factors be addressed? In asking these questions, these articles not only offer an analysis of pressures defining and delimiting work within writing programs, but also offer well thought out program ideas, offering potential alternatives and strategies for redefining that work.

Catherine Chaput's article, "Lest We Go the Way of Vocational Training: Developing Undergraduate Writing Programs in the Humanist Tra-

dition,” provides a model of a visionary undergraduate writing program that places writing within the intersections of rhetoric and cultural studies. Drawing on a diverse group of theorists and critiques of the divisions in composition, rhetoric, and cultural studies, Chaput engages the apparent dichotomy between interpretation of texts – largely delegated to literary studies – and the production of texts – understood to be the domain of composition – and rearticulates that distinction as the role of rhetoric as reproductive or disruptive. She advocates for a “humanist rhetoric” that understands both interpretive and productive aspects of language as culturally tied, dialogically and dialectically privileging engagement with others that might lead to disruptive and transformative cultural practices. The model curriculum she offers demonstrates ways an undergraduate writing program might prepare students to question how the production of texts occurs within political and economic contexts, and are embedded in questions of power and identity.

Dylan Dryer’s article, “The Persistence of Institutional Memory: Genre Uptake and Program Reform,” examines first-year placement processes as a genre that demonstrates the institutional tendency to construct hierarchical student “needs” in ways that may have little to do with student abilities, potential, or perception of their own needs. Dryer extends Jeanne Gunner’s ideas of “social genre” and Royer and Gilles’ analysis of the material implications of texts used in placement to develop a critique of the placement process. Dryer’s analysis of the way the genre of placement – including placement tests, scores, and alternative processes – function to define writing instruction itself as well as students’ experience of that instruction reminds us that our program administration must constantly struggle with technocratic institutional assumptions. Understanding writing program administration as itself engaging with institutionalized genres enables the WPA to rhetorically analyze the contexts and texts that delimit what we do, providing potential ways to intervene in those processes, and to understand why some of those interventions are not always successful.

Kimberly Costino’s article, in “Service vs. Subject Matter: Merging First-Year Composition and First-Year Experience,” describes how a WPA’s astute rhetorical analysis of institutional imperatives can lead to opportunities to constitute and define composition’s subject matter. Costino provides an innovative approach to developing a new set of merged courses that create interdisciplinary, content-focused approaches to composition in ways that mitigate what Sharon Crowley has called the “ethic of service” surrounding composition courses. The author’s experience with merging First-Year Composition with a university First-Year Experience initiative allowed her to articulate to faculty and administration outside of the writing pro-

gram an understanding of composition not merely as a set of skills for producing texts, but as a discipline that examines language and argument as socially embedded and context-bound. The author offers a model of a program initiative that, by making composition part of a sequence of content-driven seminars, makes visible and legitimates the content and practices of writing instruction as rhetorical activity. Costino outlines the impact of this merging not only on the composition sequence, but on the other disciplines' approaches to discourse in the content area seminars.

Utilizing discourse analysis and activity theory, John Oddo and Jamie Parmelee's article, "Competing Interpretations of 'Textual Objects' in an Activity System: A Study of the Requirements Document in the ___ Writing Program," demonstrates the significant role institutional texts play in program development and administration. The authors examine the ways two faculty who play key roles in the administration of a writing program interpret a document that outlines the requirements for the first-year writing courses. The authors find that because the document does not necessarily capture some of the agreed upon goals for the courses, specifically in the area of digital literacies, the way the document is interpreted and applied by individuals functioning under differing assumptions may work against achieving programmatic course goals. As Dryer's article points out, Oddo and Parmelee further emphasize that writing instruction is not defined in a vacuum, but is rather constantly shaped and delimited by the discursive practices that often become reified in institutional settings. The authors provide a framework for investigating the implications of our textual objects as we attempt to create new programs and curriculum design.

In the final article of the issue, we return to the question of radically transforming our writing programs to reflect the depth of our rhetorical theories. M. J. Braun's "The Prospects for Rhetoric in a First-Year Composition Program: Deliberative Discourse as a Vehicle for Change?" reflects on her own analysis of the textual objects that constructed a writing program defined by formalistic, a-rhetorical pedagogical practices, despite the shared goal of a program that was more richly rhetorical. Like Chaput, Braun points out the divergence of traditional composition's formalist focus on the production of written text from the more rhetorical understanding of texts as having deep contexts that respond in complicated ways to other texts and discourses. Braun recounts literally abandoning the discursive textual objects (to borrow Oddo and Parmelee's term), such as decontextualized syllabi and student guides that outlined modes of discourse, and embarking on a collective, rhetorical project with instructors in the program to completely re-envision alternative approaches to writing instruction. The process Braun and her colleagues undertook embraced the very principles

of rhetoric—deliberation and democratic debate—that the revised program adopted as goals for the writing courses, an approach informed by the work of Sharon Crowley, Patricia Roberts-Miller, and Chantal Mouffe. The author describes the exciting results and positive reception of the program by the students and instructors, as well as the engaged participation the program enabled. However, Braun goes on to point out the institutional obstacles such as dependence on contingent labor and the lack of recognition of administrative efforts as equivalent to other forms of scholarship that eventually hobbled and reversed the transformation of the writing program.

Braun's article, like all the articles in this issue, invites us to consider the dynamic potential to develop new writing programs that enable our students to navigate, question, and perhaps transform social and institutional structures. Simultaneously, however, these articles remind us that visionary program administration requires that we navigate, question, and transform those very structures ourselves. I and my co-editors hope that the dialogue opened here inspires and instructs all of us to rigorously and critically engage our programs as themselves rhetorical—interacting with and potentially transformational of larger cultural practices.

On behalf of the special issue editorial team . . .

—*Danika M. Brown, The University of Texas Pan American*

