

## 4 Disciplinary Identities: Professional Writing, Rhetorical Studies, and Rethinking “English”

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*More than a program's course content, a curriculum is a contested representation of the public identity of an institution and a discipline.*

– David B. Downing, Claude Mark Hurlbert, and Paula Mathieu (1)

Few of us in professional and technical writing or rhetoric and composition have avoided the turf wars that often accompany the development or revision of curricula within English departments. At institutions across the country, faculty in these areas have attempted to carve a niche for themselves, often in the midst of heated resistance. When we, along with several of our tenured and untenured colleagues in the areas of rhetoric, linguistics, and professional writing, proposed a curriculum for an undergraduate concentration in “Rhetorical Studies and Professional Writing” (RSPW) as one option for English majors at East Carolina University (a regional state university with approximately four thousand graduate and sixteen thousand undergraduate students), we certainly felt some heat.

At the time we developed our proposal, the department offered two degree options: 1) a BA in English, and 2) a BA in English with a Concentration in Writing. The former option provided students with detailed knowledge of literary periods and genres, while the latter combined course options in creative writing, technical and professional writing, and rhetoric and composition. As we describe below, faculty specialists in technical and professional writing and rhetoric and composition, frustrated by curricular limitations within the Concentration in Writing, developed a new curriculum that would provide students with an opportunity for focused study of writing in a variety of professional and civic contexts. While the Concentration in Writing had made sense when it was developed—a time in which creative writing courses constituted the majority of writing courses in the department—the growth

of course offerings and faculty presence in rhetoric and professional writing seemed to call for curricular revision. We envisioned that our proposal would lead to two separate, but ultimately more purposeful, concentrations in writing—one a rhetorically based study of writing in the workplace and the community, and the other a creative writing track with course parameters and requirements to be developed by creative writing faculty. We intended for the RSPW concentration to provide both theory and practice for undergraduates interested in a variety of writing-related careers. In order to provide this focused study, our revised concentration omitted a few of the previously required literary history courses required of all students in the existing BA curriculum. While we suspected that these changes might meet with some resistance, we hoped that, by retaining some of the literature requirements and by making the argument that this new concentration would increase the total number of English majors, we could persuade our colleagues that the revisions were in the department's best interest.

At a rather contentious faculty meeting, the motion we put forward to incorporate the new RSPW concentration was critiqued and ultimately tabled pending further discussion among department faculty. The attempt to reconfigure our offerings to English majors met with significant resistance and exposed tenuous relationships among the disparate scholarly and pedagogical interests in our department. We had thrown open the floodgates of disagreement about what a degree in "English" means. The proposed changes prompted faculty in the department to engage in heated, sometimes painful, but ultimately necessary conversations about what the "core" courses in the department should be and what a "core" in an English Department should accomplish.

We discuss three aspects of our proposed program here: 1) The structure and rationale of the revised curriculum; 2) The departmental identity issues our proposal raised, including the instability of disciplinary boundaries that demarcated the department's programs in the past; and 3) The tactical changes we would make if we could start this process anew. This article is not intended to be a gripe session—such an indulgence would assist neither us nor our readers. Instead, we discuss our conflicts, frustrations, and missteps in the spirit of working through them. How might the process of proposing a new curriculum have been better executed? What problematic assumptions and communicative practices impeded our attempts to revise the curriculum, and what might we have done to better respond to these problems? We conclude our discussion on a positive note, with a brief overview of some of the positive results that this struggle has produced. We believe that our story, through the cautionary tales and advice it provides, will interest other faculty and administrators who are just embarking on the process of constructing an undergraduate program in technical and pro-

fessional writing, and who are, in the process, redefining the boundaries among traditional and emerging specializations within English departments.

### PROPOSED REVISIONS

At the time of our proposal, the department awarded two Bachelor degrees—a BA in English, which focused primarily on literature; and a BA in English with a Concentration in Writing. In the past, the department has offered a BA in English Education, but that program was recently relocated to the College of Education. The BA in English with a Concentration in Writing was first listed in the 1978-79 undergraduate catalog, and, although two distinct BA concentrations were elaborated beginning with that catalogue, all English majors began their undergraduate major programs with a “common core” of courses. The nature of the courses included in this common core has changed over the years, with recent configurations of the core requiring students to take a fairly specific sequence of literary studies courses. The chart below shows the 2004-05 core:

2004-05 Undergraduate Catalogue
<p><i>Core Courses (required of students in both Concentrations)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ENGL 2000. Interpreting Literature</li> <li>• ENGL 3000. Lit in English to 1700</li> <li>• ENGL 3010. Lit in English, 1700-1880</li> <li>• ENGL 3020. Lit in English, 1880-Present</li> <li>• One Shakespeare course (Tragedies, Comedies, or Histories)</li> </ul> <p><i>For English (Literature) Concentration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One course in language or composition (includes courses in linguistics, composition and rhetoric, and creative writing, but not professional writing)</li> </ul> <p><i>For Writing Concentration</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One non-writing elective; choices include linguistics, film studies, as well as other literature courses</li> </ul>

FIGURE 1: CORE REQUIREMENTS, 2004-05 CATALOGUE

Prior to our proposal for an RSPW curriculum, the consensus among a significant segment of the faculty for several semesters had been that we needed to reevaluate and reconfigure our undergraduate major and consider possible changes, particularly to the overburdened and perhaps overly specific core. The reasons for such a reconfiguration were several:

**1. Use of faculty strengths:** The course options in the existing curriculum did not take advantage of the department's growing number of faculty (fifteen at the time of this writing) with strengths in technical and professional writing, discourse analysis, linguistics, and rhetoric and composition, particularly at the upper-division undergraduate level. For example, faculty specialists in rhetoric and composition had only one upper-division course at the undergraduate level: English 3810: Advanced Composition.

**2. Recognition of disciplinary diversity:** The limited selection of core and elective courses in these areas reflected a lack of recognition and value for these areas in the undergraduate curriculum.

**3. Response to student course needs:** The selection of writing courses was heavily weighted toward creative writing and did not address the needs of students in the writing concentration who were not interested in creative writing. Creative writing workshops—two each in poetry, fiction, playwriting, and creative nonfiction—offered a variety of writing experiences for those interested, but there was a noticeable absence of courses in rhetorical theory and composition studies. Other “non-creative” writing courses included two services courses, business writing and scientific writing (both grandfathered in when the WAC program established writing requirements in all disciplines), and only three courses created especially for professional writing: editing, publications development, and internships.

**4. Coordination of departmental programs:** The undergraduate curriculum was not clearly coordinated with the graduate curriculum. We believed that our strong MA program in professional and technical communication would be enhanced by a strong BA in writing, as would the department's PhD program in Technical and Professional Discourse. This PhD program includes three focus areas: technical and professional communication, writing studies and pedagogy, and discourses and cultures. While the third area—discourses and cultures—was represented in several of the department's literature courses, the first two areas and the study of linguistics (an important component of the third area) lacked a strong emphasis in the undergraduate major.

In response to these situations, we proposed a curriculum that decreased the number of required (core) courses, created new courses in both rhetorical studies and professional writing, and provided more flexibility for students:

<b>2004-2005 BA IN ENGLISH (36 S.H.)</b>	
<b>Concentration in English</b>	<b>Concentration in Writing</b>
2000. Interpreting Literature 3000. Lit in English to 1700 3010. Lit in English, 1700-1880 3020. Lit in English, 1880-Present	2000. Interpreting Literature 3000. Lit in English to 1700 3010. Lit in English, 1700-1880 3020. Lit in English, 1880-Present
One SHAKESPEARE (Comedies, Histories, or Tragedies)	One SHAKESPEARE (Comedies, Histories, or Tragedies)
One course in LANGUAGE or COMPOSITION (includes courses in linguistics, composition, and creative writing, but not prof comm)	Six courses in WRITING (includes courses in composition, prof comm, and creative writing)
Six ENGLISH ELECTIVES (excludes writing courses)	One ENGLISH ELECTIVE (excludes writing courses)

FIGURE 2A: COMPARISON OF 2004-2005 AND PROPOSED BACHELOR OF ARTS CURRICULA IN ENGLISH

PROPOSED BA IN ENGLISH (36 S.H.)		
Concentration in English Literature	Concentration in Rhetorical Studies and Professional Writing (RSPW)	Concentration in Creative Writing
2000. Interpreting Literature  3000. Lit in English to 1700  3010. Lit in English, 1700-1880  3020. Lit in English, 1880-Present	2000. Interpreting Literature  One upper-level lit course  One course from linguistics, film, folklore or creative writing	To be defined by faculty in creative writing
One SHAKESPEARE (Comedies, Histories, or Tragedies)	3030. Intro to Rhet Studies* 3040. Intro to Prof Wtg* 4885. Capstone Semr in RSPW*	
One course in LANGUAGE or COMPOSITION (includes courses in linguistics, composition, and creative writing, but not prof comm)	Four courses in RSPW, with at least one from each area:  A. Professional Writing B. Rhetorical Studies	
Six ENGLISH ELECTIVES (excludes writing courses)	Two ENGLISH ELECTIVES	

\* indicates proposed new course

FIGURE 2B: COMPARISON OF 2004-2005 AND PROPOSED BACHELOR OF ARTS CURRICULA IN ENGLISH

Once our first draft was submitted informally to the faculty for review, the department held two open meetings for faculty to respond to the proposal.

These meetings highlighted conflicts that, although present for many years, had been generally overcome by a collegial environment. In a department in which rhetoric and professional writing courses are strong programs at the MA level (the MA degree in Technical and Professional Writing, for example, has a maturing online degree with about seventy-five active students, a majority of the department's MA students) and are a significant factor in a PhD program, some of the faculty not specifically involved with these areas became concerned and disturbed by our proposed reduction in the number of required literature courses for students pursuing the RSPW concentration. Some even suggested that since RSPW faculty "had [the] PhD," we should let literature faculty "have the BA." Our attempt to extend our presence to the undergraduate major became a territorial struggle. The extent to which reactions to our proposal reflected struggles over institutional power can be seen in the responses of faculty in other areas of study that were also not firmly rooted in the departmental core. While we were perceived by some faculty as upstarts trying to deny the "soul" of English—the study and composition of literature—our proposal garnered support from faculty teaching in other areas with limited visibility in the major: linguistics and multicultural literature.

### **THE MEANING(S) AND BOUNDARIES OF THE "ENGLISH" MAJOR**

Our conclusion that the resistance that we encountered was tied up in larger territorial battles is hardly earth-shattering. It will be more revealing, and, we hope, helpful to our readers for us to analyze the specific scholarly and institutional conditions that demarcated disciplinary boundaries and subsequently fueled that resistance. On the one hand, these sorts of conflict may be the inevitable consequence of gathering together any group of twenty or fifty or (in our case) eighty strong-willed people who are devoted to what they do. On the other hand, while there is no doubt that ego and personality conflicts have had some part in this resistance, we do not want to reduce the divergence of opinions to "interpersonal conflict" or to present that divergence as simplistic "us vs. them" factioning. Rather, we would like to outline some of the differing assumptions that inform the department's guiding terms and that maintain (or challenge) the boundaries among the many scholarly pursuits currently housed within the English department. Departments of all shapes and sizes have had to deal with just the kinds of conflict that we have wrestled with: conflicts over the real "meaning" of the English major, the role of the so-called "practical" courses

in an English curriculum, and the merits and problems of institutionally separating writing from literature.

In his concept of “disciplinary boundary-work,” sociologist Thomas Gieryn offers a useful lens through which to examine the controversies that arose within our department (see also David Russell’s discussion of boundary work in the composition/literature split). According to Gieryn, a discipline’s representatives strategically shape its boundaries by means of discourse: they articulate the discipline’s mission in a certain way, they define a set of characteristic problems to coincide with the discipline’s methodologies, they articulate collective values, and they engage in other practices to widen the discipline’s scope and strengthen its resources. In Gieryn’s approach, the epistemological, ontological, and practical relationship between a discipline and the surrounding culture is interpreted according to a cartographic metaphor. Gieryn employs this familiar metaphor to explain that a discipline relates to other disciplines, and to larger systems of knowledge and activity, in the same manner as a geographic territory relates to neighboring territories and to the larger land mass that encloses it. Furthermore, the relationships between neighboring territories strongly influence the overall health, power, and legitimacy of the involved territories. As such, it is helpful to know how the boundaries between territories are formulated and how they share resources.

What’s up for grabs in boundary conflicts is not just traditional “resources” (such as faculty lines, research funds, courses, and students), but also control over representations of the discipline’s central problems, concepts, and methods—that is, the “rhetorical resources” that disciplines create and maintain in order to solidify their boundaries. Contests over the department’s undergraduate curriculum have the potential to shape not only very practical matters like hiring priorities and new course creation, but also the distribution of *rhetorical resources*—namely, formulations of “English” as a discipline. One of the primary rhetorical resources in this case is control over the names assigned to different programmatic elements—concentrations, degrees, and so on—of the department.

As rhetorical attempts to construct a sense of collective identification, the names that an academic department chooses to apply to its programmatic structures stand in for larger arguments about the mission and the justification of the department. What Charles J. Stewart, Craig Allen Smith, and Robert E. Denton say about terms involved in social movement debates also applies to conflicts within academic departments: The terms we choose “play a role in determining sides of a conflict, specific views of reality, notions of right and wrong, and needed corrective action” (161). As points where social struggles occur as views of reality and notions of right and wrong are negotiated, the names we give

to our pedagogical and scholarly endeavors provide important sites for examining how language intervenes between division and cooperation within academic units.

No doubt the most contested term we battled with in our proposed curricular revisions was the name “English.” The disciplinary boundaries established through this term are tremendously volatile. While many scholars in different areas of English talk about “English Studies” in their scholarship—and by this phrase signify various textual specialties—the term “English,” rather than the two-word name “English Studies,” often remains the official name of academic departments. This official name, which omits the plural “studies” designation, reflects the pugnacity with which particular areas of study remain the expected focus of English departments. As many scholars have documented, the name “English” has, over the past century, come to equal “Literature,” and an “English major” means a “Literature major,” no matter how many times we refer to “English Studies” in our scholarship. While literary studies are by no means monolithic—the name “literary studies” in fact encompasses a wide array of texts and scholarly approaches to them—this area has been defined by some scholars within the specialty in a way that limits the scope of “legitimate” textual studies within English departments.

Such legitimating processes of definition are illustrated in some of the discussion that circulated within our department after we introduced our proposal. In response to the controversy, an ad hoc committee was formed to explore ways to revise the department’s curriculum. As part of this exploration, the committee circulated a survey to faculty, asking for opinions about the missions and purposes of the English department. While several people envision a department devoted to language study broadly conceived to include literary studies, linguistics, composition and rhetoric, creative writing, and technical and professional writing, others expressed a belief that literary study is *the* business of English departments. In one survey response, a faculty member urged the adoption of a curriculum that would include the most possible literature courses. In another response, a faculty member recommended that the required “core” courses for the department should include only literary surveys.

Equations of “English” with “literary studies” result in part from the ways in which the term “English” is defined and structured by professional organizations that claim to represent practitioners in the field. Karen Fitts and Bill Lalicker point out that the MLA has the power to define and delimit “English” in a way that determines “what is central, what marginal; what’s remarkable, [and] what’s barely noticed” (428). Recent articles included in the MLA’s *Professions* journal, Fitts and Lalicker argue, portray teaching writing as drudgery—as the work that must be endured before the teaching of serious and valuable “Eng-

lish” courses can take place. These understandings—or misunderstandings—of writing instruction make it very hard to create a larger, more inclusive understanding of the term “English.”

A 2003 *ADE Bulletin* dedicated to discussing the English major similarly reinforces the centrality of a particular kind of non-utilitarian, aesthetic literary study in English departments. Addressing the doubts of many parents about the practical value of an English degree for their children, editor David Laurence suggests that “a specific and valuable sort of uselessness characterizes true engagement in the learning that serious consideration of literature uniquely affords”; yet, he continues, “part of the value of that specific uselessness lies in how useful it eventually shows itself to be in various walks of life. We are bound to be incurably ambivalent and conflicted on the subject of the ‘practical value’ of studying English” (5). Laurence makes an excellent point about the significant long-term practical value of studying literature: the descriptor “useful” too often is used to denote only immediately measurable and applicable skills, ignoring the practical benefits of long-range attitudes and habits of thought. Indeed, the practical value of what Peter Elbow calls “imaginative” language is often overlooked. As Elbow explains, “Imaginative language touches people most deeply; sometimes it’s the only language use that gets through” (537). In other words, to achieve the effect we wish to have upon an audience—to accomplish a very practical goal—we need to be able to use imaginative language, and the study of literary texts is often a tremendously effective way to develop facility with such language. Yet Laurence’s assertion about the “incurable ambivalence and conflict” surrounding the study of “English” rests on the assumption that an English degree does not include courses in rhetoric and composition or technical and professional writing, courses with more immediately identifiable practical value.

The name “English” is made to signify and exclude certain kinds of teaching and research in local contexts as well. For instance, the BA in English in our department had two concentration options at the time we proposed a new curriculum. One concentration was called a concentration in “English.” This literary-intensive option was the “regular” concentration—the one that had no modifier and was identical in name with the department itself. The second concentration option was a Concentration in Writing. It is no coincidence that the concentration focusing on literature was called the concentration in “English” (and thus named the same as the department as a whole) while the Concentration in Writing was designated by a different term.

Underlying these attempts to identify what does and does not count as “English” are well-established assumptions about disciplinary unity—unity in purpose and mission. One of the clearest forms of what Gieryn calls “boundary-work” is the strategic act of defining a discipline’s purpose or mission according

to a principle of coherence that legitimizes one type of activity while delegitimizing others. In the case of “English,” claims about the “core” of the discipline—and even claims that English is a unified discipline—create a cultural map of “English” that normalizes certain types of work while pushing other work to the margins. The components, and indeed the very concept, of a unified core for the English department, not surprisingly, became a site of heated discussion during our departmental wrangling.

As mentioned above, both concentration options started with a common “core” consisting of “Interpreting Literature,” “Shakespeare,” and three courses in literary history. Beyond this core, the two curricula diverged almost completely. Students in the “English” concentration took eighteen additional hours in literature plus one writing course, while the students in the Concentration in Writing took eighteen additional hours in writing (picking at their discretion from courses in creative writing, technical and professional writing, or rhetoric and composition) plus one non-writing course. In this Concentration in Writing, students did not receive systematic introduction to the concepts, questions, and methods of rhetoric or professional writing. One of our main goals in designing and proposing the RSPW curriculum, thus, was to ensure that students would have a “coherent experience” of these areas on some level. We proposed introductory courses in rhetoric and professional communication, plus a “capstone” seminar in which students would be asked to reflect on the whole of their major experience. In the disciplinary map defined by our proposal, we intended to provide a meaningful “core” experience for students interested in rhetoric and professional writing, a core that would replace the disjointed experience provided by the Concentration in Writing and a “core” of literature courses that made almost no reference to what those students would later encounter in their advanced writing courses.

Ironically, it was precisely our desire to create a “coherent” program that got us into trouble—not because other faculty rejected the idea of coherence, but because they disputed the principle of coherence that our curriculum proposed. In fact, nothing was more consistent than the argument by our critics that students should have a “shared experience” of some kind—but when these critics argued that students need a “coherent experience” of the English major, what they meant was the “coherent experience” that the curriculum, as configured before our proposal, provided: the fifteen hours of literature that existed in both concentrations. It was this core experience of literary study that our proposal threatened.

The idea that the department, rather than the concentration options available within the department, should be the level at which students share a common academic experience has been championed mostly, though not ex-

clusively, by literature faculty, who have also been those most likely to refer to “English” as a *discipline* with various sub-disciplines (including creative writing, rhetoric, professional writing, linguistics, and so on). By contrast, many of the faculty in areas other than literary study have tended to refer to their own areas as “disciplines” existing within the English department, which itself serves as an institutional framework of related disciplines, each with its own core. Several responses to the faculty survey circulated by the ad-hoc committee suggest that English is not a discipline in the way other so-called disciplines, such as history and mathematics, are. Rather, English is an administrative structure that coordinates related but different disciplines. In this cultural map, “English” has an *institutional* reality, while rhetoric, professional writing, and so on have the more fundamental disciplinary realities. Working from this view of English as an institutional, rather than disciplinary, reality, some faculty have suggested that we investigate the possibility of establishing a College of English with different departments within that college.

The “disciplinary boundary-work” perspective illuminates how a group of generally fair-spirited, sincere, and intelligent people can hold and vigorously defend positions that appear irreparably at odds with one another. Departments of English are eclectic spaces, and it is not surprising that the residents of those spaces would depend upon different maps to help them make their way. It might be too much to expect to formulate a single boundary map that everyone can use. Absent that possibility, if we want to be able to refigure and expand maps that others have had a hand in drawing, it is handy at least to be able to read those maps effectively.

## “ENGLISH” LESSONS

By enabling better understanding—better readings—of the different disciplinary maps operating within English departments, the boundary-work perspective can also enable more productive discussions within those departments. In this section, we highlight some communicative strategies that might lead to a process of change that is less fraught with territorial tensions. More specifically, we present some steps we might have taken—and that we think other faculty at other institutions may wish to take—to better prepare the way for proposed curricular changes. This is not to suggest that we could somehow have avoided all resistance or to imply that it’s always in the best interest of professional writing and rhetoric faculty to remain housed within “English” departments (indeed, there are many successful, independent programs); rather, if we wish to maintain close departmental ties with our colleagues in literature—and,

at this point, this is our goal at ECU—we have a responsibility to find out how best to communicate and justify our proposals to them.

### **Strategy #1: Discovering and Addressing Mistrust and Misunderstandings**

One thing our story suggests for others who might be in a position to propose changes such as we did is the necessity to conduct—preferably before proposing curricular changes—the kind of meta-analysis of faculty alliances, faculty understandings of key terms, and faculty perceptions of disciplinary boundaries that we have conducted in this article. Discovering fault lines in faculty understanding of a department’s identity and purpose is a critical first step toward productive change.

To be sure, we needed to better address our colleagues’ mistrust of things “professional” and “technical.” The attitudes of many assessment-focused bureaucrats toward the liberal arts has resulted in gut-level hostility on the part of some of our colleagues toward any program that proposes to teach communication that is in any way technical or business-related. Many of our colleagues resent the discourses of business and technical communication because these discourses are often used by those who want to “streamline” university budgets and to measure learning as quantifiable outcomes, despite the fact that, from a humanistic standpoint, much learning is not quantifiable. David Laurence’s lament that the usefulness of literary study is often not readily apparent, at least not in the way that other kinds of workforce skills are, reflects this dissatisfaction with attempts to gather and report outcomes data about graduates of literary studies programs. Understandably, many of our colleagues in literature wonder, along with Richard Ohmann, “How can the complex things we most highly value be reduced to numbers?” (63). These colleagues—with justification—look skeptically on attempts to gather, analyze, and report data because such communication strategies have been used by assessment professionals to discredit and downsize academic programs in the liberal arts.

Some of the specific vocabularies of business, and thus of professional communication, have similarly fallen into disrepute among many of our literature colleagues. As Ohmann explains, “All in the arts and science . . . are likely to be put off by the ideas and language of business that have trailed along with accountability in its migration into the university” (63). Ohmann relates the details of a 1999 conference on “Market-Driven Higher Education,” in which leaders discussed business management concepts such as “‘customization,’ ‘knowledge management,’ ‘just-in-time learning,’ ‘strategic partners,’ [and] ‘faculty management’” (63). Attempts to bring business management, and the predominant language of that management, into the administrative

structure of the academy are threatening to faculty members who are not used to being “managed”: “In short, when politicians or business people or trustees call for accountability in higher education, they are asking administrators to plan, oversee, and assess our labor,” a process that academics, accustomed to or at least enamored of the idea of academic freedom, tend to resist. It is little wonder, then, that some of our colleagues looked with serious reservations on proposed curricular changes that gave a visible presence to the teaching of the discourses of business, even if our actual curricular aim was to teach the responsible, ethical use of such discourses.

While the “technical and professional” aspects of our proposal raised hackles, so too did its focus on rhetoric. As we discussed our proposed changes with our colleagues in literature and with some colleagues in other departments, we discovered that people often either do not know what rhetoric means, or they assume that they know what it means and that it is not good. On the one hand, some equate rhetoric with composition, and, since many faculty have been socialized within academic programs that see first-year writing as a stepping stone to bigger and better academic pursuits, the idea of giving rhetoric a prominent place in the undergraduate BA program seemed paradoxical. On the other hand are faculty who associate rhetoric with verbal trickery, with “empty” political talk, and with downright deception. Rhetoric, in these perceptions, does not merit serious scholarly attention. When the term “rhetoric,” understood as verbal trickery, was combined with the term “professional” in the curricular structure that we proposed, some of our colleagues read the program as a training program in corporate deception.

### **Strategy #2: Publicizing What We Do**

These perceptions of the fields involved in our proposed curricular revision reflect a reluctance to accept new areas of scholarship and teaching into the realm traditionally reserved for literary study. But, as we have come to realize, they also reflect the need for the architects of programs in professional writing and rhetoric within existing English departments to undertake a concerted campaign of educational publicity. The perceptions of some of our colleagues in literary studies about rhetoric and professional writing are inaccurate, but not necessarily because of territorial ill-will. Rather, these colleagues are reacting to their experiences of actual institutional conditions. So how do we change their views of what we do?

First, we need to try to bridge the conceptual gaps between the study of literature and the study of rhetoric and professional writing. To address these perceived gaps, we might employ some of the critical arguments put forth by

well-known scholars of both literature and rhetoric. As Peter Elbow points out, scholars of both literature and rhetoric have argued for the commonalities of texts, regardless of where they might fall on a spectrum from “imaginative” to “technical” or “professional”:

Wayne Booth has made it clear that even literature has designs on readers—argues, does business. . . . [T]he tradition from Nietzsche and I.A. Richards provides the opposite lens to help us nevertheless see that all language use is also an instance of poetics. . . . What’s sad is that a discipline devoted to understanding language use should tend to restrict itself to one lens. (539)

Stressing such commonalities among texts might help alleviate the perception that rhetoric and professional writing are fundamentally different endeavors from the work of poets and novelists.

Secondly, we have come to realize that we need to illustrate the expanding theoretical frameworks within which professional and technical communication have developed—a development that many of our colleagues in literature are not aware of. Too often, our colleagues see courses in professional writing as handmaidens to other areas—business, engineering, science—courses that are components of curricula designed to make students more successful in other specialized fields. Yet, as we know, our courses have evolved to provide a much deeper education for our students. Once strictly service courses offered to majors from various parts of the university, writing courses in the technical professions, business, and the sciences have evolved into more or less coherent programs of study, exploring how certain kinds of specialized information can be communicated to those who need the information both within and outside of the technical or professional fields. At the same time, faculty in professional communication have worked toward carving out a niche for their research as well as their teaching. Although traditionally perceived as simply formulaic and practical, the research of educators and practitioners in professional writing has helped to define an endeavor rich in theory as well as practice.

Additionally, our colleagues need to realize the purposes and benefits—beyond marketable skills—of knowledge in rhetoric and professional writing. While some in the department will be persuaded of the importance of preparing students with “practical” writing skills, others simply will not be, not because they don’t want our students to be employable graduates, but because they don’t want them to *just* be employable graduates. This second group of colleagues mistakenly sees programs that focus on “professional” writing as primarily vocational rather than critical. Thus, we need to build into our publicity attempts examples of how instruction in professional writing, particularly when coupled

with a rhetorical approach, goes beyond the mere transmission of technical or corporate skill. We need to reveal that our scholarship and pedagogy are not part of a callous endeavor to produce students with quantifiable workplace skills—rather, this instruction sensitizes students to the power of language, to the presence of propaganda, and to the ethical/humanistic concerns of communication in a variety of contexts, including the workplace.

At the same time, we need to explain how programs in professional writing and rhetoric can promote less-quantifiable cognitive goals—e.g. critical thinking skills—and, perhaps most importantly, can encourage the integration of these critical thinking skills into communication used in technical and professional settings. Isn't it better, we might argue, for our departments to teach students about the rhetorical impacts and the ethical consequences of writing in professional situations than to let them enter these endeavors without exposure to such considerations? Writing for business need not be part of an attempt to further the heartless desires of capitalism—in fact, education in professional writing might undermine these desires as students discuss the ethical, cultural, and social aspects of communication in business and industry. For English departments to cast off professional communication is for them to ignore the part they might play in encouraging students not to perpetuate oppressive corporate ideologies.

A good source to consult when considering how to explain the benefits and merit of a program in RSPW is Carolyn Miller's 1979 *College English* article, "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing." Although this article is over thirty years old, Miller's arguments are still germane today. Teaching professional writing from a "flagrantly rhetorical approach," Miller argues, would, in fact, "present mechanical rules and skills against a broader understanding of why and how to adjust or violate these rules, of the social implications of the roles a writer casts for himself or herself and for the reader, and of the ethical repercussions of one's words" (617). "[A] course in scientific or technical writing" she continues, "can profitably be based upon this kind of self-examination and self-consciousness," thus furthering what Miller calls the "central impulse" of the humanities (617). Perhaps if we make these kinds of connections explicit for our colleagues, we can alleviate their fears.

### Strategy #3: Reviving the "Practical"

While it is essential to alter misunderstandings of professional writing that see it merely as a vocational endeavor, we might also benefit from attempts to resuscitate the practical within English departments. Ellen Cushman has suggested that "English studies *must* avoid simple vocational training: the

uncritical, unexamined acquisition of skills that apply mechanically to workplace production and distribution of information, products, and services.” But, she continues, this does not mean that instruction in modes of writing that relate to these activities should be abandoned or held in lower esteem than the study of literary textuality. The key, she explains, is to separate the teaching of writing for the purposes of vocationalism (writing for career advancement) and the teaching of writing for the purposes of utilitarianism (writing to get things done). “[V]ocationalism,” she clarifies, “should be differentiated from utilitarianism. . . . Utilitarian knowledge can be made and put to use by well-rounded, knowledgeable, socially conscientious students, citizens, and professors who together try to better the public and private institutions they are both critical of and reliant on” (213).

Scholars in English studies need to be made aware that there is important middle ground between selling out to corporate America and providing critical instruction in efficacious knowledge. Our students will find it extremely difficult to survive economically if we fail to prepare them to communicate in contemporary workplaces and other public settings. As Cushman puts it, “Any reform of English studies must consider how ultimately the knowledge made in English can be of economic and social value, can accrue cultural capital, and can help its bearers accrue symbolic capital” (213). For graduates with degrees in English to implement—in other words, to gain the symbolic and economic capital to put into practice—the kinds of social changes we might wish to see, those graduates will need instruction in utilitarian kinds of knowledge. They will need the rhetorical skills to communicate effectively in professional contexts. Teaching in this kind of utilitarian framework might provide “skills” for communicating in professional contexts, but it would do so with an undercurrent of critique—the kind of critique that literary writers have long promoted through poems, novels, and other forms of literature.

Of course, we will not be able to change everyone’s view of the proper sphere of the English department. Those who hold that certain kinds of writing are inherently superior to others or who come to the table with other departmental agendas will not necessarily care what we have to say. But, in any attempt to elevate the presence of rhetoric and professional writing within English departments, those colleagues should *not* be our primary intended audience. Instead, we need to focus our persuasive efforts on colleagues who are *legitimately* skeptical of our proposals, rather than immovably against them. Even with such focused approaches, we might find that the negative views of rhetoric and technical and professional communication are too strong. Indeed, where space, finances, demand, and political climate permit, several scholars and teachers of professional writing and rhetoric have found the best solution to departmental

conflicts to be the establishment of separate academic departments. If we wish to remain—for whatever reasons—within a broad-scope department like ours at ECU, however, we need to promote what we do in our theory and in our practice.

#### Strategy #4: Rethinking the “Core”

In addition to promoting what we do, curricular proposals such as ours call for advanced discussion about the purposes and the location of “core” courses. Such discussion had taken place in the past in our department, but those discussions were several years removed. It may have made the process of changing the undergraduate curriculum less antagonistic if we had engaged in these conversations shortly *before* putting forward our proposal. How one understands the purposes of a “core” will of course impact one’s response to curricular proposals that configure a core in a particular way. In their survey responses to the aforementioned ad hoc committee, faculty proffered three major understandings of what a “core” in the English department should provide for students: 1) a common set of skills needed for academic, professional, and/or civic achievement; 2) a common body of knowledge, understanding of which should characterize English majors; and 3) a combination of skills and knowledge that together will prepare students for academic, professional, and/or civic achievement. Obviously, each of these understandings would lead to a significantly different “core” of required courses. Exploring the purposes of a “core” and imagining different options available for locations of “core” knowledge within a degree program might have made it easier for us to present our plan to colleagues without seeming to threaten what they value.

At the time the “core” is discussed, it would also make sense to provide alternative visions of “core” knowledge in English departments. Such alternatives can be garnered from other departments and from a variety of scholarly publications. Jonathan Culler, for instance, provides some ideas for how to reimagine the concept of the “core” in an English department in such a way that students do have some common experience across the different areas of English Studies but that does not privilege one subject area over others. Although Culler begins his piece “Imagining the Coherence of the English Major” with a three-and-a-half-page discussion of how to create a unified English Major as a literary degree, he goes on to acknowledge that this kind of literary-based coherence comes at a significant cost:

The major drawback may be, however, that this approach defines the English major as a literature major, neglecting all the other things that English

departments have come to do—including the study of other sorts of writing; the practice of writing itself, whether expository or “creative,” as we oddly call it; and the study of other cultural practices, such as film and television. (9)

The concluding page and a half of the article articulate a vision of an English department that would include literature and all these other things. Culler’s proposal focuses on developing the “unity” of the English major through different abilities and habits of mind that various courses might cultivate in students. More specifically, he proposes that

English departments attempt to define the sorts of learning that we think ought to take place and that might be achieved in the English major. For instance, an English major might include literary and rhetorical analysis, historical analysis, social analysis, cultural analysis, cognitive and moral analysis, and the practice of writing. Here, I think, we have distinct sorts of analytic practices that students can acquire, all in the broad structure of the English major; the coherence of the major would lie in its attempt to provide instruction in this full range of practices. (10)

This arrangement would ensure that students in the sprawling English department have common abilities, even if they do not all graduate with the same content knowledge.

### **Strategy #5: Highlighting Institutional Realities**

We might also explore the strategic, yet admittedly materialistic, “power in numbers” argument at the same time that we suggest ways in which our studies and goals overlap with those of our literature colleagues. Pat Sullivan and Jim Porter have mapped out the spaces occupied by professional writing in English departments and explored the struggles faced by this relatively new terrain of professional writing, arguing that the “development of professional writing as an academic entity signals a key conceptual shift: from the traditional notion of writing as ancillary to some other subject matter . . . to a recognition of writing as a discipline in its own right . . .” (405-06). They conclude that professional writing may be at home in “English,” but question whether English departments can afford the resources to support these programs. Perhaps more significantly, they also ask if English departments can afford not to support these programs. More recently, David Downing has argued that administrators, under pressure to reduce expenses, “are the only ones to gain from internecine warfare among competing subdivisions. In the end, isolation makes any small unit or program

more vulnerable to administrative surveillance” (31). Such an argument, however, needs to be made strategically. Because of associations between professional writing and business interests, some colleagues may resist this argument, seeing it not as a practical reality but as yet another way that they are being pressured to submit to the interests of those driven by assessment and efficiency.

### **Strategy #6: Discussing Names**

The resistance we met with also suggests that a prior or concurrent discussion should have addressed the official name currently assigned to our department. Our proposal might have fared better if we had considered a new departmental name—a more appropriate combination of terms that reflects the scope of the work that actually goes on within “English” departments. Perhaps the term “English” is too laden with previous meanings and assumptions to be useful as a signifier with which the commonalities of the current-day English department can be represented. As one respondent to the departmental survey put it, “I don’t think a student should get a degree in English without having a substantial background in literature. Call the degree something else if necessary, but don’t call it a degree in English.” How about the Department of English Language and Literature? Or, to give writing an even more visible presence, the Department of English Literature, Language, and Writing Studies? These names identify and thus privilege multiple strands of research and pedagogy, better reflecting faculty expertise and, perhaps more importantly in terms of attracting students, explaining more clearly for undergraduates what they can study and learn within the department.

While reconsidering a bifurcated departmental name, it would also perhaps be worthwhile to ask why there needs to be one, unified mission and only one word (to reflect this supposed unity) in our name. Disciplines, Michel Foucault suggests, are not unified bodies of knowledge but disparate ones. This view of disciplinarity, Craig Dionne and David Shumway suggest, “conflicts radically with our expectations, and it should lead us to wonder where the criterion of unity comes from and why it should be applied” (6). The ability of the department to function together and make the best use of the various talents of its teachers, researchers, and students is perhaps best served by acknowledging that we don’t all do the exact same thing and that we don’t all hold the same goals to be equally important. As Elbow suggests, perhaps “a discipline can be even richer and healthier if it lacks a single-vision center. A discipline based on this multiplex model can better avoid either-or thinking and better foster a spirit of productive catholic pluralism” (544). Accepting a multivalent construction of “English” would also be an acknowledgement of the reality that the discipline

has never, in fact, been fully congealed around one methodology or body of knowledge. No English department—since there have been such departments—has ever been smoothly, wholly unified. If there was such unification, it would most likely indicate stagnation.

The process of negotiating what “English” means and the lack of understanding exhibited by some of our colleagues—and here we stress the word “some” because there has been significant support for change in the curriculum—have not always been pleasant. But we are happy that the conversation is underway. It’s a necessary process that many other departments have undergone and that still others have yet to begin. Too, there have been moments of productive cooperation. Comments from many faculty show a desire to structure the department as one that welcomes an expansive array of approaches to texts and a multi-faceted understanding of the kinds of writing that might fit within a diverse department. One survey respondent, a literature specialist by training, reminded readers of what our departmental mission statement says. This mission statement, despite its moments of elitism, presents the department as an open space that, as a matter of course, values language, writing, *and* literature, all of which are “integral” to the department:

Members in the department share these assumptions:

1. Language is fundamental to human nature and is at the heart of intellectual life.
2. Literature permits us to engage our consciousness with singular keenness, profundity, and pleasure.
3. Writing engenders social, cultural, economic, and political vitality.
4. Language, literature, and writing are integral.

This statement reflects Robert Scholes’s revised model of English studies, putting “textuality” in all its forms, rather than only literary works, at the center of our endeavors. Perhaps, as our colleague suggests, we might revisit our mission statement and rededicate ourselves, as a department, to textuality.

## **EPILOGUE: THE STAGE FOR FUTURE CHANGE**

Downing, Hurlbert, and Mathieu suggest that “when taking collective action, moments that feel like failure may have future effects we cannot know or imagine. For example, if a group plans an ambitious new curriculum and it fails to be implemented, that process might have succeeded in other ways: bringing people together to highlight tacit departmental divisions . . . or setting the stage

for future change” (13). Since we began working on this account of the turmoil that ensued when we attempted to alter the curricular structure of the department, we have witnessed the kind of “future change” that can eventually result from a moment—in this case the demise of our proposed RSPW concentration—that feels like failure. As we mentioned earlier, in response to the issues raised by our proposal, an ad hoc committee was formed to conduct a survey of faculty views on the nature of an English degree. The committee was further charged with developing a revised undergraduate core curriculum based upon these views. The work of the ad hoc committee has resulted in several significant changes to the department’s undergraduate degree, changes that were unanimously approved by departmental faculty. The two most significant changes, which went into effect in spring 2005, are as follows:

1. The core group of courses required of all majors in the department was revised to give some presence to classes dealing with rhetoric, professional writing, and English language study. At the same time, the number and specificity of core requirements was reduced, thus allowing students more opportunity to explore the variety of specialties within our diverse department. The new core is elaborated in the table below.

<b>Old Core</b> (required of all majors in the department before Spring 2005)	<b>Revised Core</b> (required of all majors in the department beginning Spring 2005)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ENGL 2000. Interpreting Literature</li> <li>• ENGL 3000. Lit in English to 1700</li> <li>• ENGL 3010. Lit in English, 1700-1880</li> <li>• ENGL 3020. Lit in English, 1880-Present</li> <li>• One Shakespeare course (Tragedies, Comedies, or Histories)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One Historical Survey (selected from a variety of offerings in Literature pre-1700)</li> <li>• One Historical Survey (selected from a variety of offerings in Literature post-1700)</li> <li>• One Shakespeare course (Tragedies, Comedies, or Histories)</li> <li>• One Language Study Course (chosen from a variety of courses in Creative Writing, Linguistics, Rhetoric &amp; Composition, and Technical &amp; Professional Communication)</li> </ul>

2. Separate, named concentrations within the BA in English were eliminated. Instead of a BA in English with options for Concentrations in Writing or Literature, the department now simply offers a BA in English for all students. As they pursue this degree, students are expected to work with their faculty advisors to create a curriculum of upper-division courses that will best meet their interests and advance their future plans. While the removal of concentrations did not give RSPW an official, named presence in the department (something we'd initially hoped our proposal would accomplish), the change provides opportunities for students to expand their studies in RSPW in ways that were not possible under the previous structure of concentrations.

At the same time that the core was being revised, several new courses in rhetoric and professional writing were added to the department's regular offerings, including two courses—Introduction to Rhetorical Studies and Introduction to Professional Writing—intended to introduce students to RSPW as an integral part of the English department. While we did not find success with our initial proposal, we are encouraged by the more visible presence we now have in the curriculum and by the attendant possibilities for collaboration among the various specialties within our large and diverse faculty.

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