

A Review of Conceding Composition: A Crooked History of Composition's Institutional Fortune

Ryan Skinnell (2016). *Conceding composition: A Crooked History of Composition's Institutional Fortunes*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP. [ISBN 978-1-60732-504-8. 188 pages, including index (soft cover)].

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[...] higher education administrators and faculty were then, and are now, at pains to balance institutional exigencies with the intellectual commitments that should inform teaching and learning. It is not a perfect system, to be sure, but it bears repeating that conceding composition is not necessarily in conflict with theoretical or pedagogical best practices. (Skinnell, 2016, p.136)

I am of two minds after reading Ryan Skinnell's (2016) thought-provoking *Conceding Composition: A Crooked History of Composition's Institutional Fortunes*. On the one hand, I am energized by the painstaking and meticulous research Skinnell has done to make the compelling case that genitive history provides new pathways for understanding composition's strange institutional history. On the other hand, if I accept his cogent argument that composition has indeed been "conceded" for more than 100 years, I despair that composition studies as an academic endeavor may not have had *any* institutional agency throughout our history.

As he explains in his introduction, Skinnell's study began as a "local history of the writing program at Arizona State University (ASU), covering an approximately twenty-five-year period" (p. 3). However, the final product, *Conceding*, extends far beyond a local history. While ASU and its evolution from normal school to teacher's college to four-year institution, and then finally to the research institution it is today occupy a central role in this history, *Conceding's* claims quickly take readers beyond the scope of a micro-history. Indeed, Skinnell rightly suggests that *Conceding* is neither "macro-historical" nor "micro-historical" (pp. 33-35). Instead, Skinnell has created a *genitive history*. Genitive histories "begin by seeking specific evidence at a specific institution" (p. 44) and then seek out *institutional reduplication* or "evidence of [...] exigencies that existed in specific times at multiple places" (p. 45). In this case, Skinnell begins at the micro-historical level with ASU and then buttresses his argument by looking for reduplication at five sites:

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University of North Texas, the University of Indianapolis, Harvard University, and the University of Kansas.

Many of what can now be called traditional histories of our field (Berlin, 1985; Connors 1997; Miller, 1991 to name but a few) have zeroed in on the ways teaching of composition was marginalized, a place where students with dirty grammar went to be purified. The narrative arc of these histories proclaims that as a result of the remedial function of required first-year comp, the teaching of those classes became part of the shit-work (Scholes, 1998) of the discipline, creating a class of gypsy academics and freeway flyers (Schell, 1998), managed by boss compositionists (Sledd, 2000, among others). These origin stories, however, are not the focus of this book. Indeed, Skinnell's history complicates our master narrative of marginalization with some much-needed attention to the institutional—not pedagogical or disciplinary—exigencies that contribute to composition's long shelf life in the academy. The institution, for Skinnell, is the university qua university, often represented by a president, a provost, or a governing board. Institutional exigencies, then, are the circumstances where a representative of the university (the president, for example) makes decisions to support the existence of the university. These exigencies form the basis for the "concessions" of composition.

"Concession" in this book has three meanings: 1) it can be "something that is yielded or surrendered, either in deference to a more powerful authority or in exchange for other benefits" (p. 14); 2) it can be the acceptance of a proposition in order to move beyond stasis; 3) and/or it can be a space, like the concession stands at big events, where "the business that is transacted does not necessarily bear on or relate to that larger enterprise that supports its existence" (p. 18). Skinnell weaves these different meanings throughout his history, ultimately claiming that as a concession, composition has been incredibly visible, not marginal (p. 141).

For example, tracing the path of ASU's writing requirement back to its earliest days, Skinnell travels back to Tempe Normal School (TNS) in 1885. Starting with the normal school, Skinnell cogently argues that from 1885 until today, composition instruction has been conceded at ASU in multiple ways. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, TNS had a surprisingly robust curriculum for instruction in writing. Indeed, pedagogically speaking, the curriculum had many parallels to English A at Harvard although, unlike at Harvard, composition at TNS was not considered remedial. The key *institutional* difference between composition instruction at Harvard and TNS at this time was that composition was taught in the first-two years of the normal school curriculum, a curriculum that was equivalent to this last two years of a modern high school. In other words, despite the pedagogical similarities between college composition at Harvard and composition at TNS, the *institutional place* for this instruction was radically different.

In 1927, as TNS aimed to convert from a normal school to a teacher's college, ENG 101/102 was implemented in the first-year, replacing ENG 1-4, the normal school composition courses. This change, Skinnell suggests, was largely a response to demands from accreditors: in order for the normal school to become a teacher's college, it had to rid itself of offering the secondary education that comprised the first-two years of the normal school curriculum (English 1-4). Even though Skinnell could find little evidence that ENG 101/102 underwent any significant pedagogical revisions in the renaming process, it is possible to conclude that "Tempe State Teacher's College administrators conceded 'English 101/102: First-Year English' to become a college" (p. 83). In other words, composition instruction was re-labeled and

institutionally resituated to meet accreditation standards, not necessarily because of any intellectual developments in the field.

A third instance of the institutional concession of composition comes, not surprisingly, in the late 1940s and 1950s during the time when waves of new students flooded post-secondary institutions. This historical moment should be recognizable to students of composition's history because, as a discipline, we largely claim this time as the beginning of the modern era of composition. It is now commonplace to suggest that the GI Bill changed the face of higher education because it opened wide the doors of a once closed institution, creating a legacy of diversity in the student population that continued through the civil and equal rights' movements of the 1960s-70s and continues today. Skinnell, however, locates the significance of this moment not in terms of how it affected composition theory and pedagogy but for how composition was once again conceded in the service of larger institutional concerns. During this time period, "composition was revitalized as a concession [...] to direct new students (and new dollars) into higher education" (p. 108). In other words, unlike the cause-effect relationship that most of our traditional histories suggest (i.e. new students = pedagogical changes), Skinnell's version of the narrative is that the desire to cash in on GI Bill funding (as well as other government programs) caused the academy to commit more resources to FYC. In this way, Skinnell situates composition's history not as a "will to pedagogy" (Worsham, 1991) but rather an institutional vehicle serving the institution's needs qua institution.

Skinnell concludes *Conceding* by declaring that composition has most decidedly *not been marginal* (p. 141) and instead has held a prominent place in institutional visions, and his research is convincing on this point. However, the fact that institutions have and will continue to use composition as a poker chip is precisely what depresses me: if we accept the claim that "the theoretical and pedagogical developments rhetoric and writing specialists use to mark sea changes in the field have often been of little consequence to faculty and administrators who conceded composition to solve pressing institutional problems" (p. 142), then we must also conclude the sorry fact that what *we do* in composition is of much less importance to our institutions than the fact that *we exist* to serve institutional goals.

To say it another way, despite our field's achievement of disciplinarity, the desires of the institution to use our work in service of institutional goals firmly positions composition studies, once again, in a marginalized role. I cannot help thinking that if composition's status and labor conditions are more a result of institutional concession—acts that have had to do more with institutional structure than intellectual decision-making—then Skinnell's work becomes yet another poignant example of composition being used to drive the neo-liberal agenda of higher education.

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