

Jeanne Gunner

## THE STATUS OF BASIC WRITING TEACHERS: DO WE NEED A “MARYLAND RESOLUTION”?

*ABSTRACT: Unlike the Wyoming Resolution, the professional statements that have been issued in recent years have enabled certain professional groups to gain status and power over the composition/rhetoric profession at large; unfortunately, their interests do not necessarily complement the interests of basic writing professionals. Basic writing teachers must consider the negative effects of the lack of such professional definition, particularly the lack of our influence within the larger field. By considering a “Maryland Resolution,” we can address our status problem and, more importantly, join in reasserting the value of teaching as our primary professional purpose.*

The professional conversation that goes on in journals, conferences, and the meetings of special-interest groups has recently been very taken up with the issue of professional self-definition, prompted by concerns about professional status. What has emerged as a tool in this struggle for professional status is a particular rhetorical form—the professional statement or resolution, of which there have been three major examples: the Wyoming Resolution, the CCCC Statement of Principles and Standards, and the Writing Program Administrators’ Portland Resolution.

---

*Jeanne Gunner is a lecturer in UCLA Writing Programs, where she teaches basic writing, advanced composition, and introductory literature courses. Her textbooks, *The Course of Ideas* (HarperCollins, 1990), and *Beyond the Conventions* (Harper and Row, 1991), reflect her continuing interest in curricular issues in basic writing. She has also written on the professional status of composition instructors, the use of computers in basic writing instruction, and the role of style in the composing process. A CBW member since 1986, she served on its Executive Committee from 1990–1991, and is currently CBW’s associate chair.*

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1993

For those of us in basic writing, three problematic issues arise from this phenomenon of professional statements: 1) we don't have one, which means that we have not been participating in the professional conversation as a professional group, which means in turn we have not constructed a professional definition or defense of basic writing in the specific form adopted by other professional groups, and we have instead been existing as subalterns within the larger profession; 2) the statements that have been published speak not at all or at best tangentially to and for our interests in basic writing, and yet by this default they still represent us professionally; and 3) the three available statements offer competing views of the profession, and the one currently holding sway—the CCCC Statement—does not serve the best interests of basic writing and basic writing professionals; in fact, I would argue, it actively threatens us as a professional field. Thus the question that forms the focus of this argument: Do we need a Maryland Resolution to address our status problem and represent the interests and values of teachers of basic writing?

The Wyoming Conference, the CCCC, the Council of Writing Program Administrators—all have produced a document that defines their membership and calls for recognition of their professional worth. I think it will be worthwhile for those of us in basic writing to look at the three major statements to examine what they have achieved for the groups they represent, and then to address the issue of developing a statement of our own.

Of the three statements, the Wyoming Resolution speaks most broadly and most eloquently (and, I might add, most briefly) about the demoralizing and debilitating effects of the poor working conditions and lack of professional respect that composition teachers collectively often experience. But what has the document actually achieved? Three major successes, I think: Most importantly, it created profession-wide recognition of the problems faced by the professionally marginalized and the solutions they desired. Through the resolution, marginalized faculty exercised their right to be heard by the larger professional group, to be identified with that group, and to be incorporated into it via its system of resolution, discussion, committee formation, voting, and adoption. In other words, the Wyoming Resolution entered the system of the professional organization. By doing so, it helped constitute as an influential professional group within the CCCC the people whose views and interests it represented.

As a second achievement, the Wyoming Resolution generated a high level of solidarity among writing teachers when it was pre-

sented to the profession at large, joining the different strands of the profession, the part-time through the tenured. It helped diverse members of the profession align themselves with each other, transcending institutional differences and defining a shared professional foundation through the call for equitable salary and working conditions for teachers of writing.

What the original resolution emphasizes is that term: teachers. In its three sentences, the Wyoming Resolution cites the word “teachers” or “teaching” seven times. Thus the third critical achievement of the Wyoming Resolution was professional validation: it was the first professional statement to cite teaching as our defining activity, our most important function, our primary interest. By so doing, it demanded respect for teaching as a professional activity at the postsecondary level. It attempted to legitimize what we do as serious academic work worthy of recognition within institutions of higher education—recognition as it exists within such institutions, in pay and other material signs of status.

In these three achievements—professional self-definition, solidarity, and professional recognition of teaching—the Wyoming Resolution spoke to the interest of basic writing professionals. I say “spoke,” past tense, because the resolution is no longer a viable professional statement, despite its original powerful impact. The marginalized faculty whose concerns generated the Wyoming Resolution became so much a part of the professional conversation that they threatened to become a central voice and force in it. As James Sledd has argued, the Wyoming Resolution threatened to become too powerful, endangering the exploitative labor practices that support the privileged status of what Sledd calls the “boss compositionists” (275). The group of professionals whose privileges had been indirectly attacked provided the ideological direction for the next document, the CCCC Statement. As in the power generated by the Wyoming Resolution, the Professional Standards Committee used the established method of gaining professional power—it defined a set of values, sought recognition, and asserted itself as the profession’s voice, speaking both to higher administration explicitly (in the mass mailing to deans and chairs) and implicitly to the profession as a whole, claiming for itself the right to define the profession’s prevailing interests and values (see Gunner, “Fate”).

Thus the CCCC Statement has supplanted the Wyoming Resolution and the group constructed by it, preserving traditional professional privilege by shifting the focus of professional concern and discussion away from teachers and teaching and toward

a preoccupation with the research and tenure process. For those who endorse this view of the profession, the CCCC Statement serves as a unifying code, a statement of values, self-definition, and definition of self to others.

The next national resolution, the Portland Resolution, developed under the aegis of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, is modeled on the CCCC Statement (its formal title is also "Statement of Principles and Standards," with an appended subtitle of "Guidelines for Writing Program Administrator Positions"). The group represented by the Portland Resolution again followed the same path of professional self-construction and empowerment by going through the statement, presentation, and endorsement process. In detailing guidelines for the WPA's terms of employment, the Portland Resolution encodes professional values and establishes consensus and precedents for the conditions of WPA positions, thus claiming for its constituents the right to define explicitly the position and the field.

What CCCC and WPA have done is to wrest responsibility for their fields from the general profession of English studies and to assert themselves as distinct, self-governing entities responsible for a defined area of the larger field and functioning as unified groups with their own agenda, values, and ways of operating. As a result, each group has gained power, authority, and status within the profession. The CCCC has been especially effective in constituting itself as the reigning professional voice of composition and rhetoric, in part by adopting the same institutional practices as the Modern Language Association. Its success can be measured by considering the extent to which the MLA has been forced to recognize and incorporate into its own system the members and the agenda of the CCCC.

The CCCC and WPA documents focus on the professional group itself—not on students, curriculum, theoretical frameworks, or, heaven forbid, ethics, all of which are central to the text and spirit of the Wyoming Resolution. The Wyoming Resolution is finally not so much a professional statement as it is an ethical appeal to the profession to defend teachers and teaching. It is perhaps then not surprising that it has done so little in material terms for the disenfranchised faculty who inspired it. It is not written in such a way that it forms a recognizable group of professionals who have the means to organize themselves and exert influence within the profession. By speaking in terms of teachers and students, it separates its constituents from the system of professional power, a position that we in basic writing will find familiar.

The problem with the professional demise of the Wyoming Resolution and the ascendancy of statements like those put forth by the CCCC and WPA is that they do not represent the interests and values of those of us in basic writing. The concerns of teachers of basic writing as a distinct professional group have not been part of the professional discussion; clearly, we have failed to make an impact on the profession at large. Our failure, I argue, is due to the fact that we have yet to constitute ourselves as a professional group. Instead, we have been content with our identity as composition's version of the Peace Corps, volunteer teachers going into the educational hinterlands to do good in the face of appalling conditions, assuaging the larger profession's social guilt, and expected to find our labor its own reward. In other words, we have to this point defined ourselves in ethical, not professional, terms. While we are likely to find the Wyoming Resolution the professional statement most congenial and relevant to our situation in basic writing—one of low status, poor working conditions, ill-defined terms of employment, and overall exploitation having a deleterious effect on our efforts to teach students to write—the differing outcomes of the Wyoming Resolution and the CCCC and WPA statements tell us that we must move beyond a stance based on ethics alone. Without sounding overly cynical, I'd like to suggest that our profession operates for the most part in material, not ethical or idealistic ways. Thus it is time for us to formulate a stand on who we are in relation to the rest of the profession and to define ourselves and our field in the rhetorical form which the profession has adopted, the language of the resolution. And thus the question, "Do we need a 'Maryland Resolution'?" a statement that says who we are, what we do, and why we matter, a statement that constructs us as a presence and force in the profession at large.

Without this self-definition, we face a continuing lack of status that stems from our being narrowly associated with the classroom and curriculum. In the past, some of us have hoped that our professional status would improve with the rise of basic writing theory and theoreticians; in recent years, basic writing has come to incorporate multiple research orientations and theoretical frameworks. Yet as the research and theoretical work has grown, we have not seen an accompanying elevation in the field's academic status. Rather, the inverse has occurred: researchers and theoreticians who began as basic writing professionals have allied themselves with more status-bearing professional groups, leaving basic writing behind. We suffer from what can be termed the Prufrock syndrome: we remain invisible, useful but unimportant, while the

Prince Hamlets of the profession rise above our field. To be fair, there are those who have maintained their commitment, the conference keynote speaker being one major example. But it seems clear that we will not see our professional status improve through the reflected glory of theoreticians; their work is not redefining us in a way that will resolve our status problem.

And probably we should not seek a way into the profession that does not reflect our actual practice. If the teaching of composition in general differs in one way from the teaching of literature by virtue of the amount of time spent in close contact with students and their written work, then the teaching of basic writing represents a radical extension of this difference and stands apart from freshman and advanced composition teaching in the proportion of hours that we must devote to students, as a class and individually. Yet the prevailing professional statement, the CCCC Statement, enshrines research, not teaching, as the validating professional activity. Therefore, it is in our interest to work against an elitist trend in the profession, to reassert the value of teaching, especially the kind that has been derided in the past as "in the trenches," and to revive the voice of Wyoming. We can do this through a basic writing resolution, helping to swing the professional pendulum back to a commitment to diversity and demystification of the academy. This kind of self-definition, then, is the first step we need to take in seeking professional status.

The second step involves seeking a national presence. A further source of our current status problems lies in the fact that on the national level, we are a weak voice in the professional organizations. As members of the Conference on Basic Writing (CBW), we are a special interest group of the CCCC. "Special interest group" is another way of saying minority, which is another way of saying marginalized, contained, and disempowered. Our special interest group status has the effect of insulating us from the larger and more powerful organization; we are not directly a part of the mainstream. We have no representatives on the major CCCC committees, for example, no member explicitly identified as the spokesperson for the interests of basic writing. The result of this peripheral presence is the increasing absorption of basic writing as a field into Freshman English.

The same is true of our existence within our own departments. Because we are typically involved in teaching rather than administration (administration as the WPA has defined it, not the untenured coordinator positions common to basic writing), our interests are usually not directly represented within composition/rhetoric programs. Thus we are viewed as outsiders in our own

departments, and what we do is treated as unrelated to the department's mission. Basic writing professionals need to demand the academic right to participate in departmental governance so that they may speak on behalf of basic writing as a professional activity, and to have their efforts backed up by the national organizations.

The third step in remediating our status problem is asserting ourselves as the representatives of our field. By drafting a statement of professional self-definition, presenting it to basic writing professionals and the profession at large, and obtaining their endorsement, we can establish ourselves as an influential professional voice. Such a statement should have multiple audiences to achieve the goal of raising our status. We need to address higher administration, to continue the struggle started by Wyoming to obtain professional conditions; we need to address the composition/rhetoric profession itself, to force it to recognize the role it has played in oppressing teachers of writing and teachers of basic writing in particular; and we need to address each other, to come to some consensus on who we are, what we do, and why we matter.

Do we need a Maryland Resolution? The alternative is to continue in our marginalized position, risking further erosion of our disciplinary authority and further losses in institutional support for us and our students. In my opinion, we cannot afford not to make a statement of our own.

### Works Cited

- CCCC Executive Committee. "Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 40 (1989): 329-36.
- Council of Writing Program Administrators. "Statement of Principles and Standards: Guidelines for Writing Program Administrator Positions" (aka "Portland Resolution").
- Gunner, Jeanne. "The Fate of the Wyoming Resolution: A History of Professional Seduction." *Writing Ourselves into the Story: Unheard Voices from Composition Studies*. Eds. Sheryl Fontaine and Susan Hunter. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992. 107-22.
- . "Shared Governance and the Nature of the WPA." Presentation, Conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, Breckenridge, CO, July, 1992.
- Sledd, James. "Why the Wyoming Resolution Had to Be Emasculated: A History and a Quixotism." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 11 (1991): 269-81.