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Rhetoric and Composition's Conceptual Indeterminacy as Political-Economic Work

By returning to the controversy created by the publication in 2002 of Marc Bousquet's *JAC* article ("Composition as a Management Science"), focusing on the labor issues attending composition teaching and the prospects of institutional critique, I examine how the conceptual indeterminacy of many of the field's key terms in actuality undergo (and perform) a political-economic function. This exploration forms the basis for an analysis of how the knowledge domains of the field can be more clearly defined through an effort to reframe the field as "writing studies," for the purpose of moving beyond the worn out commonplaces and labor exploitation associated with first-year composition.

The installation of managerialism as the core subjectivity of the discipline of rhetoric and composition is therefore not so much an indicator of the field's "success" as evidence of its particular susceptibility, the very terms of its intellectual evolution intertwined with the university's accelerated move toward corporate partnership, executive control, and acceptability of profitability and accumulation as values in decision making.

—Marc Bousquet, "Composition as a Management Science"

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Introduction—The Political-Economic in Rhetoric and Composition

At its most basic level, the study of political economy seeks to understand the relationship between the specific material situation and the realm of the ideological/superstructural, where systems of valuation are established and maintained. How labor, capital, and the administration of the workforce come together to constitute the realm of the “social” represents the most fundamental aspect of the political-economic investigation. To an extraordinary degree, questions about rhetoric and composition’s status and legitimacy as a discipline are tied up with the labor conditions in first-year writing (FYW). In the realm of administering composition programs,

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the vast majority of labor is centered on the teaching of FYW, often described as a scene of exploitation of a captive labor force.¹ While there has been extensive study and documentation of the economic conditions that have resulted in the casualization of the writing instruction labor force (Bousquet; Bousquet et al.; Schell; Schell and Stock; Scott), scholarship focusing on rhetoric and composition’s shifting understandings of itself as a field of inquiry in relation to economic regimes such as neoliberalism has been less visible. How, for example, does a specific definition of what constitutes “the field” serve local and national economic imperatives, as these imperatives are discursive formations informing what it means to “do” rhetoric and composition? What connections exist between the increasing casualization of the FYW workforce and the continually shifting conceptions of rhetoric and composition? If, to paraphrase the title of Marc Bousquet’s famous *JAC* article, composition is a management science, how has that science shaped the professional horizons and aspirations of the field? One must theorize this question as a function of political economy, examining it in relation to larger economic trends (retrenchment of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism) and in calls for increased accountability within higher education to promote conceptions of “writing” as “a skill” (Adler-Kassner and Harrington). As part of the effort to teach writing as a skill, the domain of rhetoric and composition has necessarily remained

nebulous and ill-defined as part of the effort to remain responsive to the calls for reform mandated by these external parties. Rhetoric and composition accrues tactical advantages for itself by keeping the disciplinary concepts

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guiding its inquiries vaguely defined, so as to remain responsive to the political-economic gains associated with its key disciplinary foci. Indeed, political-economic benefits accrue to the field as a result of a seeming commitment to conceptual indeterminacy with respect to loosely defining “writing,” “rhetoric,” and “literacy,” even if the effects of this conceptual indeterminacy are not entirely clear. Similar to the dereferentialization of *excellence* described in Bill Readings's *The University in Ruins*, the relative emptiness of large signifying terms at the center of our disciplinary enterprise actually works productively. Think of the elasticity of the following “keywords in composition”: “context”; “discourse”; “network”; and “materiality” (Heilker and Vandenberg). The imagination runs ahead of these “keywords” as a result of their conceptual breadth, filling in discursive spaces, and, at the same time, seeking to make the case that our expertise extends into them. Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenberg, in justifying their decision to publish a second edition, now titled *Keywords in Writing Studies*, write in their introduction to the book:

we felt that we had successfully made our case that one of the great strengths of our field can be found in the contested, unsettled nature of its key terms; that the more central and necessary the term, the more ambiguous and divergent its meanings; that a close look at the meanings of any critical term speaks volumes about our shifting cultural and disciplinary values; and that the complex conflicts enacted within our vocabulary itself, the many layers of voices reverberating within a given term, are less a cause for concern than they are something to be embraced and celebrated—a tremendously useful resource for the making and remaking of ourselves, our commitments, and the objects of our attention. (xi)

While Heilker and Vandenberg's insights are uplifting and unifying for the disciplinary community, I am concerned by the seeming tendency to inflate our range of expertise in relation to these concepts, enabling a conception

of the field as flexible and responsive to changing economic contexts and circumstances. The “making and remaking of ourselves, our commitments, and the objects of our attention” is most certainly of a political-economic nature as the refashioning of our identities and our objects of study are informed by political and economic exigencies: shifts in the disciplinary terrain may indicate an accommodation of the market in ways we might be hesitant to consciously identify. If our conceptual lenses are simply the product of a change that has already taken place outside of the academy (see Fish), might we entertain the role of the political-economic, then, in creating and generating the conditions of possibility for thinking and enacting the discipline? If so, the elastic conceptions of our keywords—*literacy*, *writing*, and *context*—become more understandable as expandable or collapsible containers for representing our expertise. There is a downside to this flexibility, however, as it inevitably leads to questions about what it is we *really know*, and all the related concerns and anxieties about whether we are sufficiently disciplined, recognized, and rewarded as experts.

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The transformation of rhetoric and composition into “writing studies” and the development of “threshold concepts,” as envisioned by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, provides a route through which to increase the disciplinary standing of writing teachers by “naming what we know,” restructuring the FYW class as a site of exploitative working conditions, and demarcating the knowledge domains that establish the teaching of writing as necessitating the training and recognition of certified experts. According to Adler-Kassner and Wardle, “Threshold concepts are concepts critical for continued learning and participation in an area or within a community of practice” (2). The subject of “composed knowledge” speaks both to and beyond our disciplinary community (3). The threshold concepts approach signals not only a recognition that inflated and loosely defined terms for describing the processes and factors informing and surrounding the act of writing will no longer suffice, but constitutes a necessary response to the increasing calls for educational reform emanating from various quarters.

To Discipline, or Not to Discipline—That Is the Question

What can rhetoric and composition specialists ultimately claim they definitely know about the signifier called “writing”? Are these specialists able to convincingly describe how writing “happens,” the specific aspects of writing instruction actually geared toward improving writing, and the principles informing writing assessment? Would everyone in “our field” subscribe to the following, as disciplinary commonplaces?

1. All writing occurs within contexts shaped by communities, purposes, values, and materiality.
2. The act of composing is thoroughly connected to, and mediated by, the social field.
3. Writing is a complex process that cannot be reduced to a formula.
4. Writing contributes to discovery and knowledge making.
5. Writing is recursive, in that the production of writing does not move linearly from point A to point B, but instead loops upon itself, as later aspects of a written text reframe earlier aspects.
6. Writing shapes, and is shaped by, the identities of writers and audiences.
7. Students can “become” better writers through formal instruction.
8. Rhetoric and composition faculty are uniquely positioned, by virtue of their expertise, to be effective public advocates for writing instruction.

The statements above are of a political-economic nature, as they connect how the whole enterprise of writing instruction relates to larger questions about rhetoric and composition’s ability to lay claim to disciplinary expertise, the positioning of students as citizens and workers in the public sphere, and the field’s effectiveness in influencing politically charged debates about higher education and writing instruction’s place within these debates. We must think carefully about these interrelated issues, strategizing our place in relation to the larger political scene and national economy. It makes sense, however, to come to some agreement about what the field has concluded about how students learn to write; how student writing should be assessed when students enter a FYW class and when they exit it; as well

as a set of realistic expectations about whether and how the writing skills introduced in FYW really transfer to other aspects of the college curriculum and beyond, such as into the work environment; finally, is this transfer of skills taught in FYW really a documentable, data-producing phenomenon?

Much in this conversation about writing skills development, assessment, and transfer remains amorphous and ill-defined, and I would argue, purposely so. When we think of writing on a conceptual level, we might imagine someone putting a pen to paper for the purpose of engaging in a creative activity, or an office worker hunched over a keyboard to produce text for a corporate report, or even a small child writing her name with chalk on a sidewalk. In these senses, writing produces inscriptions that organize one's perception of the social world for the purpose of communicating with the self and others. The process through which one learns to write is a complex one, as complex as any documented human task. Nonetheless, the process of ascribing "writing" to a defined skill set comes with challenges and limitations from the standpoint of writing instruction.

Demonstrating a mastery of this skill set, or providing evidence of a particular level of writing proficiency, is difficult to do consistently within a university setting because of the contextual factors affecting writing assessment. These contextual factors include genre-based differences within the types of assignments through which students are expected to produce their writing, differences in how individual instructors scaffold assignments (perhaps moving from a personal narrative to a rhetorical analysis to a controversy analysis by the end of the semester), and varying evaluative practices. While one might hope FYW, as it is taught across hundreds of institutions and tens of thousands of sections, would have some largely recognizable goals in common, there is clearly a range of approaches to teaching composition that should be acknowledged. However, does acknowledging the clear diversity of approaches to teaching the

If these stakeholders begin to suspect, or receive either anecdotal or data-driven evidence supporting the view, that the composition course is a topsy-turvy endeavor with no clear connection to actually advancing student writing ability because of widespread disagreement about what such advancement looks like, then complete abandonment of the course (with a resulting loss for the field's credibility) seems like a likely scenario.

FYW courses have the potential to undermine rhetoric and composition's credibility with important stakeholders whose perceptions of the course itself possess profound implications for the legitimacy of the field? If these stakeholders begin to suspect, or receive either anecdotal or data-driven evidence supporting the view, that the composition course is a topsy-turvy endeavor with no clear connection to actually advancing student writing ability because of widespread disagreement about what such advancement looks like, then complete abandonment of the course (with a resulting loss for the field's credibility) seems like a likely scenario. Whether these courses are approaching the artifact of "writing" in a similar way, and if students are leaving these courses as more adept writers, are assumptions that do productive political-economic work for the field of rhetoric and composition by presenting to external constituencies a supposedly unified approach to the teaching of writing.

This presumed unified approach has been presented in relatively recent educational policy reports as being out of touch with and unable to keep pace with a rapidly changing and complex American democracy. Consistent with a general attack against teachers in higher education, these reports characterize numerous approaches to educating students as being outside "the beltway consensus" (Adler-Kassner, *Activist* 67). In their *Reframing Writing Instruction*, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill point out:

These reports illustrate a refrain we often repeat when we talk about writing assessment with colleagues: writing is everyone's business. Everyone, however, doesn't agree on how to define "writing," let alone "good writing" or "writing ability." Likewise, everyone doesn't agree on what to teach or how to teach when it comes to writing. More importantly, at least from our perspective, not everyone has the same expertise and the same investment in writing instruction. (8)

Recognizing the influence of outside agencies in structuring conversations about higher education generally, and writing instruction specifically, Adler-Kassner notes:

Until we develop *and act* from principles about the meaning of what composition and writing studies is *as a discipline*, and then link what happens in composition courses—which *exist within our discipline*—to those principles, we are at the mercy of those companies seeking to keep our company. And, to me, that's a problem. ("Companies" 130; emphasis in original)

The sort of disciplinary framing of composition and writing studies Adler-Kassner envisions is an important part of placing both our profession and our professional aspirations on a firmer ground. Absent the capacity to identify precisely what it is we espouse as professionals, rhetoric and composition will continue to languish as a stepchild of the disciplines, falling short of achieving the status it deserves within and outside of the academy. Without establishing the requisite disciplinary knowledge base that announces “this is what we know,” rhetoric and composition’s status among the disciplines will continue to fall short of full academic recognition. A continued inability to achieve that full recognition will hamper the field’s efforts to speak to pressing public concerns about the role of writing instruction in producing a literate citizenry in the first-year writing classroom and beyond.

Inflating What We Know

Looking at the *WPA Outcomes Statement* one can quickly identify the ways in which certain statements about writing, as well as how effective writing gets characterized, are leveraged to create a specific kind of effect. The use of phrases such as “critical thinking” and “digital environments” and encouraging students to interrogate “the relationship between knowledge, power, and language” seek to subtly invest the FYW course with more cachet than it might normally possess. While writing may help one to organize one’s thoughts and to consider the implications of structuring an organizational flow in a certain way, critical thinking usually implies locating something unexpected, edgy, or against the grain of conventional thinking. Instead, the ability and agency of the writer lead to the creation of unexpected and edgy insights, as well as a reckoning with the overturning of conventional cultural pieties. In other words, there is nothing inherent within the production of writing itself that leads to critical thinking.

Critical thinking is often associated with cultural studies approaches to the teaching of composition as it brings a skeptical lens to the consumerist mentality typifying life in late capitalism and the easy-going acceptance of the propaganda offered by dominant institutions to explain away social inequality. It is interesting to note how the very cultural theory that promotes critical thinking and cultural studies has been relegated outsider status within the field by some scholars in this context of the new pragmatism. As Wendy Bishop revealed in her 1999 critique entitled “A Place to

Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition,” which focused on the field’s seemingly unreflective slide toward a heavy investment in cultural and literary theory to serve careerist ends, a distinct antagonism has emerged against those who contextualize their examination of writing and rhetoric within difficult theoretical frameworks. While Bishop’s critique revolved around objecting to social constructivist accounts of the expressivist movement, it also questioned the reasons for the importation of high theory into the field, suggesting that it obscures the actual purposes behind being a writing teacher. Surely, these critics lament, we should be able to teach writing without having to delve into all the complex theory informing deconstruction, signification, and psychoanalysis. Furthermore, as such sentiments go, the field should not give shelter to half-baked political science, psychology, sociology, or other social sciences housed in academic departments not focused on language study. One might note a general anti-intellectual stance in this regard, as a seeming gatekeeping mechanism often takes the following form: “Person X is not in the field because she *really does* critical theory and cultural studies. Rhetoric and composition is merely an afterthought for her.” This assertion of “she really does,” as opposed to “what the rest of us genuine practitioners do,” is an interesting rhetorical move framing the boundaries of the field by separating legitimate and authorized speakers from those who are merely pretending to “traffic” in rhetoric and composition for the market benefits. For example, some who were angered by his observations in “Composition as a Management Science” portrayed Bousquet as speaking out of turn as a literary studies and critical theory scholar in his scathing critique of the political economy of composition, and not really as “one of us” in rhetoric and composition (see O’Neil). This tendency is unfortunate given our general theoretical understanding of how othering and the marginalization of critical views often operates to keep out necessary critiques of an accepted consensus. Only a few were willing to entertain the notion that all that really should have mattered was the cogency of Bousquet’s critique.²

By analyzing how this gatekeeping mechanism operates when scholars stray too far from the field’s scholarly consensus around what constitutes the basis for field membership, the field’s range of coverage, and how this range should be established and explored, one comes to understand the intransigence of those involved in recent debates about rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary identity. Beyond the straightforward requirement

that one should graduate from a PhD program in rhetoric and composition, there seems to be a general consensus that one's work should touch upon issues related to writing pedagogy, writing assessment, writing program administration, and rhetorical theory. Of course, not everyone has appreciated the importation of difficult and abstract critical theory and cultural studies into the field (see Bishop; Olson, "Death"). Some have viewed this embrace of high theory as a resort to MLA-style elitism, a less-than-subtle sign of disrespect toward the efforts of many hard-working writing teachers who do the bulk of the teaching in writing programs. These rough divisions within rhetoric and composition have political-economic effects in terms of how the field represents itself to external constituencies. Obviously, not all of us are experts in writing assessment, writing program administration, or remediation. That some specialists within the field are heavily invested in what others might consider "esoteric theory" has led to a politically difficult undercurrent that has created division and propelled debate, contributing to a less-than-positive image of the field among important internal and external constituencies (see Zorn).

Situating the Predicament

How do rhetoric and composition professionals represent their work in terms of the political-economic? In other words, how do the administration of writing programs, the teaching of writing courses, and the negotiation of the domain of rhetoric and composition within English departments and stand-alone writing departments relate to the larger operations of the institutional, regional, and national economy? These are obviously not easy questions to answer in a comprehensive way, but we must begin to answer them to stave off questions about our accountability to students and other stakeholders within and external to the university. Rhetoric and composition scholars have subjected the FYW course to intense scrutiny, going so far as to wonder out loud if it actually fulfills the aims often associated with it. The most prominent critics, of course, openly question whether FYW positions students to successfully engage in college-level writing assignments and whether there are identifiable skills introduced in the course that transfer to other parts of the college curriculum. Since some critics have even called for the abolition of the course, it is understandable that the field must be careful as to how it represents this requirement to external constituencies.

At this historical moment, one can easily observe the strong dissatisfaction associated with the low cachet value of the field as a result of its focus on writing instruction. Frequent concerns include the following: composition lacks standing in the academy; its staffing results in the creation of exploitative working conditions; its labor conditions contribute to the rise of a lower-managerial class that creatively theorizes the scene of subjection to rationalize and normalize the labor conditions associated with composition teaching, serving the interests of upper management;

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the course doesn't really help students write better; the course is taught by teachers whose educational backgrounds are more likely to be in literature, cultural studies, or creative writing than in rhetoric and composition; and the course exploits graduate students as surplus labor.

Add to these frequent complaints Sid Dobrin's recent critique in *Postcomposition* about

how the field of composition studies has never really come around to actually studying writing, preferring instead to focus on the pedagogical and administrative imperative and the management of student subjectivities. As Bruce Horner points out in his recent *College English* essay, “Rewriting Composition: Moving beyond a Discourse of Need,” Dobrin draws upon a conception of the “dominant” that he does not name but is beholden to as he considers the shortcomings of composition teaching and the field of composition studies. In the same article, Horner also critiques David Smit's *The End of Composition Studies* in its call for abolishing the first-year writing course since it does not lead to improvement in the syntactic complexity, rhetorical maturity, and persuasiveness of student writing. According to Horner, Smits—like Dobrin—relies on a conception of the “dominant” when he claims that the true test of students' writing comes in the marketplace when, as workers, their writing is persuasive to a boss, a city council, or some other person or organization with the authority to make a decision. Persuasiveness, then, is measured by success in the marketplace and in relation to a constituency possessing authority. Horner argues that writing

studies scholars have long been addressing “writing” in the ways Dobrin suggests have been absent, and that composition’s terms of work should not be measured in relation to fast capitalism’s metrics and terms of evaluation but instead in relation to its resistance to such metrics and terms.

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Rhetoric and composition scholars are continually striving to find ways to learn how the composition class can play a vital role in preparing the students who enter it to become productive global citizens and employable members

of an increasingly complex economy. The negative publicity associated with the current state of writing instruction in American colleges and universities, which often suggests that students are not being taught the skills they will need to succeed in today’s competitive workforce, places the field of rhetoric and composition on the defensive because it suggests scholars devoted to the study of writing are responsible for not adequately educating today’s college students on how to write for economic success in the workplace. While the pragmatic bent toward educational training set in as early as the 1920s in the United States, the increased calls for assessment of writing programs within the logic of accountability have come to exercise a near-hegemonic hold on public perceptions that college students are not being taught to write well enough to function adequately in the workplace.

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ways to reframe these pejorative stories about writing instruction circulating with great frequency in the US public space, as these stories advance certain flawed definitions about what constitutes good writing and the contexts within which writing takes place, resulting in a slide toward stale and facilely formulated narratives about how poorly equipped college students are as writers (see Adler-Kassner and O'Neill). They carefully examine the language of various reports scrutinizing the state of high school and college education and calling American universities to order with respect to preparing young people to join the workforce. Adler-Kassner and O'Neill identify a clear rhetoric within these reports: educational institutions are obligated to impart skills to students, leading to well-paid employment; and if they are not doing so, they are not being accountable to stakeholders and taxpayers. Clearly, political and economic interests that are opposed to the goals of actual education are guiding the publication of these reports. Implied in these narratives describing the decline of the kinds of literacy associated with upward mobility is a specific conception of "progress" based on economic prosperity that constitutes a dominant framework for understanding the contexts in which discussions about writing instruction take place.

Adler-Kassner has invited us to consider ways to reframe dominant narratives about writing and writing instruction in the US public space by taking small steps to ameliorate the public's perception of how writing instructors (and teachers generally) are falling down on the job in teaching American college students how to write. In the age of the accountability agenda, in the wake of the *Spellings Report*, educators have been pressed to demonstrate that the skills supposedly being taught are actually being taught *and* learned. In their *Reframing Writing Assessment*, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill astutely argue

if "everyone" (and that's a big word we realize) thinks writing is their business, how can we as college-level educators and scholars interact with them around these issues of writing assessment—issues we have indicated, that are related to considerably larger concerns and purposes, and about which there is sometimes considerable tension? (9)

The larger concerns and purposes producing considerable tension revolve around representations of field knowledge and expertise, as well as the methods and data collection procedures informing assessment measure-

ments. However, much of this tension can be traced back to the labor issues that continue to plague writing programs.

“Haven’t We Been Here Before?”—Looking Back at the Past as a Way of Strategizing for the Future

I would like to return to a key debate within the field around labor and composition that coincided with the publication of a provocative article in *JAC* in 2002, Marc Bousquet’s “Composition as a Management Science.” Bousquet’s article questioned the field’s ability to reflect on the conditions of possibility for its own success, suggesting its willingness to serve the dictates of management was the real reason behind the increased employability of rhetoric and composition graduates. Provocatively, Bousquet alleged that writing program administrators, who pose as being among the composition people, were actually creative theorists of the miserable working conditions for contingent faculty in writing programs. Bousquet finds the point of his critique, an article by James Porter and coauthors on institutional critique, to be indicative of the field’s seeming naïveté of its own positionality in relation to management against labor, arguing that rhetoric and composition’s “success” is a result of a capitulation to the model of labor espoused by managers.

At the heart of the tension between writing program administrative discourse and cultural or critical discourse sit two contradictory rhetorics. The first, described by Marc Bousquet as the “rhetoric of pleasing the prince,” entails understanding the pragmatic constraints that govern academic life within the educational management organization, and requires “buying into” market values and logics to advance one’s professional and disciplinary goals. This rhetoric sometimes views the pursuit of social justice and a commitment to the alleviation of oppression through one’s professional work as unrealistic and naive, necessitating compromises with institutional stakeholders who possess the power to shape important decision making. Critical rhetorics, associated with institutional critique and change, have been absorbed by rhetoric and composition’s disciplinary discourses, sustaining a necessary reflection on how institutional power reifies the dominant culture’s codes and values. The tension between the rhetoric of pleasing the prince and these critical rhetorics becomes evident in writing program administration discourse, as this discourse navigates between institutional demands and social-political aspirations grounded in

equity and justice. Ultimately, writing program administration discourse's inability to resolve this tension ends up situating it on the side of the forces of exploitation and management. This is best illustrated in the context of

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the management of composition labor, where WPAs create structures to normalize the extraction of cheap labor from the non-tenure-track labor force, making this extraction more efficient and less visible.

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Admitting one's complicity in a pervasive structure of ill-gotten gains and systemic abuses is not easy. This has proven to be especially true in the rationalizations and evasions that inevitably accompany both administrative and tenured-faculty stances on the deplorable treatment of temporary and part-time instructors within English departments. As Eileen Schell points out in her *Gypsy Academics and Mother-Teachers: Gender, Contingent Labor, and Writing Instruction*:

Many tenure-line faculty, whether consciously or unconsciously, often view contingent faculty as a layer of protection, sealing them off from the market forces buffeting higher education. This "protectionist" view of contingent labor, however, is a sad illusion. Ironically, tenure is being lost through the very overuse and exploitation of faculty members whom tenure-line faculty members have often viewed as their protection against market forces. (14)

It is assumed, at least according to the logic of the professions, that one will advance through the academy on the basis of her or his ability and nothing else. By this line of thinking, those who find themselves as contingent workers owe their plight to their own incapacity to join the finest in the profession at the top. *Meritocracy* and *professionalization* are terms that rationalize gross inequalities in status and resource distribution within English departments. The logic of the professions has concealed the operationalization and circulation of inequality within the academic institution. Academic casualization, the flexible use of labor, complicates the logic of

professionalism and meritocracy because possessing an advanced degree no longer guarantees one a living wage that allows for a comfortable lifestyle. As Bousquet points out, academic casualization has closed the teaching professions to those seeking genuine socioeconomic advancement:

academic casualization has increasingly closed the profession to persons who rely on waged work to live—and replaced them with persons for whom teaching figures as a secondary income. If it typically requires family support to become a teacher, how do factors such as class and the racialized wealth gap affect the composition of the professoriate? (98)

Bousquet forces us to reflect upon the structuring of the composition labor force in a new way, interrogating the very market conditions that enable some to pursue an academic career in rhetoric and composition. These concerns about the labor conditions within the field have necessitated a turn to institutional critique and its emphasis on exploring the prospects of exposing, analyzing, and reforming oppressive practices.

The WPA discourse Bousquet describes in “Composition as a Management Science” seeks to normalize the scene of labor exploitation through creative theorizing, screening out dissent and difficult

questions that complicate how writing programs conduct business as usual. Bousquet’s analysis unnerved writing program administrators because it alleged that rhetoric and composition’s better job prospects—in comparison to other humanities disciplines—resulted from the field’s usefulness to management in undermining sustainable labor conditions in the contemporary university. Bousquet’s indictment of WPA discourse and the figure of the “heroic WPA” upset the more self-congratulatory narrative positioning rhetoric and composition as an employable area of English studies because of the marketable skills it instilled in its graduates. If anything, according to Bousquet, rhetoric and composition scholars had mastered “the rhetoric of pleasing the prince,” acting as the lower-level managers who pretend to “be among the people,” while sympathizing with the goals of upper managers who are interested in ensuring a cheap stream of flexible labor delivered

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just in time to meet the institution's needs. In this scenario, WPAs are creative theorizers of labor's scene of subjection, justifying poor working conditions in the interest of management, while advancing careers toward middle management.

The disciplinary "turn" toward and focus upon institutional critique within rhetoric and composition signals an interesting albeit frightening recognition: enacting the sort of social change propounded within progressive theoretical scholarship is nearly impossible within the post-historical

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university. Just as the burgeoning industry in "job crisis" scholarship signals a recognition of the dire times ahead for those laboring within the humanities disciplines, scholarship attempting to promote an awareness of the possibility of institutional change through "rhetorical rewriting" suggests a sort of

despair and hopelessness: direct forms of social protest will not work and will not even register a hearing within the corporatized workplace; subtle rhetorical strategies, it seems, are in order. A frequently cited article in this genre, Porter et al.'s "Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change," became an object of pointed criticism in Bousquet's analysis.

Porter et al.'s article sought to bring a materialist edge to previous discussions within rhetoric and composition about institutional critique. Through the use of such space theorists as Edward Soja and David Harvey, in addition to academic capital analysts such as Pierre Bourdieu, Porter et al. wished to steer a middle ground, in enacting institutional change, between the Charybdis of naive utopianism and the Scylla of cynical alienation. At the time of the article's publication, Porter et al. recognized the power seemingly embedded within the discourse of business and professional writing on an engineering and technology campus (Purdue) and the cachet value attached to a graduate program in rhetoric and composition.

Bousquet portrays rhetoric and composition as the beneficiary of an unjustified market windfall, which led the field to construct a self-congratulatory narrative about its successes while ignoring its easy cooptation by powerful managers who have supposedly used the administration of writing programs to cripple the previous gains of labor by casualizing

traditionally stable employment practices. Bousquet's article brought to center stage the issue of labor in English departments and the role writing instruction is forced to play in an increasingly managed university, where bottom-line business practices take precedence over educationally sound decision making.

What particularly touched a nerve was the implied indictment of writing program administrators, who were portrayed as participating in a scheme to dupe the contingent class with the trope of the "heroic WPA," who was ever vigilant in looking out for the interests of the untenured,

contingent, and vulnerable faculty. As Bousquet contends, the WPA—who is actually a middle manager—possesses socioeconomic sympathies with the upper managers and not with the workers he or she supposedly represents and cares about. This unveiling of the ideological apparatus of the WPA ignited a fierce response from several top scholars (see Harris; O'Neill; Watkins; Zebroski; Murphy). Bousquet, as a spoiler, had exposed the hidden reality that the field has been diligent in covering up and explaining away.

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The Political-Economic Conditions in Composition

The disciplining, surveillance, and profiling of students in the composition classroom go hand in hand with the more general production of citizenly subjectivities described by Crowley and others. This shaping of the subject is political-economic work to the degree that these bodies conform to the ideological expectations of the institution and the doctrinal system governing the "normal." The exact connection between the superstructural level and the base of economic production can only be speculated about, leaving one to wonder about the relationship between student subjectivities and the social order and how these relate to the maintenance of a dominant hegemony. Teaching writing is an act of social control that should not be underestimated, especially as it relates to maintaining conceptions of the dominant social order. Let's not forget that ideas relating to the perception of reality are established and perpetuated in the composition classroom, one of the first courses entering college students take that solidifies their relationship to the social order. Given that the composition classroom is

simultaneously the scene of domination and oppression, we are left with a paradox; how can a space so thoroughly described as a scene of emancipation, by putting students in touch with their identities through writing, be so thoroughly implicated in the dominant social order? This is a key question for those seeking to interrogate the contemporary economic social order that has obtained.

Beyond the pedagogical purposes associated with the composition course that are often at cross-purposes with those of the institution or

As a site of ideological situatedness and indoctrination, the course itself is constrained by institutional, economic, and political factors that necessitate that the skills conform to the dominant cultural conceptions around what constitutes “good” and “effective” writing, which idealizes a certain understanding of what good and effective writing looks like and the related characteristics associated with good writers, who are often white, middle class, and well situated within the dominant culture.

economic order, there are obvious paradoxes surrounding who teaches it. What other discipline staffs its beginning course with those with so little teaching experience and disciplinary knowledge, while protecting its tenured and most senior members from the labor associated with it? The less one teaches composition, as perhaps this line of thinking goes, the more standing one probably possesses in the field and in one’s department and program. Part of the reason composition is counted as relatively unskilled or unprofessionalized labor is because the field has been reluctant to define the exact skills to be

taught in the course and the methods through which students will be assessed as they complete the course’s objectives.

As Sharon Crowley, Susan Miller, and James Berlin have indicated, FYW has served specific ideological goals with respect to the inculcation and maintenance of middle-class norms, desires, and habits. As a site of ideological situatedness and indoctrination, the course itself is constrained by institutional, economic, and political factors necessitating that the skills conform to the dominant cultural conceptions around what constitutes “good” and “effective” writing, which idealizes a certain understanding of what good and effective writing looks like and the related characteristics associated with good writers—who are often white, middle class, and well situated within the dominant culture.

The place of the writing program in the university structure serves

to solidify the skill of “writing” within the college curriculum, as well as within the wider culture. Exactly what we mean by “writing” and “writing skills” is left unspecified, productively so—as stakeholders have identified something called “writing” as a necessary skill related to civic competence and workplace success. The college degree, as preparation for productive employment, situates writing as a communicative competence necessary for performing one’s job. Clear communication, the ability to follow instructions, and the ability to execute a plan are the successful corporate warrior’s skill set.

Composition’s place in the corporate imaginary is significantly larger than perhaps imagined, as it weds the concept of the academic skill set with the pragmatic desire to obtain an identifiable marker of “employability.” “Writer” signifies as a producer and shaper of texts who can follow orders without reflecting on whether those

orders are ethical or consistent with one’s personal code. The “writer” possesses an ability to adapt to organizational creeds and demands without experiencing cognitive dissonance, a willingness to be a team player without becoming concerned about ethical outcomes. “Writing” becomes a label for the conformist worker, who can develop and sell the corporate message, sufficiently malleable to the organizational mindset. The relationship between the skills being marketed, as being supposedly taught in the writing program, and the skills desired by the corporate sector has been undertheorized. How does the signifier “writing” function in this relationship to promote a conception of skills-based job training that serves a certain understanding of being a literate citizen? This is a vital question writing programs must be accountable to external constituencies in answering.

Responsive to the needs of external constituencies, which are instrumental for employing the very students the writing program educates, the writing program serves a crucial mediatory role between the university and the public sphere. This role necessitates that those occupying administrative positions within these programs be nimble politicians as much as they are educators committed to communicating forms of disciplinary knowledge to colleagues and students. In other words, writing program administra-

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tors must balance the demands of administration (assessment measures, accountability to stakeholders, as well as managing and responding to public perceptions of writing) against their legitimate aspirations of making composition studies and the composition course serious disciplinary endeavors within the university. How have writing programs reached this predicament? How did “writing,” as an elastic skill, come to exert such a locus of control over skills as wide-ranging as academic analysis, composition teaching, memo writing, professional writing, and digital rhetoric? Additionally, the push for “online learning,” particularly the emphasis on offering online writing courses—essentially pushing the English department’s “cash cow” into cyberspace—shows how curricular designs have to follow potential paths for capitalistic expansion.

Writing scholars identify specific aspects of the writing scene (“audience,” “rhetorical situation,” “purpose”) and gesture toward writing’s effects (“transfer”), indicating that these key concepts signify that writing is alive and cannot be placed in a ready-at-hand container. Consider the titles of these well-known and relatively recent published books in the

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field: *Vernacular Insurrections; Tactics of Hope; Producing Good Citizens; Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being; Acts of Enjoyment: Rhetoric, Žižek, and the Return of the Subject; Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres; Networking Arguments; Distant Publics; Toward a Composition Made Whole; and Inessential Solidarity*. These titles are provocative,

seemingly transgressive and potentially transformative, as they invite readers to imagine a world in which individuals, through writing, literacy, reclaimed agency, improved foreigner relations, and a renewed skepticism toward ideological critique, can make a difference within the public sphere by challenging and overturning deeply entrenched hegemonies. Any consideration of the political-economic in rhetoric and composition must account for how seemingly inflated claims about the transformational power of writing and literacy in actuality make the case for the range of our expertise. This function of not being able to precisely pin down what it is we mean by “writing,” “literacy,” “agency,” “foreigner relations,” and “ideological critique” actually works to expand the franchise of our expertise, sometimes with unpredictable and unfortunate results with respect to labor conditions.

As specialists in persuasion, scholars in rhetoric and composition recognize how the political-economic imperative within the academy is shaping perceptions of the kinds of job skills required to attain middle-class employment in the business world. Its success as a field has revolved around advancing pragmatic skill sets (professional writing, publishing, new media design, writing program administration) to advance the field's location within the changing academy, where the ability to connect what is being taught in the classroom to employment opportunities is a necessary market-sustainability indicator. The pressure to respond to these indicators is enormous, as higher education comes under increasing scrutiny to show that it is worth its heavy economic costs.

The back-to-basics movement, efforts to show how skills obtained in the first-year composition classroom “transfer” to other aspects of the college curriculum, and the continued push to insist that composition is a course that actually does what it claims to, demonstrate the multiple and complex vectors influencing conceptions of writing instruction. The intense scrutiny of student work, the desire to trace definitive skills that are being identified and developed in the composition course, and the presentation of data about student learning and retention of skills in composition to stakeholders and institutional decision makers are part of a larger structure of surveillance and political economy driven by external constituencies, legislators, and writing program administrators.

The field's commitment to studying writing, as well as its unique positioning to develop theories of persuasion, enables rhetoric and composition to speak to a number of critical concerns. However, if to be in rhetoric and composition is to be invested in the FYW course and its administration, we may very well be entering into a logic that limits our ability to speak to broader conceptions of what it is we do as rhetoric and composition scholars. Of course, many scholars have called for the abolition of the FYW requirement, but it seems odd that so many years after these trenchant critiques, we continue to invest so much into a course that reproduces

Of course, many scholars have called for the abolition of the FYW requirement, but it seems odd that so many years after these trenchant critiques, we continue to invest so much into a course that reproduces exploitative working conditions—conditions that contribute to the perception that rhetoric and composition is a service discipline, rather than a research-driven enterprise.

exploitative working conditions—conditions that contribute to the perception that rhetoric and composition is a service discipline, rather than a research-driven enterprise (see Connors). Yet, this is the very turf that the field is desperate to own, desiring to situate writing skills development within its professional purview, realizing that to lose control over this course could jeopardize a loss in professional standing for a field that seemingly stands at the periphery of the academy's hierarchy.³

The publication of Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle's edited collection, *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, marks an important moment in the field's attempt to define the specific

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knowledge domain of writing studies, a seemingly different tag than "rhetoric and composition," which comes with some of the weighty ideological freight I identify in this article. This collection attempts to account for exactly what it is writing specialists "know" about the writing process. These claims about what writing does, how it occurs, and

the processes informing it demonstrate that knowledge claims sit at the very heart of the discipline's development and evolution.

The thirty-five sections of the book, written by several writing specialists including David Russell, Heidi Estrem, Victor Villanueva, Paul Kei Matsuda, Dylan Dryer, and others, move the field beyond the stale debates of the past by laying out the detailed thinking about writing that has been done over the last decade. Indeed, this collection answers the calls made by Charles Bazerman and Susan Miller over a decade ago to shift rhetoric and composition's conception of itself to "writing studies" (Bazerman; S. Miller, "Writing"). This effort moves the study of writing beyond the composition classroom, into the professionalized space that it deserves, and away from the exploitative labor practices. By creating a professionalized body of knowledge that writing teachers would be expected to study, understand, and demonstrate proficiency around, we would move away from the inflated and sprawling conceptions of "writing" enabling so many to claim an expertise in writing instruction that is not grounded in a disciplinary

framework possessing actual credibility. It is this lack of professionalized knowledge that has unfortunately contributed to the poor working conditions within writing programs, as teachers who have received inadequate training and support continue to administer student subjectivities without really teaching writing. Naming what we know, to borrow the title of the Adler-Kassner and Wardle collection, entails identifying and professing an actual body of disciplinary knowledge that can be identified, refined, and assessed. An unwillingness to “name what we know” enables the kind of arguments that float on their very vacuity: “Everything is writing,” “Everything is discourse,” “Everything is rhetoric,” and so on. In her “The Erasure of Language,” Susan Peck MacDonald writes:

if we had a clear, stable sense of our professional mission, we would more often define our work through recognizable categories that would be repeated year after year. Our difficulties in consistently naming and categorizing our relation to language study are signs of a professional weakness—a sort of professional attention deficit disorder that keeps us from sustaining a conversation long enough to work on and improve some of our understandings about language. (619)

“Our difficulties in consistently naming and categorizing our relation to language study” spring from attempts to inflate the field’s scope of expertise by seeking to lay claim to knowledge domains that are not really our own. This inflationary tendency may very well arise from a recognition of, and constitute a response to, rhetoric and composition’s low standing within the hierarchy of the disciplines. The desire to elevate the discipline’s status by aligning with, and borrowing from, more well-established and recognized disciplines such as philosophy and critical theory cannot necessarily be faulted, but the downside for naming what we *actually* know becomes obvious when establishing a definable and defensible knowledge domain. **By instituting a more serious vetting of credentials by requiring that those who wish to teach composition demonstrate what they know about writing through the threshold concept approach, writing programs will be able to promote themselves as knowledge-producing units providing an identifiable set of skills requiring serious and assessable training.** By instituting a more serious vetting of credentials by requiring that those who wish to teach composition demonstrate what they know about writing through the threshold concept approach, writing programs will be able to

promote themselves as knowledge-producing units providing an identifiable set of skills requiring serious and assessable training.

Would it be possible for writing studies to stand its professional ground by insisting that those who do not possess these credentials, or who are unable to demonstrate their knowledge of the threshold concepts in writing studies, will not be hired since neither writing departments nor the field

Although Lamos does not mention the use of threshold concepts in his call for such credentialing, they are seemingly a useful way to enact his proposal to promote occupational closure and to professionalize teaching.

will endorse placing noncredentialed teachers in front of undergraduate students? As Steve Lamos argues in his “Credentialing College Writing Teachers: WPAs and Labor Reform,” the creation of “a national apparatus for ‘credentialing’ college writing teachers” would go a long way toward

making the argument that writing studies is a legitimate discipline deserving the pay and working conditions of other academic fields. By creating a thoughtful and well-defined apparatus, WPAs could define “a national set of knowledge and skills essential to professional college writing instruction” (46). Although Lamos does not mention the use of threshold concepts in his call for such credentialing, they are seemingly a useful way to enact his proposal to promote occupational closure and to professionalize teaching. Threshold concepts are not just about achieving these two goals, however; they will also work to highlight and demonstrate the conceptual knowledge that writing studies scholars share as a result of their doctoral training. While calls for such a uniformity of presentation around field knowledge might seem contrary to the disciplinary impulse to be as inclusive and responsive to diverse approaches to the field, we will derive far more by closing ranks and declaring what it is we know about writing to the institutional and extramural stakeholders who formulate policy. As Lamos notes, “We should propose such a credential, we should discuss carefully the various issues related to its development and implementation, and we should consider various story-changing strategies designed to overcome concerns about the costs of credentialing” (64). One might anticipate stiff resistance in moving toward the national credentialing system Lamos describes, but if this system is responsive within local and regional review contexts, colleagues might be willing to consider moving to a national review. As Lamos concludes, “This kind of simultaneous national and local action will give

us the best chance of pursuing credentialing—and thus the best chance of pursuing a fuller sense of labor equality for college writing teachers within the RFA [research-focused academy] environment” (65). This push toward a fuller sense of labor equality through credentialing works coextensively with creating a cohesive professional identity for writing teachers by framing disciplinary knowledge as nameable, definable, and assessable by institutional, regional, and national certification boards. If the expertise within writing studies is backed up by a credentialization system attesting to the disciplin-

If the expertise within writing studies is backed up by a credentialization system attesting to the disciplinary competence of its practitioners, writing teachers will move a long way to resolving the identity crisis surrounding many contingent and non-tenure-track faculty.

ary competence of its practitioners, writing teachers will move a long way to resolving the identity crisis surrounding many contingent and non-tenure-track faculty. This identity crisis emerges in the context of coping with an absence of professional status, reinforced by feelings of alienation and disrespect associated with not “being among the real faculty.” As Ann M. Penrose argues, “The concept of professional identity is particularly intriguing in our field, where staffing practices intersect with disciplinary indeterminacy to create a teaching community comprising professionals with widely varying preparation, knowledge, philosophical commitments, and disciplinary allegiances” (109). In her “Labor Profession: Expertise, Autonomy, Community in Composition Teaching,” Penrose emphasizes the importance of establishing professional autonomy through the creation of “a specialized and dynamic knowledge base or body of expertise,” “a distinctive array of rights and privileges accorded to members,” and “an internal social structure based on shared goals and values” (112). Establishing “a specialized and dynamic base or body of expertise” for rhetoric and composition has been challenging given the range of scholarly interests and pedagogical perspectives represented by its practitioners. As Penrose points out with respect to this observation, “Faculty who see the profession’s knowledge base as idiosyncratic are not likely to see their own knowledge validated” (114). Drawing upon a phrase Henry James used to describe novels, David Smits—in assessing the influence of Stephen North’s *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* twenty-five years since its publication—notes that rhetoric and composition might be accurately described as a “loose baggy monster”

due to its lack of a coherent and unifying content and clear methodological principles. As MacDonald argues, the field's tendency to avoid limiting itself

The effects of these moves to inflate the size of our disciplinary tent to accommodate all comers are not beneficial to the promotion of a professional identity or to the creation of a disciplinary community.

to some essential and foundational questions prevents the kind of sequential knowledge building associated with the very academic disciplines among which we wish to take our place.⁴ The effects of these moves to inflate the size of our disciplinary tent to accommodate all

comers are not beneficial to the promotion of a professional identity or to the creation of a disciplinary community. As Penrose laments,

When there is a mismatch between faculty members' own sense of expertise and what the profession seems to value, one or the other may have to give. At the extremes, faculty members may question their identity as professionals and wonder if they belong, or they may question the legitimacy or coherence of the profession and choose not to belong. (114)

In endorsing the "threshold concepts" approach and the national credentialing system, have I simply responded to the call of the dominant that Horner laments by seeking to advance a disciplinary framework for the teaching of writing? Perhaps, but this seems to be the best way forward in solidifying the professional identity and status of writing studies, while also addressing the exploitative labor conditions associated with FYW that hamper the development of that identity and status.

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Notes

1. See critiques of the field's use of composition labor in Crowley; Susan Miller; and Berlin.
2. See WPA Archives for messages with the subject line "From Today's *Chronicle*" 26 and 27 Jan. 2004.
3. Horner takes issue with this claim in his *College English* article, "Rewriting Composition: Moving Beyond a Discourse of Need."

4. As MacDonald writes, "Academic professionals benefit from standing on the shoulders of their predecessors so that they do not have to continually reinvent knowledge we already have, but if we do not cultivate and pay attention to the storehouse of knowledge we already have, we will eventually have to do the reinventing" (619). MacDonald points to rhetoric and composition's hesitation "to adopt some of the rationalist assumptions common to most academic disciplines" and how "we have shown ambivalence about other common academic values regarding research and professional identity" (586).

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