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With “Increased Dignity and Importance”: Re-Historicizing Charles Roberts and the Illinois Decision of 1955

I revisit the so-called Illinois Decision of 1955, which eliminated basic writing from the University of Illinois Rhetoric Program and caused a chain of similar programmatic actions on other campuses nationwide. I contend that reviewing and archiving the Illinois Decision as a locally specific act with multiple actors besides WPA Charles Roberts historicizes a familiar narrative present today—namely, how WPAs address anxieties about writing in high school versus college, and how composition students and programs are beholden to ongoing institutional and extra-institutional imperatives regarding literacy and efficiency.

*I realized suddenly that I was not a person, but a footnote. I
was a stance, a position, a reference point.*

—James Murphy, in Agnew et al.,
“Rhetorical Historiography and the Octalogs”

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In the history of basic writing, one moment stands out: the so-called Illinois Decision of December 1955, when the University of Illinois passed a resolution to discontinue remedial writing effective fall 1960.¹ The resolution was authored by writing program administrator Dr. Charles Roberts, also the first editor of *College Composition and Communication* (1950–53). The decision was documented in essays published in *CCC* in May 1956 (Wilson, “Illinois vs. Illiteracy”) and May 1957 (Roberts, “Underprepared Student”; “Has English Zero Seen Its Day?”). As a policy move, the Illinois Decision was unusually public—chronicled, debated, and defended extensively, sometimes in the context of larger conversations on remediation in numerous academic and public news outlets.² As such, it would be lodged in the annals of composition history as proof of the disdain by English departments—and, by extension, writing programs—for writers deemed “not ready” for college.

As one of the historians who has referenced the Illinois Decision, I am sympathetic to its negative memorialization. In *Before Shaughnessy*, I argued that it exposed “an unwillingness on the part of [other] colleges and universities during this time period to take significant ‘risks’ on basic writers” (69). Indeed, the decision mobilized institutional anxieties about underprepared students, resources, and standards. It provided a prominent model for phasing out a course that a significant percentage of students nationwide were deemed to need.³ And absent other evidence, the decision seemed to argue against maintaining a responsible and challenging basic writing course for those students who needed it.

But now, as the WPA at Illinois, occupying the seat that Roberts held for over two decades,⁴ I want to revisit my earlier assumptions. With an eye toward complicating this narrative that otherwise seems so easy to historicize, I revisit the Illinois Decision to reframe it: not as a policy designed to punish basic writers, but one hoping to create better conversation between, and more reasonable working standards and support for, writing teachers. In doing so, the decision also aimed to clarify and strengthen a curriculum that had long struggled to articulate its goals. I therefore recuperate the history of the decision first, to reanimate discussions about what forces caused such a consequential policy decision to emerge, and second, to rehistoricize the man most associated with it—to change him from a footnote or reference point, in Murphy’s terms, to a real person in a difficult moment

now relevant to issues of accountability, alignment, and standards in our own college writing programs.

Others before me have written about Charles Roberts, and Illinois, yet there has been no singular attention paid to his role in the Illinois Decision itself. I employ Lisa Mastrangelo's assertion that the historicizing of notable field figures is "[u]nlike our recovery of programs, which is often grounded in social/historical contexts," because "our recovery of individuals is typically ensconced in 'lone wolf,' 'king,' and great man narratives" (249). In Roberts's case, I argue that the reverse is also true, as viewing him as a "lone wolf" fails to take into account other local actors involved. Revisiting Roberts and the Illinois Decision also enacts a rereading of "negative or uneven stories" that Mastrangelo contends is rare in our histories (260). In the case of Roberts's apparently single-handed destruction of basic writing at a flagship institution, our aversion to nonheroic field moments have held static his disciplinary narrative, in the process obscuring a deeper understanding of the decision itself, which compromises how we can recall it to advocate for our programs today.

I therefore invoke Steve Lamos's observation about archival figures in composition—from his own research on basic writing at Illinois in the 1960s and 1970s—that they are "undoubtedly accountable for their own actions and decisions in certain ways, [but] are also profoundly influenced by many larger institutional forces that operate beyond their control or agency" (392). Lamos, concerned over exposing negative histories tied to specific individuals, especially those still living, cautions that we should be careful not to "focus more on praising or excoriating 'good' or 'bad' people than on analyzing the complex institutional dynamics of which these people are but one (albeit central) part" (392). I structure my study as what Lamos terms an "overt-historical approach," in which administrators are "actual, identifiable people who are faced with specific choices" (396), because to do so makes Roberts's identity a central part of this narrative, and my own identity as the current Illinois WPA clear in the retelling. This narrative is, in Neal Lerner's terms, "subject to the perspectives, desires, and goals" of my own narration and positionality (26), since I cannot discount my own investment in the rich history of writing at Illinois, and Roberts as one of my predecessors. I want to mindfully reconstruct these known fragments of the decision that have led to cascading disciplinary assumptions about basic writing's history—much as Lerner searched for Robert Moore—in order to

challenge us to reread and employ our local histories as capaciously as we can, including those that would negatively implicate our own programs.

My rereading of the Illinois Decision and Charles Roberts includes reviewing what is already known about Roberts, as well as taking into account new material found in “unofficial” archives of the Rhetoric Program stored in our English building, official university archives, and news stories and commentary. Each archival enclave tells a different, yet complementary, tale about Illinois’s attempt to define “good” college-level writing and the appropriate mechanisms for ultimately achieving it. I ask, how will historians know and remember WPAs such as Roberts in their particular time and places, and what will those memories do to further the evolving story of basic writing? These are questions I hope readers will keep in mind as I reinscribe the story of Charles Roberts and basic writing at Illinois.

Charles Roberts: Straightening Out the Lines of Responsibility

The life and career of Charles Roberts is well documented in Thomas M. Masters’s 2004 book *Practicing Writing: The Postwar Discourse of Freshman English*, which analyzes first-year writing at Wheaton College, Northwestern University, and Illinois. Roberts became chairman of rhetoric at Illinois in 1939, following the untimely death of Chairman Bernard Jefferson (195). He would hold this position until 1960, moving all the way through the ranks to professor.⁵ Masters notes that Roberts tried to resign in 1953, without success (195). As a result, unlike CCCC founder John Gerber, who resigned as WPA at the University of Iowa after just four years, Roberts stayed on for two decades—what we might now term “WPA for life.”⁶

Throughout his lengthy tenure, Roberts produced numerous studies of his program, many of which he submitted to the Senate Committee on Student English (SCOSE), whose role in the Illinois Decision I discuss later. These included data on grade reporting and pass/fail rates (Roberts, “Rhetoric Staff”; Roberts, “Statistical Evidence”), enrollment rates (Roberts, “Placement Statistics”), and teacher workloads (SCOSE, “Provisions for Rhetoric”; Roberts, “Analysis”), produced for institutional use. In the early 1940s, Roberts also conducted a large-scale survey of all rhetoric students, asking about their home life as well as their habits in reading and writing; these nearly 1,700 coded survey responses are intact in the unofficial archive hereafter termed the “Rhetoric Closet.”⁷ These and other studies demon-

strate the degree to which Roberts sought to document program standards and student progress toward them; he also wanted to understand Illinois students' pre-college experiences with literacy instruction and to help his institution understand the same.

Indeed, *Practicing Writing* includes discussion of Roberts's ongoing efforts to enforce high standards in the face of what he famously considered, in the pages of *CCC*, the problem of "illiteracy" at Illinois (197). Roberts devised a detailed syllabus for rhetoric courses in order to support the scant teaching experience of his instructors—almost exclusively doctoral candidates in English literature—at a time when graduate training in the teaching of writing was extremely rare. Contemporary accounts of Roberts's teaching support Masters's portrait. As Harold B. Allen notes in *CCC* in 1952, Roberts was one of few faculty nationwide teaching writing pedagogy; of those courses offered, most were in communication, not English (6). Allen comments, after visiting Roberts's seminar, that he found Roberts "so successfully devoting the session to the professional responsibilities of the freshman instructor that the University of Illinois now has more CCCC members than can be found in any other one institution" (6–7).

As was noted at his 1968 memorial, Roberts also worked with Gerber to found CCCC, thereby rescuing composition from being, in their terms, the "stepchild of English departments" (Hamilton et al., n.p.). The memorial authors further observe, "It is not to claim too much to assert that Professor Roberts gave increased dignity and importance to the freshman writing program . . . through his activities in this organization and his personal stature" (n.p.). Work about Roberts's graduate course appeared in *CCC* twice, including in 1955, where he explains that the course is aimed at those "without any particular professional training for teaching, [who] suddenly awoke to find themselves in a college English classroom with about twenty eager but ignorant freshmen staring at them" (Roberts, "Course" 191).

The advent in 1946 of this pedagogy course, Rhetoric 480, is one example of Roberts' investment in the professionalization of teachers of rhetoric, resulting in the betterment of both their working conditions and the course. As he lamented, in a statement that perhaps reveals his own perceived isolation from other English faculty, "The scholarly graduate professors . . . have politely ignored the existence of the course. One told me, rather bluntly I thought, that he considered his own demands for literary excellence in the writing of the doctoral dissertation a sufficient amount of

training in composition teaching for any graduate student" (192). Roberts believed Rhetoric 480 should also be open to "high school teachers, and the fugitives from the College of Education [who] can give such a course its proper perspective and can keep it from becoming narrow and provincial" (193). Roberts's view of the teaching of writing as a cross-institutional activity, and his insistence on field training germane to this work, were ahead of their time.⁸

Excerpts of Roberts's post-retirement 1967 CCCC talk, "The Merits of Being Emeritus," voices his own views on teacher training and WPA work. It appeared in the October 1967 issue of *CCC* beside a section on the graduate teaching assistant, who, Roberts said, "is bound to serve two masters—the director of the freshman composition program, and the graduate professor. His success depends upon his ability to measure up to both" (200). Roberts goes on to talk about the effect this "tug of war" among TAs had on his own career:

When I took the low road, which led eventually to a Freshman Rhetoric directorship, I was often envious of my colleagues who took the high road to graduate school professorships. . . I see quite clearly now that the graduate professor and I were co-workers in one endeavor—that of training young people to become more effective teachers. And as I look back over my own career, I see that, while I and the university considered my main job to be the training of freshmen in the art of self-expression, my more valuable contribution was the in-service teacher training which I gave my staff members. (Roberts, "From 'The Merits,'" 200)

This reflection encapsulates well the Roberts I see profiled by Masters and in archival documents at Illinois. It also provides insight into his rear-facing view of the work of a WPA; it is notable that Roberts felt his greatest work was developing *teachers*, not providing a useful or thoughtful course for *students*. This identity flies in the face of our typical contemporary expectations for, or perceptions of, the WPA as tireless student advocate. Roberts was open about his valuation of teacher needs and programmatic responsibilities above everything else, including student perspectives. This less-than-heroic stance also bears mightily on how and with what other institutional actors he would eventually propose the elimination of Rhetoric 100.

Roberts's self-declared identity as a *teacher of teachers*, perhaps influenced by own his pre-graduate school career as a high school teacher

(Masters 194), was the basis for a series of initiatives Roberts launched in the early 1950s to bring together high school and college faculty in conversations about the teaching of English (i.e., writing), culminating in an

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criticism of remediation. It was a mandate against what the University of Washington WPA would call, in the CCC “English Zero” symposium that featured contributions from forty-four colleges and universities, “unqualified” students, or what the Stephen F. Austin State University WPA would similarly deem the “rotten apple” student who deserves only “concentrated misery” in a separate course (93, 74). More locally, the Spring 1956 issue of the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* noted in its December 27 calendar entry for “Illinois in 1955” that the University of Illinois’s recent decision to “drop its remedial Rhetoric 100 course. . . and flunk out all freshmen unable to carry college-level English courses has touched off a barrage of criticism of elementary and secondary schools for teaching too many ‘frills’ and neglecting the ‘three Rs’” (Adams 92). Such a response directed toward failure in the high schools was also common in media accounts of the decision, as I chronicle later.

The Illinois Decision was, in fact, part and parcel of a wider view of Roberts’s view of the work of university writing programs as the final point of education in the state system and the limitations that *college* teachers had on correcting gaps in student skills. Prior to becoming editor of CCC in 1950, Roberts edited the *Illinois English Bulletin* from 1941 to 1949. Through

this publication as well as considerable outreach, Roberts saw an ongoing partnership with secondary school English departments as the responsibility of the WPA. This is evident in the 1956 *Standards in Freshman Rhetoric at the University of Illinois* booklet, the culminating product of his efforts. Its front page lists the "persons and groups [who provided] counsel and advice in the preparation of the manuscript for this publication" (SCOSE, *Standards* n.p.), which included communication between nearly twenty-five Illinois high school teachers, numerous external college faculty, the Illinois Senate Committee on Student English, the University of Illinois Council on Teacher Education, the University of Illinois Committee on the Preparation of Secondary School Teachers, and Roberts's own Department of English. The booklet was sent to all Illinois high schools, with a circulation of ten thousand initial copies, and printed at a cost of \$2,500 ("Brochure" n.p.).

Roberts's letter to high school administrators introducing the *Standards* booklet on November 19, 1956, announces, "In the next four years, we are going to make every effort to keep you . . . informed regarding our standards and to help you in your efforts to prepare your students for successful work in college English. . . . We are also repeating a procedure begun last year in sending to you the impromptu compositions written by graduates of your school on our September placement test. They have been marked and evaluated by the teachers in whose classes the students enrolled, and are subsequently revised and corrected by the students." Later in this same memo, Roberts reinforces how offering "a paragraph a week" throughout high school coursework would result in "few complaints about writing incompetence" in college, asking those faculty who *do* enforce this paragraph plan to let him know, so that he might subsequently study their students' writing in rhetoric courses (Roberts, Memo to Illinois High School Teachers). A final communication to teachers on January 20, 1956, which was accompanied by a separate communication explaining that semester grades in rhetoric courses had been amassed for all public school students graduating between 1935 and 1955, and private school students between 1935 and 1945 (Roberts, "Records" n.p.), expresses hope that "you [administrators] may put [a *Standards* booklet] in the hands of every English teacher in your school, and in the hands of every senior student who may be considering enrollment in the university" (Roberts, Memo to Illinois High School Principals).⁹

Earlier correspondence leading to the final publication of the *Standards* booklet documents Roberts's numerous attempts to draft and redraft the forthcoming standards in response to specific high school teachers' comments and suggestions, and his own expectations for the rhetoric courses that would eventually exclude basic writing, an exclusion made logical by increased preparation in the high schools that also reflected high school teachers' own wants and needs for their students. This document's drafting was anchored by the first Allerton conference meeting on the subject at the Allerton estate—owned by the University of Illinois and located about twenty miles from campus.¹⁰ An example invitation to Allerton, dated February 13, 1955, states, "The University of Illinois Council on Teacher Education and the Senate Committee on Student English would appreciate your meeting at Allerton Park during parts of two days next month for a round-table analytical review of a proposed booklet tentatively entitled 'English Preparation for Students Entering the University of Illinois.'" The invitation further clarifies that "all expenses for travel, lodging, and meals would be paid from university funds" (Rose).

Invitation letters like this went out to more than twenty teachers, principals, and area chairs at high schools across Illinois. The files on this meeting include numerous chains of correspondence from these educators, as well as marked-up drafts of the document in various stages as edited by the participants, who were later sent complete complementary drafts of the booklet.¹¹ Overall, the archived teacher responses are very positive. Miss Margaret Newman, head of English at Elgin High School, commented, "The manuscript you sent for my criticism seems so clear to me that I have searched to find any part of it that might be misunderstood," adding, "We shall be glad to have the added incentive to insist on improvement to the point of acceptable writing and fairly intelligent reading which this new program of yours will give us" (Newman). Mr. Robert Carpenter of New Trier High School in Winnetka said, regarding the sample graded compositions in the booklet, "we will welcome all the help we can get in promoting greater validity and reliability in teacher judgments of student compositions" (Carpenter). Some teachers sent mixed suggestions, such as Miss Isabel Hoover, from the Western Illinois University Lab School, who commented that the vocabulary test included seemed "rather difficult for the average high school senior," even as she found the overall project something that, "if . . . in the hands of every English teacher," would create "real incentive

for better work" (Hoover). Still other responses were lists of stylistic edits, many of which appear to have been incorporated in the final document.

However, not all feedback was entirely positive—in part due to the frustration that teachers felt toward their students who were already severely underprepared long before the moment of college application and the limited motivation that these students had toward even an explicitly articulated college curriculum. One example is from Miss Marjorie Dieg of Morton High School in Cicero, who characterized the booklet as a "highly commendable procedure" that still "cannot achieve, except to a limited extent, the ends you desire," based on her own experiences. These students were, in her words, "not students. They have no conception of higher learning. They have managed to acquire the minimum achievement for, let us say, a trial entrance. They are part of your perspective freshmen" (Dieg). Miss A. C. Baum of Oak Park High School similarly questions why "what is generally demanded of intelligent and educated people" is not addressed in the booklet, alongside the Rhetoric Program's requirements, and also questions why the implementation date is 1959 and not sooner (after 1956), as a quicker implementation would be welcomed by "high school teachers [who] would like the coercion of no remedial work in college" to begin as soon as possible (Baum).

These letters suggest a highly collaborative arrangement toward a document that would represent the interests and concerns of high school teachers of writing as accurately as possible. But they additionally indicate not only a strong interest in being consulted on the project but also a deep discontent with the state of high school English instruction at the time, and the differing abilities of the student body, sometimes in ungenerous terms. The conditions fostering such discontent were clear in a 1954 survey of Illinois high school teacher workloads and needs conducted by the Senate Committee on Student English and designed to inform the *Standards* document. As indicated in the stunning 60% return of surveys distributed, 90.7% of these teachers wanted "a list of the essentials of grammar and composition" required by freshmen rhetoric programs in college, 55.7% wanted "sample themes . . . with detailed critical comments," and 64.8% wanted "copies of placement and proficiency examinations" for freshmen rhetoric programs ("Results" 4–5). These requests were augmented by data on teacher workload, which included statistics on how many classes, on average, teachers taught daily (4.8), along with how many free periods per

week (5.9), how many pupils (102), and how many compositions/themes they assigned across students' four years of high school English (114.7) ("Results" 1–2). In sum, the report reflected an overworked group of teachers facing great challenges in moving students from high school to college without better instructional tools, or clear incentives.

This survey certainly paints a bleak picture of the mid-1950s conditions for English students and teachers in Illinois high schools, which is consistent with workload studies conducted by NCTE and others in the postwar era. But it also showcases a cooperative set of teachers eager for collaboration with the university. Still, this outreach was only one part of what informed and supported Roberts's work toward eliminating Rhetoric 100. His identity as a journal editor and field pioneer—unlike most WPAs at the time, usually literature specialists not invested in the emerging discipline—also made him acutely aware of the capacious demands of the freshman course at other universities nationwide, leading to his efforts to benchmark Rhetoric 100 against other institutions. This is evident in his collection of writing program materials from outside Illinois, left uncataloged in the Rhetoric Closet. Notable among these are other universities' writing placement and proficiency tests, from institutions such as Harvard University, University of Denver, University of Wichita, Chicago City Junior Colleges, and Rutgers University. With the exception of Harvard's exam, which in its 1940 iteration was a three-hour essay exam consisting of five questions on two brief literary passages, plus two opinion/analysis questions ("English"), these tests were exclusively objective measurements on grammar, spelling, and usage. This objective structure is later mirrored in the 1949 Rhetoric Placement Test that Roberts authored, which was augmented by a first-day impromptu essay conducted in the rhetoric courses and read by the instructor, then a faculty committee, to check against the objective scores (Roberts, "General"; Roberts, "Committee" n.p.). Augmenting these uncataloged artifacts of Roberts's are other publications chronicling how peer institutions with conditions similar to the those at Illinois were teaching writing, such as copies of *Purdue English Notes*.

As the archives illustrate, Roberts's research on writing instruction outside the campus went downward into the secondary schools and laterally into peer institutions, informed by his position as a field pioneer and former high school teacher. But he was also driven by his relationship with a powerful governing body at Illinois, one that did not always share

his motivations, but whose end aims would help him to accomplish the elimination of Rhetoric 100.

Roberts and the SCOSE: A Marriage of Convenience

Charles Roberts wanted Illinois rhetoric courses to be more stringent, more meaningful, and more aligned with field standards—and in the process, he wanted to improve the conditions of teachers of rhetoric at both the high school and college levels through deeper collaboration. Though his data collection and initial outreach occurred between 1940 and 1953, the elimination proposal's first official utterance was not in just his own voice, nor just bolstered by his own programmatic desires. It is rather in the 1954 summary report of the University of Illinois Senate Committee on Student English (SCOSE), Sub-Committee on the Improvement of Rhetoric, coauthored by Roberts, Theodore Peterson, of the Department of Journalism and Communication, and W. W. Yapp, of the Dairy Science Department, that the proposal to eliminate Rhetoric 100 first emerges. The SCOSE was a powerful, long-standing force on the Illinois campus, officially reconstituted in 1944 after three years of study by the Senate Committee on Educational Policy and an ad hoc committee on Student English.¹² Its files comprise nineteen boxes in the university archives, dating between 1940 and 1969. The SCOSE was responsible for all administrative mechanisms relevant to student writing at Illinois, including transfer articulation, the qualifying (exit) examination, international (or "foreign") student use of English, the Writing and Speech Clinics, student writing in "subject" courses, and the interface with the Rhetoric Program—or Rhetoric "Division," as it was then known.

At the time the Illinois Decision was enacted, enrollment at the university was predominantly in-state students from public high schools. As such, the SCOSE concerned itself not just with what was happening on campus, but also with what was being taught in Illinois high schools. In these ways, it resembled other similar bodies at Harvard University (e.g., Committee on Use of English by Students) that likely served as peer models. The committee's membership shifted over time, but during the years when the decision was discussed, members were faculty from eight colleges and the Provost's Office, plus Roberts himself. While the committee was constituted to be a representative executive group, Roberts's role on this committee was as the provider of curricular information and, later, the

public face of the decision. Roberts's efforts to eliminate Rhetoric 100 were thus both in constant cooperation with this committee and in recognition of other Illinois administrators to whom he ultimately reported and upon whom he relied upon for resources.

Well before the elimination of Rhetoric 100 was ever proposed, Illinois had experimented with a variety of pre-college, noncredit writing curricula, none of which seemed to take. Between 1927 and 1931, students who failed the entrance proficiency exam were required to take Rhetoric 0, a noncredit, remedial course, prior to Rhetoric 1, the standard first-semester course (Roberts, "Calibre" 1). From 1932 to 1934, students were "given a diagnostic test, but were all enrolled in Rhetoric 1, on a sink-or-swim basis"; the non-credit course was dropped. In this second era, the idea of remedial work being the purview of the high school and the argument for standardized placement first appear—both of which would be critical to later justifying the elimination of Rhetoric 100, and for marshaling high school faculty behind that decision via the *Standards* collaboration. From 1935 to 1942, all students took Rhetoric 1 (renamed Rhetoric 100 in 1943), but "deficient students were segregated into classes which met for four hours per week [versus the usual three]." Roberts comments in a report on rhetoric curricula from 1927 to 1951 that this plan was abandoned "when it became apparent that the deficient students could not derive much profit" from it. On the other end of the scale, in 1939 the program began granting proficiency credit to students who excelled on the placement test.¹³

In this same report, Roberts also emphasizes the increasing number of "deficient" students placing into Rhetoric 100 over time—a rise from 7.7% in 1927 to 22.0% by 1953—noting, "Our problem is to determine why every fourth or fifth student entering the University of Illinois is so deficient in English expression as to need to take a high-school level, non-credit, remedial course in Rhetoric" (Roberts, "Calibre" 3). In this preamble of sorts to the Illinois Decision, which would inform the SCOSE's recommendations, Roberts still interrogates preparation, not student desires; at no point does he advocate *refusing* students who test poorly, nor does he anticipate the shuttling of remedial courses to other institutions—a situation at many state universities today. Rather, he questions alignments corresponding to a curriculum already under considerable institutional scrutiny from SCOSE, from an administrator's perspective. Roberts's approach is double-edged,

therefore: while he neither demonizes nor blames basic writing students, he also seemingly never considers their perspectives in crafting his proposal.

The 1954 SCOSE report calling for the elimination of Rhetoric 100 outlines, first, the "facts" in evidence, including "[m]ore students and a higher percentage of students than in the past fail in the placement tests" such that "[t]he department offers forty-four sections of non-credit courses in rhetoric." The Sub-Committee on Improvement of Rhetoric recommended, "on the premise that strengthening the teaching program in Freshman Rhetoric is desirable and necessary," the following: "1. A Realistic salary scale for teachers of Freshman Rhetoric. 2. An opportunity for professional advancement as a teacher of Freshman Rhetoric. 3. The establishment of a permanent staff for teaching Freshman Rhetoric. 4. The discontinuance of high-school level instruction in Rhetoric [at Illinois]. 5. A definite time-goal for carrying out a program of improvement" (SCOSE, "Memo" 1-2).

What should be noticeable in this memo, which includes the first written call for the elimination of Rhetoric 100 (point 4) and a schedule on which to do it (point 5) is the additional acknowledgment of *working conditions* for rhetoric faculty, as tied to the quality of instruction in the courses. While the outcome of this set of recommendations resulted in, as far as the archives show, *only* the elimination of Rhetoric 100 (and not other requested items), it appears that Roberts was using the larger statistics on student ability—which were important to the SCOSE as a political body—to make an allied argument for teachers' workload improvement.

The archives of the SCOSE include an extensive allied document labeled "Provisions for Rhetoric and the Rhetoric Staff," attached to a copy of an earlier (1942) study of the program. This study highlights the lack of training of staff (partially later remedied by the Rhetoric 480 pedagogy course), the increasing number of freshman enrollees, their attendant Qualifying (exit) Examinations, and the number of students failing that exam. In addition, it highlights how the course is staffed by graduate instructors with short-term residency, who were deemed to be overloaded. One salient fact included was that graduate teaching assistants taught three sections of rhetoric per semester, with no assignments in literature courses. This resulted in "the anomalous situation of having ninety per cent of our Rhetoric 101 and 102 classes taught by a staff of whom normally about eighty percent consider themselves apprentices teaching this subject as a means

of livelihood while they are obtaining the training necessary to qualify them to teach literature” (“Provisions” 3). Further, their pay was deemed abysmal—“\$2400 to \$3010” per year (4). And the training for teaching Rhetoric 100, a course with its own pedagogical requirements, was non-existent.

The executive summary of the “Provisions” notes an ongoing toll on “staff morale” in the Rhetoric Program as of the date of the summary (c. 1952) as well as “rising remedial needs,” leading to a need for education of “members of the Senate Committee . . . who are unaware of the burdensome problems under which rhetoric labors” (SCOSE, “Provisions” 1). The summary characterizes the teaching of rhetoric as “likely to be regarded as only a chore, a temporary means of livelihood, a ‘blind-alley’ job, a dreary routine from which escape is to be found at the earliest possible moment. The problem which faces us at this point is then one of overcoming a prejudice . . . of creating a favorable climate of opinion for rhetoric courses and instructors, that is, for the teaching and advanced study of rhetoric” (4). One solution was to employ more full-time teaching staff in addition to expanding training in English language and composition for graduate students, which would provide “fully competent teachers of rhetoric to meet both [Illinois’s] needs and those of other institutions” and put the university in a position “to make scholarly contributions in a field which is apparently regarded as important in many other institutions” (7)—a point only made possible by Roberts’s own founding role in the CCCC.

The conditions informing these recommendations are also provided as part of this committee’s February 27, 1953, researched appendix to the report, including the number of sections of Rhetoric 100, which stood at 40 for fall 1952, and the number of persons teaching the rhetoric courses with only an undergraduate degree (9), only a master’s degree (65) or a PhD (1). Fifty-five of those instructors taught a full-time load. Graduate assistants in sum carried “about 98.66% of the teaching load” for the program (Roberts, “Analysis” 1). Later noting these observations in January 1955, English Department head Gordon N. Ray—who would just a few weeks later wholeheartedly endorse the proposal to eliminate Rhetoric 100—explained that he was “unable to accept [the Committee’s] assumption that it [should] advise the English Department concerning appointments, promotions, and salaries. . . . I have noted your views on these points, but you will understand that decisions regarding them must be based on the total picture of needs

and resources as it appears to the responsible departmental authority” (Ray, Memo to Francis Weeks).

Even as the English Department was apparently unwilling to make wholesale changes to its rhetoric staff’s working conditions, the heavy workload carried by rhetoric instructors—instead of being meted out over multiple years of high school instruction—was a triggering factor in Roberts’s rationale for the elimination of Rhetoric 100. If students were to actively engage in more or different writing prior to college enrollment, in Roberts’s view, the rhetoric courses might then focus on loftier intellectual goals. He clarifies in his *CCC* piece “The Underprepared Student at the University of Illinois” his hope that the Illinois Decision will force the hand of the already-capable public school teachers in the state to take a stronger role in writing instruction in their own classrooms—a role the teachers already want, as expressed in the *Standards* correspondence above. In his article Roberts cites his own February 1955 report to the Senate:

[I]n my twenty-six years of work with Freshman Rhetoric at the University of Illinois, I have not seen a more opportune time than the present in which to straighten out the lines of responsibility in English instruction in the entire public school system. The good sense of public school administrators and teachers is beginning to assert itself. The accompanying resolutions adopted by the Illinois Association of Teachers of English are most heartening. If the recommendation of a theme a week throughout the four years of high school were generally accepted, our remedial problems, at the college level, would vanish. (Roberts, “Underprepared” 97)

Roberts’s hope was that students would not need Rhetoric 100 in order to be “ready” to be *Illinois* students, if Illinois Association of Teachers of English (IATE) resolutions were met.¹⁴ Roberts closes his *CCC* piece with an excerpt from Vernon L. Nickell, State Superintendent of Public Instruction, addressed to “all school administrators” and also stemming from his correspondence on the *Standards* booklet:

It may be helpful if an outline from first grade through high school is developed, specifying just what each grade level should accomplish in grammar and written work. The development of such a program provides a fine educational and curricular experience for teachers and administrators working together When desirable standards of mastery have been established at each grade level, it would be wise, I believe, to see that they are achieved and maintained through organized and coordinated teaching. Otherwise, some of our youth

may experience serious difficulty in moving from grade to grade, school to school, and from school to college. (“Underprepared” 100)

Unlike today’s Common Core standards, which advertise a cross-institutional partnership but give those institutions no real agency, Roberts saw these midcentury agreements as the means for a *productive* and organic partnership between K–12 schools and state universities. What resulted on the intake level for rhetoric students was the previously noted *Standards* booklet.¹⁵ What helped Roberts get the *Standards* booklet and this partnership in motion was the backing of the SCOSE and the general attitude on campus that remedial writing had no place at Illinois.

But could such coordination, begun by the bold move to eliminate remedial writing at Illinois, ever have positive results? In his 1961 *CCC* article, “The Elimination of Remedial English at Illinois,” Harris W. Wilson, Robert’s successor and assistant WPA during his tenure, argues that despite worries that the Illinois Decision would make “Rhetoric 101 degenerate into Rhetoric 100 in all but name” (70), in fact, Roberts’s prediction that the failure rate in 101 would rise to a “normal” rate of 10–15% was fulfilled, charting a failure rate for 1959–60 of 4.3%, compared to 12.8% in 1960–61 (71). Wilson cites this—and statistics on low grades in the course—as proof that grading standards “did not deteriorate” in Rhetoric 101 after Rhetoric 100 was eliminated (71). Further, Wilson argues, “Students are [now] generally more serious in their approach to Freshman Rhetoric; they have known for the past four years that they would not be able to depend on a high-school level, non-credit course to help them make up their deficiencies” (72).

Wilson blames the students for their placement, but he does so in order to rationalize the drop in Rhetoric 100 placements leading up to the Illinois Decision—suggesting that the message was getting to students—and to reassure the readers of *CCC* that standards at Illinois were intact. We know now, after decades of subsequent research, that students do not place into basic writing because they *rely* on a “catch up” for their *willful* lack of effort. But in Wilson’s time, this profile of the basic writing student meshed with both institutional expectations and public perceptions of what a flagship university should be teaching. It also validated Roberts’s ideations for teacher preparation across institutional levels: if students were now better prepared, high school faculty were properly relaying the standards message. An even clearer sense of how the privileging of Rhetoric 101 over

Rhetoric 100 informed the decision is evident through an examination of the value of rhetoric courses—and writing as a valued part of the university curriculum—within the Illinois community itself.

Demanding “Good” Writing: Institutional Efforts behind the Scenes

In order to see the bigger picture regarding basic writing at Illinois in 1955, it's important to understand the earlier research undertaken by SCOSE and others at the behest of the administration. A memo dated January 16, 1952, from Illinois provost Coleman R. Griffith to Jessie Howard, who also served as the influential executive secretary of the SCOSE, states—in medical terminology common to this era—“If the high schools are doing a bad job, and if many of the teachers are former students of this university, we can only conclude that a remedy is right here in our own front yard. The Committee on Student English was asked by the Board of Trustees to find the remedy and apply it to the patient” (Griffith). Three years later, on February 2, 1955, English Department head Gordon N. Ray sent a memo to the chair of the Educational Policy Committee, communicating the initial request from Roberts to eliminate Rhetoric 100 from the curriculum, effective fall 1959, and endorsing it. Ray further outlines the “logic” of the request, which includes the “assumption of a responsibility which belongs to the preparatory schools,” including the responsibility borne upon denying some entering freshmen admission to Rhetoric 101, which “belongs to the Office of Admissions or the Committee on Admissions from Secondary Schools” (Ray, Memo to Tom Hamilton). What this memo does *not* outline are the studies, discussions, and recommendations that came from the committee in the three years between Griffith's memo to Jessie Howard and the English Department's advocacy for the Illinois Decision, as well as recommendations in years prior, stretching back to the early 1940s. The foundation for arguing against remedial writing at Illinois had actually been in the works for nearly two decades, since Roberts assumed the chairman of rhetoric position.

The problem that faculty and administrators outside the English Department found with Rhetoric 100 was embedded in the relationship between freshmen rhetoric courses and high school English, in one direction, and upper-division writing on campus in the other. Both the Rhetoric Program and others charged with teaching “basic skills” to students struggled

to articulate the efficacy of freshman composition against future demands in major coursework or as a corrective on past gaps in schooling. In argu-

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ing, ultimately, against a remedial course for freshmen, a collective statement was agreed upon regarding the line between high school and college instruction, and the responsibilities of faculty outside the Rhetoric Division in making students into student *writers*. The research informing the Illinois Decision investigated not just what was in the rhetoric courses, then, but also what other faculty felt was “deficient” about student writing in relation to their perceived charge in improving it. The following table illustrates the timeline of the committee’s initiatives toward improving students’ use of English.

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Table 1

Year	Authors of Study	Study Focus	Summary/Conclusions
1939	English Department and Provost’s Office, under SCOSE	Study of quality of written English	Grades earned in Rhetoric 1 and 2 (101 and 102) not accurate predictors of quality of writing in subsequent courses/years
1940	Professor Harold Hillebrand (Head, English Department) and “prominent businessmen,” sponsored by SCOSE	Training students in use of English	Recommendation to set up a “program designed to assure proficiency in English”
1940–42	Edward F. Potthoff (English Dept) sponsored by SCOSE	Quality of upperclass students’ writing	“in general, a student backslides in his writing,” but a student receiving an A or B in Rhetoric 102 is “far more likely to maintain good standards of English than a student receiving less than a B”

Table 1: Continued

1947-48	Robert Moore (Director, Writing Clinic) with rhetoric staff, "business executives," and high school administrators, with sponsorship by SCOSE and Joint Commission on Research in Student English (JCORSE)	Standards check of papers for Qualifying Examination in English	Standards compared with standards held by co-readers of these themes showed businessmen agreed with standards, rhetoric staff "slightly more strict," and high school administrators "slightly more lenient." No drastic revision of standards warranted. Businessmen confirmed that "good writing is of immediate, practical importance."
1948	College of Commerce, sponsorship by SCOSE and JCORSE	Economics papers graded for "content and for English"	No conclusive findings secondary to "students [being] warned their English would be graded"
1950	SCSOSE and JCORSE	Questionnaires to students and faculty as "preliminary to and publicity for the <i>Stylebook</i> "	Results not conclusive (response rate poor); but "fair to conclude that all students do considerable writing for their courses and that they need to write well to succeed in college"
1950	SCOSE and JCORSE	Study of writing in students' final examinations	Graded using same standards as those for Qualifying Examination; concluded that writing was poorer on these exams than on Qualifying Exam ("there would be three times the number of failures. . . if students wrote them as they wrote other examinations"), but that students who receive A or B in Rhetoric 102 "continue to write acceptably"

At the conclusion of the sheet outlining the above projects, an admonition appears:

[T]he average student does not maintain the quality of writing he produces to meet his rhetoric requirements. Put another way, in other than rhetoric courses, the student *can* write better than he *does* write. This fact implies that if all instructors would demand good writing from their students, they would

be likely to receive it. The Senate Committee on Student English should make every effort to secure the cooperation of faculty members. (SCOSE, "Research")

Two important observations are embedded here. First, faculty should take a larger role in requiring students to produce better writing in their upper-division coursework. I contend that this is an early call to a WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum) approach, one I believe is supported by many of the archival documents.¹⁶ Second, students do well in high-stakes

Rhetoric remained the flashpoint for testing not just literacy but also student character and motivation, both inside and outside the space of the institution.

settings, such as the Qualifying Examination, but subsequently do not remain vigilant about their writing. Embedded *deeper* in this observation is the assumption that students are capable of "more than they do," stretching back to freshman year. In short, the committee demanded a more consistent attention to writing *throughout* the four-year undergraduate experience. Unlike Roberts, SCOSE et. al were not shy about putting the blame on students and their lack of effort and fortitude. Yet, ultimately, the studies agreed that such demands start at the *beginning* of a student's career at Illinois, in the rhetoric course. And so the historical record would support that rhetoric remained the flashpoint for testing not just literacy but also student character and motivation, both inside and outside the space of the institution.¹⁷ Eliminating Rhetoric 100—rather than continuing to experiment with its many forms or delivery mechanisms—would be the first step toward achieving these broader student literacy goals.

Closing the "House of Correction": The Public Responds to the Decision

Following the announcement of the Illinois Decision, and despite the support from campus administrators and faculty and apparent support by other institutions that would use the decision to justify the discontinuance of remedial writing on their own campuses, there still remained a visceral split amongst disciplinary founders. This split would linger in our disciplinary histories as discord over the place of remediation in college writing programs and would fuel the impasse in determining where and how to identify and help basic writers on our campuses. In the recently archived papers of Professor John Gerber at the University of Iowa, a folder labeled "Fan

Mail" includes letters between Gerber and one Professor Harold L. Clapp of Grinnell College, Iowa. In this letter, dated May 1, 1956,¹⁸ Clapp writes:

When I first heard of the Illinois decision on the matter of ditching remedial English and putting the burden on the public schools, I rejoiced. . . . Then I found a "Staff Writer" article in the *Des Moines Register* quoting you as exploring the decision . . . and I felt somewhat less elated. I would not presume to argue the point with you, nor question your right to your opinion. I would, however, very much like to know whether the Staff Writer can have quoted you correctly, as saying "We don't feel that the high schools can reasonably be expected to prepare them for college work. We take the position that they should be expected to prepare them for good high school work, and it's our job to prepare them to do college work." (Clapp)

In response, Gerber penned a nearly three-page letter to Clapp, in which he contends:

The Illinois action, it seems to me, reflects unfairly on the high school teachers of English who are one of the most hard working groups in the business. I don't see how they can get much better results unless the public is willing to raise certification requirements and pour enough money into secondary education so that teaching loads can be lightened. Even supposing that they could get better results under present conditions, the action of the Illinois trustees is not likely to make them want to. (Gerber, Letter)

Gerber goes on to outline several points of rebuttal to the Illinois Decision. These include a concern for "segregation" in high school instruction, based on students' college aspirations, even as students will be "motivated to work harder" if they want to attend Illinois. Gerber also feared that "students entering Illinois in 1960 will not be much better equipped in English than they are now. If this is so . . . the only possible result will be a lowering of college standards" (Gerber, Letter)—something Wilson later responds to directly in his 1961 *CCC* piece.¹⁹

It's important to also note Gerber's points regarding local conditions in his own state. Gerber argues, "So long as the State University is committed to taking every student with a diploma from an accredited Iowa high school, we shall be getting a certain percentage of students who are semi-literate." Gerber's premise is that the high schools will always produce a certain percentage of students needing remedial work, which the colleges cannot control. The key difference between Roberts and Gerber, in my reading, is

that while Roberts wanted to see *if* high schools could do more—to build a stronger incoming class and Rhetoric Program, and not fearing a lessened program reputation in doing so—Gerber seems to take a fatalistic view of the situation, a view sympathetic to high school faculty. But he is also reluctant to take any action.

Spotlighting public reactions to the decision, which would also take up these very concerns, is the final piece of a recovered history regarding Roberts and the decision that not only clarifies its reception but also allows for a segue into how, at present, the decision might inform K–16 work, WPA agencies, and public notions of basic writing.

What we see at work in Gerber's archived reaction to the Illinois Decision is a question of how high school literacy versus college expectations are defined, and whether the student is agent or object in her literacy acquisition. Spotlighting public reactions to the decision, which would also take up these very concerns, is the final piece of a recovered history regarding Roberts and the decision that not only clarifies its reception but also allows for a segue into how, at present, the decision might inform K–16 work, WPA agencies, and

public notions of basic writing.

Several contrasting examples from local and national media between 1954 and 1957, immediate pre-and post-decision, illustrate the postwar impasse that persists today in college “readiness” debates. Across these examples, two common and familiar threads emerge: the discourse of teacher blame (high school teachers are deficient) and the discourse of self-improvement (students should try harder; remedial students are lazy). Taken in tandem, the lack of stasis in defining how to help basic writers means trouble for WPAs as interlocutors. For example, the op-ed piece “Juvenile Delinquency on the Campus,” from the December 28, 1955, *Chicago Tribune*, showcases a deeply judgmental public to whom Roberts would be accountable, as WPA. The article opens:

Almost a third of the young men and women in the freshman class at the University of Illinois are juvenile delinquents altho not, we hasten to add, in the sense in which the police use the phrase. These unfortunate young people are delinquent in English and are committed by the hundreds to a reformatory known as the remedial class in rhetoric. While serving their terms they are taught useful trades, including spelling, punctuating, and expressing ideas in sentences and paragraphs that will pass a moderately rigid inspection. The

university authorities have just announced that they will close their house of correction in 1960. ("Juvenile Delinquency" 14)

Thereafter, the piece goes on to further align morals and literacy behaviors. The final sentences of the piece exemplify this negative alignment:

"Your slip shows" might serve as a slogan to heighten the interest of girls in English, and maybe somebody can figure out another slogan for the boys. . . . Young men whose ambition does not reach beyond a steady car hiker and young ladies who look forward to careers clerking in a dime store needn't bother too much about the accuracy and fluency of their English. The rest had better learn to make sentences and punctuate them while there is still time. (14)

This op-ed is clearly a scathing attack on what the paper sees as the scourge of illiterates, clearly aligning proper literacy with social (middle) class. But what's more important, perhaps, is that it *celebrates* the Illinois Decision and, as such, was archived *by* the Committee on Student English in its institutional files. The committee as a whole therefore, presumably, did not disagree with the *Tribune's* overall views; in contrast, it archived them for posterity.²⁰

It is not difficult to find other news stories like these declaring support for the elimination of remedial writing, with voiced belief that hard work is the fix for poor literacy. A *New York Times* piece from November 1957 focuses on Illinois students in remedial courses who contend their high school teachers "were not tough enough." Responses include a high school teacher who asserts, "I don't care if my students hate me, I'm going to require them to read great works. Good books forced me to pick up vocabulary words." Marcia Winn's *Tribune* series of articles on poor high school student writers includes "Illinois Pupils Aren't Only Poor Spellers" from February 5, 1956—two months after the decision was announced. It notes, "Everyone here today is saying *Good for Illinois*; maybe now Indiana will follow suit. Most of the high school pupils are capable enough, but they are content to 'get by,' and the schools too often let them," adding, "A Chicago high school English teacher wrote that many of her colleagues 'regret that the plan will not go into effect until 1960. . . ' [and] concluded wistfully: 'The taxpayers should now question the remedial classes in high schools.'" (Winn 14).

These non-institutional media outlets paint a picture of the basic writing student as socially deficient (or perhaps socially *delinquent*), unmotivated, and, as Winn observes, a taxpayer *burden*, a concern that Roberts was careful to note in his defense of the decision, in particularly unheroic terms.²¹ Similarly, the *Daily Illini* and local Champaign-Urbana community newspapers featured numerous stories from 1954 to 1956 that profiled remediation and its underlying causes. Stories focused on faculty reporting on trouble with student writing and the SCOSE rehearsing its call for greater cooperation in writing instruction (“83 Percent”; “Committee Lacks”); university and English department representatives, including Roberts, reporting on the increase in failures of the Qualifying Exam, as well as increased Rhetoric 100 enrollments (“U of I”; “More Rhetoric”); and Roberts and others previewing the decision (“Brochure on UI”; “Committee Lacks”; “Trustees Drop”; “Board Eliminates”).

One *Daily Illini* report from August 1, 1956, detailed the Illinois Decision and its ramifications, employing an extensive interview with Roberts that reassured students that the continued use of placement tests would indicate which students would need “special attention,” even as “handicapped students won’t be competing with other handicapped students; they’ll be expected to compete with scholars competent in English composition” (“2 Major Changes” 3). Here we also see the rhetoric of competition—and scholastic achievement—which would come to characterize much of the discourse on the decision pre- and post-implementation, and also the climate on the Illinois campus both in the 1950s and today. Playing upon students’ fears of being “less than,” in scholarly terms, was one way to reassure them that standards would not be reduced when Rhetoric 100 was eliminated, and that the decision, therefore, was harmless. Roberts knew early on that the decision would not only respond to public concerns about intellectual rigor at the flagship institution, but that such concerns might also fulfill his attendant hopes for better teacher training, faculty workload, and increased alliances between secondary schools and colleges toward common standards. About these and other hopes, he was sadly mistaken.

The Decision Is Not History: Basic Writing and the WPA

The legacy of the Illinois Decision, and Charles Roberts’s both powerful and powerless role in it, weighs heavily on WPAs today. Our Rhetoric Program at

Illinois once again includes a small but thriving basic writing curriculum. But as the decision passes its sixtieth anniversary, we are no better off regarding the public's perception of basic writing or productive K–16 partnerships. We continue to struggle for control of the measurements of student learning within otherwise ambitious initiatives such as the Common Core. We continue to see the receding landscape of basic writing nationwide, as it is increasingly relegated to two-year campuses, if at all, and is regarded as not worthy of investment. We lose still more of our students to dual credit, early college, and myriad testing. If basic writing *is* a course our students need, it is often eradicated in “credit wash” or is disregarded by faculty advisers and financially stressed students and parents.

The decision, and Roberts, certainly can thus appear to comprise the *Ur*-text on basic writing that led us here: a powerful WPA with strong field standing who leads a large, visible program eliminates basic writing, to the great cheers of faculty, students, and the media. Seeing Roberts as the wrecking ball of the house of basic writing, however, and thus the anti-hero of our origin story, is a dangerous assumption to cast in light of our own current struggles as WPAs. There was no easily identifiable hero at Illinois in 1955; there were only many flawed, complicit actors. The deeper story of the decision that I have narrated here, and the context in which its elements were archived, continues to reveal much about competing public identities of writing, as well as ongoing pressure on WPAs to both offer a responsible, locally sound curriculum *and* serve a larger skeptical public—a pressure revealed to be not new through Roberts's example. While Roberts's actions reveal the extent to which a WPA sacrificed the basic writing students in his program in order to save the professional lives of

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his instructional staff, they also raise a question for WPAs today: How far would you go to make your program “better,” and for whom?

Retelling Roberts’s story indicates that representing historical figures in our discipline is fraught with complications. The undertheorization of WPAs as historical, local figures who are the faces of their programs’ actions (or reactions) is real; each of us who runs a writing program today will be potentially written into its history, often without sufficient contextual support. As revealed in previous work on WPAs in history—chief among these Barbara L’Eplattenier and Lisa Mastrangelo’s *Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration*—program directors have long since battled between achieving professional agency and being subsumed by the larger needs of their own programs, especially when leading initiatives that result in notoriety at end points on the scale of praise and blame. Roberts’s case illustrates this battle acutely. Today, WPAs face an aggravated set of circumstances regarding curricular control that challenge even the most prepared among us to sustain their programs’ integrity in the face of a flattened national perspective on “good” writing across educational venues. At this juncture, then, we must also ask ourselves, what can we take away from these complex stories of our predecessors toward addressing our present conditions?

First, the locus of control over high school to college partnerships has essentially slipped out of our programs’ hands and out of our immediate expertise. Some WPAs are not well versed in all the regulatory mechanisms designed to create ease of enrollment and transfer for the largest number of students possible while eliding our key, local programmatic differences. This stems from multiple causes, including the nature of our professional training and the era in which that training occurred. If we are to avoid being written negatively into our institutional histories, however, WPAs of all generations and backgrounds need to take a greater role in local and national discussions that seek to eliminate from our campuses not just first-year and basic writing courses, but also general education. Roberts could not anticipate the degree to which general education has now been devalued, but he did create a kind of model for reaching out beyond the university itself, defining our *own* standards before they are defined for us.

Second, all WPAs—as Linda Adler-Kassner has recently argued in *The Activist WPA*—need to articulate our program’s values to the general public, in terms relevant to stakeholders. While Roberts created documentation

for arguably negative ends, he nonetheless could explain his program's workings on a moment's notice, to a variety of audiences. We must continue to document what our programs do, and do well, and, further, we must articulate the value of *college courses on college campuses*, if we are to hope to save courses such as basic writing, which articulate, in theory, to nothing and appear to external stakeholders to cost more than they provide.

Finally, we need to continue to interrogate both the histories of our writing programs on a local level and the opportunity for more cross-institutional research on and discussion of WPA histories across campuses, for example, putting into conversation the work of Charles Roberts with other WPAs who lauded the Illinois Decision in its historical time. Did Illinois have as wide an influence as the archives would indicate? What conversations about Illinois and basic writing took place on other campuses? How will we continue to document these negative as well as positive stories and use them to better our programs, both locally and collectively?

Answering these questions requires a concerted effort to review and accordingly revise our disciplinary history to locate where sometimes uncomfortable, always frustrating, accepted narratives implicate us still, and to reinvest in documenting our struggles and paying equal attention to both the positive outcomes we achieve and the negative consequences—the failures, the “anti-hero” moments—we engage in and learn from. Over the long horizon of a career, some WPAs may find themselves in high-profile positions of scrutiny regarding programmatic decisions—decisions that may look to future WPAs as foolish or not supportive of students or curricula. Some of us will not look like heroes at all. But rarely will we have acted alone. Re-historicizing the Illinois Decision reminds us that questions about the line between high school and college, and how writing programs are beholden to larger political conversations, are ongoing. It also forces us to consider what power WPAs have to control these conversations in the first place.

In other words, Charles Roberts is me; he is also you. We must now seek to understand, more deliberately, why and how this is so.

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Notes

1. In 1956 there was neither the UI–Chicago campus (which opened in 1946 at Navy Pier as an extension campus only, moving to its present “Circle” location and becoming UIC in 1965) nor the UI–Springfield campus (inaugurated in 1995 as UIS, formerly Sangamon State University), so the nomenclature of the era would have simply been *University of Illinois* representing the one flagship campus. I thus use *Illinois* to designate the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, for historical accuracy.
2. These included the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Des Moines Register*, all local area newspapers for Champaign-Urbana, the campus *Daily Illini* newspaper, as well as field journals such as *College Composition and Communication* and industry publications such as *The High School Instructor*. Concurrent articles on remedial students in English also appeared in venues such as *Time* magazine and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.
3. In the 1957 “English Zero” symposium, universities reported that significant percentages of their students place into basic-level writing courses. Some examples were Indiana University (21–24%), University of Kentucky (15%), University of Minnesota (9–18%), Ohio University (“1/3” of incoming class), and the University of Oregon (18–20%). In 2013, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that between 1999 and 2000, an average of 26% of all enrolled students were in remedial courses (English or math); in 2003–2004 this figure was 19%, and in 2007–2008, 20%. Figures for two-year and open admissions institutions, which traditionally enroll more economically disadvantaged students, were notably above the average (at 30–37%, 19–23%, and 20–25%, respectively) (National Center for Education Statistics).

4. At the time of this writing (April 2016), I was the WPA at the University of Illinois. As of its February 2018 publication date, I am the associate dean for curricula and academic policy in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois, a position I assumed in July 2017, having served for four years as WPA at UIUC and an additional thirteen years as WPA prior, across two other university campuses.

5. Though various historical accountings of Roberts's WPA career concur that he held this position until 1960, in an April 1, 1958, article in the *Daily Illini*, the announcement is made that Roberts would step down to "to a position involving English articulation between the University and Illinois high schools." I cannot locate any other evidence, however, that he vacated the WPA role before 1960.

6. John Gerber was hired as an assistant professor of English at Iowa in September 1944 and thereafter was appointed chair of the Communication Skills basic course as part of a split appointment. Gerber petitioned to resign from this chair position in February 1948, asking that his line be reallocated as a full-time appointment in English (Gerber, Memo). E. C. Mabie, then chair of the Department of Speech and Dramatic Arts, wrote a letter of support to the dean of the Division on Research and Teaching on March 11, 1948, stating that the chair of English feels that "Dr. Gerber's future is in literature. Therefore, this Communication Skills [course] must always get secondary consideration" (Mabie).

7. These surveys are not dated, but context clues from Roberts's other noncataloged archival items would indicate the likely date to be 1943 or 1944. These surveys are particularly interesting in their attention to students' home lives and extracurricular habits, such as use of media (i.e., radio) in conjunction with their perceptions of their high school English courses. Socioeconomic-centered questions such as parental occupation provide insight into the makeup of the freshmen class as a whole. These surveys, in my view, deserve a separate study that I hope to undertake in the future as an example of Roberts's prescient views on ethnographic research in composition.

8. Roberts also contributed to the edification of freshmen writers, as Hamilton et. al tell how he "brought to the teaching and direction of Freshman Rhetoric at the University of Illinois the full power of his enthusiasm and imagination," including the establishment of a Freshman Reading Room and, while still a graduate student in 1931, a freshman departmental magazine, *The Green Caldron* (Hamilton et al. n.p.). On the other hand, as part of his paradoxical professional identity, he also created the "Bona Fide Boners" column in *CCC*, which ridiculed errors committed by composition students. Content for "Bona Fide Boners" was taken from the section "Rhet as Writ" in each issue of *The Green Caldron*.

9. In the document “Background of the Publication of ‘Standards in Freshman Rhetoric at the University of Illinois,’” Senate Committee secretary Jessie Howard explains that a similar publication was presented by the mathematics department at the Allerton Conference on Education in 1952 and received “much praise” (SCOSE, “Background”). This document was coauthored by faculty in math, the College of Engineering, and the College of Education. Its publication resulted in English being “advised to prepare a similar work” for rhetoric.

10. In subsequent decades, the Allerton English meetings morphed into articulation negotiation sessions between high schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges in Illinois. Much more recently (post 2008), the annual meeting has become a scholarly conference in which college faculty from across the state present papers and discuss issues related to English studies.

11. Indeed, even after the *Standards* booklet was in press, an accompanying order form sent with the notice of its publication included this caveat: “We’d be interested in any comment you may care to make on our current efforts to help students bridge the gap between high school and college. We’ll not quote you in print without first obtaining your permission, so feel free to speak your mind.”

12. The committee’s original iteration, according to the Illinois archives, was from 1918 to 1931.

13. At present at UIUC, credit-by-examination exempts, on average, 50% of its approximately 7,500 incoming students from the Comp I (rhetoric/communication) requirement, via AP, IB, and ACT or SAT English subscores.

14. The nine-point list of resolutions adopted by the IATE on October 29, 1954, includes class sizes of no more than twenty-five students, to ensure “effective training in spoken and written English,” and requires that “a minimum of one short written composition be required in *all* English classes every week; this will of course necessitate reducing the teaching load.” These recommendations culminated in the overall admonition that the principal enlist teacher cooperation in “holding all pupils to the highest possible standards of speaking and writing” (IATE).

15. As Harris W. Wilson notes, regarding the content and value of the *Standards* booklet, “The pamphlet spells out in detail exactly what the university expects of entering freshmen. . . . In addition to stating the specific requirements and objectives of the freshman rhetoric courses, it provides an example of the proficiency test in rhetoric given to all entering freshmen, and typical proficiency themes of A, B, C, D, and failing caliber. If this publication receives the dissemination and use we hope for it, the dropping of Rhetoric 100 in 1960 will cause little disturbance” (72).

16. The move toward increased attention to writing outside English courses, on the part of both students and faculty, was profiled in a February 27, 1959, *Daily Illini* piece called "A Step toward Righting." This piece, which advocates "the noteworthy attempt" by the Senate Committee on Student English to raise standards in rhetoric, observes nonetheless that students "cease to care about their writing when composing a term paper in aeronautical engineering or an exam in history."

17. For a more detailed overview of the research of the SCOSE, see Edward F. Potthoff's 1945 *College English* article, "The Program for Improving Students' Use of English at the University of Illinois."

18. The letter as found in the University of Iowa archives is dated May 1, 1967; clearly this is a typographical error, as correspondence from Gerber surrounding this letter in historical context would put the correct year as 1956.

19. For yet another competing opinion about remediation and the status of the college writing instructor, see Edward J. Sparling's "Improving the Status of the Composition Teacher" from *CCC*, May 1957.

20. One might question whether the Senate Committee actually compiled this archive of public reactions in order to document the positive response. First, the overall archive of the committee indicates full support for the elimination of remedial rhetoric. Second, as I have noted in my previous work on historical formations of basic writing, it was not uncommon for institutional committees on student writing to archive or "scrapbook" their accomplishments during this time period. Harvard University's Committee on the Use of English by Students did exactly this between the turn of the twentieth century and the Second World War, as I describe in chapter 4 of *Before Shaughnessy*.

21. Roberts made several brief mentions of the *cost* of offering Rhetoric 100 in his interviews with local news outlets. In the December 21, 1955, *Daily Illini* feature, Roberts comments that "the University can hardly ask the taxpayers of this state to buy again from us the sort of elementary composition instruction they thought they were buying in their tax investment in their local schools." The teaser that opens the piece summarizes Roberts's position as "UI Cannot Afford to Offer High School English."

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