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Power Revisited; Or, How We Became a Department

Rebecca Moore Howard

For most of the twentieth century, American universities have typically housed composition and literature together in one department called "English." Increasingly, however, the compatibility of the two has been challenged in declarations such as those of Maxine Hairston and Susan Miller. Sherry Burgus Little heralds a move toward independence for composition studies that she likens to the early twentieth-century split between speech and English, whereas Louise Z. Smith regards the departure of composition from the English department as ill-founded or at least controversial. But the proposition is nevertheless quietly tested, at institutions large and small, as writing programs from San Diego State University to Mount St. Mary's College move to become autonomous departments of writing, demonstrating in practice what continues to be debated in print.

Departmental power and the power to become a department

Susan Miller asks, "Given the traditional low status of composition and of its underclass faculties, how can the field achieve a respectable past, either as an elaboration of standard historical accounts of English or as a critique of them?" (35-6). The quandary she describes applies not only to the history and theories of composition but also to its institutional structuring. To gain the power of departmental status, the writing program must exercise power; yet how can it exercise what it does not have?

The problem loses circularity when one differentiates subsets within the category of power. Departmental status is one type of power--"institutionally sanctioned power"--but attaining that power requires the exercise of another type--"institution-changing power." The writing program can gain institutionally sanctioned power by exercising institution-changing power.

Institutionally sanctioned power tends to be territorial, concerned with property rights and privileges derived from the university's established, traditional understanding of itself. Academic institutions sanction power to groups (most notably academic departments) and to individuals

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(most notably the tenured). In their collective functioning, these then become the official institution, reproducing the criteria for and mechanisms of institutionally sanctioned power. This inner circle of institutionally sanctioned power also recognizes an outer circle of necessary and/or desirable units (e.g., programs) and individuals (e.g., adjuncts and the untenured).

From time to time, those with institutionally sanctioned power recognize and respond to institution-changing power exercised by outer-circle individuals or groups. This institution-changing power, which revises established definitions of the university, may also produce institutionally sanctioned power for the group or individual(s) who wield it. In the dynamic of institution-changing power, what is proposed and how it is proposed are equally crucial. If what is being proposed or those proposing it are portrayed as superior to the status quo, the inner circle is unlikely to accept it, for to do so would be to acknowledge their inferiority, since they are the status quo. Those in the outer circle who wish to change an institution have a much higher probability of success if what they propose is depicted as an enhancement of the status quo and if those who propose it depict themselves as the equal rather than the superior or inferior of those to whom they propose it.

Although he does not differentiate them, Edward M. White describes these two types of power in "Use it or Lose it: Power and the WPA." In one sentence, he advances three important propositions: "[R]ecognize the fact that all administration deals in power; power games demand aggressive players; assert that you have power (even if you don't) and you can often wield it" (3). In asserting that "all administration deals in power," he alludes to institutionally sanctioned power. In declaring that "power games demand aggressive players," he valorizes a militaristic mode of operation which later in his essay he declares necessary. His third proposition seems paradoxical: In the academic world (or any world), is the assertion of institutionally sanctioned power tantamount to holding that power? It is if one subscribes to Carlyle's Great Man theory wherein the heroic individual, through an internally generated assertion of self, wins dominance over the more easily cowed population. In this post-Enlightenment, post-Romantic era, however, few of us feel comfortable with the precepts of heroic individualism.

If one translates White's third proposition, "assert that you have power (even if you don't) and you can often wield it," into institution-changing power--the power of vocal groups and/or charismatic individuals to propose and effect new paradigms for an institution--this statement loses its paradoxical qualities (although it still retains potential affinity with heroic individualism). In this translation, White's third proposition eloquently describes the "how" of institution-changing power. Those who propose change must depict themselves as the equals of those to whom they propose it. In that case, one can assert power (institution-changing power) and wield it, even when one does not already have institutionally sanctioned power.

The Colgate Interdisciplinary Writing Program, which has become the Colgate Department of Interdisciplinary Writing, has employed some of the institution-changing strategies advocated by White. For the most part, though, it has not adopted the militaristic stance that he acknowledges as a presupposition to his power-building agenda (12). On the contrary, the Colgate experience has demonstrated that playing power games does not necessarily entail adversariness. We are not so much the warriors White arms for battle as we are the formerly timid but now self-liberating "flying mice" celebrated by Hélène Cixous ("Writing" 11). Our objective has been not so much to win a high place in the established order as to shape our own place, a place of power-sharing collectivity and liberatory pedagogy, in spite of the hierarchizing bureaucratic tendencies of American academic institutions. The shaping of that place, as long as it is within the university structure, entails gaining a sound footing in that structure and a certain measure of institutionally sanctioned power. After all, the subordinate seldom choose their fates; instead, they are given them. But as we strove to lose subordinate status, we worked against the temptation to do so in a militaristic spirit of antagonism, for that would have undermined the principles of collectivism and shared power that have come to characterize the Department of Interdisciplinary Writing's democratic, administrative decision-making processes and its curriculum, which values instruction over evaluation and which emphasizes interactive, power-sharing pedagogy, such as peer group response groups and the discussion rather than lecture format.

One response to subaltern status is to fight for a higher place in the hierarchy. Another is to recognize the fallacies of hierarchy as an arbitrary rather than foundational social condition. (Perhaps not coincidentally, the turn-of-the-century Vassar English Department, as described by JoAnn Campbell, also experienced poor working conditions and functioned as a democratic collective in both administration and curriculum.) As an alternative to adversarial competition, the Colgate Department of Interdisciplinary Writing illustrates Cixous' metaphor of flying--flying from hierarchical strictures and flying by means of disruption and change ("Laugh" 344). True, despite the allure of Cixous' "flying," we recognize that real escape is impossible and that real change is glacial. The Colgate Department of Interdisciplinary Writing is going to remain at Colgate University, functioning as part of an American university; that is, we will continue to

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function within a hierarchy. As Ernst Behler explains in his discussion of Derrida, there is no place for transgression outside that which it transgresses. However lofty its aims, our department is not going to effect any radical changes in the hierarchical ways in which universities function. Yet Cixous offers the enticing metaphor of escape, the soaring to a place above hierarchical domination and subordination. If that image must remain more a metaphor than an objective, it is a metaphor that furthers a realistic objective: Gain sufficient power within a hierarchical institution to set one's own non-hierarchical agenda for administration and curriculum and gain that power through non-adversarial methods.

Whereas Edward M. White espouses military methods for conquest, ours are collaborative methods for effecting change without hierarchical competition, change that will itself transgress the discourse of hierarchical competition. Yet in White's agenda and ours, the goal is the same: to gain institutionally sanctioned power for composition studies.

Instruments of institution-changing power

In 1983, composition studies at Colgate University consisted of two remedial courses taught by four adjuncts with no departmental affiliation. As of July 1992, composition studies at Colgate University resides in and constitutes the Department of Interdisciplinary Writing, which offers over a dozen language theory and studio writing courses taught by seven faculty, only one of whom is adjunct.[1] That transformation has been effected by means of several instruments of non-adversarial institution-changing power, all of which are at the disposal of every writing program administrator, not just for the struggle to become a writing department but also for a variety of other potential purposes as well.

Talking and writing

As White observes, "the writing ability that WPAs usually possess is . . . an instrument of power" (11). Most of us are gifted, too, with a silvered tongue. But to gain institutionally sanctioned power for a disempowered writing program, knowing when to use oral conversation and when to use written memoranda--and choosing one's audience–become crucial skills that are not always readily at one's disposal. No formulae will answer every exigency. Our experience at Colgate, nevertheless, renders a few flexible guidelines:

- No matter how much more comfortable you may feel with your pen than with your tongue, never let yourself rely too heavily on written communications. If the rest of the university is to learn to respect you as an equal, they will rely on oral discourse to make their judgments. Don't let too much of this discourse take place on the telephone either; they need to see your face as they talk with you. In setting up face-to-face conversations, resort as seldom as possible to phoning a colleague to ask for an appointment. You are in a less subservient position if, in a chance encounter, you bring up the topic of concern and suggest that the two of you discuss it over lunch.

- When you have oral conversations with administrators who have power over your program, be conservative in your judgments about the reliability of their memory. Even the most well-meaning administrators' memories can fail them in your hour of need. Whenever possible, write a follow-up memorandum to conversations with powerful administrators.

- Keep a daily private log of all key interactions concerning the writing program; you can't trust your own memory either. (Incidentally, if you also include a sketch of the work you do each day in this log, you will have ready answers when new administrators inquire into how you could possibly make productive use of such an enormous amount of release time.)

- Expect no one else to carry out the responsibilities for your program unless you hound her into doing so, but find polite, cheerful, even indirect ways of hounding, and always specify target dates. Make sure your target date is well in advance of the date you actually need the material, so that when the other person is behind in her work, you can still get the material by the actual deadline.

- Without going overboard, make sure that everyone is always aware of the scholarly work going on in your program. Too easily people will think of you only as an administrator and the writing faculty only as teachers. If you are to gain departmental status, you cannot allow that to happen.

External review

No matter how good your on-campus relations are, faculty and administrators at your university are more apt to consider you an equal if they know that the professoriate elsewhere respects you too. The external review (a system for which is sponsored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators) is the world's finest instrument for accomplishing this task. Our dean asked for a list of potential reviewers, which we supplied to him. On our list, we indicated our three first choices, whom he invited. Those three were very carefully selected, in frank consultation with the dean; we wanted people whom our administration and colleagues would value. Because we also wanted a heterogeneous group whom no one would view as a rigged collection of automatic supporters, we made sure that the evaluation team included people with convictions different from our own but with sufficient flexibility to bring an open mind to our arrangements. One evaluator was a Colgate graduate; a second was the WPA from a neighboring institution of higher status than ours; and the third came from an institution comparable to ours.

In the on-campus agenda that we arranged for the reviewers, we included not only our supporters but also our detractors. We wanted a review that would realistically assess our place in the university and our options for movement. In that regard, we candidly described to the review team our own assessment of our situation, our most pressing concerns, and the solutions to them that we considered most promising.

The external review came back with a very favorable portrait of our program, derived from the triangulation of three very different reviewers' perspectives. They agreed with us that the absence of tenurable, full-time positions--the institutional sanctioning of individuals--was our most pressing problem, and they also agreed that the most promising solution was department status--the institutional sanctioning of the group.

The proposal for departmental status

Having created the conditions for the desired outcome, we still believed our position too powerless to initiate a frontal charge toward departmental status. We had to wait for that initiative to come from elsewhere, and that "elsewhere" turned out to be the best possible "elsewhere": when the new dean met to discuss the external review with the Writing faculty, he invited us to petition to become a department. Such an invitation was a piece of great good fortune. We had a supportive dean who believed that composition instruction was important for the future of the university and who believed that Writing faculty should be treated equitably with other faculty, but the great good fortune was also partly of our own making. We had worked for years to establish our teaching as important, our scholarship as significant, and our personal conduct as comparable to that of other Colgate faculty.

The petition itself was collaboratively composed by the entire Writing faculty, who worked intensively for three months. Two of us drafted text, and the group debated and revised in innumerable, endless, but singularly fulfilling sessions. Periodically we shared drafts with the dean and two other administrators instrumental to the decision-making process. They, too, met with us from time to time for advice, arguments, and negotiations.

The actual language of the petition was extremely difficult. We not only had to design a department but to define our field. To transmit the interdisciplinary intricacies of rhetoric in permeable language for non-rhetoricians, without banalizing rhetorical studies, proved a monumental task, with great disagreements and heated arguments. What was at stake was changing the institution so that we would have a sanctioned place in its inner circle.

We could choose to submit a conservative petition containing only requests that we felt reasonably sure would be granted, or we could submit an ideal-universe petition that would describe precisely the sort of department we wished to become. We settled upon the latter. We decided, though, that the petition would have separable components, so that administrators who opposed, say, the idea of a degree program in writing, would not feel compelled to oppose the entire petition. The petition we finally submitted outlined a three-step process: (1) establishing a department; (2) developing new courses; and (3) establishing a minor concentration.

The Dean's Advisory Council, supportive of the Interdisciplinary Writing Program but laboring in a time of limited financial resources, deliberated for four months.[2] When they granted our petition, they endorsed only the first step, tabling the other two for future negotiations. In establishing the department, moreover, the council did not create full-time tenure-track positions, nor did they grant our requested name. Instead of "Interdisciplinary Rhetoric Department," we are the "Department of Interdisciplinary Writing." The reasons for this revision have so far eluded our every attempt to ascertain them. In some accounts, "rhetoric" seems to have been considered a realm that does not include "writing," at least insofar as "writing" includes "composition studies." In this regard, "rhetoric" seems to have been defined in the aesthetic realm described by Berlin (185), a realm that excludes the business of teaching. In these accounts, sometimes "rhetoric" seems also to have been considered a

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dangerous term that would open the floodgates for the department to teach an expanded range of theoretical courses while avoiding our true mission--fixing comma splices. To our mystification, in still other accounts "rhetoric" seems to have been taken as a term too narrow for our activities as teachers of composition, language theory, and linguistics.

In designating the name "Department of Interdisciplinary Writing," the dean allowed that we might at a future date again raise the question of our name. We will. When we do, we will obviously have to do a better job of communicating our vision of rhetoric, resolving at our local level the factionalism that Berlin attributes to the discursive formation of rhetoric (179-80), so that the term can be employed in our departmental title to signify not only theorizing about language but also teaching composition, both of which participate in the interrogation of signifying practices that lies at the heart of rhetoric. Behind that question of title may also lie the question of whether the Department of Interdisciplinary Writing is still seen as a group of fine teachers who may only incidentally be scholars and whose instruction is fundamentally normative in its aims: the hard-working folks who make "those students" write "good English."

In a time of difficult fiscal constraints, the administration necessarily took a conservative approach to creating a new department; but it took a bold step, by virtue of which Interdisciplinary Writing now holds institutionally sanctioned power as a group. With no tenured positions, we still do not have institutionally sanctioned power as individuals, but our efforts to gain tenurable (and thereafter tenured) positions can now bring to bear not only the mechanisms of institution-changing power that we already possessed but also the processes of institutionally sanctioned power that departmental status devolves upon us as a group. The first exercise of institutionally sanctioned power in the new department was successful. In September 1992, the Dean's Advisory Council authorized the first full-time tenure-track position in the three-month-old Department of Interdisciplinary Writing.

Methods of institution-changing power

What brought us to departmental status was the exercise of institution-changing power. Every single time we successfully exercised institution-changing power, we did so through non-adversarial methods. Whether that is because institution-changing power is by definition non-adversarial or whether non-adversariness is a predisposition of this particular Writing faculty is impossible to determine. I can only say that although we have recognized and participated in the hierarchical structures endemic to academic bureaucracy, we have at the same time striven to level or avert hierarchy, or at least to devise alternatives to it.

The personal approach

Most of our program development has proceeded on a one-to-one basis, as we have tactfully educated the university about what our business is and should be and have allowed our colleagues to educate us on the same subject. We have been guest speakers in colleagues' classes; we have conducted writing workshops; and we have engaged in myriad conversations about rhetoric while eating lunch at the faculty club, picking up our children at the Chenango Nursery School, or pushing a cart at the Grand Union grocery store.

Popularity

We have made sure to establish a composition curriculum valued by the students and faculty of our university. Every move in curricular development has been responsive to needs expressed or implied in the community, even as we redefined those needs. As a result, we offer courses so popular that student demand far outstrips our ability to staff them. We offer a highly varied curriculum of generic, discipline-based, and interdisciplinary composition courses, none of which is remedial. Approximately 17% of each year's entering class is required to take a composition course, but another 33% choose it as a free elective. We also sponsored a course-based peer tutoring program with an enthusiastic group of volunteer participating faculty. At the same time, we have worked hard at doing more than our share of teaching in the all-university instructional efforts of General Education and First-Year Seminars, and we have developed our introductory composition courses in concert with these courses.

"Good girls"

We have been, whenever possible, "good girls." We have hoarded our scanty political capital, saving it for really important issues. Whenever possible--whenever it did not entail compromising our fundamental self-definition--we have acceded to requests. We have cooperated. When asked to teach just one more section of General Education, we have. When asked at the last minute to find a peer tutor for a First-Year Seminar, we have. When asked to participate in an on-campus humanities colloquium

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during a semester's sabbatical, we have. We have not agreed to over-enroll our composition courses. We have not agreed to cut the travel budget that takes even our adjuncts to each year's 4 C's, giving them an active participation in the community in which they teach. Finally, we have not agreed to turn our offices into walk-in tutorial sites for students of colleagues who just don't themselves have the time.

Opportunism

The fundamental method of program development has been that of opportunism. Working without institutionally sanctioned power, we could not plot a multistaged plan of attack to be pursued confidently. Instead, we articulated our goals in both written and oral form among ourselves and from time to time with our supervising administrators, and we created a program-external climate conductive to their realization. Then we stayed very alert to opportunities when they arose, and we were willing to put in whatever intensive, unexpected labor the seizing of those opportunities entailed.

Persistence

That method has required our great patience. Sometimes those opportunities seemed never to arrive. At our darker moments, we have resorted to the laughter that Bakhtin, Irigaray, and Cixous prescribe for effecting change in apparently unchanging institutions. We have mounted an impromptu contest for the most outrageous earrings, organized a potluck supper at someone's house, or gathered at the Colgate Inn after work for a glass of wine and a lot of joking. It's a game, after all, and we have enjoyed that game when we recognized it as recreation rather than competition.

Collectivism

Just as opportunism has been our method, collectivism has been our mode. Throughout this essay I have used the first-person plural pronoun, not as a literary ornament but as a signifier of the Colgate Department of Interdisciplinary Writing. To be sure, in the early going I *was* the writing program; there wasn't much else but a director. As quickly as a faculty was acquired, however, a collective spirit gained ascendancy, one in which the director (now chair) is "in charge" only insofar as she is expected to enact the policies determined by the group. The operation of the collective allows us to see and seize opportunities when they arise. If we were not in constant

contact with each other, to share, sift, and evaluate information, we would have no way of making opportunism work for us.

Everything we do in our program, we do after a debate and a vote, without regard to rank or seniority; on almost every issue, the vote is unanimous. We seldom reach consensus; we disagree on a great deal. We get mad at each other, and talk about the offender behind her back until we've figured out how to speak to her face. Regarding program policy and development, though, we recognize that our only power is collective power, and we are all willing to compromise. That is our power.

If this definition of power sounds very familiar, like the {time-worn} stereotypes of women's ways of power, this is probably no coincidence. The Colgate Department of Interdisciplinary Writing is, at the moment, constituted entirely of women. Moreover, within the university structure, we had been in a severely subordinate (feminized) position. Because we succeeded by persuasion, rather than by coups d'état, our moves toward departmental status established a stable, satisfying power base--institutionally sanctioned power--for a previously subordinate writing program. This year the new department gains its first tenure-track line, and we are well along toward negotiating a satisfying means whereby the Writing faculty will have a full voice in the first tenure decision, even though at that time the Writing faculty will be untenured. We also possess the architect's plan for our new quarters, which will be not in our present dormitory basement but in an academic office building, along with the departments of Education, History, and Sociology and Anthropology. Most importantly, we now possess the institutionally sanctioned power necessary to gain the objectives tabled in our original departmental petition. We intend to pursue additional tenure-track positions, and we intend to propose again a degree program in our department. We intend, too, to revive the issue of our name, realizing that in that label of "rhetoric" lurks the recognition that composition studies encompasses a broad range of theoretical as well as practical concerns.

Yet the right to name ourselves does not constitute our greatest challenge. The most difficult task facing us is to maintain a third type of power that has darted along the margins of this entire essay: the power to enact collective rather than hierarchical structures in our administration and our curriculum. We face the challenge that the Vassar English department at the close of the nineteenth century did not: We have remedied our subordinate position within the university. Through the exercise of institution-changing power, we have gained institutionally sanctioned power. We have won a high place in the established order, and that is our new problem. Our challenge now will be continuing to function as a collective within the hierarchy, in the face of hierarchizing activities

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such as annual promotion and tenure rituals, the quotidian functionings of the department chair, and the inevitable departmental committees. As one Writing professor simply and eloquently said (in language that deliciously destabilizes my interrogation of Edward M. White's military metaphors), unless we can use our new institutionally sanctioned power to maintain our own place as a democratic collective, we will have "won the battle but lost the war."

Notes

1. Over the years Writing faculty have included not only Ph.D.s from literature and composition but also from anthropology, art history, biology, classics, geology, and history—which has had the effect, on the local level, of decentering that "half" of textual studies which involves writing/composition/rhetoric. As my Colgate colleagues and I have argued elsewhere, "Viewing the teaching of writing as a truly interdisciplinary enterprise, rather than the special prerogative of the English department and literature specialists, contributes to the definition of composition as a legitimate and independent profession" (Howard, Hess, and Darby 30). In this arrangement rhetoric has emerged as one of Geertz's "invisible colleges" usually obscured by traditional disciplines (157)--among which I would number the English-based writing program.

2. Unlike the situation at most universities, the Department of English was not involved in the petitioning or decision-making process, since the Interdisciplinary Writing Program was independent of English, and none of its faculty came from that department. At Colgate, literature, theater, and creative writing are taught in the English department, and language theory, linguistics, and academic writing in Interdisciplinary Writing.

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