

Should Composition Secede From English Departments?

The brochure for this conference advertises the fact that "The young Rhetoricians' Conference has cut loose" aiming to "breathe new life into year-weary writing teachers. In that spirit, I would answer the question in the title of my talk "Should Composition Secede from English"? by saying "Of course compositionists should secede. Why not? They have nothing to lose but their chains."

But, as always, the situation is more complicated than that and I find, just two years after the formal beginning of the Division of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas, my home institution, that I'm still more inclined to tell stories about the creation of the division than to analyze the event. And there is still much left to learn.

But in the twenty minutes or so I have today I'd like to be a bit more analytical, so I propose briefly to outline the conditions under which I believe a split of composition and rhetoric from an English department is feasible, the advantages of such a split, and the disadvantages. Pardon me if I wander into anecdote.

Let me begin by outlining four conditions necessary for a successful secession from a department of English, acknowledging that the circumstances under which the split occurred at the University of Texas were so unusual that I would not offer the Texas experience as a model except that it proves that it proves that a separation can be managed successfully under even in the most difficult times if other conditions are favorable.

For a successful division you must have a clear vision of what you intend to accomplish with a separate department or division of rhetoric. This vision is what pushes the enterprise past all the difficult political and bureaucratic hurdles that will stand in its way. It must be a relatively simple vision that can be sold to the university at large, to the general public, and to students. It must contain elements that serve the interests of most of the faculty likely to join you in the new academic unit.

shared with

The vision should entail some specific plans--ours included overhauling the undergraduate writing curriculum, creating a writing center, and working toward teaching more than 80% of our writing classes in networked classrooms. But the vision also entailed a professional commitment to the teaching of writing over the long-term and with competence and enthusiasm. The bottom line is that someone has to want a department of composition enough to fight for it. Not everyone will share this vision initially--but it should be contagious

↳ you need this not only for yourself but for the administrators taking the risks. Shall we go ahead with this?

The second condition for a successful secession is support in the university community for such an action. That is to say, the groundwork for a successful composition program outside of English must be laid down outside of the English department.

For at least a decade prior to the creation of the Division of Rhetoric in 1993, the English department at Texas had answered most requests on campus for more help in improving student writing with an arrogant "no." It refused to offer assistance with writing across the curriculum efforts, closed down its writing center, and even looked for ways to dump freshman English on the local community college. To some extent, then, the spadework for the division of rhetoric was done by precisely the people who would later most vigorously oppose the creation of a division of rhetoric. They convinced the university community that the English department would never take the teaching of writing seriously. *They were thoroughly puzzled to find the university*

had, in their minds, turned against them

But support must also be won strategically and deliberately; you can't rely on the blunders of opponents. People in the composition programs must establish their credentials and credibility with Deans and program administrators across a campus interested in writing. They must suggest at every appropriate opportunity what a fully independent and professionally managed writing program might do. They must learn to say "yes" to requests for seminars and workshops especially when administrators in English are saying no. They must establish a significant presence on their campus, a high profile. They must also make political alliances with people across the university--and here I don't mean anything sinister. You simply have to be willing to work for the legitimate causes other faculty might be championing in order to win a hearing for your own cause. In effect, you must learn to practice the rhetoric that you preach and make a persuasive case for the academic unit you hope to build (not forgetting to make this case to student constituencies as well). This kind of networking takes time, but it can pay off handsomely--particularly if you act with integrity and honesty.

A third condition for a workable secession from a Department of English is adequate resources. In these tight fiscal times, this condition may forestall the plans of many to create new departments. But it is better in most cases to stay where you are than to split with English and wind up underfunded. What college and university officials must understand is that you cannot create a new department just by siphoning off a portion of the resources English formerly had. New money must be committed, especially in the first few years to establish the legitimacy of the unit.

unprotected

We were fortunate in creating a Division of Rhetoric at precisely the moment when the governor of Texas and the legislature were pressuring our research university to show a greater commitment to undergraduate education. I don't know how many times I reminded the dean of our college and several associate deans that nothing would better express a full commitment to undergraduates than a high profile, adequately funded department of writing. And once the decision to go ahead with the new division was made, those of us in the new unit simply insisted on new offices, new equipment, and a financial commitment to writing expressed through a new writing center.

We were able to accomplish this partially because of the fourth condition necessary for a separate department of writing to succeed on any campus--full academic credibility. While it was impossible for many technical reasons to move the graduate program in writing into our new division, we insisted on the equivalent of departmental status in very other way and got it. We have a full upper division program and all our new faculty will be tenured or tenure-track appointments. None of us would go ahead with the division on any other terms. In the two years since our establishment, we have acted and been treated exactly like every other department in the college of liberal arts. We aren't a service; we aren't a program; we aren't an arm of the Dean of Student's office. We are faculty who teach and publish, sit on major university committees, and represent the university at all major functions. And we have done it--I may add, with enormous competence and style as a part of a deliberate program to build an image on the campus. We let nothing to chance in this area. And we were, in fact, tested to see how well we would do.

What are the advantages of having your own department of division? They are legion.

You control your own budget. Given the convolutions of college and university funding, anytime you get more control over your resources, it becomes easier to do things.

You control hiring and promotion. We were warned by a senior faculty member in English hostile to the new division that we would never have the credibility to hire and promote successfully. He was wrong. We've done both very well and very easily. I vividly remember the moment in a budget council meeting when Lester Faigley, John Slatin, Sara Kimball, and I decided we wished to hire a particular person as an assistant professor. We suddenly realized that all we had to do at that point was send the necessary forms on to the Dean. We didn't have to explain why we needed a composition theorist, we didn't have to compete with the

medievalists who wanted a Chaucerian, we didn't have to explain what composition theorists did, we didn't have to suggest that maybe she could teach American literature too. We just hired her.

You control your program. You can define what you want to do, set appropriate priorities, and work toward goals, not fearful that next year, the chair of the English Department will appoint a wholly different committee to oversee the writing courses--including several full professors who hadn't taught a writing class since the Truman administration. In departments of writing, writing courses and programs are in the hands of people with continuing, serious, and professional commitments to the teaching of writing. At the outset of the Division of Rhetoric, we established a set of goals we hoped to accomplish in four years. We managed to achieve every one of them in two. Had we stayed in English we might have managed half of them in ten. Which brings me to the next great advantage.

*f Except
we
probably
wouldn't
have
had
goals.*

You eliminate Washington. This may not be the best argument to make to an audience of liberals. But English departments too often act like Washington bureaucrats who don't trust folks at the local level to run their own lives. In a division of rhetoric, you suddenly realize how much energy you have wasted over the years justifying your work, your courses, your programs, and your visions to people whose only interest is in preventing composition programs from getting too strong. Let me tell you a story here. John Slatin is an Americanist in the Department of English who became enthralled a decade ago by the potential that the computer held for instruction first in literature and then in composition. Indeed, he gravitated toward composition more and more in that decade because most people in English didn't want to talk to him about computers.

John diligently tried to persuade the English department to make a modest commitment to computer instruction. He usually met resistance or--what is often worse--indifference. John was highly skeptical about the new division when it was first proposed. But he thought the division might be more sympathetic to his interests and, at an early planning meeting to discuss "the vision thing," John gingerly proposed a goal that he knew was possible in the English department: that fifty percent of the writing classes be taught in a networked computer environment. There was a moment of silence among the faculty of the proposed division--and then someone asked. (I think it was me.) Why only fifty percent? And that commitment has made John was of the most important and enthusiastic members of the new division--his enormous energies could be devoted to developing programs rather than explaining and justifying them.

his writing

Washington had been cut from the loop and we forged ahead. Now the English department is coming to us, asking for the opportunity to use our computer classrooms.

Let me conclude with two final advantages--though I could list many more.

The first is one to ponder deeply. When you become a unit identified with writing, you also become a place for funding. English departments rarely attract money. No one in the university bureaucracy, for example, quite understood what English department might do with computers, so our composition people--like John Slatin--had to struggle annually to compete for machines and support with people in engineering, MIS, business, and computer science.

But during the first year as the DRC, we received \$300,000 for computer equipment. In our second year we received slightly more. In our third year, we're apt to get a similar amount. Why? Because teaching writing and research requires computers and the Division of Rhetoric clearly and unequivocally said it wanted computers. The English department waffled.

We've had similar success with our writing center. When I oversaw the writing center in 1984 as director of freshman English, I had a discretionary budget--I kid you not--of about \$50. Next year, the Division of Rhetoric and Composition's Undergraduate Writing Center will have a budget topping \$400,000. We achieved that level of funding by proving what we could do with a lab funded from our own resources the first year and a half and then working with the Dean to win approval for a student writing center fee. Numbers like these were just impossible to contemplate when the writing program was a barebones office somewhere in the basement of the English department. If we had been content to stay there, we'd probably still be wasting our energy writing vitriolic editorials about each other, as we did during the E306 dispute.

The final advantage of a department or division of writing is this: you do a better job teaching students. You develop a better curriculum. You prepare better materials. You provide more services. You train and support teachers better. You work with enhanced morale. I won't be content until we start hearing other faculty on the campus commenting on how much better students at Texas write than they did before. I haven't heard that yet and it may be a decade or so before the sentiment becomes a commonplace. But that's my vision for the program, one the English department never had.

I promised also to enumerate the disadvantages of the separate division of writing. I can think of only one and

I'm quite serious about this: in such a unit, you'll work harder than you ever did in your academic life. But that's the price you have to pay for growing up.