

The Case for Rhetoric and Composition as an Emerging Field

The Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition
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To: Taxonomy Committee for NRC Assessment of Research Doctorate Programs
From: Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition (Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Coordinator of Visibility Project)
Subject: Request to Include Rhetoric and Composition in the NRC Taxonomy as an Emerging Field
Date: October 31, 2004

C: Dr. Charlotte Kuh, Deputy Executive Director of PGA and Director of the Study

In June, 2004, Dr. Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Syracuse University, met with Dr. Charlotte Kuh as a representative of the national Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition. On behalf of the Consortium, she wanted to inquire how Rhetoric and Composition could be recognized in the NRC's revised taxonomy of research disciplines, so that information about the field can be gathered consistently in the upcoming NRC Assessment of Research Doctorate Programs. She noted that Rhetoric and Composition did not appear in the draft taxonomy even as a subfield, despite the fact that the field as a modern discipline dates back to the 1960s and its Ph.D. programs have experienced remarkable and continuing growth since the 1980s.

Based on Dr. Kuh's counsel and our own reading of the Committee's draft study on methodology, we are writing here as a consortium of 70 universities with doctoral studies in Rhetoric and Composition to request that Rhetoric and Composition (R/C) be included in the revised taxonomy as an "emerging field." In this memo, we describe doctoral education in Rhetoric and Composition and outline the case for inclusion.

The Consortium is still in the process of collecting and analyzing data on R/C Ph.D. programs to support this case. The difficulty in doing so reflects the problems of tracking the emergence of an interdisciplinary field, whose doctoral programs vary greatly in their titles, intellectual configuration, structures, and locations. Nonetheless, the Consortium itself is a strong argument that such programs have emerged and assumed a common identity despite their diversity. We are currently conducting a survey to capture this information and to document that the field has reached a critical mass in doctoral programs and graduates that amply justifies including Rhetoric and Composition in the taxonomy as an independent, emerging field. An interim report on this survey is attached; a full report will follow in December.

The Emergence of Rhetoric and Composition as a Field of Doctoral Study

The formation of Rhetoric and Composition as a contemporary discipline is conventionally dated to around 1963, but founders saw it as reconnecting writing to a history of Western rhetoric stretching back to ancient Greece. In the sixties and seventies, scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds brought this humanistic tradition together with the methods of social and behavioral sciences to develop a new field focused on studying written

language. Studies of writing today interpret “text” and “discourse” broadly, addressing the transformative role of technology in communication and the creation of multimedia texts. Meanwhile, Rhetoric and Composition has become ever more interdisciplinary, drawing on a widening range of fields for its theories and research methodologies (See Appendix A for a brief history of the discipline.)

Doctoral programs reflecting these developments began to develop rapidly around 1980; the first survey of (often fledgling) doctoral studies in Rhetoric and Composition was published in 1987 (Chapman and Tate). In many cases, doctoral studies began as tracks or emphases within other degrees, although others were initiated specifically as degrees in Rhetoric and Composition (variously named). English departments were a natural site (because they housed writing instruction), but not an exclusive one, and even those programs situated administratively in English tended to affiliate with disciplines outside the department as well as within (e.g., Linguistics, Literature, Cognitive Psychology, Communication Studies). A second survey published in 1994 (Brown, Meyer, and Enos) showed substantial increases in doctoral specializations and formalized programs: from 53 universities reporting some specialization in Rhetoric and Composition in 1987 to 72 describing programs in 1993.

In the most recent survey, published in 2000 (Brown, Jackson, and Enos), the number shrank slightly (to 65) as programs consolidated and strengthened in quality, with some pruning (and overall enrollment up). The original tracks and emphases in R/C tended to evolve toward more autonomous programs or independent degrees, although programs incorporating Rhetoric and Composition within an integrated (generalist) degree continue to fit some universities, students, and available faculty positions. A number of R/C doctorates are now situated in independent writing departments, programs, or centers.

Recent reports suggest that doctoral study may be experiencing another spurt of growth, with a number of universities (e.g., Michigan State, Virginia Tech, North Carolina State) undertaking significant commitments to creating new Ph.D. degrees in Rhetoric and Composition with a strong faculty core and strategically defined missions. Others are adding concentrations. Although a number of major programs have sustained a record of high quality for a decade or more, as a whole doctoral education in Rhetoric and Composition remains in a fluid, formative period.

The Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition

In 1993, in recognition of the increasing number and importance of Ph.D. programs related to the study of written communication, a group of scholars formed the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition, which meets annually at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). (See Appendix B for a brief history of the Consortium and a list of current Consortium members.) Universities with doctoral studies in Rhetoric and Composition, including independent degrees, concentrations, tracks, and interdisciplinary configurations for advanced study, are invited to join and to name representatives. Its current membership is 70 universities (and growing). The Consortium maintains a listserv and a website and undertakes projects in support of scholarship and doctoral study in the field.

At the time of founding, the programs that came together in the Consortium recognized the need to adopt an umbrella term for a field of studies that was inherently interdisciplinary in its sources, traditions, and methodologies. It was a difficult and potentially contentious decision. There was (and is today) no single term used by Ph.D. programs or by scholars that encompasses all the complexities of the field itself or accounts for the diverse ways that doctoral studies in writing and rhetoric are configured and articulated at different universities. These differences reflect both the historical formation of Rhetoric and Composition through the convergence of different intellectual traditions, producing competing visions of the field, and also the local conditions that have produced distinctive interdisciplinary integrations and partnerships for doctoral education. Any choice by the

Consortium also carried with it the risk of potential confusion about the relationship of the field to other, cognate disciplines with which our own scholarly community has overlapping subject matter and close affiliations.

The Consortium adopted “Rhetoric and Composition” as a generic designation of the field because these terms and their variants are the most commonly used in scholarly discourse and in doctoral program titles to refer to the discipline as a whole. They are also the most distinctive to the field and (especially when linked) are the least likely to produce confusion with other disciplines. The linkage expresses the field’s dual scholarly heritage and distinguishes its study of rhetoric from the subfield of Rhetoric within Communication Studies.

Identifying Doctoral Studies in Rhetoric and Composition

Program Titles

Doctoral degrees and specializations in Rhetoric and Composition continue to show individual variation in names and titles, designed to differentiate them from other programs in emphasis, concept, and/or interdisciplinary affiliations. They appear in various administrative and structural locations, not always easily identifiable (see “Program Locations” below).

To help in identifying programs, I list below primary terms for the field or its subject matter that may be found in program titles (separately and conjoined) or descriptions of areas of study within a broader degree:

- rhetoric, composition, and their variants and combinations
- writing
- literacy
- discourse
- text
- professional/technical or scientific communication [*see below*]

“Rhetoric,” “composition,” and “writing” are by far the most commonly used to name what is studied. Titles may combine any of these with other topical terms (e.g., language, communication, technology, information design) or disciplinary field and subfields (e.g., Linguistics, Cultural Studies, Literature).

Program Locations

Although many Rhetoric and Composition programs originated in English departments, where most writing teachers were located, the founding scholars in Rhetoric and Composition saw the field from the beginning as an independent discipline regardless of its location. That was especially the case since the first and second generation of scholars migrated into writing studies from many fields besides literature, bringing with them their research traditions and theoretical perspectives. In fact, R/C degree programs grew up opportunistically wherever they could find a home: in departments of humanities; in ad hoc interdepartmental structures; in interdisciplinary centers. With the rise of independent units in writing (programs, departments, centers), some doctoral studies are moving or starting up there, where they are more easily constituted as full degree programs. English departments, however, continue to house many programs, either as relatively autonomous “concentrations” in an umbrella degree or as separate degrees.

As one might expect in an emerging field, doctoral programs in Rhetoric and Composition are found at various stages of formalization from minors to full specializations or independent degrees. This fact, along with their diversity of structures and locations, can make it difficult to recognize or evaluate the autonomy of the program: in some cases a “concentration” can be completely autonomous, while in another case it may be a minor option within a broader program. Below, I have categorized and exemplified programs in these terms.

Full programs in Rhetoric and Composition:

- specializations/concentrations in R/C that are autonomously defined within a broad Ph.D. degree, i.e., with their own requirements, exams, and/or admissions, and a core of R/C faculty

Examples: Purdue, University of New Hampshire, University of Massachusetts Amherst

- named degrees in R/C within departments more broadly defined (e.g., English, language and literature, humanities)

Examples: University of Arizona, Bowling Green, RPI, Michigan Tech

- independent degrees within independent academic units in writing, rhetoric and composition

Example: Syracuse, University of Texas Austin

- independent degrees that are interdisciplinary and/or not located traditionally in a department (e.g., placed in a college or center):

Examples: University of Utah, University of Michigan, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, University of California Santa Barbara

Minors or strands within other programs:

- R/C emphases, concentrations, minors, tracks, specializations that are not defined as “programs” in themselves

Example: University of Alabama (distinguishes its “concentration” in the Ph.D. in English from its “full specialization”: Ph.D. in Composition, Rhetoric & English Studies)

Integrated Programs with strong element of Rhetoric/Composition:

Example: Illinois State

Program Categories for the NRC Taxonomy

Programs in Rhetoric and Composition do not yet exhibit a high degree of specialization in the form of subfields that have branched off and attained the status of separate degree programs. Rather, they vary at the level of how they define the field in interdisciplinary terms (through affiliated faculty and courses) or in the way they focus the degree by their mission. At present we identify only one true subfield with its own degrees: **rhetoric and professional/technical or scientific communication (or writing)**. Rather than branching off from Rhetoric and Composition, this specialization has a semi-autonomous status and independent history that converged with the development of Rhetoric and Composition in the nineteen-seventies and eighties. Within Rhetoric and Composition, this specialization usually links studies in professional, technical, business, or scientific communication to rhetoric or writing studies, producing researchers and communication directors for the professions as well future faculty members for undergraduate majors and graduate programs.

Thus we propose categorizing programs in Rhetoric and Composition as follows:

Field:

- Rhetoric and Composition [generic]

Examples: Carnegie Mellon, Penn State, University of Wisconsin Madison, Miami University, Ohio State, University of Louisville

Subfield/specialization:

- Rhetoric and Professional/Technical or Scientific Communication (and variants)

Examples: Iowa State, New Mexico State, Texas Tech

As I understand the NRC draft taxonomy, we should instruct our programs in Rhetoric and Professional/Technical or Scientific Communication to list themselves both in the generic category of Rhetoric and Composition and also in this well-defined specialization as a subfield.

Some programs do not fit neatly into these categories. For example, some universities define their programs as completely integrated or fused studies (e.g., in “English” studies or “Cultural Critical Studies”) rather than an intersection of relatively autonomous fields, including Rhetoric and Composition. Classification of these as Rhetoric and Composition programs can only be determined in the short run by their self-reports (representing faculty identification with the discipline) and in the long run by the scholars they graduate who affiliate primarily with the scholarly community of Rhetoric and Composition.

Other specializations are likely to emerge in the next decade, but they have not reached the level of differentiation that supports major tracks or degree programs, especially since most Rhetoric and Composition programs are quite small. However, some are distinct enough to be standard categories in job ads, including, for instance, technology and digital media, writing program administration, writing across the curriculum or writing in the disciplines (WAC/WID), writing centers, and basic writing (see Stygall).

Autonomy and Relationship to Cognate Disciplines

Relationship to English

In my conversation with Dr. Kuh, she raised the possibility of listing Rhetoric and Composition both as an independent field and also as a subfield of English. The Consortium discussed this possibility at its annual meeting and strongly opposed classifying Rhetoric and Composition as a subfield of English studies, even temporarily. Scholars in the Consortium see such a classification of Rhetoric and Composition as historically inaccurate and misleading because of this field’s multiple source disciplines and the varied intellectual configurations and institutional locations of its doctoral programs. English itself is becoming an umbrella term for increasingly disparate specializations that find themselves historically placed in the same department and often now take the form of different degree programs (e.g., Creative Writing, Linguistics, Cultural Studies). Although many Rhetoric and Composition programs are still located nominally in English degrees, or placed in English departments, most have a distinct identity and have moved toward autonomy within those structures, or even separation in independent units.

In addition, the Consortium believes that a subfield classification, allowing for ranking only those R/C programs located in English departments, would be unfair to programs located elsewhere (including some of the strongest and best-established) and would produce skewed, misleading results.

Relationship to Communication Studies

Although it may appear that Rhetoric and Composition programs could easily be confused with Rhetoric programs in Communication Studies, in fact the two are quite distinct in perspective and institutional location. Some Rhetoric and Composition programs include Communication as an interdisciplinary element or affiliated field, and the two fields engage in cross-disciplinary dialogue within shared journals and professional organizations. Among these are the newly formed Alliance of Rhetoric Societies, discussed below.

Relationship to Creative Writing and Other Studies of Writing

There is very little possibility for confusion with Creative Writing, since doctorates in this area are rare. In a few doctoral programs in Rhetoric and Composition, Creative Writing is an interdisciplinary component, either as one strand of English studies or as part of a broadly inclusive study of writing and writing instruction. Increasingly, Rhetoric and Composition faculty are preparing graduate students to teach in disciplinary or interdisciplinary majors in writing or rhetoric that cover a broad range of genres.

Meeting the Criteria for Critical Mass

Many of the founders of the field had their original scholarly training in other disciplines. But in the last two decades, the cumulative impact of graduates trained specifically in the field of Rhetoric and Composition has created a very robust national faculty, included several generations of tenured professors. These scholars publish not only in Rhetoric and Composition (journals, edited collections, and single-authored books) but also in related disciplines (e.g., Communication Studies, Applied Linguistics, ESL, Cultural Studies) and in interdisciplinary publication venues. Attached (Appendix C) is evidence of this large body of scholarly work, including

- 1) a selected list of refereed journals in which Rhetoric and Composition scholars publish their work
- 2) a list of edited series in Rhetoric and Composition and in which R/C scholars are published.

The primary professional organization with which R/C scholars affiliate is the Conference on College Composition and Communication, founded in 1949. Its membership (combined individual and institutional) is currently around 8000, including 1000 graduate students. Scholars in the field can also join a variety of specialized organizations, some of which are themselves cross-disciplinary in nature and membership. (See Appendix D, for a selected list of organizations in Rhetoric and Composition as well as listservs and discussion groups.) Scholars in Rhetoric and Composition tend to hold citizenship in multiple disciplinary and transdisciplinary communities. Recently, scholars in Rhetoric and Composition joined together with colleagues in Communication Studies and other disciplines to form an Alliance of Rhetoric Societies around their common interests in rhetoric; its membership comprises both individual departments and professional organizations (e.g., CCCC, Rhetoric Society of America, National Communication Association, International Society for the History of Rhetoric). According to President Gerald Hauser, “ARS came into being as a response to the difficulty rhetoric scholars have experienced in learning about each other’s work, in sharing insights with those who are working on similar projects but in different traditions, in making their collective voice heard by granting agencies, and through an absence of coordination among their respective scholarly organizations” (ARS Home Page, www.rhetoralliance.org).

The sheer number of tenured and tenure-track faculty members across the country who teach and publish primarily or exclusively in Rhetoric and Composition argues that the field has probably met the NRC criteria for critical mass in its doctoral degrees. However, documenting this reality in terms of degrees in R/C granted by doctoral programs is not easy. Until 1996, there was no dissertation code for Rhetoric and Composition in the DAI, and it is not yet used consistently enough to offer reliable figures. Not all programs have kept accurate records, especially in early years while transitioning from minor concentrations to full specializations. While the overall number of degree-granting programs has stabilized at somewhere around 70, they are still in a generative

and somewhat volatile phase, especially those that are small or less autonomous. Some highly productive programs in the early years (e.g., University of Southern California) have closed, while promising new ones are too young to have many graduates. The last of three surveys of program development (by self-report) was published in 2000 (Enos, Jackson, and Brown) and is out of date; a new one is planned for 2006.

For the purposes of documenting degree production and other features of programs (faculty size, enrollment, etc.) for NRC, the Consortium is presently gathering data through a survey of R/C doctoral programs that will be tabulated and analyzed within the next month. Meantime, the process of distributing and administering the survey has updated the Consortium's membership to include at least 10 more universities with R/C programs than its 2003-04 membership. A number of these are recently founded, in final stages of approval, or in planning. The attached interim report (Appendix E) provides preliminary data from the survey. Final results will follow in about a month.

Finally, I have attached a bibliography which includes not only works cited here but selected works on the discipline and its doctoral programs.

Participating in the NRC Study

Whatever the decision of the Committee on inclusion of Rhetoric and Composition in the taxonomy, we plan to mobilize our members to provide information to campus coordinators of the 2005 NRC survey on their degree programs in Rhetoric and Composition as an independent field. According to Dr. Kuh, NRC could facilitate these efforts by identifying Rhetoric and Composition to the campus coordinators as an emerging field and requesting information on its programs. As the survey planning proceeds, I will seek Dr. Kuh's further advice on how the program directors and campus coordinators can ensure that this information on Rhetoric and Composition programs is integrated and interpreted as evidence for one field with multiple representations, rather than (as we surmise happened in the past) being overlooked or invisible because of the programs' diverse names and variable locations.

I would be very pleased to answer questions from the Committee, Dr. Kuh, or researchers associated with the NRC doctoral survey. I would appreciate your letting me know when we might expect a response that I can report to the R/C Consortium at its annual meeting, March 16, 2004. Thank you for your consideration of our request.

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