The Wyoming Conference Resolution: A Beginning

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On March 17, 1988, the Executive Committee of the Council of Writing Program Administrators voted unanimously to endorse the Wyoming Conference Resolution. The resolution calls on the Executive Committee of CCCC to formulate professional standards for salary levels and working conditions of postsecondary writing teachers, to set up grievance procedures against institutions which fail to comply with these standards, and to establish means to censure publicly institutions found to be in non-compliance (see Appendix). Because the Wyoming Conference Resolution focuses at long last on important issues concerning the unfair treatment of writing teachers, we believe it represents an important step forward in the growing political maturity and self-determination of composition studies and writing programs.

The resolution was drafted at the Wyoming Conference in the summer of 1986, following a remarkable release of the anger and bitterness so deeply felt in the rank and file of writing teachers—anger about the poor conditions that make it difficult to teach properly and bitterness about the insecurity and powerlessness of so many who teach writing. In their report on the Wyoming Conference Resolution published in *College English* (49, March, 1987: 274-280), Linda Robertson, Sharon Crowley, and Frank Lentricchia tell the story of how James Slevin and James Sledd galvanized the common sense of outrage among writing teachers across the board—graduate teaching assistants, part-time faculty, established teachers and scholars, tenured and untenured, from community colleges to private liberal arts schools and research universities. This outrage focused on the unfair practices many writing teachers face, the exploitation of part-time faculty, the tenure fights that should never have happened. What occurred at Wyoming, however, went beyond the usual retelling of academic horror stories. More important, the Wyoming Conference Resolution represents the formation of a political will among writing teachers—a collective decision that we do not have to accept second class status because we are interested in the study and teaching of writing and that together we can determine our own fate as a profession and pursue our hopes as writing teachers, scholars, and program administrators.

The Wyoming Conference Resolution passed by a unanimous vote at the CCCC business meeting in Atlanta the following March, 1987. Since then a CCCC task force on the resolution has decided to work through the grievance procedures of regional accreditation agencies, the AAUP, the American Association of Colleges, and other existing organizations.

I.

Whatever the outcome of the CCCC task force's efforts to implement the Wyoming Conference Resolution—and we share the concern of many in our profession that its critical edge may be blunted by relying on existing organizations rather than on ourselves—the importance of the resolution finally is that it reflects a growing sense of self-confidence in composition studies and writing programs and in our ability to change unfair and unjust treatment of ourselves and our colleagues. The Wyoming Conference Resolution states outright and without apology what is required to do our jobs well. It amounts to a declaration of independence on the part of writing teachers, a recognition that together we can advance our collective interests and define our future.

This feeling of empowerment spreading across our field is not just a symbolic gesture or an act of the imagination. It also mediates and gives expression to some real, if limited and uneven, changes in the material conditions of teaching writing. Since the mid-seventies, in the wake of a perceived literacy crisis and renewed attention to undergraduate education, writing programs have proliferated. The movement to revise and strengthen a core curriculum of undergraduate studies has led many colleges and universities to reinstate required freshman composition sequences dropped in the sixties and early seventies. Writing-across-the curriculum programs have spread, as have advanced composition courses of all types, in business, scientific, technical, and legal writing. From the mid-seventies on, as career-minded students flocked to majors in business, economics, and computer science and away from traditional humanities offerings, many writing programs have expanded their enrollments, increasing their share of FTE's and relative social weight within English departments. At the graduate level, programs in rhetoric and composition have maintained a steady growth rate while many literature programs have languished. New journals keep appearing, and the volume and quality of research and scholarship in rhetoric and composition have increased dramatically. On top of all this, the job market in the past two years has been encouraging to composition specialists, for senior faculty vying for endowed chairs and recent Ph.D.'s alike.

As Alexis de Tocqueville theorized about the French Revolution, people rebel against injustice not when oppression is most intense but when social expectations are on the rise. This seems to be the case today with composition studies. The Wyoming Conference Resolution occurs at a moment of upswing in our profession that makes us less willing to accept the old conditions and the old explanations. Its call for justice and fair treatment also asserts the validity of our work as writing teachers, scholars, and program administrators and articulates a growing desire in composition studies to set the record straight about why English Studies has overlooked rhetoric and composition and why colleges and universities have failed to support their writing programs.

We have come to realize that the persistent job insecurities and marginalized status of writing teachers result from a hierarchy of values that determines institutional and departmental priorities, not from tight budgets or demographic realities, as we were told in the mid-seventies. We have come to see that the economy in higher education is always political. The doomsday demographics academic officers used to freeze lines, frighten faculty, and assign part-time and non-tenure track to teach composition never materialized. Instead of the predicted decline between 1974 and 1984, the number of students enrolled in higher education increased at a rate of 20%. At the same time, the number of new Ph.D.'s in English able to find tenure track positions dipped to 40%, creating a pool of surplus labor and squeezing individuals out of academics. The problem was, and to a large extent remains, not a lack of students and not just a lack of jobs for teachers, but a particular lack of institutional commitment to the faculty who do research in rhetoric and composition, who teach writing, and who administer writing programs. The situation of composition studies and the teaching of writing is a political one, shaped by a long and sometimes willful misunderstanding of what it means to study and teach writing. In this regard, the Wyoming Conference Resolution is a telling sign of the building sentiment within composition studies to challenge the prevailing hierarchy in English Studies and the reward system and institutional priorities of higher education—to assert the worthiness and viability of our own field of inquiry and activity.

II.

From the blatant economic exploitation of part-time faculty to the smallest insensitivities and oversights, the conditions that the Wyoming Conference Resolution protests are familiar terrain to writing program administrators. These conditions, moreover, not only describe the facts of everyday life in writing programs, but also constitute the source of certain troubling asymmetries of power within writing programs and the profession as a whole. Part of our ongoing struggle is to define composition studies and writing programs not as service functions at the margin

of the academy but as legitimate scholarly and pedagogical activities central to English Studies and to the mission of higher education in general. The professional recognition for which we have fought so hard, however, also brings with it the risk that our field will reproduce the dominant academic logic that privileges research "opportunities" over teaching "loads" and will perpetuate a two-caste system of researchers, scholars, theorists, and program administrators at the top of the field and classroom teachers below.

For writing program administrators, the tensions caused by the professionalization of composition studies and writing programs are posed quite sharply. WPAs exist in a complicated set of relationships to the faculty they train and supervise, the programs they run, and the careers to which they aspire. A recent survey found that 68% of WPAs are tenured. If not well paid, WPAs are often times at least secure, often managing a staff of insecure and definitely underpaid part-time faculty. In certain respects, WPAs resemble a labor aristocracy in writing instruction. Like trade union bureaucrats, WPAs are increasingly removed from the assembly line, on released time from the daily struggles at the point of production. Of course, WPAs need and deserve compensation to carry out their duties. The danger is that the growth and professionalization of writing programs—which in part have contributed to the courage of writing teachers to speak out against unjust practices in the first place—may increase social distance among writing faculty and within writing programs.

Despite the upturn in the job market and the willingness and desire of colleges and universities, as well as English departments, to hire composition specialists, the fact is that a new senior person and some Ph.D.'s recently out of graduate programs in rhetoric and composition cannot yet offset the excessive reliance on part-time faculty and the perpetuation of a two-caste system. The addition of permanent positions in composition is certainly a gesture of good will and perhaps of a better understanding of what it means to study and teach writing, a sign that composition studies has achieved some success in legitimizing itself as a body of theory and practice. But, as we learn to assert ourselves and take control of our destiny, we must also continue to confront our own internal organization, to resist the unnecessary and unhelpful polarization of scholarship and pedagogy that determines the structure and reward system of most academic disciplines. We need to articulate a vision of composition studies as a field of applied theory that connects research and scholarship to teaching and program development.

III.

The real power of the Wyoming Conference Resolution is that it raises a series of issues which cannot be resolved and makes a series of demands

which cannot be met under current conditions. We believe the Wyoming Conference Resolution should be seen not just as an end in itself but as an initiator. If the Wyoming Conference Resolution begins with the felt needs of writing teachers, the anecdotal accounts and individual testimonies we have all heard about injustice and exploitation, it goes on to link these felt needs, the points at which the personal becomes political in the lives of writing teachers, to the need for wider and more sweeping changes in the role of English Studies and the priorities of higher education. To implement the Wyoming Conference Resolution would change what it means to study and teach reading and writing, literature and composition. It would require a reallotment of resources and personnel and a revision of the current hierarchy that would transform English Studies from a field that valorizes literary texts over "naive" student texts and privileges the virtuoso performances of specialist critics over ordinary readers. It would require imagining English Studies as a field that takes the critical and emancipatory potentiality of literacy as its point of departure, so that reading and writing can become public and empowering activities for both students and teachers, to name their desires and to make their own history. And that, we believe, is something worth fighting for.

Appendix

THE WYOMING CONFERENCE RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, the salaries and working conditions of post-secondary teachers with primary responsibility for the teaching of writing are fundamentally unfair as judged by any reasonable professional standards (e.g., unfair in excessive teaching loads, unreasonably large class sizes, salary inequities, lack of benefits and professional status, and barriers to professional status, and barriers to professional advancement);

AND WHEREAS, as a consequence of these unreasonable working conditions, highly dedicated teachers are often frustrated in their desire to provide students the time and attention which students both deserve and need;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Executive Committee of College Composition and Communication be charged with the following:

1. To formulate, after appropriate consultations with post-secondary teachers of writing, professional standards and expectations for salary levels and working conditions of post-secondary teachers of writing.

2. To establish a procedure for hearing grievances brought by post-secondary teachers of writing—either singly or collectively—against apparent institutional non-compliance with these standards and expectations.

3. To establish a procedure for acting upon a finding of non-compliance; specifically, to issue a letter of censure to an individual institution's administration, Board of Regents or Trustees, State legislators (where pertinent), and to publicize the finding to the public-at-large, the educational community in general, and to our membership.