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Introduction

UNRAVELING AN ALIEN SYSTEM OF MEANING

Composition as Concession

When we cannot get a proverb, or a joke, or a ritual, or a poem, we know we are on to something. By picking at the document where it is most opaque, we may be able to unravel an alien system of meaning. The thread might even lead us into a strange and wonderful world view.

—Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*

What is called for, I think, is “getting the story crooked,” looking into the various strands of meaning in a text in such a way as to make the categories, trends, and reliable identities of history a little less inevitable . . . What else but rhetoric will make a claim for the “other” sources, and show a deeper respect for reality by reading texts in crooked ways?

—Hans Kellner, “After the Fall: Reflections on Histories of Rhetoric”

Conceding Composition is not the book I set out to write. I originally conceived this study as a local history of the writing program at Arizona State University (ASU), covering an approximately twenty-five-year period from the mid-1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century.¹ During these two and a half decades, ASU’s writing program was host to a number of influential rhetoric and composition scholars² and the site of important advances in the field of rhetoric and composition studies.³ When I began this research as a doctoral student at ASU, documenting the contributions of ASU’s writing program to the field in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s seemed a worthy goal, especially given the increasing importance of local histories in rhetoric and composition at the time.⁴ *Conceding Composition*, however, is not the realization of that goal for several reasons, and understanding why can help make sense of what it has become.

For starters, I wanted to know how ASU’s writing program became so prominent. The contemporary writing program I initially had in mind

may be said to start in the mid-1980s, when David Schwalm took over the position of director of composition. Almost all of ASU's composition directors had been junior faculty members dating back to the late 1950s when the position was created. But in the early 1980s, administrators at ASU, including the English department chair, recognized that the responsibilities for writing programs and writing program administration were increasing substantially, both at the university and across the state (ASU Department of English 1984). In light of the changing realities of the position, Schwalm was hired as a tenured associate professor and director of composition in 1986, and his appointment marked the first time a tenured faculty member was hired at ASU expressly to administer the writing program. It is not too much to claim that Schwalm helped establish ASU's writing program as an exemplary model of what professionalized writing programs could be. Originally, then, this study was to be a history of ASU's writing program beginning with Schwalm and carrying forward to the present day. My research took me in other directions, however.

In the process of trying to contextualize Schwalm's momentous appointment at ASU using archival materials, department histories, and interviews with current and former faculty (including Schwalm), I realized that I needed to begin my history earlier than 1986. I discovered, for instance, that although Schwalm was the first tenured director of composition, one of his predecessors, Dorothy M. Guinn, was the first faculty member hired at ASU specifically to direct the writing program (she was also the first female writing program administrator at ASU). Before Guinn, all the composition directors had been chosen from faculty members in the department—usually a junior faculty member who needed to build a tenure case by demonstrating “publications, research, or other service of special value to the institution,” which included writing program administration (“Faculty Personnel Policy” 1956, 3).⁵ Guinn was the first external hire brought in to run the writing program. And while she was not the first rhetoric and composition specialist to do so, she was the first person hired to run the program specifically because of her disciplinary affiliation.

Guinn had an impressive résumé at the time of her hire—she earned her PhD from the famed rhetoric program at the University of Southern California in 1978, she was an early participant at Rhetoric Society of America meetings in the 1970s and at the first Wyoming Conference in 1976, and she came to ASU after directing the University of Tulsa's writing program for two years (D'Angelo 1999c, 272; ASU Department of English 1984). Guinn was hired at ASU in 1981 as an assistant professor with the expectation that she would assume writing program

administration duties in 1982, which she did. She ended up leaving ASU in 1984, however, which precipitated Schwalm's hiring two years later.⁶ Although Guinn's departure set the stage for Schwalm's appointment, her entry at ASU also invited questions that pointed backward in history—for instance, what circumstances occasioned her hire? Guinn, as it turns out, was recruited to ASU by Frank D'Angelo.

Frank D'Angelo is an icon in rhetoric and composition for his efforts to recuperate the classical rhetorical tradition and to advance the study of rhetoric in popular culture. At ASU, he was likewise an influential figure. D'Angelo first came to ASU in 1970 and took over as director of composition in 1971. He served in that capacity for eight years, during which time he also spearheaded ASU's graduate concentration in rhetoric and composition (along with John Gage). He relinquished the composition director position when he was elected to chair the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) in 1979 (see D'Angelo 1999b, 1999c), which ultimately led to Guinn's recruitment. I quickly realized that I needed to start my history well before Schwalm's hiring in 1986 or even Guinn's hiring in 1981 in recognition of D'Angelo's formative contributions to ASU's writing program and to the field of rhetoric and composition. The discovery process that took me from Schwalm to Guinn to D'Angelo turned out to be symptomatic of my early research process.

I learned that D'Angelo was hired by former ASU English department chair Jerome W. Archer. Archer came to ASU from Marquette University in 1963, and he was primarily known as a medieval literature and Chaucer scholar. Frankly, I had no particular interest in Archer, given his literature credentials, so I figured he would be a natural bulwark in my backward research trajectory. As it happens, however, I discovered that Archer played a formative role in rhetoric and composition's early professionalization efforts. Prior to moving to ASU, he was a charter member of CCCC. He was also elected to the CCCC Executive Committee in the early 1950s and was elected to preside over the sixth annual CCCC convention in Chicago in 1955. In addition, Archer organized a major conference at ASU in 1965 that was jointly sponsored by the CCCC, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the US Office of Education to consider the place of English instruction in junior colleges (Archer and Ferrell 1965).⁷ In short, Archer was instrumental in rhetoric and composition history.

The same can be said for the man Archer replaced as ASU's English department chair, Louis M. Myers. Myers was a well-regarded linguist, textbook author, composition teacher, and CCCC Executive Board

member, and he chaired ASU's English department in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.⁸ Myers studied the ways linguistic knowledge could be used to improve the teaching of writing in high schools and colleges, and he helped pioneer the use of descriptive grammar in composition instruction years before there was even a field to speak of (see Myers 1940, 1948, 1954, 1959). He advised the state of Arizona on education policy and was a consultant for the State Board of Education on teaching English in elementary and secondary schools. As chair of ASU's English department, Myers administered the first-year composition program for nearly two decades; and in the late 1950s he played an integral role in establishing the director of composition position, which was for the first time distinct from the department chair. Myers plays a relatively minor role in *Conceding Composition* for reasons that will become clearer below, but a strong case could be made that he was the most influential person in composition's 130+ year history at ASU. As ASU's university archives make abundantly clear, however, he was not the first influential faculty member in composition at the school.

The process of discovery I have been describing is both the signature blessing and the preponderant curse of archival research. As I followed successive research leads in the archives, each step back required additional steps back—an infinite regress any historian will surely recognize. In fact, rhetoric and composition teacher-scholars have a long history at ASU, dating at least as far back as 1911 when second-year English faculty member and department chair James Lee Felton published "Difficulties in English Composition" in the *Arizona Journal of Education*.

Felton is an interesting character in his own right. He chaired the English department at ASU (called Tempe Normal School when he was hired in 1910 and then Tempe State Teachers' College after 1925) for approximately twenty years. In 1926, Felton took a two-year leave of absence from the faculty to serve as mayor of Tempe, Arizona. He returned to chair the English department in 1928, and two years later he was relieved of his chairmanship because he had only earned a masters degree and new accreditation standards required that department chairs hold doctorates. In 1932, purportedly as a result of stress related to Depression-era layoffs, Felton died of a massive heart attack. But during his time on the faculty, Felton taught the introductory composition course nearly every semester. In fact, he taught composition far more than any other course, and he may well have taught more composition courses than anyone else on the faculty between 1910 and 1932. Noteworthy though Felton was in the history of composition at ASU, it should come as no surprise that the materials in ASU's archives dragged me ever further

backward. By the time I was looking closely at Felton's materials, it was readily apparent to me that composition had existed in various forms at the institution since it was founded as a normal school in the 1880s.

The extension of my time frame by approximately a century, while not insignificant, was not necessarily an insurmountable obstacle to constructing a local history of ASU's writing program. In fact, it seemed at first to allow me to add substantial scholarly heft to a history that might otherwise have been deemed too laudatory or insufficiently "objective," given my position as a graduate student at ASU. What also became increasingly clear as I researched, however, was that the existence of composition at ASU far exceeded the familiar scope of rhetoric and composition history. Or, more precisely, the further back I researched ASU's "writing program," such as it was, the less sense I could make of it by reference to (1) commonly recognized historical developments related to the field of rhetoric and composition or (2) influential people who were connected in some instructive way to rhetoric and composition's history.

To give one example of this investigative obstacle, while researching Felton, I discovered in ASU's early course catalogs that there was an abrupt shift in English course titles in the mid-1920s, from "English 1-6" to "English 101/102: First Year English." This shift marked the establishment of first-year composition⁹ as a requirement at ASU, but I could not determine why the change happened or why it took ASU's administrators so long to adopt a first-year composition requirement that, according to most composition historians, "by 1900 had taken hold almost everywhere" (Breerton 1995, 13).¹⁰ It was especially perplexing because prior to 1927, when the name change officially happened, composition at ASU seemed to reflect the intellectual conditions composition historians have described in the period more generally. For all the reading and research I was doing about composition at ASU and for all I was learning about the important people affiliated with the writing program, I struggled to find a satisfying answer to explain the name change. In short, there was no disciplinary frame—historical, pedagogical, theoretical, professional, or ideological—that helped me explain why ASU suddenly replaced "English I: Rhetoric and Composition" with "English 101: First Year English," seemingly out of the blue.¹¹

INSTITUTING FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

My effort to comprehend the reasons for renaming ASU's first-year composition course(s) in the mid-1920s literally kept me awake nights. I spent hours in the archives trying to make sense of the change. It was, to

borrow Robert Darnton's provocative phrase, "an alien system of meaning" (1999, 5); and the only way I was eventually able to unravel it was by temporarily exchanging my disciplinary frame of reference for an institutional one.¹² That is, rather than trying to understand the composition curriculum at ASU as it related to rhetoric and composition theories, pedagogies, histories, or people or even as it related to ASU's writing program or English department, I ultimately came to consider the shift from English 1 to English 101 in reference to contemporaneous institution-level changes taking place at ASU that were all but wholly detached from the intellectual considerations that constituted the majority of my early research.

Less abstractly, when I couldn't make intellectual sense of ASU's introduction of first-year composition, I started rereading Ernest Hopkins and Alfred Thomas Jr.'s *The Arizona State University Story* (1960). What was impressed upon me on this second reading of ASU's early history was that the institution transformed from a normal school to a teachers' college in 1925 to meet new accreditation standards. I discuss the important distinctions between normal schools and teachers' colleges and their relationship to accreditation at more length in chapters 2 and 3, but for now the thing worth knowing is that normal schools primarily offered a split curriculum, which included high school curricula plus teacher-training courses—essentially, a two-year high school course and a two-year pedagogical methods course. In contrast, teachers' colleges confined their curricula to a four-year collegiate course of study, which included teacher education but, more important, deliberately excluded high school coursework. The upshot is that the transformation in Tempe from normal school to teachers' college required a redesigned ("collegiate") curriculum. "English 101/102: First Year English" came into being soon thereafter. In effect, the institution transformed and composition transformed with it.

This may seem like an obvious realization, but it was not obvious to me at the time I was conducting research in ASU's archives. Nor was it explicitly spelled out in the materials I was examining for evidence of more identifiable intellectual/disciplinary connections—materials consisting largely of course listings, course descriptions, pedagogical materials, textbook adoptions, teaching assignments, teaching reflections, and student writing (consisting of exactly one theme from 1938 titled "What America Means to Me" [Manulat 1938]). These are precisely the kinds of materials rhetoric and composition historians have enumerated as the most valuable sources for disciplinary histories.¹³ But despite the general abundance of such archival materials, there was almost no

reference, much less explicit deliberation, in them about the change from English 1 to English 101. There was certainly no indication in the archival materials I was reading that there might be some connection between the course's name change and the institution's change from normal school to teachers' college. In fact, I routinely glossed over other evidence concerning the institution's transformation because it did not register as an important change in composition course materials, textbook adoptions, teaching assignments, and so on.

Even after I recognized the chronological correlation between changes to the institution and changes to the composition course names, it still required significant investigation in the archives to track down any evidence of causation, but I did. And when I did, what I discovered again did not match my expectations. I mentioned that ASU transformed in the mid-1920s and the composition curriculum transformed with it. It is more precise to say that the institution transformed *by virtue of* transformations to composition.

The newly constituted "English 101/102" was related to an extensive campaign beginning in the early 1920s to turn the normal school into a teachers' college. According to ASU historian Alfred Thomas Jr.:

By the year 1922 it had become evident that the tendency to elevate the qualifications required of public school teachers must be met by advancement and improvement in the opportunities for preparation to be offered to Arizona Youth by the Normal School. The Tempe Normal School Alumni Association began by publicizing the issue and bringing the advantages of such a move into the open. The Board of Education encouraged the employment of such better trained instructors and encouraged long time members of the faculty to secure advanced degrees. The alumni association had the issue discussed before civic groups, education meetings, the press, and after three years of extensive publicity, in January 1925, the question was presented to the Legislature. (Thomas 1960b, 315–16)

I initially discovered this campaign because English department chair and perennial composition instructor James Lee Felton was traveling throughout the region, arguing for liberal re-conceptions of English instruction in 1925 to drum up support for the change from normal school to teachers' college (Thomas 1960b, 348). The campaign to convert the normal school into a teachers' college was predicated on changes to the entire curriculum, which in most cases meant removing secondary-level courses and adding postsecondary-level courses in each department. This is precisely what happened in the English department—dozens of new courses, almost all literature courses, were added to the books in 1926.

As I describe in chapters 2 and 3, however, English 101/102 played a unique role in the change from normal school to teachers' college. In fact, English 101/102 was not part of the curriculum in the teachers' college's first year in existence. There was still required composition instruction, "English 1-6," but it was not explicitly in the form of first-year composition. Almost immediately, however, the absence of first-year composition became a sticking point in transfer agreements with other colleges and universities. To make a long story short, the teachers' college was not recognized as such without the proper "collegiate" curriculum, which by that point conventionally included required first-year composition. In addition, first-year composition requirements—or the lack thereof—were tied to larger discussions about regional accreditation taking place around the country, including whether normal schools or teachers' colleges could even qualify for accreditation. As a result of these and other complicating factors, in 1926 some schools (notably, the University of Arizona in Tucson) refused to accept transfer students from the newly constituted teachers' college in Tempe (Thomas 1960b, 415-30). In 1927, therefore, administrators at Tempe State Teachers' College readjusted the curriculum and brought "English 101/102: First Year English" into existence.

It will seem counterintuitive to most rhetoric and composition specialists, but "English 101/102: First Year English" helped legitimize the newly established teachers' college as properly "collegiate." In other words, the change from "English 1" to "English 101" was not simply a matter of updating course names or redistributing pedagogical offerings or inaugurating new requirements. Nor was it related to research advances in the teaching of writing or new pedagogical goals or even evolving student writing objectives. In fact, from what I can tell, despite all the other changes to the English curriculum—which turned out to be far more extensive than I initially realized—not much changed with regard to composition *instruction* except for its institutional conditions. The intellectual (i.e., theoretical and pedagogical) foundations seem to have been relatively untouched. Nevertheless, installing "English 101/102: First Year English" was a necessary aspect of the normal school's institutional transformation into a teachers' college.

The introduction of English 101/102 proved an important point of insight for me about how ASU officials had historically used composition to address pressing institutional exigencies. Rather than speculate about why the connection between institutional exigencies and composition curricula perplexed me for so long, I am content to say that the consequent shift in perspective enabled me to recognize that shifts

in composition at ASU *often* correlated closely with attempts to address institutional exigencies, generally irrespective of disciplinary developments in rhetoric and writing theories and/or pedagogies. English 101/102 turned out to be just one obvious example among many. I ultimately came to realize that an important history of composition is the history of composition's relationship to ASU's non-disciplinary institutional exigencies. Broadly conceived, that is what this book has become.

It may seem strange for a history of first-year composition to focus primarily on non-disciplinary institutional exigencies, especially when such institution-level concerns often seem distant from the specific demands of composition classrooms. But as Mary Soliday (2002) and Jane Stanley (2010) demonstrate in their groundbreaking studies, writing instruction is often closely tied to broader institutional concerns. Soliday points out that "faculty and administrators in every segment of private and public higher education have skirmished over writing curriculums, complained about student writing, and lamented the decline of standards" for over a century (2002, 3). For Soliday, composition and literacy education, particularly remedial education, "serves immediate institutional needs to solve crises in growth . . . as much as it does to solve students' needs" (*ibid.*, 2). Stanley makes the further case that "well-published lamentations about students' 'illiteracy' (and later, 'deficiency'; and later, 'need for remediation'; and recently, 'underpreparation') have accomplished important political—that is to say rhetorical—work for the university [University of California, Berkeley], and for California herself" (2010, 6).

Both Stanley and Soliday focus specifically on "remedial" work to assess how it authorizes particular institutional arguments and supports particular institutional needs that are all but independent of the realities of classroom instruction. Remediation as such is a small element in *Conceding Composition*, but institutional—that is to say political, which is to say rhetorical—functions of composition education are central to this study. I consider specifically some of the ways administrators and faculty have over time marshaled composition at Arizona State University to make and support claims about what the institution was doing, as well as what it could and should be doing. In other words, studying composition in relation to non-disciplinary institutional exigencies has the potential to significantly reshape what we know about composition's history.

Some of ASU's most significant institutional exigencies and corresponding changes in composition education provide the core around which this book is constructed. In chapter 2 I argue that composition was necessary to fulfill the institution's mission, first as a normal school beginning in the 1880s and then, as discussed above, as a teachers'

college in the 1920s. Composition was an indispensable component of a traditional “normal school” curriculum and therefore an indispensable component of the normal school’s institutional mission for forty years. Of course, this was the curriculum (and mission) that was eventually surrendered in the pursuit of teachers’ college status, but composition in its various normal school permutations was the cornerstone of the school’s existence for four decades, and it eventually played a singular role in proving that the teachers’ college was no longer normal.

In chapter 3 I argue that composition was also an important factor in administrators’ decade-long struggle to earn regional accreditation, from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. As noted, one of the primary reasons for the change from normal school to teachers’ college in 1926 was the advancement of regional accreditation as a force in American education. By the 1920s, accreditation was becoming obligatory for all sorts of institutions—secondary, postsecondary, and otherwise. To resist accreditation was to risk obsolescence. The establishment of Tempe State Teachers’ College described above was the culmination of efforts that began in 1922, when Tempe Normal School’s alumni association, Arizona’s Board of Education, and the whole of Tempe Normal’s faculty and administration were campaigning to transform the normal school into a teachers’ college. But the establishment of the teachers’ college was just one early milestone in a much longer campaign to meet the increasing demands of accreditation—a campaign not fully realized for almost ten years after the normal school was little more than a memory.

In chapter 4 I pick up in the aftermath of accreditation and argue that composition played multiple and shifting roles in faculty and administrators’ attempts to attract various forms of federal funding beginning in the 1930s and stretching into the 1960s. Throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, federal agencies introduced new funding programs, which could be accessed by postsecondary institutions. These programs, including parts of the New Deal, the GI Bill, and the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), had increasingly specific parameters for qualified institutions, which were regularly interconnected with various aspects of composition education. As the federal parameters changed, so too did composition’s place in the institution.

In examining composition from an institutional perspective, *Conceding Composition* suggests new possibilities for disciplinary histories. The contributors to Barbara L’Eplattenier and Lisa Mastrangelo’s landmark collection, *Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration*, set writing programs and their administrative concerns “within the larger institutional context that so often explains their formation” (2004, xix).

Notwithstanding the invaluable insights these histories provide, most of them cast writing programs and classrooms as the inheritors of institutional decision-making—a sort of institutional trickle-down effect. Institutional contexts undoubtedly shaped writing programs and the instruction they sponsored, but I am claiming that historians can push L'Éplattenier, Mastrangelo, and their contributors' good insights even further to consider how institutions were profoundly entangled with composition *education* as an institutional construct, even if they were simultaneously divided from composition *instruction* as an intellectual, disciplinary endeavor. Put differently, attempts to address Arizona State University's non-disciplinary institutional exigencies certainly shaped the conditions in which ASU's composition instruction existed, and I discuss some ways they did so throughout this book. But, as should be clear by now, I do not believe the institution can be relegated to context—it was not simply the scene in which more obviously disciplinary events played out. Where composition is concerned, the needs of the institution have generally taken precedence, as evidenced in the brief examples above, but they were not inadvertent consequences of oblivious decision-making. To the contrary, this study is predicated on the contention that at different moments in its institutional history, ASU's composition education deliberately reflected, and in some cases actively facilitated, the school's attempts to meet new and pressing institutional exigencies.

CONCEDING COMPOSITION

In *Conceding Composition* I elaborate the institutional perspective sketched above to offer insights into the way ASU changed as an institution over the course of a century *in relation to* the school's composition education and *because of* composition education. I contend that the institution has long been intertwined with, even inextricable from, composition education. Of course, composition was not entirely unique in this regard—other courses and requirements developed in relation to institutional needs (think business majors, gender studies departments, and the recent rise in Massive Open Online Courses [MOOCs]). But composition is distinct in that it has been involved in institutional change at ASU as much as, or more than, any other single course. In other words, the examples introduced above were not anomalies—they are indicative of a regular, even ordinary, relationship between the institution and composition. This contention informs one of *Conceding Composition's* major claims, which is that the connection of institutional needs to composition education was neither incidental nor accidental.

In contrast to Robert J. Connors's claim in "The Octalog" that composition was "created to solve a social problem and not by the evolution of a body of knowledge" (1988, 6–7), I am arguing that composition education, particularly in the form of first-year composition, has been routinely implemented by ASU administrators and faculty in efforts to solve *institutional* problems—problems that were not coterminous with the kinds of social or intellectual problems Connors and other historians have commonly identified. In fact, the absence of a "body of knowledge" was one characteristic that made composition advantageous for solving institutional problems—it is a truism in rhetoric and composition that everyone thinks they know how to teach writing.¹⁴ Composition was (and is) marketable, negotiable, and fungible, which is not necessarily the case even with other introductory courses like college algebra or Western civilization or intro to chemistry. In other words, composition is generally more open to wildly varying interpretation, and, as such, it has been particularly susceptible to institutional intervention. This, I argue, was generally the case at ASU. At various times and for various reasons, ASU administrators and faculty introduced, reformed, maintained, threatened, or eliminated first-year composition as part of negotiations related to larger, non-disciplinary institutional exigencies. Viewed from this perspective, I contend that composition can be usefully understood as an institutional "concession."

The metaphor of concession is obviously an important one for *Conceding Composition*, and as such it bears some explanation. As I use it here, concession most directly refers to something that is yielded or surrendered, either in deference to a more powerful authority or in exchange for other benefits. For example, a public prosecutor might concede a lower sentence in exchange for a defendant's confession. Likewise, the defendant concedes the right to defend him- or herself in court in exchange for a lighter sentence. This sense of concession needn't be penal. A student-athlete might concede a chance to finish college in exchange for a professional athletic contract. Or one country might concede some amount of territorial rights to a second country to ensure an alliance against a third country. Or under certain circumstances, a senator might concede her seat in the US Congress to run for president. The most important aspect of concession in this sense of the term is that it entails yielding one thing to attain another desirable thing or outcome. It is in this sense that I most frequently use the figure of "concession" in this book. I contend throughout *Conceding Composition* that composition was routinely offered by administrators and faculty at ASU as a concession—a symbolic token manipulated as necessary to curry educational, promotional, or political favor for the institution.

Claiming that ASU administrators and faculty “manipulated” composition and that it was an institutional “token” or “concession” may not seem remarkable given the long history of hostility and abuses relating to composition that has been cataloged by rhetoric and composition historians, scholars, teachers, and administrators. In *From Form to Meaning*, David Fleming gives voice to the common belief that first-year composition “seems always and everywhere on the border of things, the margin or threshold” (2011, 205). If composition is stereotypically marginal, so too is anything associated with it—faculty and staff, writing programs, students, curriculum, and so on. Susan Miller’s (1991) now-famous “sad women in the basement” provides one of the more striking analogs to the presumed status of composition more generally. The perceived marginality of first-year composition among rhetoric and composition specialists rests on the belief that writing instruction in American higher education has consistently been conceived by non-specialists—that is, administrators and other faculty members—as temporary and disposable, what Mike Rose (1985) labels a “transient” need until lower schools finally meet their responsibility for preparing students to do the real work of college.¹⁵ Additional evidence that composition has been historically “sold out” does not seem entirely necessary. And it is certainly possible to read ASU’s history as precisely that—one more damning example of composition’s unwarranted (intellectual) marginality.

In *Conceding Composition*, however, I argue something like the opposite. I contend that composition has been anything but marginal at ASU—in fact, first-year composition in particular has often been central to ASU’s institutional development. The major claim of this book is that composition, specifically first-year composition, endures as the most common requirement in American postsecondary education because of its significant, positive value to institutions and to various stakeholders, which makes it available to concede. At ASU, composition has been, and continues to be, a crucial concession proffered in broader institutional negotiations with upper administrators, legislators, accrediting bodies, federal education officials, private donors, faculty across the disciplines, and other interested parties. Explaining why composition is valuable to stakeholders is part of the task of this book, but in brief, the vast majority of people invested in higher education think students should be required to take composition classes.

Describing composition as a concession in this way raises additional meanings that haunt the term but which may be less consistent throughout this book. For instance, a second possible definition of concession is “admission of a point claimed in argument; acknowledgement of the

validity or justice of a proposition or idea. In *Rhetoric*, the surrender by a disputant of a controvertible point or position, in order to ground a fresh argument thereon, or to clear the way for one of greater importance" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, "Concession, n." 2015). In other words, concessions open up new argumentative options, and sometimes composition is conceded as the ground on which other arguments may proceed. This sense of the term has had cascading effects for composition throughout its history. Administrators concede the importance of composition instruction to, in turn, concede it in negotiations with other stakeholders. Composition teachers, scholars, and administrators concede universal composition requirements to ensure students received some measure of direct instruction in reading and writing.¹⁶ And most institutions have historically conceded the necessity of such a requirement in accord with conventional (if shifting) notions of liberal education. In other words, conceding composition is, not incidentally, an acknowledgment of its validity, the act of which clears the way for other arguments to be made—about what it entails, who teaches it, how often, to what population, to what effect, and so on. The ubiquity of composition's concession at ASU invites us to consider the degree to which it represents the surrender of a controvertible point to achieve other goals.

Even as I unpack this sense of concession, however, it is not to say, as Susan Miller and others do, that first-year composition was the necessary "Other" against which literary studies was defined as a valuable academic enterprise. Nor, for that matter, is it to say that composition was important at ASU for teaching students to be better writers, better thinkers, or better citizens—the course's ostensible theoretical and pedagogical aims. Whether first-year composition has been central to advancing literary studies' academic credentials or to advancing students' literate development—either of which may or may not be the case, and both of which debates I leave for other people to advance—I contend that first-year composition has been essential to the development of ASU as an institution of higher education, from normal school to teachers' college to regional college to research university and points in between.¹⁷ In other words, it is not my intention to weigh in on debates about whether first-year composition at ASU was intellectually marginalized. It is not necessary to do so to make the case that first-year composition was not institutionally "marginal" in the sense of being temporary or imperiled as a result of administrative or interdisciplinary hostility.

To be sure, there is ample evidence that scores of people at ASU, from teaching assistants to university presidents, aligned against

first-year composition and in some cases openly sought its eradication. In 1965, for instance, ASU president G. Homer Durham corresponded with Jerome Archer, then chair of English, and indicated his (Durham's) ambivalence about first-year composition: "Dr. Keast (Wayne State) is prepared to eliminate freshman composition and force all members of every faculty to be in fact teachers of English as well as teachers of their own subject fields . . . I am sure the results would be salutary in the lives of all faculty members who do not now appreciate the work and service preformed by the Department of English" (Durham 1965).

In this letter and elsewhere, Durham seems amenable to the dissolution of first-year composition on intellectual grounds. And we might reasonably conclude, given the utter lack of defensiveness in Durham's message, that Archer was a relatively receptive audience.¹⁸ Nevertheless, first-year composition was not eliminated at ASU (nor, to my knowledge, at Wayne State). Moreover, composition was rarely under serious threat at ASU because it served other crucial institutional interests—by 1965, for instance, teaching assistantships in first-year composition classrooms funded both English and education graduate students. The first-year composition requirement has persisted at ASU without interruption since 1927 because, to put it bluntly, composition education served the institution in numerous ways that were not *necessarily* tied to theoretical or pedagogical best practices (though it was not necessarily impervious to them either). This is also not to suggest that first-year composition was never vulnerable or marginal at ASU but that its vulnerability and marginality were a consequence of its substantial institutional value, not of the sincere belief that intellectual responsibility for composition could eventually be returned to its "proper" place in the lower schools or to anywhere else for that matter.

In *Conceding Composition*, I assert that despite well-documented and broad-ranging criticisms of first-year composition's pedagogical, theoretical, and socio-cultural efficacy, the course's enduring existence in American higher education can be usefully understood by considering its positive value for meeting specific institutional needs irrespective of student needs, demographics, disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical best practices, or even improved student writing. This points up a third common usage of concession that pervades this book. This third sense of concession is most commonly used in reference to concessions at concerts or sporting events and designates the allotment of "a small area or of a portion of premises for some specified purpose, e.g. for the establishment of a refreshment stand" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, "Concession, n." 2015). Business is transacted in these spaces of concession, goods are

exchanged, services are rendered; but the business that is transacted does not necessarily bear on or relate to the larger enterprise that supports its existence. That is, the sale of beer and hot dogs has no direct bearing on whether pitches are pitched, outs are recorded, or runs are scored (though it may affect the funding and enjoyment of such events).

Used in this way, the metaphor of concession returns attention to the state of composition in the university, where the business of teaching, learning, and practicing writing is transacted. And here again, we'd do well to recognize that the business of writing instruction does not *necessarily* bear on the larger enterprise of the institution, no matter how much first-year composition may be used to institutional ends. It is allotted, presumably because it can be made to serve the larger institution in some way(s). In this sense of concession, first-year composition might best be characterized as institutionally “flexible” or “malleable” as opposed to marginal or vulnerable. As such, ASU’s composition education helped administrators and faculty produce institutional change, if not necessarily intellectual progress.

As noted earlier, first-year composition was introduced at ASU in the mid-1920s and helped save the school from being decommissioned. In the 1930s, the course was stratified into three versions—remedial, regular, and advanced—to mirror course offerings at other colleges and universities. In the 1940s, first-year composition was redefined as part of the general education requirements, the provision of which enabled the school to offer MAs and PhDs. In the 1950s, exemptions were introduced to attract top students who refused to take the required “remedial” classes. In the 1960s, primary teaching responsibilities for first-year composition were transferred from full professors to teaching assistants, part-time faculty, and assistant professors to facilitate the recruitment of research faculty. And so on and so forth. In each case, without exception, composition was conceded—sometimes by faculty but usually by administrators or committees—to address institutional exigencies.

Course descriptions in ASU’s general catalogs over this period were virtually unchanged—verbiage was updated with the times, but the core concepts stayed relatively stable. We might reasonably surmise that the intellectual content of the courses changed only inasmuch as writing teachers and writing program administrators changed it. In other words, it seems fairly apparent that course content was generally left to disciplinary specialists. Despite the consistency in course descriptions, however, the institutional place of composition education changed considerably on a number of occasions to address new institutional challenges. The baseline presumption seems always to have been that good

teaching and good learning could happen in first-year composition, but ultimately the course persisted at ASU because administrators and faculty could concede it in some sense of the term to meet changing institutional exigencies.

CONCEDING (IN) RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

In the next section, I argue that recognizing composition's institutional value as a "concession" at Arizona State University can help historians recognize that the practice of conceding composition has vastly exceeded ASU's individual case. Before doing so, however, I return briefly to some disciplinary—that is, pedagogical, theoretical, and professional—considerations. The institutional perspective I have been describing thus far is pointedly not "disciplinary" for reasons I explicate in chapter 1. It is therefore not necessarily intended to illuminate pedagogical and theoretical implications for composition classrooms. Nevertheless, I believe *Conceding Composition* potentially has serious pedagogical, theoretical, and professional implications for composition teachers, scholars, and even administrators. I contemplate some of these implications more specifically in the conclusion of the book, but they deserve a few words here as well. In fact, I believe the radical dissociation of composition-as-institutional-need from rhetoric and writing pedagogy and research has the potential to open productive new avenues for the field.

In the field's conventional historical narrative, composition is marginalized in higher education because institutions are ambivalent at best and hostile at worst to composition as a scholarly and pedagogical object. This institutional hostility, according to historians, proceeds from the belief that composition and its disciplinary consorts (e.g., rhetoric, writing, literacy) are insufficiently intellectual. Sharon Crowley (1998a, 4) makes precisely this point in *Composition in the University*: "The history of composition studies has been written in the fortunes of the required introductory course in composition. Unfortunately, this course enjoys very little status within the university, and so its history and status negatively affect the current status of composition studies."

Implicit in most historical accounts of this belief, and explicit throughout a good deal of composition scholarship, is the assurance that better teaching and better scholarship can eventually enable the field to overcome this form of institutional hostility (e.g., Fleming 2011, 13). The promise of overcoming hostility, in turn, has long linked rhetoric and composition's disciplinary aims to assumptions about what institutions expect from composition education. This belief is probably

stated nowhere more succinctly than in the most recent edition of *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, in which the authors write, “The field’s desire to become a legitimate scholarly field like others in higher education led to the development of serious pedagogical scholarship involving theoretical and qualitative methods and even empirical research” (Tate et al. 2014, 16–17).¹⁹ Crowley (1998b, 112) has characterized this governing desire as “the topos of improvement = appreciation.” If institutions are unsatisfied with student writers, writing programs, composition instruction, and/or rhetoric and composition scholarship, then the best way to earn institutional approbation is by demonstrating intellectual excellence—providing irrefutable evidence of better teaching and improved research. Massive efforts to professionalize composition teachers and program administrators have been advanced on these grounds in the past seven decades.

It should be clear, however, that I do not necessarily think better teaching or better scholarship will lead to institutional approval. A central assumption of this book, in fact, is that the notion that inadequate teaching and scholarship are the cause of institutional hostility is fundamentally a misdiagnosis. This notion is based on the very reasonable assumption that everyone involved with composition education, at whatever level, shares the common goal of helping students become better writers—that better student writing is a stasis point. But as I argue, composition has served and continues to serve institutional ends that do not necessarily correspond with the production of better student writers.

Perhaps the most bracing illustration of this reality is described by Chris Anson (2002), who explains the circumstances in which the University of Minnesota’s (UM) independent writing program, which he administered, was unceremoniously disbanded in 1996 by an interim dean while Anson was attending a conference in Europe. Despite the fact that the program “boasted a first-rate training and development program; a strong team of teachers; a solid, nationally recognized curriculum informed by current work in the field and keeping pace with university-wide liberal education initiatives; productive faculty; and a consensus-based management system that helped to prepare graduate students in composition for possible roles as writing program administrators” (ibid., 153), it was rolled back into the English department from which it had split a decade and a half earlier. From Anson’s description of the program’s intellectual contributions plus the program’s economic contributions to the College of Liberal Arts, it was patently excellent and should have been a prime candidate for administrative appreciation. Obviously, given the outcome, it wasn’t appreciated enough.

Anson weighs the possibility that the dissolution of UM's independent writing program was part of a disciplinary turf war, but he ultimately concludes that it was conceded to support the English department's attempts to prosper within a new funding model. To make the causal chain more explicit, (1) upper administrators changed the funding model to strengthen the institution, (2) lower administrators reconceived smaller units' organization to streamline costs, (3) English needed more full-time enrollment hours (FTEs) to meet the new funding guidelines, and (4) composition was ultimately taken over (conceded) by the interim dean because it was suited to the "larger" cause (*ibid.*, 160). In other words, the program's concession seems to have had nothing to do with intellectual issues—least of all, actual writing instruction. In fact, it seems highly likely, though admittedly speculative, that the interim dean figured the intellectual content of the courses would be wholly unchanged by the institutional reconfiguration. All the more reason, then, to dissolve it.

Although I am skeptical of this particular interim dean's motives, in my broader reading it is clear that the vast majority of administrators and faculty are actually quite interested in what happens in composition classes. Most of them genuinely want students to be better writers and more successful students, and they even regularly trust rhetoric and composition specialists to meet that charge, all evidence to the contrary. But such pedagogical/intellectual interest is regularly (and most administrators would no doubt say unavoidably) subordinated to larger "essential" institutional needs. In other words, for all its important pedagogical/intellectual value, institutions and administrators also appreciate composition for very different reasons than "the topos of improvement = appreciation" suggests. Put even more bluntly, composition's intellectual value as a teaching and research subject often has little, if anything, to do with its value as an institutional concession.

As such, better teaching and scholarship on their own cannot address the non-disciplinary institutional needs composition education is routinely conceded to meet. No doubt, the immediate impulse among writing specialists would be to combat the use of composition for such ends. That certainly seems to be Anson's impulse, and understandably so. But if tertiary education is to continue to exist, such non-disciplinary institutional needs do need to be met, and the institution's keepers are constitutionally pitched toward doing so. Given a choice between better first-year writers and efforts to secure institutional well-being against hazards (real or perceived), it is not hard to guess where most people who make decisions for postsecondary institutions will come down. More often

than not, then, the principled actions of composition faculty will probably have little lasting effect on those decision-makers' decision-making. In other words, the prospects for preventing institutions from conceding composition seem to me to be pretty low.

My attempts to separate intellectual objectives from institutional imperatives in *Conceding Composition* may therefore seem cause for cynicism and despair, but I think they actually represent a potentially important opportunity for rhetoric and composition teachers and scholars. My larger point is that a better understanding of the tenor of institutional expectations as analytically separable, if not functionally separate, from intellectual considerations affords rhetoric and composition specialists new, exciting disciplinary opportunities. Redefining composition as a "concession," as opposed to a "service," can function in at least two substantial ways.

First, redefining composition as a "concession" effectually mitigates the pernicious expectation that composition can eventually meet institutional needs by way of intellectual, disciplinary advances. It can't. The dissolution of this psychic link, however, means that rhetoric and writing instruction might be expanded to augment the current disciplinary mission of making better writers. Composition classes could be developed to include ethical, political, and epistemological inquiry (which I know already happens in many places but which might be brought further into the open). For instance, what might a composition class, even a first-year composition class, look like that is designed to help students think, research, and write about "basic" questions like "what is writing" (Nicotra 2009, W260); "how does writing work" (Bazerman 1988, 9); "who owns writing" (Hesse 2005); or even "should writing be taught" (Vitanza 1991, 161). These are questions we pursue in our scholarship, certainly, but they do not seem to me to be questions we often invite students to pursue in our classes, especially first-year classes. Moreover, although my point is not that these are *the* necessary questions to be asked, they are potentially fruitful pedagogical questions among many that are hard to ask and answer within current disciplinary assumptions about the nature of institutional constraints. Reconsidering those disciplinary grounds, therefore, can potentially open spaces for productively rethinking the field's pedagogical limits. This kind of expansion would work well with broad-ranging disciplinary efforts to develop undergraduate majors (see, e.g., Giberson and Moriarty 2010).

Second, redefining composition invites new research questions about why composition exists in the university, how it exists, and how it might be productively reconceived in light of non-disciplinary

circumstances with which the field has not previously grappled. *Conceding Composition* is an early foray into raising questions and thinking through some answers from a non-disciplinary institutional perspective. But much work remains to be done in this vein if we are to understand the complicated roles composition is designed to fill in and for postsecondary institutions.

The ultimate goal, of course, is to discover ways to strengthen composition as a teaching and research subject and as a profession in light of deepening understandings about institutional needs. As this work is carried out, rhetoric and composition teachers and scholars may find new, more effective ways to position the field's commitment to composition instruction in relation to composition education's non-disciplinary institutional functions. For if composition education cannot be made to please institutions in such a way as to completely prevent "concession," perhaps it can be made to mollify institutions in the service of good instruction. I have in mind a sort of disciplinary analog to Robert Brooke's "underlife," which Brooke says "refers to those behaviors which undercut the roles expected of participants in a situation" (1987, 141). Mollifying could be, in Brooke's words, "a *contained* form of underlife, a form which . . . attempts to exist within the existing structure without introducing too much friction" (*ibid.*, 151, original emphasis).²⁰ And mollifying can potentially create the kind of disciplinary space necessary for teachers and scholars to pursue dramatically enhanced opportunities not generally afforded by attempts to please. I do not mean to suggest that the field will suddenly find itself in an "anything goes" environment or that teachers, researchers, or writing program administrators would even want that. But by reducing the cognitive demands of one kind of institutional constraint, the so-called service function, rhetoric and composition specialists might suddenly discover (1) pedagogical and scholarly opportunities that were previously obscured and (2) new lines of argument that can effectively advance the profession, both within institutions and potentially outside of them.

CONCEDING COMPOSITION AS A NATIONAL TREND

One of *Conceding Composition*'s premises is that rhetoric and composition specialists can learn important lessons about the history of postsecondary composition education—and consider possibilities for rethinking our relationship to it in theoretically, pedagogically, and professionally gratifying ways—by considering it more precisely in relation to Arizona State University's institutional exigencies, as opposed to the more

conventional pedagogical, intellectual, or socio-cultural ones. However, as Richard E. Miller cogently articulates in his study of education reform, “The ‘turn to cases’ must be followed by a *return* to generalities, hypotheses, overarching observations, and speculations if this methodological interest in the local is to have any chance of escaping the charge of mere parochialism” (1998, 17, original emphasis).

Although ASU’s example provides the initial emphasis for my investigation, *Conceding Composition* is not simply a case study. Rather, ASU provides a point of departure for larger claims I make about how composition as an institutional concession developed in American higher education more generally. Put succinctly, I set my intensive examination of ASU’s example against intensive examinations of other institutional examples to argue that first-year composition has had wide-ranging value as a “concession” throughout its existence in American higher education. I contend that first-year composition has been “conceded” by administrators and faculty *around the country* to advance broader, non-disciplinary institutional interests tied to organizational development and daily operations.

This realization dawned on me nearly as slowly as the realization that ASU’s writing course numbers and titles were somehow tied to its institutional mission.²¹ In examining ASU’s history through an institutional perspective, I discovered that the university’s institutional exigencies often correlated closely to institutional exigencies at other schools around the country. It is hardly a revelation, I suppose, that attempts to address exigencies related to institutional mission, accreditation, and federal funding, among many others, have been widely consequential across multiple institutions in American education. As it turns out, for instance, the vast majority of normal schools in America transformed into teachers’ colleges alongside ASU in the mid-1920s.²² ASU’s shift from normal school to teachers’ college was in many ways one datum in a national trend. This is not to say that ASU’s local situation was not distinctive. It was in a number of ways, both dramatic and mundane, and I detail some of the more noteworthy idiosyncrasies for rhetoric and composition scholars.²³ Nevertheless, one goal of this book is to demonstrate that ASU’s institutional story is not simply a local one.

Beginning with its establishment as a normal school, ASU was closely associated with other institutions. Its curricular, organizational, and bureaucratic structures were consciously modeled on comparable structures at other institutions throughout the country. Decisions about what courses to offer, what majors to emphasize, what degree tracks to support, and many more were made in light of, and sometimes as a response to, other institutions’ actions. Not only did ASU not exist in a vacuum,

but the exigencies to which it was compelled to respond often originated in other institutions and organizations, educational and otherwise.²⁴

In the early 1940s, for instance, ASU was still a teachers' college: Tempe State Teachers' College. For all intents and purposes, this meant the school could only issue teaching degrees, a BA in education and an MA in education. Although there were specializations (students could get a Bachelor of Education degree with a specialization in English or math, for instance), the school was not authorized to offer standard BA and BS degrees. In 1945, however, in view of the needs of returning GIs, the teachers' college became Arizona State College, a regional comprehensive college with the authorization to grant BA and BS degrees in fourteen majors ("New ASU Story" 2001). According to Edward P.J. Corbett, the flood of new students following World War II was a consequence of "newly adopted open admissions policies" that proliferated throughout higher education in the mid-1940s (1993, 63). Although he ties composition and writing program administration directly to this increase in enrollments, Corbett doesn't spend much time discussing these policy changes. But at least at ASU, such policies were hard won based on the conscious decision—and significant administrative and political efforts—to transform the institution from a teachers' college to a regional college. Moreover, as I discuss in chapter 4, this decision was explicitly predicated on decisions made by federal and state governments, administrators at other postsecondary institutions, and extra-institutional organizations (e.g., accreditation associations).

Historians have often characterized these sorts of institutional transformations in romanticized terms—usually in classic bootstraps narratives of individual (if institutional, and therefore also collective) fortitude. ASU's institutional historians, Ernest J. Hopkins and Alfred Thomas Jr., conceive of ASU's evolution from normal school to university as a story of western grit, triumph over adversity, and Manifest Destiny.²⁵ Narratives of localized, independent gumption serve a variety of purposes, one of which is to reinforce the sense that colleges and universities strive for and achieve continual progress. Evidence of persistent institutional advancement supports rhetorical claims about the educational, promotional, and political importance of tertiary education. This striving is inseparable from the institutional uses to which composition is put in local situations. Such "striving" narratives, however, belie the dynamic relationships among institutions, which affected and were affected by institutional transformations.

Institutional achievement narratives also belie the dynamic relationships among (1) institutions, (2) their institutional affiliations, and (3)

their curricula. I argue in this book that certain kinds of composition education evinced ASU's affiliation with other institutions or institution types—"English 101: First Year English" was properly "collegiate," whereas "English 1: Rhetoric and Composition" was not. If course descriptions are any indication, the classroom experience was essentially unchanged; but being demonstrably "collegiate" granted ASU (née Tempe State Teachers' College) the affiliations necessary for its continued existence.

In the introduction to his compendious documentary history of ASU, Alfred Thomas Jr. argues that such matters were characteristic of the "institutional rivalry" between ASU and the University of Arizona and that they served as an "opposing and limiting force" in ASU's development (Thomas 1960a, n.p.). Opposing and limiting though the rivalry may have been, inter-institutional hostility was also profoundly formative. It was, after all, a powerful contributing factor in administrators' decision to adjust ASU's curriculum in 1927 to include first-year composition—the introduction of which helped prove that ASU's course offerings were comparable to the University of Arizona's and resuscitated transfer agreements. Although commonly cast in pedagogical and intellectual terms, it should be clear that such decisions served institutional needs as much as, or more than, any pressing instructional needs. In short, particular kinds of composition education (as well as particular kinds of history education, math education, and so on), as opposed to specific kinds of writing instruction, served as bridges between various institutions and evinced a kind of group membership.²⁶

Historian Hans Kellner asserts that "each academic tribe produces and harbors a system of anxieties that, perhaps more than anything else, identifies a scholar as a member of the group" (1989, 129). We might usefully extend Kellner's observation to describe institutions inasmuch as different types of institutions (e.g., normal schools, teachers' colleges, regional colleges, universities) often share anxieties within the group that identify members. The most obvious anxiety among colleges and universities is that students receive at least nominally the same education from one constituent institution to the next. Another prominently shared anxiety is that graduates will register as competently literate and numerate subjects. Given the shared quality of anxieties, I contend in *Conceding Composition* that ASU's individual institutional anxieties direct historians' attention to ways composition education was used in higher education *at large* to address common institutional exigencies.

To paraphrase Kellner, members of particular institutional tribes generally faced comparable anxieties, and sometimes exactly the same

anxieties, as in the examples I analyze in this book. The proliferation and subsequent demise of normal schools, the ascendance of regional accreditation associations, and the growth in importance of federal grant funds reverberated widely throughout American education. These are not the only examples that can be discovered. But my goal is not to be comprehensive in this regard; it is, in James A. Berlin's words, to conduct "a search for interpretations that cast the past and present in new conceptual formulations" (1994, 123).

In the following chapters, I offer just such a search for interpretations by directing attention to non-disciplinary institutional exigencies and their simultaneously momentous and mundane consequences for composition in American higher education. In chapter 1, I elaborate a new methodology for undertaking the history I have been describing to this point, and in my concluding chapter I reflect on some implications of this study for the field of rhetoric and composition. I do not intend to repeat that work here, but I do want to point out one additional contribution of *Conceding Composition* as a way of framing the larger study. In offering the notion of composition as a concession, this book is an attempt to provide a more precise explanation for why first-year composition continues to exist in spite of, and maybe because of, the many competing assessments about its functions and value.

In claiming that composition has been a concession, I contend that first-year composition was intended less as a gate-keeping mechanism, as most rhetoric and composition historians have claimed, than as evidence of postsecondary institutions' suitability for educating large numbers of high school graduates. First-year composition might, in fact, be considered a wide-ranging form of curricular public relations inasmuch as it has helped colleges and universities across the country demonstrate their broad appeal following several centuries as cloisters of elite privilege. This is all to say, we may stand to learn valuable lessons about how composition education—particularly in the form of first-year composition—came to exist, how it proliferated, and how it has endured in American higher education from this history because it allows us to consider what kinds of rhetorical, political, organizational, institutional, and promotional options conceding composition, or specific forms of composition, opened up for institutions of higher education. One important challenge in re-describing first-year composition as a concession, then, is to envision what the course and the field might look like if the thing we have long thought of as a barrier—composition's transience—is reimagined as the consummate institutional value.