English department’s literature-based MA program, developing some composition and rhetoric expertise through our annual spring seminar workshops and other professional development activities. Tenure-track lines have been few and far between—in large part because without a major we were unable to make the argument that we needed to fill a particular “slot” with disciplinary expertise.

Historically, a budget crisis in the early 1980s reinforced the institutional perception that writing was not a discrete discipline, despite the number of rhetoric faculty who either had completed or were completing doctoral work and who were specializing in rhetoric and composition studies. With inadequate enrollments in other departments, OU chose to save tenured positions by assigning faculty from across the university to teach FYC in lieu of some courses in their own programs. Thus the rhetoric program saw tenured faculty from departments as diverse as modern languages, philosophy, music, and political science teaching FYC. Unlike those who taught the Exploratories, these faculty were given some training by OU’s compositionists and were teaching FYC rather than integrating writing instruction into courses based in their own disciplines. Many grew to understand the complexity of the task, but few, if any, ever expressed any feeling of inadequacy for the work, particularly those who were abject failures. Within a very few years, university enrollments grew and the “cooperating faculty,” as they were termed, gravitated to their home departments, leaving, unfortunately, with the sense (both for themselves and among administrators) that, really, any OU faculty member could teach FYC and (for some) the unenlightened notion that FYC instruction was primarily about “correctness.”

As a result, both our course proposals and our major proposal have received scrutiny over the years by non-disciplinary faculty and some powerful administrative staff who consider themselves at least as expert as we, an attitude they would be most unlikely to take with chemistry, say, or theatre. Herein arises perhaps the largest benefit that might have accrued had the writing program been affiliated with English: English faculty were among the most severe critics as we developed the proposal, and their position heavily influenced the CAS curriculum committee. Had we been in the English department, the English faculty would likely have been allies if they had believed in the major, rather than seeing the writing program, as so many of them have for so long, as a service program only. Equally likely, though, is that the literature faculty would have suppressed the idea at the outset.
The residual belief that diverse Oakland faculty and administrators are experts about writing programs has continued to impede our development. Today, for example, among our English department colleagues, too many regard writing instruction as what inexperienced TAs do until they earn their PhDs and find full-time literature positions. Even the College of Arts and Sciences Committee on Instruction, in its initial response to our proposal for a major in rhetoric and writing, inquired, “Might the department want to budget for graduate assistants, perhaps from the [totally literature-based] English M.A. program?” (Elvekrog, 2007). Another example comes from the former chair of the linguistics department. In response to a request from us for a letter of support to accompany the first submission of our proposal, he objected to the entire course plan, offering in a March 2007 e-mail comments such as: “The use of various new technologies does not represent a content area,” “A foundational course in writing ought to be an English grammar course,” and “Suppose you remove RHT [XXX] from the core courses and add COM 311, Rhetoric and Public Address. . . . This way, you could appeal to the long history of rhetoric ‘as an independent discipline’” (Binkert, 2007). Would we have found more understanding and academic support for our discipline if housed in an English department, as so many writing programs have been? Knowing the institutional politics, I think we would have fared differently but likely still would have been second-tier in allocation of positions and support for creating upper-division coursework—and, perhaps, would have been encouraged into creating a hybrid major or restrained from creating a major at all. Helpfully, institutional memory is fading due to retirements, and the writing faculty are gaining recognition across campus as disciplinary experts.

LOOKING AHEAD

Undoubtedly, the writing and rhetoric program faculty are excited about the new era unfolding: holding separate department status, offering a major and minor. Although the current dean explicitly disagreed that having a major was essential to becoming a department, creating the proposal and having sufficient tenured and tenure-track faculty to mount the coursework gave, I believe, more institutional legitimacy to his proposal to move the program into its own CAS department. A deep concern for senior faculty steeped in institutional history was the possibility that the new department would be created before the major completed its journey through governance, with the result that the program
would then have some of the status and resource issues of the LS and RCJ periods. Importantly, that worry was resolved this spring. Now we can build on our disciplinary coursework, pedagogy, and research, which have their roots in the establishment of OU’s independent writing program at the auspicious time when the rhetoric and composition studies discipline was emerging. The program now looks like an equal player with the other College of Arts and Sciences units, with the opportunity to make the case for tenure-track positions and for less reliance on part-time faculty, to seek grants and other development sources of support, and perhaps to pursue a graduate degree.

REFERENCES
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Oakland University Catalog 1966–67. N.d. Rochester, MI.
Registrar record books. N.d. Office of the Registrar, Oakland University, Rochester, MI.
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Writing major. 2007. Composition Studies 36, no. 1 (Spring).
APPENDIX
The Oakland University Writing Major Curriculum

Core (12 credits):

- WRT 160 Composition II (or equivalent)
- WRT 340 Issues in Writing and Rhetoric (new course)
- WRT 394 Literacy, Technology, and Civic Engagement (new course)

Students will choose one of the following tracks for their major course work and complete both the required course and three of the electives from that track. One of the elective courses may be chosen from another track with the permission of the WRT department chair:

Writing for the Professions (16 credits):

- WRT 331 Introduction to Professional Writing (required; new course)
- WRT 305 Advanced Writing: Various Themes (new course)
- WRT 332 Rhetoric of Web Design (under development)
- WRT 335 Writing for Human Services Professionals
- WRT 341 Rhetoric of Professional Discourse
- WRT 350 Service Learning Writing
- WRT 380 Persuasive Writing
- WRT 382 Business Writing
- WRT 381 Scientific and Technical Writing
- WRT 460 Writing across the University: Language and Disciplinary Culture
Writing for New Media (16 credits):

- WRT 330 Digital Culture: Identity and Community (required)
- WRT 305 Advanced Writing: Various Themes (new course)
- WRT 231 Composing Audio Essays (new course)
- WRT 233 Digital Storytelling (new course)
- WRT 320 Peer Tutoring in Composition
- WRT 332 Rhetoric of Web Design (under development)
- WRT 364 Writing about Culture: Ethnography
- WRT 381 Scientific and Technical Writing

Writing as a Discipline (16 credits):

- WRT 320 Peer Tutoring in Composition (required)
- WRT 305 Advanced Writing: Various Themes (new course)
- WRT 341 Rhetoric of Professional Discourse
- WRT 342 Contemporary Rhetorical Studies
- WRT 350 Service Learning Writing
- WRT 364 Writing about Culture: Ethnography
- WRT 365 Women Writing Autobiography
- WRT 380 Persuasive Writing
- WRT 414 Teaching Writing
- WRT 460 Writing across the University: Language and Disciplinary Culture
“BETWEEN THE IDEA AND THE REALITY . . . FALLS THE SHADOW”
The Promise and Peril of a Small College Writing Major

Kelly Lowe
William Macauley

. . . most students conclude that the field of English studies entails the study of literature and, to a lesser extent, the teaching of composition.
—Janice Lauer, “Rhetoric and Composition”
in *English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline(s).*

There is a certain intellectual and emotional appeal to an undergraduate writing major: majors bring students and advisees and money and tenure-lines and your name in the graduation bulletin. A writing major can also indicate that, finally, your institution recognizes writing as a legitimate academic field rather than simply a set of skills to be (quickly) mastered in the service of other majors or as a secondary consideration to “content.” So, what could possibly be wrong with a writing major?

Plenty, as it turns out. Our argument is simple: there is nothing wrong with a writing major *per se.* However, there is a lot that *can go wrong* with a writing major and we feel, in our experience in creating, maintaining, and finally leaving a writing major at a small liberal arts college, that we have seen much of what is good about a major and the many pitfalls, traps, and other mishaps that can occur in the development of a writing major at a small college. Whether you are working to begin a writing major or you are sustaining one, we hope that a discussion of some of the issues that presented themselves in our work in developing a writing major will be helpful in supporting yours.

We write this not out of a sense of sour grapes (although, in an effort at full disclosure, it is important to acknowledge that our various levels of dissatisfaction with the writing major led to both of us seeking and finding employment elsewhere), but in the hope that others can learn
from our experiences. We can also now, more than two years later, recognize our own culpability in how things went. We write this with the knowledge that nothing is perfect and that, for many, a bad writing major is better than a number of professional alternatives. Finally, we write this with the knowledge that the number of writing majors around the country is growing and that we are not interested in inveighing against any sort(s) of historical inevitability.

That said, we would like to present a case study of one writing major at one school at one time, tracing the development, maturity, and eventual decay of the first iteration of the program. We are most interested in articulating the peculiarities of doing so at a small, somewhat selective, liberal arts school where, as common assumptions might have it, things should be “easier” if for no other reason than there are fewer worries; fewer faculty, smaller majors, and less red tape should, one posits, make change easier. We will present this information in the form of a cautionary tale: We got what we wanted, in a sense, but the price we had to pay for what we got was, in retrospect, far too high.

BACKGROUND: LITERATURE AND WRITING

Before we talk in specifics about our own experiences with a writing major, it is important to take a brief look at the history of the teaching of writing in American colleges and universities. This history is important because the parallels between the development of the teaching of writing and the development of the study of writing are manifest. What we ran into, in short, was the central problem discovered by many of the historians of the discipline: how do you take a second-class subject like writing and keep it from becoming a second-class major? In some sense, of course, this history is as old as education—the turn toward rhetoric as a model for modern composition studies tries to tap into the powerful idea that all education has its roots in the teaching of reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking. And it does. But the departmental separation of rhetoric from literature in the late nineteenth century has

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1. Disclosure number 2: Soon after we left, the department made significant changes to the writing major, changes that one or both of us had been advocating for several years. While our intellectual vanity wants to take credit for these changes, chances are they were made independent of our departure.

2. McComiskey’s introduction to English Studies: An Introduction to the Discipline(s) does a far better job arguing this than we can.
led to the current *de facto* hierarchy: literature and the study of text as primary, writing and the production of text as the subordinate.\(^3\)

Lest we stand accused as raving paranoids, the written histories of the discipline commonly called English and/or English studies seem to bear out the premise that writing is something that has always been the poor stepchild of literature. Gerald Graff’s important history of the discipline has often been faulted for only mentioning composition and the teaching of writing a few times. The fact that Graff is telling the truth about the relationship between the teaching of writing and the study of literature only makes it more uncomfortable to consider the strange relationship between the two areas.

In a wonderful way, James Berlin’s *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges*, in offering a strong counter-narrative to Graff’s work, seems to, at the same time, confirm the argument that, in Berlin’s terms, rhetoric and poetic, while forming the core concerns of an English department, are often featured in a dominant/subordinate relationship. Berlin’s argument that “the devalorizing of the writing course in the curriculum was the result of the convergence of a remarkably complex set of forces” (1987, 21), makes for a wonderful story and, at the same time, lays the groundwork for the current sense of anxiety that pervades many rhetoric and composition faculty. Indeed, the story, in brief, is one of opportunism—that, as Berlin argues, seems to revolve around the simple argument that anyone can teach writing, and only the chosen few can teach literature. For instance, Berlin writes that “establishing the entrance test in composition suggested that the ability to write was something the college student ought to bring with him from his preparatory school” (1987, 23) and that

In order to distinguish the new English department professor from the old rhetoric teacher or the new composition teacher, a new discipline had to be formulated, a discipline based in English as the language of learning and literature as the specialized province of study. (1987, 7)\(^4\)

Robert Scholes makes this same argument in *The Rise and Fall of English*, where he explains:

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3. We don’t want to overstate things—the complicated nature of creative writing seems to wander throughout this tale; it’s a subject we’ll address throughout.

4. It is important to note, in the above, the use of “professor” and “teacher” in the two disciplinary conceptions Berlin presents.
English departments need composition as the “others” of literature in order to function as they have functioned. The useful, the practical, and even the intelligible were relegated to composition so that literature could stand as the complex embodiment of cultural ideals, based upon texts in which those ideals were so deeply embedded as to require the deep analysis of a trained scholar. Teachers of literature became the priests and theologians of English, while teachers of composition were the nuns, barred from the priesthood doing the shitwork of the field. (1998, 35–6)

Thus, we end up where we are today in so many schools and universities.

Recently (and fortuitously for the writing of this essay), the ugly specter of the literature v. writing divide has shown itself again. As has become an almost yearly ritual, the Writing Program Administration Listserv (WPA-L) online discussion board was consumed, for several weeks in March 2007, with a discussion of the metaphorical War between the States that is rhet/comp/lit. The narrative begins, as it often does, with a story about the different assumptions that faculty sharing the same departmental space often have about the work that one another do. To wit:

So . . . I went to a meeting today where we discussed the development of a new track in rhet/comp at the MA level. According to our track, a student could finish the degree without ever taking a graduate-level literature class . . . although they could take lit if they wanted. The comment was made that this would be okay if we were offering an MA in Rhet/Comp, but since we offer an MA in English with a track in rhet/comp no student should get their degree without taking literature because “literature is the foundation of English.”

And so begins a three-week series of e-mails that starts with a discussion of the statement that “literature is the foundation of English” and ends with a discussion of writing programs “divorcing” themselves from literature programs/departments. Perhaps most troubling in this discussion is the realization, soon reached by Elizabeth Wardle, that a “divorce” between rhet/comp and literature isn’t always the best solution because “splits were not necessarily resulting in stronger disciplinary standing for rhet/comp.” What Wardle has found is something we will address

below: mainly that a writing major inside a strong English department is often, especially in a small school where new tenure lines are infrequent, a far better solution than going it alone. (At our former institution, one to two tenure lines a year for the entire school was the usual. Due to budget issues, there were no new tenure lines for several years during the ten years this study addresses.)

WHY A MAJOR IN WRITING? WHY NOW?

In the original planning documents for the writing major, we made four fairly basic claims having to do with how the major would work both within the department (in concert with the existing major in “English,” which was, as many above argue, a major in literature) and within the curricular goals of the college. These claims as originally presented to the department and then to the college, were as follows:

the concern to help students become better writers has perhaps never been so widely shared across all disciplines and between professional academics and people in many other careers;

the demand—at the secondary and college level—for talented and trained teachers of writing and rhetoric has increased (even as the market for teachers of literature has become increasingly competitive);

in recent decades, the field of English studies has rediscovered its roots in rhetoric and has increasingly recognized rhetorical research and pedagogy as equal in value to work in literature (in practice, it has always been difficult to separate literary study and rhetoric);

the increasing demand in the corporate world not only for trained technical writers, but for all future career professionals to know how to write for business and technical fields. In a survey of nearly 2,000 recent graduates of business administration programs, 88% of respondents indicated that being able to write well is crucial to advancement, and that almost 25% of on-the-job time is spent writing. (Storms 1983, 13)

And here is where the trouble began. The department, at the time it discussed this major, was comprised of nine faculty: seven whose primary mission was to teach literature, one whose primary duty was to teach
creative writing (although she had some academic preparation in rhet/comp), and one whose background was in rhetoric, composition, and program administration. The one rhet/comp faculty had a two-course release (from a four/four annual teaching load) to run the writing center, develop the at-the-time new Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program, and solidify the summer assessment and placement program for first-year composition. All full-time, tenured and tenure-track faculty were to teach at least 50 percent of their load in first-year composition, although, as we’ll see, this didn’t always happen.

There was a lot of initial excitement about the major—faculty in the department felt that the major would take students away from the communications department and bring more students to literature and creative writing. There was, at the time, no discussion of what effect a writing major might have on the literature major.

The writing major, as originally developed, had students take a wide variety of classes, many in literature, including the two-semester Foundations course, which would be tweaked to serve as the foundation for all English department majors. Writing majors took a new course, a hybrid history and theory of rhetoric course called Rhetoric for Writers (to differentiate from the rhetoric courses taught in the speech/communications department) and a Senior Portfolio course which was an opportunity for senior writing majors to explore, in-depth, an area of writing which best reflected their intended field(s) of expertise. All well and good.

What happened next should be a familiar story. After lengthy discussions in the department about staffing, intention, and curriculum, it was determined that all writing majors should take a minimum of twelve hours of literature courses (a period, a genre, an elective, and another category which students most often fulfilled by taking literary theory); students also had to take either linguistics and/or history of the language. And nine hours of writing.

The irony was not lost on the writing faculty: a writing major where students took over half of their hours in literature (the Foundations course was entirely focused on literature and literary analysis) seemed less writing major and more a writing track or literature lite. Of course, as the story goes, we were just happy to be at the grown-ups’ table. The major (called, perhaps prophetically, “English without books” by one colleague) was passed unanimously by the department and the faculty

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8. There were four adjuncts who taught primarily first-year composition. They were not invited to department meetings and had no input into the major.
and was put into place in the fall semester of 1996. As is the case with so many opportunities in academe, the department may have jumped into a major without thinking through the long-term consequences—Kelly was a brand-new hire, the college’s first in rhet/comp, and there may well have been a “honeymoon period” involved. That said, whatever the reasons, writing became a major at our college.

And it was a success. Within three years, the number of writing majors was equal to the number of literature majors, and within ten years, writing majors had exceeded the number of literature majors. This is when the sniping began.

As the writing majors began to outnumber the literature majors in literature classes, tension started between students and faculty. Typical comments heard across campus included “writing majors aren’t very strong in the literature classes” and “the writing major senior projects are not as strong as those of the literature majors.” Sympathetic colleagues from other departments pulled us aside to commiserate. Students ended up in tears in our offices after being told that the writing major was no good and wouldn’t get them into a good grad school or land them a good job.

Other problems also presented themselves at this time, which exacerbated these many, albeit common, issues. We continued to hear from administrators (there were five deans in the ten years we were there) that they recognized the “significant levels of dysfunction” in our “deeply divided” department, which fueled our optimism for change. Administrative acknowledgement of our dysfunction, however, did not seem to bring with it any will to help the rhet/comp faculty find the balance they were looking for.

Within the department, we tried to force a number of changes to move each side toward some understanding. For instance, the introduction to the major’s course was team-taught every year, over two semesters, by a pair of English department faculty. Until the last two years of our time at the college, it had usually been taught by two lit faculty. However, in an effort to bridge the growing divide between lit and writing, as well as meet the needs of students who were pretty evenly divided between the two majors, the course was team-taught by one lit person and one writing person. The problem this presented, of course, was manifest in the design: it was, for instance, the only team-taught course on campus where the teachers were assigned to teach it (as opposed to other courses which were team-taught because two faculty members shared an interest in multiple
approaches to a subject). In the two years that one of us taught the course, the writing faculty member often sat quietly in the corner while the literature faculty “introduced” students to the “discipline” of English studies. The end result of this division of labor was, in retrospect, disastrous—students caught on very quickly to the fact that literature faculty had the power, due to their “expertise,” to silence writing faculty during any discussion of literature. Discussion of writing, as is shown above in Berlin’s discussion and as we demonstrate below, was a different matter.

Other, less formalized, efforts were made to bring the teaching of our senior majors together—to bring to their capstone a balance of writing and lit. These efforts sometimes resulted in cooperative capstone presentations, sometimes in capstone classes meeting together. There is no question that efforts were being made in good faith.

However, it just seemed like too little, too late. At this distance or closer, it is impossible to say what made these efforts less than healing. Was there just too much frustration within the department for these Band-Aids to help? Did the courses perpetuate the hierarchy in even more personal ways? Had the writing folks given up? Was there just too much evidence that these efforts were disingenuous? Although most, if not all, of these options were considered and discussed at some point, there was just no way to tell.

The question of why these conflicts continued when we all had ample opportunity to discuss and address them, unfortunately, involves some speculation. While there is a certain vanity that argues that of course the literature faculty were jealous of our success, there is no empirical proof of this. And while there is some anecdotal evidence that the writing faculty “copped an attitude” about the necessity for changes, we rest easy in knowing that whatever divisions there ended up being seem indicative of the kind of split that Berlin and Scholes describe in their respective histories of the discipline—that much of the discomfort the literature faculty felt was not jealousy so much as a misunderstanding of the mission of writing with/in a larger English studies curriculum. For instance, the unease that many in literature felt about the writing majors’ senior portfolio projects—that they weren’t as “serious” as the literature majors’ twenty-page critical paper—is indicative of a way of seeing English studies that is fairly narrow in its focus. This unease, we would argue, is simply a deeper unease that manifests itself with students as proxies; the unease is born out of what Bruce McComiskey argues lies at the heart of the debate between literature and rhet/comp:
For example, scholarship in English education and rhetoric and composition is often “pedagogical.” While pedagogical scholarship is highly valued in the disciplinary structures of English education and rhetoric and composition, in the context of tenure criteria based in literary studies, it is worth less than theoretical criticism. (2006, 29)

So it then stands to reason that students who are being taught and evaluated based upon their ability, as seniors, to produce a piece of “theoretical criticism,” are judged as working harder than those students engaged in senior projects having to do with pedagogy or creative writing, as most of the writing majors were. We did wonder at times if they were right, but, consistently, we looked at the amount of work students did in each major, and they were certainly comparable in terms of difficulty.

So the writing major, in part, fell victim to a certain kind of success—an increasing number of majors—which carried with it some less comfortable questions: those having to do with personnel decisions and curricular and departmental priorities. This success, and again we are supposing to a certain extent, was explained away by our colleagues as due in part to the fact that the writing major was more “fun” and less “serious”—primarily because the production of texts, even multiple drafts in multiple genres, was viewed as less challenging than the theoretical engagement with literature.

By fall of 2001, when Bill arrived on campus, there was already interest in revising the writing major, in hopes of making it more focused on writing. In fact, Kelly had been arguing for some time that continued development was not only necessary but useful. Bill found himself in three different kinds of conversations about the writing major. In his on-campus interview conversations, he was told that the writing major was growing and that continued development was expected, to which he was encouraged to contribute. In private conversations with several literature faculty members, he was told that the writing major was unfocused and declining, not worthy of his time or energy. In yet another kind of conversation with various groups outside of the English department, he was told that the writing major was a target for the English department because they really didn’t want to teach writing at all (with the exclusion of Kelly).

It is perhaps informative in our cautionary tale to try and pinpoint where the divisiveness about the revisions of the major began. One area of long-standing tension was that the students enrolled in the writing major...
were taking the vast majority of their coursework in literature; this curricu-

lum, however, had left the literature faculty very satisfied with the writing

major as it stood, and thus any desire they had for change was relative.

While it is easy to say in retrospect, it is important to understand that

there was no malice toward literature classes being included in the writ-
ing major; as a department, we all believed in the importance of both

reading and writing to both the English and writing majors. However,

after initial research by Bill, we discovered rather quickly that writing

courses comprised less than half of the curriculum in the writing major

(56 percent literature). This fact alone wouldn’t have been so bad, but

we also discovered that the literature major only asked students to take

one writing course, which could be a creative writing course, the depart-
ment’s Advanced Writing course or its Business and Technical Writing

course. This seemed, to the writing faculty, an odd contrast and distribu-
tion of courses and resources.

Of course, there were significant contextual issues to be considered, a

point to which we will return later in the chapter. To wit: more than two-
thirds of the permanent faculty in the English department, in 2001, had

a background and/or training in literature, and, while they did assign

writing in their courses, they taught few writing courses. Their expertise

was needed in their areas of interest as well as in the general education

introduction to literature courses (a significant part of the department’s

obligation to the college’s general education curriculum). Although

some might argue the point (as, in fact, we did), teaching writing and

assigning writing are not exactly synonymous activities. That left the

majority of the writing courses, both for the majors and, significantly, for

the rest of campus, to the two of us, along with a complement of visiting

and adjunct faculty members. It is also important to note that both of us

had significant administrative duties that hampered our ability to teach

the full range of courses we needed to.

Almost from the start, Bill was not particularly careful about sharing

his perceptions of the writing major with Kelly and, to be truthful, part

of what attracted him to the college was the opportunity to develop the
writing major. Because Kelly had worked long and hard to make the writ-
ing major happen, it was often difficult for him and Bill to discuss revis-
ing the major without feeling criticized and/or Bill feeling misled about

the department’s intentions about the writing major (as Kelly was one

of the two initial interviewers Bill met at MLA the winter before). This

is due, in no small part, to Kelly’s personalization of the major—from
1996–2001, Kelly had been the only full-time faculty member working on/with the major and, by Bill’s arrival in 2001, any critique of the program, constructive or otherwise, was seen by Kelly as a personal attack. We knew that we had to protect our working relationship and our growing friendship, so, many times, when things got a little tense around revisions of the writing major, we had the good sense to leave it alone for a while. Having said that, there was never a time during Bill’s four years at the college, or Kelly’s ten years, when revision of the writing major was not a primary focus of departmental discussions, even if action and/or movement on revision was not. In retrospect, we are sure that the other members of the department must have been exhausted by our unrelenting insistence on talking about it.

In fall 2001, Bill’s first semester on campus, it seemed clear and necessary to him that the department should consider what it was doing in terms of resources and majors. The department seemed split into two camps: folks who wanted the writing major to change and become more focused on writing and others who seemed tired of hearing about it and/or were happy with the writing major being 56 percent literature. But the conversations continued—one would focus on specific courses and the next on the relationships between the majors, then back to specific courses. Bill discussed with Kelly the need to break this trend and proposed looking at the distribution of resources in relation to courses and majors. So Bill prepared a report on resource allocations within the department.

At that time, the most salient points were these:

- More than half of the courses offered by the English department were first-year composition courses (57 percent)
- Writing majors and English majors were nearly equal, 46 percent and 54 percent of English department majors, respectively
- Ratio of literature sections offered to writing sections offered: 1:2
- Ratio of tenured literature faculty to tenured or tenure-track writing faculty: 2:1

A lot of this should not be surprising; this is a more than a twice-told tale. And it makes sense based on the resources in place.

However, not less than three years later, writing majors had overtaken English majors (51 percent and 49 percent of English department majors).
majors, respectively), and there had been some improvement in the ratio of literature sections to writing sections: 1:1.5. Even so, the lit/writing faculty ratio remained unchanged at 2:1. The data made it impossible to ignore the fact that the writing major was growing and the English major was declining, which, and again we’re supposing here, certainly must have been disconcerting for the lit folks.9

Here, unfortunately, is where we dip again into the murky world of perception. While both of us were party to a number of public discussions of the major, we realize that some of what we describe below is in part a we-said-they-said argument. We have done our best to ground our discussion in personal recollections as well as with conversations with students who were, unfortunately, involved far more than anyone would have liked in the growing turmoil surrounding the major.

The most common response of the literature faculty to discussions of the writing major was that the writing major was too unfocused. We never did get to a good definition of what “unfocused” meant. It may be, as was discussed briefly above, that since the writing major didn’t resemble the kinds of sequencing that went on in the literature major (i.e., first you take an introduction to the major, then follow with courses on British and American periods, literary genres, and critical theory, ending with a senior project), the literature faculty couldn’t recognize it. It could have been considered “unfocused” because it allowed students to construct a sequence of courses that had seemingly nothing to do with one another. Or it could have been considered “unfocused” because the work that the students were doing involved a more product-based curriculum—that the literature major, wherein students were being taught theories and frameworks, was somehow more tightly focused than a writing major where students were, strangely enough, often just writing.

Despite all of the discussion about focus, however, prior to our departures (both at the end of the spring 2005 semester), the department had not been able to see the relationship between the lack of development of the writing major and its seeming lack of focus.

For both of us, it seemed a no-brainer—40 percent of the courses listed by the department were writing courses, and more than half of

9. An interesting number to consider here is that the total number of majors stayed relatively the same—so our hope of growing the total number of English majors was not coming true; what seemed to be happening is that many students who either were literature majors or potential literature majors ended up graduating as writing majors. We have no way of knowing why this might have happened.