There are many good reasons to turn away from civic rhetoric as we develop our undergraduate majors. What sounds good in theory is not always good in practice, and what sounds good in our journals is not always applicable in our home institutions. Peggy O’Neill, Nan Stevens LoBue, Margaret McLaughlin, Angela Crow, and Kathy S. Albertson, all from the newly formed (at the time) writing and linguistics department at Georgia Southern University, succinctly outlined the main problem with focusing our programs on civic rhetoric. In a short response to David Fleming’s “Rhetoric as a Course of Study,” published a year after the original article, the Georgia Southern professors criticized Fleming’s article on the grounds that its ideas were not applicable to the vast majority of students in the vast majority of universities. They reported that they were initially excited to see Fleming’s article because “we expected to find arguments that we could adapt as we construct our proposal for a new undergraduate major” (O’Neill et al., 1999, 274).

But they were, unfortunately, “very disappointed” as they read and discussed the piece “because his arguments did not seem applicable to our situation as a public institution educating the general populace, including many first-generation college students” (274). The professors were also “frustrated by his refusal to connect the ‘study of speaking and writing well’ to careers and jobs.” They wrote:

In our experience, upper administrators and governing boards demand that departments proposing new majors make these connections—and make them explicitly, with more than theoretical arguments. In short, we need to prove that students who graduate with a major in rhetoric are employable. (274)

The real problem with Fleming’s proposal, they concluded, was its elitism. Fleming, they wrote, “seems to direct his arguments at those at more elite institutions whose students may not have to worry about what kind of jobs they can get once they graduate or whose faculty do not need to demonstrate the practical value of a major course of study.” They did, of course, believe that “rhetorical education is a viable route to success,” and they wrote that they were in the midst of developing their own argument “to demonstrate that rhetorical study is not just for the elite who are obligated to serve the polis but for all citizens regardless of class, race, gender, or ethnicity” (275).

The Georgia Southern professors made an important point. We do need to be careful when crafting arguments for our programs, and we do need to develop majors that are as inclusive as possible. Their objections
were also ominous and prescient, as it turns out, laying out an alternative justification for the development of undergraduate majors, a justification that has flourished in public descriptions of our programs. Their objections may have been the first hint that, somewhere along the way, somewhere between the ARS’s call for a manifesto and our public descriptions of our programs, we’d lose our nerve. Somewhere between reclaiming our birthright and staking a claim in the undergraduate curriculum, we’d trade in civic rhetoric for something a little more practical, something a little more marketable to potential majors. We’d trade it in for a job.

**FORM, FUNCTION, AND THE UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR IN WRITING AND RHETORIC**

And that is a mistake. As we make our arguments to colleagues and administrators, potential students, and the public at large, we need to be careful to not inadvertently diminish the prospects for rhetoric education in the twenty-first century by focusing our undergraduate degree programs exclusively on practical, career-related concerns. These are dire predictions, sure, but our history suggests that our field’s focus has a profound influence on the form, or shape, of our programs. Much like the modernist architectural dictum that “form follows function,” the history of our field suggests that our programs grow and prosper along the lines drawn by our guiding focus.

We have heard many calls over the years for our field to move in one direction or the other, to focus on one set of concerns or another. But two broadly defined focuses in particular seem to have endured: a focus on academic writing and a focus on professional or workplace writing. These focuses grow out of a concern for empowering people in different spheres of human activity, different spheres in which training in the arts of rhetoric and writing will prepare a person to use language to participate effectively in one endeavor or another, to participate in different aspects of their lives. The focus on academic writing, arguably the founding focus of our field, empowers people in their academic lives, while the focus on professional writing empowers people in their professional lives. Civic rhetoric, the focus we are advocating here, empowers people in their public lives.

Over the years, different subspecialties of our field have become associated with these different focuses. Rhetoric and composition, though it is also the umbrella term for our field as a whole, is focused primarily on academic writing. Professional writing is focused primarily on writing
for the workplace, and civic rhetoric is focused primarily on public or political writing. Our field’s three subspecialties, their primary focuses, and the areas of human activity in which they empower people, can be seen in the figure below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline/Field of Study</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Empowers People to Participate in their...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rhetoric and composition</td>
<td>academic writing</td>
<td>academic lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>professional writing</td>
<td>professional/technical/workplace writing</td>
<td>professional lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic rhetoric</td>
<td>public/political writing</td>
<td>public lives</td>
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Fig 1. Our field’s subspecialties empower people to participate in different spheres of human activity.

Rhetoric and composition and professional writing have developed unique programs to train people to participate in different aspects of their lives, programs that have been radically shaped and influenced by their guiding focus. Rhetoric and composition developed what most of us would recognize as the modern writing program. It consists of first-year composition, supported by a writing center, and, at many places, basic writing courses and a writing-across-the-curriculum program. It also includes, at many schools, additional upper-level writing courses, such as advanced composition or tutor-training courses.

Professional writing developed professional, technical, and workplace writing programs offering courses that often fulfill a service function, as well as courses for majors and minors. These programs include service courses such as business and technical writing, which are often required courses for students in business, engineering, and science degree programs, and also more specialized courses for majors and minors like writing for the Web, grant writing, desktop publishing, and, occasionally, theory courses.

These two subspecialties have created different kinds of programs, programs that have been shaped and influenced by their guiding focus. Rhetoric and composition’s focus on academic writing led to the development of programs at the two extremes: first-year composition programs to teach students the ways of writing in the academy and graduate programs to study and fully understand writing in all of its complexity. (And to train instructors to teach in those first-year composition programs,
though, ironically, most rhetoric and composition PhDs teach very little first-year composition). What it did not lead to was the development of undergraduate degree programs.

This is not surprising, however, given the fact that rhetoric and composition is focused on empowering people to participate in their academic lives. There is an inherent contradiction in offering a degree—and an even greater contradiction in seeking a degree—in a field that trains one to write for the academy. If the focus of a field’s training is on academic writing, a terminal degree, which implies the end of academic training and the beginning of something else, makes no sense. A student would be getting a degree in a subject designed to help her get a degree.

Professional writing as a field is not affected by the same internal contradiction and, as a result, has developed programs in many parts of the curriculum that have proven to be resistant to rhetoric and composition. Many PhD programs offer specializations in professional writing, fulfilling the same research and instructor-training goals as graduate programs in rhetoric and composition. In addition, a number of graduate programs offer professionally focused MA degrees and postgraduate certificates in professional writing. At the undergraduate level, many schools offer minors or certificates in professional writing, and a growing number of schools offer full-fledged BA degrees.

What we see in professional writing is a proliferation of programs that offer training “around the edges” of other degrees. MAs and postgraduate certificates, as well as minors and undergraduate sequences, make sense because training in professional writing empowers people in their professional lives, a sphere of human activity outside the academy. But full undergraduate degree programs are only relatively successful because these programs are unable to make a strong enough claim on empowering students in their professional lives. Sure, training in professional writing will help a business person succeed in business, or an engineer succeed on the job, but a degree in business or a degree in engineering will help even more, and may even be a prerequisite for entry into those professions. Professional writing programs, then, are pushed into a supporting role and, over the long-term, may be unable to support vibrant undergraduate degree programs.

Civic rhetoric, however, has the potential to support vibrant undergraduate degree programs in rhetoric and writing. A bachelor’s degree in rhetoric and writing, with a focus on civic rhetoric, makes sense to both students and administrators, instructors and the public at large,
because such a degree will empower people in their public lives, a 
sphere of human activity only tangentially affected by degree programs 
in other disciplines. Civic rhetoric has the potential to send a simple yet 
powerful message to potential students. If you want to be effective in 
business or medicine, two potential professional lives, get a degree in 
finance or biology. But if you want to be effective in your public life, get 
a degree in writing and rhetoric.

Unlike professional writing, which plays a supporting role to train-
ing in other fields that prepares people for their professional lives, civic 
rhetoric has the potential to play a leading role in preparing people for 
their public lives. And unlike rhetoric and composition, which primarily 
prepares people for success in the academy and has found a home at its 
two extremes, civic rhetoric has the potential to prepare people for suc-
cess outside of school and will be at home throughout the curriculum. 
Focusing our undergraduate degree programs on civic rhetoric will help 
us not only reclaim our birthright, our leading role in civic education 
but also secure a place for rhetoric in the academy in the twenty-first 
century and beyond.

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At one point while students were working on their in-class projects for the Multimedia Authoring class I was teaching, it occurred to me just how much these students were juggling: They had been researching community events and organizations for Web sites they were constructing; story-boarding and working in groups to determine who was going to film interviews for the mini-documentaries on student life they were producing; and reflecting on and writing about how they were going to integrate the still photography they shot and edited into arguments for campus involvement—arguments that would eventually become large-format posters distributed in common-use areas. These students were undergoing a composing process that demanded constant production of image *as a means* to refine their process (not the other way around). As these students worked, I realized that what they were producing wasn’t really the Web page, the short film, or the collage; these students were learning to create innovation itself. As a learning laboratory, they came to terms as to what it means to compose with images of both sight and sound, and, as they did so, they came closer to what it means to be a producer within a creative economy—an economy that relies less on producing a manufactured product or producing a service and more on producing innovation itself. Said differently, these students were using their knowledge and skills of multimedia to create rhetorically constructed images, and, at the same time, learning to become innovators for a new creative economy as they composed multimodal texts.

What many of these students did not realize at the time was that as they became multiliterate they also became better prepared for a changing economy. Richard Florida’s book, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s*
Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life (2002), defines the creative economy as the next “large-scale economic transformation” (66):

Many say that we now live in an “information” economy or a “knowledge” economy. But what’s more fundamentally true is that we now have an economy powered by human creativity. Creativity—“the ability to create meaningful new forms,” . . . —is now the decisive source of competitive advantage. In virtually every industry, from automobiles to fashion, food products, and information technology itself, the winners in the long run are those who can create and keep creating. This has always been true, from the days of the Agricultural Revolution to the Industrial Revolution. But in the past few decades we’ve come to recognize it clearly and act upon it systematically. (5)

Undergraduate majors today must take into account this reality, and one good way for students to learn that innovation itself is the key to their professional and economic futures is to stress what Florida calls the “three Ts” of economic development: technology, talent, and tolerance (266). For my purposes here, these three Ts serve more as a set of values (with talent referring specifically to the degree to which students are multiliterate). In order for students to be comfortable in being able to handle so many literacies—sometimes at once, sometimes in rapid succession—they must first understand how to compose non-discursive images as well as discursive images. Just as the creative economy puts a value on technology, talent, and tolerance, so must multiliterate students value multimodal composing.

Composing a variety of texts—from traditional print to less traditional hypertext and cinematic texts—requires a set of courses that redefines traditional paths to literacy because anything else has the effect of stifling innovation and multimodal rigor. If a typical path to literacy in higher education can be described as learning what it takes to write the traditional, academic essay (i.e., print mechanics, print research, print rhetorics and disciplinarity), then new undergraduate majors must develop the necessary scaffolding and preparation required to become multiliterate and accustomed to multimodal textual production technologies. Many students in that Multimedia Authoring class were struggling not just with unfamiliar technology (though that was certainly part of it) but with finding the invention tools needed to innovate with image. Clearly, a course such as this one is less effective if it not sufficiently built into a sequence of courses within a major that demands they compose with image from very early on. Though texts
may vary considerably in means of production, consumption, and distribution (all of which necessarily alters the nature of both the text and its composition), the one element that remains central to printed text, hypertext, and filmic text is image. In order to build an undergraduate major that can accommodate the variety of texts students must ably navigate—in order for students to become multiliterate composers—we need to develop courses within the major that put image at the center of the “spiral” so students can gain experiences in the classroom that leads to rhetorical proficiency for any textual mode.

Becoming able to operate technology, however, is not sufficient nor even necessarily relevant to English studies, but learning to integrate technology into compositional practice is. Literacy is bigger than whether or not a student can use Flash, Word, or Final Cut. What I teach students is how to compose for any mode: how to create rhetorically suitable texts, no matter what kind of text it is. In order to be digitally literate, students must learn more than technical proficiency in software and hardware. In *Multiliteracies for a Digital Age* (2004), Stuart A. Selber rightly observes that “too few teachers today are prepared to organize learning environments that integrate technology meaningfully and appropriately” and, instead, have the “mistaken” view that to become digitally literate, students merely need to learn about computers at the operational level (1). Perhaps a close analogy to this line of thinking would be to assume that once a student understands the operational functionality of a pen and paper our obligations to their learning how to compose is complete. Clearly the technology, though important, is only part of what a student must learn to practice composition—in the end, perhaps even only a small part. Selber notes three important aspects of multiliteracies for digital texts (though these three categories seem applicable to many other types of literacy as well):

My view is that teachers should emphasize different kinds of computer literacies and help students become skilled at moving among them in strategic ways. The three literacy categories that organize my discussion—functional, critical, and rhetorical—are meant to be suggestive rather than restrictive, and more complimentary than in competition with each other. . . . Students who are not adequately exposed to all three literacy categories will find it difficult to participate fully and meaningfully in technological activities. . . . Likewise, there are three subject positions connected to the literacy