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THE NEW IMMIGRANTS:
Neither Here Nor There

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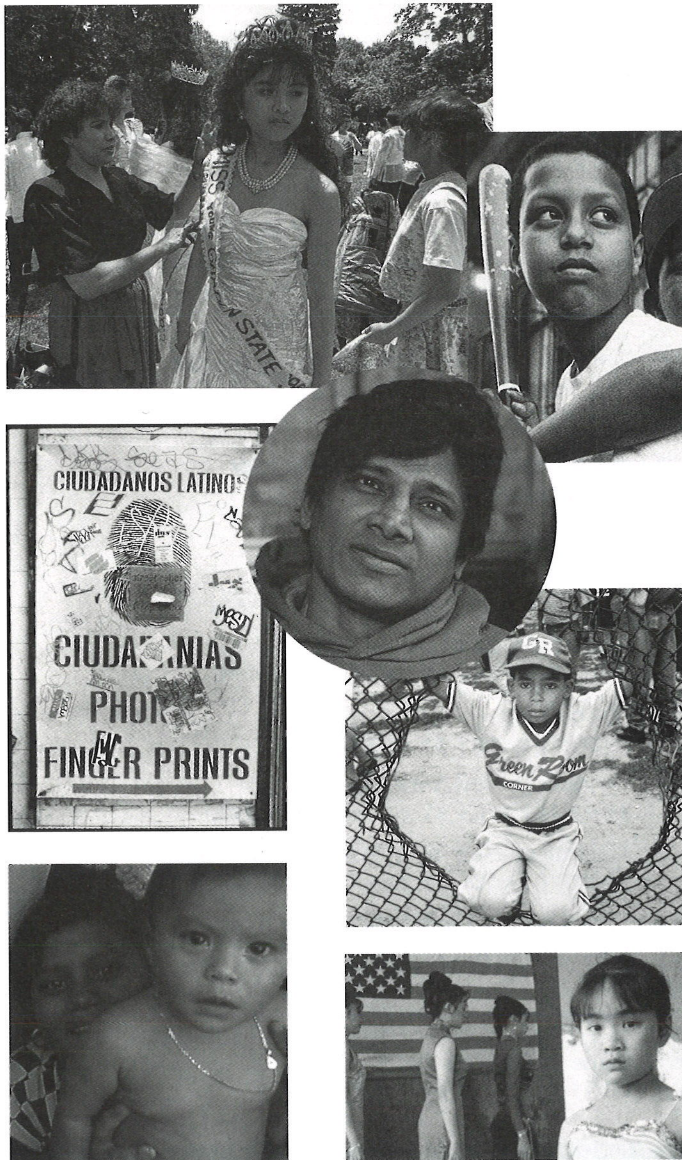

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Writing Teachers of America UNITE! A Manifesto

BY JOHN SUMMERS

The professional classes habitually suffer paroxysms of anxiety about the state of literacy in American culture. At least once every generation, disgruntled businessmen, journalists, and university administrators join indignant literature professors in a chorus of lamentation. According to the "Johnny Can't Write" refrain — made popular by *Newsweek* in the 1970s — college students do not meet even the most modest grammatical standards. A recent assessment of contemporary education by the Lehman Brothers investment firm renewed this long-held sentiment. "Businesses," noted the 1996 report, "complain that they cannot employ the 'product' coming out of our schools because graduates cannot read and write, and, recognizing the consequences of this situation

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in the contextof a global economy, businesses are demanding...immediate reform." American universities, it seems, are failing to deliver young capitalists who can tell a noun from a verb.

Complain about poor writing skills among American undergraduates, and the custodians of the literary tradition will wince in knowing assent. Yet mention freshman composition, and they will scurry away frightfully — but not before drafting other people for the job. When college freshmen arrive on campus, they do not find their composition courses staffed by indignant professors, but instead by a poorly paid, exploited, and ill-trained underclass of writing instructors. Consider this: when confronted by what the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called a "labor crunch" last October, administrators across the nation hastily pressed into service scores of unsuspecting graduate students from fields like English and History. No problem? They also took teaching assistants from Musicology and Kinesiology, few of whom received even a wisp of preparation. Yet the crisis did not afflict the tenured among us, for most administrators adamantly refused to conscript senior scholars for the task.

Last year's scandal proved noteworthy only for its unseemliness. Non-tenure-line faculty, minorities, and women have long borne the burden of the much-despised freshman writing course. According to the most recent statistics from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), tenured and tenure-track professors staff fewer than five percent of all first-year college writing classes in the United States. Graduate teaching assistants account for a full fifty-five percent, and part-timers and full-time adjuncts another twenty percent each (these statistics, and more, can be found at the NCTE website: http://www.ncte.org/ccc/2/49.1/forum.html). Writing teachers, in turn, comprise the largest, oldest, and easily the most abused contingent of non-tenure-line instructors in higher education. No other group of college pedagogues has endured so lowly a station for so long. Hence, a paradox underlies the ritualized lamentation of the American elite: Why does a society that claims to value writing consign its writing teachers to a subservient position in the hierarchy of higher learning?

The genealogy of the problem reaches back to the nineteenth century, when a confluence of developments simultaneously gave birth to the freshman composition course and dispatched its instructors to the lowest rungs of education. By the Gilded Age, silent inscription had displaced public oratory as a hallmark of advanced thinking; the prestige of the emerging academic disciplines and the enlightenment of the growing middle class depended almost entirely upon the dissemination of printed scholarship. As the venerable "art" of rhetoric became the provenance of written composition in the last half of the century, the traditional oral component of the college curriculum gave way to the freshman writing course.

In 1874, Harvard became the first college to ask for a writing sample (in English) as part of the admissions application. When more than half the candidates turned in less-than-acceptable performances, a minor literacy crisis ensued — complete with the customary prophesies of national cataclysm. Harvard's president, Charles W. Eliot, undertook to remedy the problem a decade later by requiring freshman composition as part of the curriculum, and every major university soon copied Eliot's innovation. Since its widespread adoption in the late 1880s, the course has enjoyed a lengthy, if ignominious, stay in the academy; it remains one of the few offerings that nearly every American college student encounters.

Then, as now, a dilemma confounded the freshman course: Who would teach it? A few leading scholars — the University of Michigan's Fred Newton Scott, for example — treated the enterprise with intellectual seriousness and plunged dutifully into the business of teaching writing. Most others resolutely evaded the course. Thus Francis Child, who occupied Harvard's distinguished Boylston Chair in Rhetoric from 1851 to 1876, exerted himself in the cause of English literature, not rhetoric, and often simpered indecorously about the amount of time he squandered correcting undergraduate compositions. (Once, according to a popular anecdote, he let loose an ungenteel fit of rage and punted a chair across a room to protest his compositional obligations.) Child's escape to Johns Hopkins University in 1876 owed much to his determination to avoid the teaching of writing. In turn, the freshman course's reputation as a task of sweaty travail and endless frustration owed much to Child's widely discussed demurral.

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To what did Child and the others object? Work. Too much work. Those brave (or unlucky) enough to venture forth into the college writing classroom face what critic Robert Connors has termed a "nightmare of overwork." In the mid-1890s, four instructors and two graduate students at the University of Michigan wrestled with more than one thousand students. Twenty teachers evaluated papers for two thousand

undergraduates at Harvard, where Barrett Wendell gallantly graded more than twenty-four thousand themes each year. Similar situations developed at Yale, Wellesley, Minnesota, Iowa, and other universities, thanks both to high enrollments and to the "laboratory method," which still renders composition an especially laborious subject to teach. In a series of reports compiled in 1923 for the NCTE, Edwin Hopkins, a faculty member at the University of Kansas, brought this problem to the fore. Hopkins reported that an alarming proportion of writing instructors

Veblen observed

that the "assertion of prowess, not of diligence" now signifies superior work.

"certify to wearing out, suffering from nervous exhaustion, loss of efficiency, impaired eyesight, shattered nerves, and in certain instances, to complete nervous collapse — all as the result of attempting to carry a 'killing' overload of pupils in English composition."

The surfeit of work helps to explain the early exodus of the American professoriate from the freshman composition requirement. Nearly everyone preferred what one former writing instructor called "the glorious liberty of literature." Still, the quantities of labor only partly account for the routine contempt heaped upon the course and its instructors. Literature unquestionably proved easier to teach, but why did the leading members of English departments treat rhetoric as a subservient branch of learning — and writing instructors as an irredeemably impoverished class? "The opinion that the correcting of school compositions is a low and disagreeable form of mental labour has been expressed so often and with so much emphasis and by so many eminent authorities that is has now come to be regarded as part of the condensed wisdom of humanity," grieved Fred Newton Scott in 1903. "During the years of his training the instructor-to-be has not only been taught composition, but he has been led to regard the work as dull, uninteresting," Lyle Spencer affirmed a decade later. "He has been taught, if not by precept, certainly by example, that composition teaching is menial work, drudgery, a pursuit to be avoided."

How did teaching composition acquire such odious trappings? In the modern era — the "predatory phase of life," Thorstein Veblen called it — particular kinds of labor take on the attribute of "irksomeness." Veblen observed that the "assertion of prowess, not of diligence" now signifies superior work. Socially valuable labor that involves proximity to tools, on the other hand, "carries a taint, and all contamination from vulgar employments must be shunned by self-respecting men." As Veblen explained in his first and most notorious book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), "conspicuous abstention from labour becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement and the conventional index of reputability; and conversely, since application to productive labour is a mark of poverty and subjection, it becomes inconsistent with a reputable standing in the community."

Viewed in the searing light of Veblen's critique, the efforts to denigrate composition as a dishonorable, irksome necessity — while ennobling the study of literature as an honorable enterprise — appear as an aggressive assertion of class superiority. Demeaned for their usefulness, composition teachers have serviced, in a direct manner, the needs of the American middlebrow. They have handled the basic tools of language, the rudimentary implements of communication that have been declared vital for both the civilizing mission of education and the general vitality of bourgeois life. Within the university, freshman composition has also facilitated the transformation of material foundations (written words) into finished products (printed scholarship), and thus have occupied a primary role in the reproduction of the academic community itself.

The business of composition evokes elemental notions of survival and production, while the study and teaching of literature stand as a more abstract, more recondite, enterprise. Distanced from the mundane, everyday production of language, its purview is the "best" and most labyrinthine utterances by the "best" and most labyrinthine authors. Reading, not writing, comprises its cardinal activity; leisure, not labor, its leading connotation. Celebrated for its opposition to the utilitarian impulse, literature remains a scholarly trophy for English Ph.D.'s with enough class privilege (i.e., a tenure-track job) to finagle their way out of the servile duties of writing instruction.

It's no surprise, therefore, that professors of English preferred "the glorious liberty of literature" when confronted with mounds of irksome work, and reserved the ordeal of correcting themes for what Robert Connors has called "a cadre of graduate assistants, low-level instructors, part-timers, and departmental fringe people who became the permanent composition underclass." Women, in particular, have traditionally taught the course in numbers disproportionate to their overall presence in higher education. In 1929, fully thirty-eight percent of all composition teachers were women. (Only home economics counted a higher percentage of feminine labor.) Today, more than two-thirds of writing instructors are female, even at elite schools. Composition remains, perhaps more dependably than any other field, within the paternalistic confines of "women's true profession."

Regardless of gender, part-timers, non-tenure-line full-timers, and graduate teaching assistants — "men and women of uncertain or negative qualifications," to borrow a durable 1921 phrase from a well-credentialed literature professor — always and everywhere comprise the first line of attack in the composition classroom. As last year's scramble for proletarians demonstrates, the autocrats who run the universities would

rather conscript an untrained graduate student in Kinesiology than a full professor of English literature. Again, no surprise. To ask a tenured scholar to shoulder the burden of writing instruction — or, conversely, to permit a graduate student in, say, Musicology to teach a course about Shakespeare — would violate a fundamental axiom of hierarchy in America's knowledge industry. As Veblen articulated the precept, "the able-bodied barbarian of the predatory culture, who is at all mindful of his good name, leaves all uneventful drudgery to the women and minors of the group. He puts in his time in the manly arts of war and devotes his talents to devising ways and means of disturbing the peace. That way lies honor."

Practices fixed early in composition's history — low pay, poor training, little job security, few opportunities for upward mobility, excessive labor hours per pupil, and, of course, sneers in abundance — prevail today, as a cursory glance at the field's angst-ridden newsletters will swiftly indicate. Although they bemoan the wretched writing skills of the nation's youth, the professorial class has refused to improve the wretched conditions of composition pedagogy. Why should they? These days university elites, like their corporate counterparts, are immune to arguments shaded by moral concern. In any case, the chronic plethora of jobless Ph.D.'s in English readily supplies a cheap and demoralized labor pool.

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Let us not flinch. Departments of English in the United States do not produce hordes of unemployed and underemployed Ph.D.'s because of poor prognostications about the academic job market. Someone has to teach writing, and graduate admission committees rarely fail to deliver the requisite number of warm bodies. Forget the scandalous insularity of modern literary criticism. That class-conscious graduate admission committees regularly mislead bright young scholars — by promising them a profession yet only providing casual labor — constitutes the real scandal of English departments.

What, if any, are the prospects for reform? Leading figures in the field of "composition studies" have typically addressed this situation as a problem of professionalization. The last few decades have witnessed the emergence of the "new rhetoric," which has given the field enough epistemological sophistication to rescue writing instructors from the comments of the more supercilious literature professors. Preoccupation with professionalization has yielded some rhetoric of its own, but little material improvement. The "new rhetoric" made "composition studies" as trendy, as overtheorized, and, ironically, as exclusionary as any other field that demands a ritualistic parade of abstruse theory for participation in its journals and conferences.

The field's most notable reform effort began in the late 1980s when a band of insurgent conferees assembled in the Equality State and came away brandishing the "Wyoming Resolution." In 1989, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) — a disagreeably named professional group formed in 1949 under the auspices of the NCTE — incorporated most of the spirit and some of the substance of this resolution into a "Statement of Principles and Standards." The CCCC characterized the situation of its membership as "the worst scandal in higher education today," one that had produced "an enormous academic underclass." The "Statement of Principles" called for tenured, full-time status for qualified composition teachers; for limits on the use of part-time labor; for course sections of not more than twenty students; and for the flexibility and time necessary to conduct scholarly research and to design individualized syllabi. The "Statement of Principles" even earned the endorsement of other professional organizations, including the Modern Language Association. But it has not become an efficacious call to action, only a public document by which to measure an ever-increasing number of indignities and exploitative practices.

In my view, composition teachers must set aside the issue of professional status, and instead join the burgeoning movement to organize academic labor. A complete evaluation of the problems and prospects of this movement would require another essay. For now, let me say rather plainly that nothing else has succeeded, and nothing else is likely to succeed. Recent campaigns to organize graduate teaching assistants, part-timers, and full-time adjuncts of all disciplines — efforts that have gained considerable momentum and confidence on a disparate group of campuses across the nation — have underscored the idea that nothing motivates university autocrats more effectively than the murmurings of organized dissent. In unionization lies the only available strategy for bettering the working lives of writing instructors — and for improving, thereby, the writing skills of young American capitalists.

The organization of composition pedagogues would also throw into sharp relief the fault lines of contemporary higher education. No group of comparable teachers is so large, and their potential role in any campus-wide unionization effort is enormous. They occupy a position in the academy that has long been recognized as useful. And they readily understand the consequences — both personal and material — of transforming college teachers into anxious, confused proletarians. Indeed, as the tightening grip of commodification strangles the life out of universities once dedicated to humanistic study, low-level writing instructors and untenured professors of literature — to say nothing of disillusioned teachers in other fields — may well reach common ground in campus unions. ■