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A Review of Conceding Composition: A Crooked History of Composition's Institutional Fortunes

Skinnell, Ryan. *Conceding Composition: A Crooked History of Composition's Institutional Fortunes*. Logan, Utah State University Press, 2016. 188 pp.

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Compositionists (a community in which I include myself) often work with a chip on our shoulders. Perhaps we find the chip during grad school or when we are asked to teach an overload or when a literature professor's summer course does not make and they demand a section of first year writing instead or because so many of us remain contingent faculty. Whenever and however the chip appeared, many of us have felt or discussed its presence: we, and our courses, are the misunderstood and much maligned. In fact, this is "the field's conventional historical narrative, [that] composition is marginalized in higher education because instructions are ambivalent at best and hostile at worst to composition as a scholarly and pedagogical object" (19). The conventional response to this conventional narrative has been (ultimately for the better, probably) efforts of legitimation: philosophies, scholarships, journals, societies, conferences, methods, research – activity that Sharon Crowley has called "the topos of improvement = appreciation" (qtd in Skinnell 20).

Instead, Ryan Skinnell's *Conceding Composition: A Crooked History of Composition's Institutional Fortunes* challenges the conventional narrative and the corresponding "topos of improvement = appreciation," and asks us to reframe composition as a series of concessions – that is, the history of rhetoric and composition might be better imagined as a site of give and take in a complex ecology of stakeholders. "Put even more bluntly," writes Skinnell, "composition's intellectual value as a teaching and research subject often has little, if anything, to do with its value as an institutional concession" (21). *Conceding Composition* is not an either/or proposition, however. Skinnell notes that previous "historians' disciplinary focus...has been and remains absolutely vital for helping teachers, researchers, and administrators negotiate the complicated factors that shape rhetoric and composition's existence in the academy" (39). Considering the complex confluence of history, decision-making, ecologies, and time, Skinnell's alternative history might only be possible *because* composition's conventional narrative is, in fact, conventional. *Conceding Composition*, then, is a both/and proposition: while we participate in the everyday composition narrative, Skinnell adds a layer of complexity to that narrative and suggests that we might be more effective stewards of our field if we can begin to understand the institutional roles composition has and continues to play.

The question "[f]irst and foremost" is "why does first-year composition still exist in American higher education" (30)? Not intending to be "mere provocation" (30), Skinnell's question demonstrates a shift from a disciplinary focus (How should we teach writing?) to an institutional focus (Why does this persist? What does it do?) The answer is that composition was, and continues to be, a concession of (1) standardization, (2) conformity, (3) vertical alignment, and (4) funding such that composition today appears ubiquitous.

A CONCESSION OF VERTICAL ALIGNMENT

The concessions made through, to, and for composition seem to happen both all at once and apart from each other that traditional notions of what happened first and then

second do not necessarily pertain. However, a good beginning might be vertical alignment (“articulation” in *Conceding Composition*), and like any good history of composition, Skinnell turns to Harvard and English A, which “was expressly intended to be a concession inasmuch as it created a bridge from public high schools to Harvard that had never existed before” (92). Conventional narratives of composition argue that English A was instituted at Harvard as a “temporary remedy” for the poor writing habits of entering students “*until* secondary schools finally accepted responsibility for writing instruction [emphasis added]” (92). Skinnell argues, though, that composition was an institutional concession as Harvard moved to grow its enrollment and attract non-classically trained students. The move was not about teaching students to write (an intellectual concern), but was about creating a shared academic space for students as they entered the school (an institutional concern).

Only three years after the first English A course saw students, America’s first accrediting association (New England Association of Colleges and Preparatory Schools) Commission of Colleges recommended that “association members” (of which Harvard was a powerful participant) “redesign the last year of preparatory schools and the first year of colleges to articulate more closely” (93). Although there was some variety in the courses colleges developed to facilitate that articulation, composition was the only course to exist across institutions and across time. That is, composition, specifically, was intended to help secondary and postsecondary institutes vertically align.

A CONCESSION OF STANDARDIZATION AND CONFORMITY

As Normal schools became teachers colleges and then state colleges and finally universities, the system of institution-by-institution agreements and contracts gave way to a more formalized regional accreditation. For example, before regional accreditation, in 1902 Arthur John Matthews, president of Tempe Normal School (ASU’s historical predecessor), “successfully negotiated an accreditation agreement with the California State Board of Education” (80) whereby TNS graduates could teach in California and also transfer TNS credits to Berkeley and Stanford. Accreditation by association

“provided a model for coordinating and standardizing large numbers of institutions to (1) reduce competition between secondary and postsecondary institutions, (2) standardize institutional objectives, and (3) formalize articulation” (94). Other regional accrediting associations modeled themselves on the NEACPS: because the NEACPS had composition built into its accrediting procedures, other accrediting associations included it as well. Not only were the colleges and universities within one region standardized in regards to composition, but “composition became relatively ubiquitous as an institutional attribute even in institutions that had little else in common” (77).

What began as alignment between secondary and postsecondary institutions then “allowed accreditation associations to advance arguments about the importance of standardization” (94). As adherence to accreditation standards increased, the characteristics that marked universities as universities and colleges as colleges and normal schools as normal schools became more formalized and created a kind of conformity/uniformity between like institutions. Accreditation was a kind of Members Only jacket for a club that institutions could attempt to join – and composition was the commemorative patch that linked clubs.

A CONCESSION OF FUNDING

Skinnell’s final argument is that composition was conceded in the rush to receive federal funding. For example, as university systems established research institutions, they also worked to reduce redundancy between their campuses. This contributed to the general education core requirements that persist today. Along similar lines, as universities pushed research agendas and doctoral programs, professors taught fewer lower level courses. Composition was conceded to graduate students as cost saving and teacher training measures, which likely contributed to labor issues that continue to this day.

A CONCESSION TO RESEARCH

Conceding Composition is not exactly comprehensive in its scope. Much of the text focuses on the history of Arizona State University from its inception as a Normal School to its final iteration as ASU. Skinnell tracks the reduplication of composition concessions through several other institutions, though, and the schools that are mentioned provide a range of geography and prestige. The schools (Arizona State University, University of North Texas, Indiana Central University, Harvard, Berkeley, University of Kansas) link the country, and so act as locus points for other historians to continue the work of understanding how composition has been conceded in various settings.

Skinnell accomplishes two other important things with *Conceding Composition*:

(1) He coins the term “genitive history.” Following its linguistic and rhetorical implications, genitive history is a kind of owned history, a history of locus. So rather than generalizing composition history and *imposing* that history as a comprehensive or conventional narrative, Skinnell explores composition’s genitive history at his own institution (at the time, ASU) and then looks for reduplication in composition’s genitive history at other institutions. This allows Skinnell and future historians to draw conclusions and articulate patterns at micro and macro levels of the departmental, institutional, regional, and national ecologies without obscuring details or anomalies in any particular history.

(2) In the introduction to this book, Skinnell writes at length of the messy and disjointed nature of his research. He gives space and voice (à la Rickly; Takayoshi, Tomlinson, and Castillo; Williamson and Huot) to what we all know but seldom discuss: research is complicated, disorderly, confusing. *Conceding Composition* already has a space in WPA and history of rhetoric courses, but it may also be meaningful in an introduction to methods course – as well as a model that we do not need to pretend that research occurs as antiseptically as our journal articles sometimes seem to suggest.

The reader may walk away from *Conceding Composition* with, perhaps, more questions than answers. Considering composition as a concession, for example, does not necessarily make the environments in which we work and research any less potentially hostile. And if the topos of improvement \neq appreciation, what can we do to improve our lot? *Conceding Composition* may have shown us which path to follow, but others still need to blaze the trail. What Skinnell's book does is shift the rhetorical possibilities available to us and calls on us to respond with new theories and activity of navigating our institutional situations.

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