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Enlisting Composition: How First-Year Composition Helped Reorient Higher Education in the GI Bill Era

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In March 1945, Harvard officials distributed a recruitment brochure to American servicemen returning from overseas.[1] It read in part, "Harvard recognizes that the veterans of this war will expect something else from education than the ordinary peacetime student. Clearly the man who has been making life and death decisions at sea, in the air, and on the ground has other ideas than the man who comes direct from high school. The University is bending every energy to meet the needs of these men" (Official Register of Harvard University, n.p.). The following year, Weston J. McConnell, President of North Texas State Teachers' College in Denton, TX, received a letter from a man named Leo Baron. In the letter, dated April 8, 1946, Baron writes, "The most acute problem facing thousands of returning servicemen is that of finding a college in which to finish their education. As you are aware, the large universities and colleges are turning away applicants while scores of smaller schools of high scholastic standing have openings for new students. Recent surveys indicated that nearly forty percent of the smaller colleges have not yet filled their quotas" (Baron). Baron was the Director of Public Relations at the John A. Cairns Advertising Company, and he was spearheading a campaign to produce promotional materials for those "smaller schools of high scholastic standing." For a reasonable fee, the Cairns Company would produce and distribute the promotional materials to Veterans' Service centers around the country.

The appearance of these promotional materials in the immediate aftermath of the war is particularly striking because they seem to run counter to the familiar narrative historians have constructed in the field of rhetoric and composition about the effects of the GI Bill. In brief, as Edward P.J. Corbett puts it in his history of writing program administration, "college enrollments took a quantum leap" in 1946 because of the GI Bill, and "English departments especially bore the brunt of that tidal wave of students" (65). Corbett's formulation rehearses a commonplace notion that colleges and universities were inundated, flooded, swamped, besieged, overwhelmed as a result of the GI Bill (see, e.g., Lloyd-Jones). Traditionally places of privilege, colleges and universities were suddenly forced to admit the plebs, and as Corbett makes abundantly clear, first-year composition became a form of triage for dealing with all those new students—students, it should be noted who were non-traditional, first-generation, unevenly prepared, pragmatic, older, eager, self-aware, and so on. And, of course, well funded. The vision that Corbett constructs, which is prevalent in rhetoric and composition histories, is of colleges and universities scrambling to meet the needs of a new brand of student—an onslaught for which colleges and universities were apparently unprepared.

Corbett's vision is not entirely inaccurate. There *was* a tidal wave of new students. In the 1939–1940 academic year, the last before America entered the war, approximately 1.5 million students were enrolled in higher education. Enrollments slumped significantly during the war, but they quickly rebounded with the returning GIs. By 1947, over 2.3 million students were enrolled in colleges and universities, of which nearly one million were veterans. By 1960, postsecondary enrollments topped 3.6 million, and by 1970, nearly 8 million students were enrolled.

But as the promotional materials detailed above make clear, Corbett's vision is not precisely accurate, either. Colleges and universities, from small regional teachers' colleges in rural Texas to

Harvard University, were actively recruiting these students beginning even before they had returned from the front. In other words, the tidal wave wasn't exactly unexpected since administrators and faculty actively pursued the burgeoning enrollments. Larger enrollments were part of a broader agenda to expand higher education to attract new sources of revenue and other resources. This is not exactly the news of the day. Historians of education have been noting as much for decades. But rhetoric and composition historians have been slow to recognize that the rising enrollments in this period were not just the cause of huge expansions in first-year writing programs, as Corbett and others believed. To the contrary, first-year composition helped to bring about the huge expansions in higher education, and moreover, first-year composition helped to mediate a number of competing tensions first introduced into American higher education in the Post-War era.

Before the Serviceman's Readjustment Act (i.e., the GI Bill) was voted into being by Congress in 1944, the Federal government undertook to define eligible institutions where students could use GI Bill funds to get college credits. It will come as no surprise that this was no small task—in fact, there were a series of commissions, negotiations, coordinating bodies, and so on dedicated to the task beginning as early as 1943, and perhaps even earlier.[2] A substantial infrastructure, which spanned the whole country and every state, was put into place to consider questions of what counted as a GI Bill eligible college and/or university. What was initially decided was that the Federal government would defer to the states to decide which postsecondary institutions would be considered reputable (Bloland 24; Weissburg 94–100).

Officials in the states, in a good many cases, relied on postsecondary classifications developed by regional accreditation associations over the course of several decades to determine what institutions would qualify for GI Bill funds. One of the defining characteristics of accredited colleges and universities in the 1940s was that they offered a two-year general education program followed by a two year professional major—this is essentially the curricular organization we have now (see North Central Association). There is not room here to detail the full history, but regional accreditation associations had been strongly encouraging their members—and aspiring members— as early as the post-Civil War era to offer first-year composition beginning (see Skinnell, *Conceding* and "Harvard, Again"). By the time WWII ended, first-year composition was a defining requirement for accredited colleges and universities, which meant that colleges and universities that wanted to be eligible for GI Bill funds had to offer first-year composition. As a result, first-year composition quickly became a de facto requirement for GIs.

The growth in first-year composition enrollments had a profound effect on the field of rhetoric and composition, as Edward P.J. Corbett's reflection on the period indicates. But rhetoric and composition scholars are wrong to focus strictly on post-WWII composition classrooms to consider the relationship of first-year composition to the GI Bill. In fact, the first-year composition requirement sponsored by accreditation associations had some of its largest effects before the tidal wave of new students, particularly for the kinds of schools that Leo Baron was trying to recruit for the Cairns Company's promotional campaigns—the "smaller colleges have not yet filled their quotas." Before the war, as it turns out, many of these schools were often not precisely covered by the "college" or "university" classifications that would allow them to access GI Bill funds.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, a huge system of teachers' colleges, women's colleges, technical colleges, and so on existed slightly outside the accreditation associations' official "college" and "university" purview. This is probably understandable since they were not technically colleges and universities. They had different missions, different purposes, and commonly different populations. Considered single-purpose institutions because they tended to focus on specific forms of professional preparation, these schools often offered a unified curriculum—for example, a four-year course of study differentiated by major instead of the two-year general education plus two-year major course.

Many of them were accredited in some form or fashion, and in fact many even offered some form of composition requirement; but they were generally not accredited as so-called standard colleges and universities, and they often offered composition requirements that differed slightly from that offered at official colleges and universities (a yearlong course instead of two semesters, for instance).

Throughout the 1940s, however, there was a wave of institutional transformations as public institutions like those just described became multi-purpose state colleges, commonly indicated by the introduction of bachelors of arts (BA) and/or bachelors of science (BS) degrees (see, e.g., Dunham). These transformations were often the consequence of state legislative measures designed to attract the newly established Federal largesse. As one administrator of Tempe State Teachers' College put it, "Soon after the passage of the GI Bill in 1944, it became evident that the State of Arizona could not participate effectively unless all three of its institutions were able to educate and graduate returning war veterans" (Richardson 18). In 1940, only the University of Arizona could award BA and BS degrees, and Arizona's other two postsecondary institutions—both teachers' colleges—awarded B.Ed. and M.Ed. degrees. In fact, administrators at Arizona's teachers' colleges had been lobbying the state legislature to allow them to offer standard BA and BS degrees, but the legislature routinely denied the petitions on the grounds that they would dilute the value of the University of Arizona's degrees (Hopkins and Thomas 249).

However, Tempe State Teachers' College became Arizona State College within months after the passage of the GI Bill.[3] This transformation was, in part, achieved by redesigning the schools' general education program to match what was expected of an accredited state college, including the provision of first-year composition. In fact, first-year composition helped facilitate these changes around the country as institutions adopted or reformed their first-year offerings to meet accreditation associations' requirements in order to be eligible for GI Bill funds. In short, first-year composition was a linchpin in the massive reorganization of America's postsecondary institutions, which spread the effects of the tidal wave more broadly than they might otherwise have been, and without which, higher education might not have been able to grow so dramatically.

First-year composition also took on important coordinating functions in the immediate aftermath of the war. First-year composition served as a common link that bridged the majority of standard colleges and universities before the war, and as I noted above, it helped establish a number of new standard colleges and universities during and after the war. Of course, it was not unique in this regard—a number of other courses, including Western Civilization, College Math, and Introductory Literature courses were advocated by accreditation associations. But first-year composition was one of the few requirements that was generally affixed to the first-year. This arrangement helped colleges and universities achieve two important goals. The first is tied to general education. As it was initially conceived, general education was supposed to allow students who wanted some education to take two years, which would prepare them for the workforce. They might choose to forego the second two years of the four-year degree and still be employable. Writing skills were one of the main pitches that colleges and universities made to attract students who might only stay on for two years—essentially, come to college, learn to read and write so you can rejoin the workforce with state of the art, practical skills for the modern economy. It is perhaps no surprise that two-year colleges, offering the equivalent of the general education curriculum, attracted a lot of returning veterans.

Even for students who decided to earn a BA or BS degree, the general education curriculum, including first-year composition supported their unique needs. One stipulation of the GI Bill was that recipients could be granted in-state tuition and fees regardless of where they were from. GI Bill students could therefore transfer from school to school and state to state if they were so inclined. As a consequence, the transferability of credits became a significant concern as students reassumed and

redesigned their lives after the war. First-year composition both helped students develop the kinds of marketable skills that would help them get jobs, and allowed them to transfer credits from one institution to another without losing time (and therefore, wasting their fixed amount of GI Bill funds). Again, it served a coordinating function that was largely unrelated to its purported intellectual content. In fact, there was very little oversight from the Federal government, or from the accreditation associations, for that matter, regarding the content of the courses or the pedagogical best practices. Uncle Sam was not especially concerned about the required textbooks or the number of freshman themes students produced. What the Federal government was interested in was ensuring that students could take their GI Bill funds to any number of institutions throughout the country and get nominally the same education in return for Federal dollars. Colleges and universities gladly complied, and in fact, turned it to their advantage.

Over the course of the next several decades, and truly into the present moment, first-year composition was actively pitched to prospective students as a boon to their future employability. It was a recruitment tool used to convince non-traditional students that they could be successful in college even if they were not traditional men and women of letters. After all, everyone needs to learn how to write. First-year composition's transferability across institutions continues to serve important institutional functions, which often have little or no relation to course content, even as rhetoric and composition specialists have spent the past five decades trying to make that content more useful for student writers.

Along the way, first-year composition—as an institutional element, if not necessarily an intellectual one—played an important coordinating function in higher education that strengthened and stabilized colleges and universities even as they sought to diversify and expand their responsibilities. For decades, first-year composition has been described in the field as a marginalized intellectual endeavor, but this history indicates that first-year composition has long served centrally important institutional functions—in this case, helping to attract Federal funds to public institutions.[4] In the Golden Age of American higher education, first-year composition was both a driving force for change and an anchor point for institutional and system wide stability.

Notes

[1] A previous version of this essay was originally delivered at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Houston, TX, in April 2016 (the original title was "Conceding Composition: How FYC Helped Reorient Higher Education in the GI Bill Era," session H.03). I want to thank *JVS* editor Mariana Grohowski for inviting me to revise and submit it for the *Journal of Veterans Studies*' special issue. There is a considerable opportunity to investigate FYC's relationship to the GI Bill in ways that I only begin to introduce here given the constraints of the special issue. Nevertheless, I am thankful to the two anonymous reviewers for their careful readings and for their encouragement to note some of the connections to larger discussions this essay is meant to extend.

[2] See, e.g., "Proposed Program" and Research Division

[3] Arizona State Teachers College at Flagstaff became Arizona State College at Flagstaff at the same time.

[4] As Sue Doe and Lisa Lanstraat make clear in *Generation Vet*, the contemporary GI Bill remains inextricably linked to writing instruction, and in fact, efforts to attract Federal funds have taken on new dimensions in the post-9/11 era. On one hand, efforts to attract Federal funds have resulted in some colleges and universities developing strong veteran support services; on the other hand,

attempts to collect Federal dollars have resulted in unsuitable curriculum, understaffing and insufficient training, and all too commonly, "unethical recruitment and predatory recruiting practices in the for-profit education sector" (Doe and Lanstraat 5; see also Hart and Thompson). Notably, the latter is possible in part because for-profit colleges and universities often mimic traditional university curricula, including first-year composition, without adequate structures for doing so. Although there is not room to do so here, the persistent historical connection of Federal funding to first-year composition invites scholars to investigate its implications in much more detail.

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