

## Review

O'Neill, Peggy, Angela Crow, and Larry W. Burton, eds. *A Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies*. Logan, Utah: Utah State UP, 2002. 319 pages. \$26.95 (paper)

Susan H. McLeod

Twenty years ago, in her chair's address to CCCC ("Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections"), Maxine Hairston exhorted those of us in composition studies to declare our intellectual and in some cases actual independence from literature. Since that time, Kathleen Yancey noted in her 2004 CCCC chair's address that a move toward the latter sort of independence had materialized; she pointed out that the number of departments that identify themselves as "English" in the *MLA Directory* has declined, and increasing numbers of separate departments or programs are evidently devoted to writing as a serious arena of academic study. The essays in O'Neill, Crow, and Burton's *A Field of Dreams* focus on the formation of such academic units. The book's three sections—"Local Scenes: Stories of Independent Writing Programs," "Beyond the Local: Connections among Communities," and "The Big Picture: Implications for Composition, English Studies, and Literacy Education"—are followed by an afterword by editor Larry Burton. The editors' purpose in collecting these essays, he states, was "not only to document various institutional changes related to composition, but also to provide information to others who may find themselves in similar circumstances" (1–2).

For several years I was chair of an English department at a mid-size research university, trying my best to hold its disparate programs and interest groups together; I now find myself the director of an independent writing program that divorced from traditional "English" a decade ago, and I work dedicatedly to keep the two as separate as possible (a process that's not always easy when we have shared custody of the TAs). So I read *Field's* essays from two points of view, one sympathetic to the move toward independence, and the other mindful of the possible outcomes, not all of them intended. The Angela Crow and Peggy O'Neill introduction to the book is subtitled "Cau-

tionary Tales about Change” —and so they are indeed. Change invariably involves conflict, and as the various essays show, such conflicts are necessarily site-specific functions of the particular institutions and situations in which they arose. The book raises some important questions: If writing programs break away from English, how can they work out their own disciplinary or inter-disciplinary traditions (as, for example, women’s studies has done)? If writing programs form alliances with other disciplines or departments, how can they ensure equal footing with those disciplines in a new combined unit? Seen more broadly, *A Field of Dreams* is part of the national discussion of a larger question: Where do writing programs belong in the university?

Several pieces provide contrasting stories of writing programs moving toward independence. Dan Royer and Roger Gilles describe the bottom-up transformation of their traditional English department into two separate departments, an evolution that resulted in the creation of Grand Valley State University’s Department of Academic, Creative, and Professional Writing. It was worked out with what strikes me as great tact, diplomacy, and rhetorical skill. By contrast, Eleanor Agnew and Phyllis Surrency Dallas describe the results of a top-down process that created the Department of Writing and Linguistics at Georgia Southern University. Difficulties arose there because of a mismatch between the mission of the new unit and the literature backgrounds and teaching experience of most of the faculty assigned to it—the traditional faculty felt demoted in the new situation. The resulting conflict between the literature faculty and those with composition PhDs became so great that conflict resolution specialists had to be called in. Barry Maid’s essay in *A Field of Dreams* describes the formation of two new academic units. The first was formed in 1993 at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (this was a banner year for divorces of writing from literature: the Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at San Diego State and the Division of Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas Austin were also founded in 1993). Little Rock’s writing department came about because of what seem common difficulties—the self-destructive nature of many English departments, whose literature faculty either fail to understand the important general education mission of the department as embodied by and imbedded in composition courses or who are contemptuous of this mission *and* of those who teach those courses because some assume that composition smacks of “vocationalism.” Maid talks of a key meeting as “probably one of the ugliest meetings I’ve ever attended” (143); in it faculty expressed outrage that the nontenure-track writing faculty had any rights, let alone the right to vote. Maid calls this attitude “academic fundamentalism,” the sort of snobbery that one bystander thought “had died along with the last person who said ‘But his father, you know, was in trade’ and meant it to sting” (35).

(In his contribution to the book, Chris Anson discusses the same snobbery's leading to the dissolution of the program he had headed at the University of Minnesota.) Maid goes on to describe a department so dysfunctional that the provost, not the faculty, made the decision to split it into two departments. (Maid's recounting is parallel in many ways to the story of the split at San Diego State University, commented upon in Jane E. Hindman's contribution to the book.) Little Rock's new writing department started amid chaos and had a rocky beginning, going into receivership almost immediately. Nevertheless, Maid states, five new tenure-track hires and the installing of an outside chair ultimately lent more stability, boding well for the new department. Maid goes on to describe the new unit he is developing from the ground up at Arizona State University East, one that has the advantage of being planned from the beginning.

I have focused on these essays here because they exemplify the "cautionary tales" of this volume's introduction, warnings that we should be careful what we wish for when we dream after our independence from literature. Other stories are, quite naturally, framed more positively: Anne Aronson and Craig Hansen describe the writing department at Metropolitan State University, an institution with a culture that facilitated the development of an independent department; Louise Rehling describes the technical and professional writing program at San Francisco State; Elizabeth Deiss and colleagues describe the independent rhetoric program at Hampden-Sydney College; and Brian Turner and Judith Kearns describe an independent writing program at the University of Winnipeg. Peggy O'Neill and Ellen Schendel's thought-provoking piece on the place of writing programs in research universities reports on the results of a survey of such institutions and provides a close examination of two different programs, one at Harvard, the other at Syracuse University. The book concludes with thoughtful reflective essays about the implications of separate writing programs or departments by some of the leading lights in our field, Wendy Bishop, Theresa Enos, Thomas Miller, Cynthia Selfe and her colleagues Gail Hawisher and Patricia Ericsson, and Kurt Spellmeyer.

There is insufficient space in a short review to discuss all the essays in this valuable book. Collectively, they present a picture of profound change in the discipline of what used to be called "English Studies" as our new discipline of composition, rhetoric, and writing studies emerges. Change is precarious, as some of the essays demonstrate in riveting detail. Further, these essays demonstrate quite clearly that the answer to the question of where writing programs belong in any university is indeed site-specific and dependent on all sorts of contextual variables. I tend to agree, however, with the sentiments expressed in the final essay by *Field's* third editor Burton, who had been act-

ing chair at Georgia Southern during the difficult first period of that university's independent writing program. The title of Burton's essay is "Countering the Naysayers—Independent Writing Programs as Successful Experiments in American Education." Burton points out that all programs and departments have intrinsic difficulties, writing departments not excepted, and that independent writing departments "have already given faculty a fresh way of thinking about what it means to teach writing, and they have given students increased opportunities for developing themselves as writers" (297). Pointing to the relative youth of many of these new departments, he counsels us to remember that we are still in the experimental stage in developing free-standing writing programs or departments. Certainly labor issues, resources, and leadership are the key issues when thinking about separation. When these are satisfactorily addressed, "members of independent departments of writing will have discovered a new mentality—a refreshing mentality—out of which they conduct their professional lives" (300). To this sentiment, I would add one more issue: the development of a departmental major. Some independent writing departments remain service units, offering general education courses and perhaps also graduate courses in the teaching of writing. Such units are anomalous in the university, and often find themselves at the bottom of the list when an influx of resources becomes possible. Yancey's chair's address was (and continues to be) a call to action. Independent writing programs may develop, but they will achieve equal footing with other disciplinary units in the university only when they offer a major. I share the optimism suggested by the title of this book: *if we build it, they will come*.

#### WORKS CITED

- Hairston, Maxine. "Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections." *College Composition and Communication* 36 (1985): 272–82.
- Yancey, Kathleen. "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key." *College Composition and Communication* 56 (December 2004): 297–328.