## Creating a Writing Program Digital Archive

Proposed by:

Neal Lerner, Northeastern University

**Mailing address [deleted]**:

### Project Overview

Many scholars have described the past 15-20 years as constituting an “archival turn” in writing studies, given the volume of publications that have drawn on archival sources to tell our histories of writing courses and writing programs in US higher education. As a complement—and at times counter—to the grand sweeping historical narratives of writing studies (e.g., Berlin; Connors; Kitzhaber), more recent publications have focused attention on individual institutions (e.g., Ostergaard and Wood; Ritter), individual programs (e.g., Gold; Fleming; Lamos), and individual figures (e.g., Varnum; L’Eplattenier and Mastrangelo; Lerner). This research complicates what we know about our history, challenging long-held beliefs such that all first-year writing grew out of Harvard’s implementation of English A in the 1870s (Donahue and Moon). Instead, we learn that writing instruction—particularly informal instruction—has long been a feature at most, if not all, colleges and universities (Gannett, Brereton, and Tirabassi), and that this instruction—its purposes, values, and methods—has been as diverse and situated as all instruction needs to be.

The project for which I am seeking funding is intended to add to this cumulative history, but not simply by crafting a narrative based on archival materials. Instead, this project combines the “archival turn” with the “public turn” in my intent to build a digital public archive of the N\_\_\_ University Writing Program, one that would be curated or “narrated” for users to learn from these digitized archived materials, but one that would also allow users to have access to the “raw data”: the actual memos, reports, articles, student work, assignments, and other “everyday documents” that constitute this archive.

Such a digital public archive of one institution has great potential not merely for the ways it will add to our knowledge of writing program history, but similar efforts at multiple institutions—perhaps under the aegis of the National Archive of Composition and Rhetoric—can move our efforts to tell the stories of our pasts into a new era, one capitalizing on the power and ubiquity of digital access.

### Project Methods

A brief history of the N\_\_\_ Writing Program: While not a powerhouse that has cultivated generations of PhD composition scholars (in fact, the PhD program is only 10-years old though a former MA in Professional and Technical Communication did produce many graduates of note), the Writing Program at N\_\_\_ is important in many ways because of its familiarity. In the early 1980s, led by Richard Bullock, the program grappled with assessing and placing incoming students unprepared for college-level writing. Also long-standing has been an upper-division required disciplinary writing course, one that has adapted over time to meet university, student, and general education needs. Finally, the program has shifted as undergraduate student demographics have shifted—from largely a local, urban student population to a much more diverse, but more highly prepared, student body.

These activities of the N\_\_\_ Writing Program—and the English Department more generally—are documented in a relatively large collection of paper materials, including meeting minutes, memoranda, reports (including two WPA Consultant Evaluator reports), news clippings, readings, student writing, and assessment prompts from the early 1980s to the present, all of which is currently packed into a four-drawer filing cabinet. The first step to create a public digital archive of these materials is to organize, tag/label, scan, and upload them. This proposal is to fund graduate student labor to perform these tasks. The second step will be to build a digital, public-facing archive, which will be both curated—brief syntheses of the materials along timelines and/or themes will be offered—and will also offer access to the primary materials themselves for users to interact with in ways they choose.

### Timetable

The funds requested in this proposal will be spent in academic year 2018/19. Because of the amount requested ($1,500) the on-campus rate for graduate student employment ($20/hour) and an expectation that a graduate student would be able to devote 5 hours per week to this project, this funding will pay for 15 total weeks of graduate student time. While my hope is to augment this potential funding with other sources, including grants proposals in progress through our university’s Digital Scholarship Group, 75 hours of graduate student time will go a long way to complete the first phase of the project: organizing, creating metadata for each object (e.g., key words for particular topic or particular class of documents or particular kind of meeting, genre, date of creation, author, recipients), and scanning archival materials.

If funding remains after the completion of this first phase, we will work on phase 2: putting the material online (most likely through my university’s existing digital publication platform) and creating “points of entry” or retrieval points—small essays pointing to groups of documents that are the sources for these essays and that would allow users to interact with these materials.

### Expertise and Experience

In terms of my background with archival research, I have published one monograph and 14 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters that draw on archival materials. I have also written about the process of archival research for the edited collection *Working in the Archives* (Ramsey, Sharer, L’Eplattenier, and Mastrangelo, eds.).

In terms of institutional resources, I am in conversation with our Digital Scholarship Group about resources useful to this project, particularly OCR software that will convert scanned text to machine-readable text, as well as the construction of a digital front end. N\_\_\_ has focused a great deal on digital humanities generally and archival projects specifically in the last several years, producing multiple sites that range from documenting and presenting current cultural milestones, to offering access to literary and non-literary texts from non-mainstream authors, to collecting and curating 19th century newspapers.

The purpose of all of these efforts is the creation of public, community-driven archives. My interest is offering the history of my own institution's writing program in such a way, both through active curation and through a front end that would allow users to go beyond a constructed narrative and make their own sense of primary materials.

### Sharing of Results

The overall intent of this project is, in a sense, to share results through the construction of a digital public archive of the N\_\_\_ Writing Program. Because I also see the purpose to model and inform similar efforts at other institutions, documenting the process of the project would make for an appropriate conference presentation at the WPA Summer Conference and/or an article for the *WPA Journal*, particular one co-authored with the graduate student research assistant who is hired to assist with the creation of the archive.

### Budget

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Item** | **Cost** | **Total** |
| Graduate student research assistant | $20/hour x 5 hours/week x 15 weeks | $1,500 |

*Note*: Campus employment rates are fixed (e.g., the Writing Center also pays graduate consultants $20/hour). Also, English Department PhD students with TA stipends are allowed to work 5 hours per week above their TA duties. MA students do not have a similar restriction, but realistically are only usually available for ~ 5 hours per week. Next academic year there will be approximately 20 PhD students and 15 MA students constituting the pool for a potential research assistant for this project.

Based on my experiences with archival research and the volume of materials we have to process for the first phase of this project, I estimate that 75 hours should be enough time to organize, log, tag, and scan all of the materials. If hours remain after completion of this phase, the RA and I will focus on creating “exhibits” of the materials: brief synopsis of major trends, milestones, and key incidents that would then begin to curate the collected materials.

### References

Berlin, James. Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.

Connors, Robert J. *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997.

Donahue, Patricia, and Gretchen Flesher Moon, eds. *Local Histories: Reading the Archives of Composition*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2007.

Gannett, Cinthia, Brereton, John C., and Katherine E. Tirabassi. “’We All Got History’: Process and Product in the History of Composition.” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*. 10.2 (2010): 425-450.

Fleming, David. From Form to Meaning: Freshman Composition and the Long Sixties, 1951-1974. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2011.

Gold, David. *Rhetoric at the Margins: Revising the History of Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1873 – 1947*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2008.

Kitzhaber, Albert R. *Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850 – 1900*. Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1990.

Lamos, Steve. Interests and Opportunities: Race, Racism, and University Writing Instruction in the Post-Civil Rights Era. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2011.

L’Eplattenier, Barbara, and Lisa Mastrangelo. Historical Studies of Writing Program Administration: Individuals, Communities, and the Formation of a Discipline. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor, 2004.

Lerner, Neal. “Remembering Roger Garrison: Composition Studies and the Star-Making Machine.” Ed. Bruce McComiskey. *Microhistories of Composition*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2016. 218-37.

Ostergaard, Lori, and Henrietta Rix Wood. In the Archives of Composition: Writing and Rhetoric in High Schools and Normal Schools. Pittsburgh, PA: U of Pittsburgh P, 2015.

Ramsey, Alexis E., Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L’Eplattenier, and Lisa S. Mastrangelo. *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2010.

Ritter, Kelly. Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard, 1920–1960. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2009.

Varnum, Robin. Fencing with Words: A History of Writing Instruction at Amherst College during the Era of Theodore Baird, 1938-1966. Urbana: NCTE, 1996.