A Radical Response to Declining Enrollments in the Humanities: A Case Study

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The Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of an interdisciplinary English curriculum that has significantly increased the number of majors since it was implemented in 2013. Faculty members created a curriculum that broke traditional disciplinary boundaries and integrated the study of literature, fine arts, philosophy, public speaking, and writing by embracing the shared historical tradition of rhetoric. By making overt a common interest in the study of language and texts (broadly defined), the English major cultivates integrative thinking by providing opportunities for students to connect their learning across courses, locations, and kinds of work. As a result, the department is better positioned to weather the current crises of declining enrollments and eroding public faith in higher education. The sustainability of the program depends upon continued creative and strategic action, including ongoing curricular review as well as meaningful faculty development to maintain a shared focus. Such programmatic initiatives require leaders to have imagination, courage, persistence—and at times very thick skins.

This case study will offer an account of a challenging but successful process to revise the English major and ensure its continuing vitality. In this essay, we will discuss both past and current initiatives that undergird the success of the program, beginning with the founding of the Institute Writing Program in 2002, subsequent actions in 2012 taken by the Dean that provided an impetus for change, as well as ongoing efforts to maintain shared focus but with the elasticity necessary for future growth.

Institutional Context

The Virginia Military Institute is a state-supported, public undergraduate institution that aims to prepare its students for lives of service—to their nation, their professions, and their communities:

> It is the mission of those at Virginia Military Institute to develop educated, honorable men and women, prepared for the varied work of civil life, imbued with love of learning, confident in the functions and attitudes of leadership, possessing a high sense of public service, advocates of the American democracy and free enterprise system, and ready as citizen-soldiers to defend their country in time of national peril. ("Mission and Vision")

Among its alumni are distinguished military officers, leaders in professions, and remarkable humanitarians. The Institute attracts young people who want to test their own limits and follow in the footsteps of such impressive graduates. The recruiting motto "Don't Do Ordinary" is an apt description of the appeal for many who choose to attend.

Originally an engineering school, VMI now offers majors not only in engineering but also in the hard sciences, humanities, and social sciences. Because of its storied past, VMI naturally attracts History majors; however, the English major is a bit of an unusual fit. Moreover, it is still a largely male institution. In 1996 the U. S. Supreme Court ruled on U.S. v. Virginia and required the admission of women to VMI. The first women matriculated in August 1997, and women now comprise about 13% of the total enrollment.

All men and women live in the Barracks on Post, wear uniforms, and follow a highly demanding military and physical regimen throughout their four years. Their days are tightly scheduled and governed by both a regimental system and strict Honor Code. Cadets are tested physically, morally, and academically every day throughout their four years.

The Founding of an Institute Writing Program

During the mid- to late-1990s, in addition to tightened budgets and lower enrollments, many English departments were confronted by the very real threat of losing first-year composition as tenure-track jobs for rhetoric and composition faculty proliferated and the trend toward independent writing programs gained momentum. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article "Bad Blood in the English Department: The Rift Between Composition and Literature" detail-

ing a long history of inequity for writing teachers working in English departments (Schneider). Most were graduate students or adjunct instructors, who frequently were assigned multiple sections of first-year composition courses, underpaid for their work, and afforded no health benefits. Consequently, composition programs began "splintering off from English departments to set up shop on their own," taking first-year courses and considerable funding with them (Schneider). In 2002, *A Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and The Future of Composition Studies* was published, foretelling the change that had already begun on campuses across the country (O'Neill).

That same year, VMI chose a different path when it created a position for an Institute Director of Writing to join the Department of English and Fine Arts. A writing program administrator was hired to oversee and coordinate first-year composition, a writing minor, writing-intensive courses across the curriculum, and the operations of the Writing Center, thus ensuring meaningful, productive relationships among the various components under the umbrella of the newly formed Institute Writing Program. The Program was founded as one of three "enrichment programs," each tied to academic program goals and charged with forming generative alliances with Institute Honors and Undergraduate Research. In contrast to the national trend to remove composition from English departments and form independent writing programs, VMI chose a hybrid model in establishing the Institute Writing Program. The Program exists both inside the English department and beyond it. The Institute Director of Writing and the English department head work closely together on matters of curricular and faculty development in first-year composition and courses in the writing minor. On matters concerning Writing Across the Curriculum, the Writing Center, and budget, the Director reports to the Dean. The potential pitfalls of such a model are obvious. Perhaps most importantly, it lacks traditionally recognizable institutional property lines—the physical space given to departments with a faculty who deliver a curriculum that leads to a major or minor. However, the Program has some department-like stability in the form of its own budgets, including State and private funds that are used to encourage curricular and faculty development, as well as to sponsor cadet publications, special programming, and cadet writing awards.

Initially, the very existence of an Institute Writing Program significantly challenged the local culture among faculty and their beliefs about teaching writing. Doug Hesse in his 2005 Chair's Address at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) posed this fundamental question: "Who owns writing?" At VMI, a good portion of the faculty could reasonably have felt that they owned writ-

ing, in the sense that they had "assume[ed] responsibility" for teaching it (Hesse 337). A successful writing across the curriculum (WAC) initiative begun in the mid-90s had established an Institute-wide policy that required all cadets to take two W-designated courses, one of which must be in the major, in order to graduate from VMI. Every department had at least one course that employed a "writing to learn" pedagogical approach to help cadets develop as writers. The Department of English and Fine Arts, understandably, felt the greatest responsibility for teaching writing. The predominantly tenured faculty trained in literary studies prided themselves on regularly teaching "Rat English."[1] As a result, they regarded first-year composition courses as the long-held property of the department, not the Core Curriculum. This proprietary view fueled a strong resistance to efforts to align individual approaches with common learning outcomes and disciplinary Best Practices. Institutionally, then, the writing curriculum (first-year composition, a writing minor, and writing-intensive courses) was both *everywhere* and *nowhere*. No specialist (or group of specialists) controlled its use (the other sense of "ownership" that Hesse emphasized).

From the Dean's perspective, hiring a WPA was a strategic move to ensure both quality and consistency of instruction, as well as the continued growth of the writing curriculum. The Institute Director of Writing (an English Ph.D.) needed a departmental home. The new hire became the first specialist in rhetoric and composition—an area of expertise for which several English faculty had little regard—to join the department. Moreover, many believed that this new faculty position was one that they did not need or want. At the time, the English major did not require any writing course beyond the two-course composition sequence cadets completed in their first year. National concerns regarding the viability of the English major and the wider threat to the humanities largely fell on deaf ears. There was little interest in strengthening the English major at VMI by developing the writing curriculum. The Dean wisely knew at the outset that the success of the hybrid model would depend largely on the ability of the writing director and the department head to discover areas of common ground and create opportunities for colleagues to join forces in strengthening both the English major and the writing curriculum.

The first step toward identifying areas of common ground was the implementation of an assessment of first-year composition that would show how instructors were helping cadets achieve the established learning outcomes in this two-course sequence. Drawing on Edward M. White's "Phase II" model for portfolio assessment, the process required students to submit portfolios of their writing that included a common reflective essay. The portfolios were randomly sampled and

the reflective essays rated independently by two instructors, using a holistic rubric keyed to the learning outcomes.

In the earliest iterations of the assessment, workshops focused on anticipated issues such as strategies for helping cadets to cultivate a stronger audience and purpose for the essay, engage in reflection rather than simply description, and incorporate and document evidence from the essays selected for inclusion in their portfolios. Other disparities, though, seemed to stem from the wide-ranging differences in writing assignments—from comparison/contrast essays to literary analysis to five-paragraph themes on controversial issues. Efforts to locate common ground (while not eliminating flexibility and choice so that instructors felt empowered to teach from their strengths) took several forms: adopting a common textbook, sharing assignments and grading rubrics, as well as providing feedback to instructors' course materials annually. In some cases, such efforts simply drove individual approaches underground as instructors' materials reflected commonality while classroom practices often did not. Meaningful common ground, in fact, did not emerge until the Academic Program chose as its 2006 Quality Enhancement Program (QEP) for the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities (SACS) a review of the entire Core Curriculum, which was implemented in 2007-08. The revised Core Curriculum prioritized common experiences across sections of the same course and assessment reporting that articulated annually goals for continuous improvement in achieving student learning outcomes. Even then, however, more covert practices continued among some faculty.[2]

Despite these currents of resistance, new writing courses were created, additional tenure-line positions to hire faculty in rhetoric and composition were given to the department, the number of writing minors increased, services and staff in the Writing Center expanded, and writing-intensive courses across the curriculum proliferated. The curricular requirements for the English major, however, remained unchanged. As is the case in many English departments, the long-standing curriculum of the English major, primarily focused on literature, would accommodate some degree of change but mostly along parallel, not intersecting, paths: "You can only invent inside what an arrangement permits" (Yancey 317). In this case, invention would require more permeable boundaries. The lines—between theory and practice, the consumption and production of texts, literature and composition—were clearly drawn and defended for roughly the first ten years of the Institute Writing Program's existence.

The Dean's Initiative and the Significance of "Peripheral Vision"

In her book, *Leading Academic Change: Vision, Strategy, Transformation* (2018), Elaine Maimon describes an ability in effective college and university leaders that enables them to anticipate and prepare for change. Some administrators (particularly women administrators, she points out) possess "peripheral vision that produces readiness for opportunity" in advance of immediate needs or wants (12-13). Our Dean's "peripheral vision" enabled him to recognize that VMI's academic program needed not just some departments to flourish, but all fourteen to be strong. He thus developed a bold, multi-faceted plan to strengthen the academic program that provided the necessary framework for change. The comprehensive plan outlined strategies to both revise curricula in four departments and create an enrollment management system that would ensure a more equitable distribution of cadets across majors. English and Fine Arts, Mathematics and Computer Science, Modern Languages and Cultures, and Psychology and Philosophy were the four departments charged with making significant changes. The Dean issued his directive in April 2012, and the revisions were to be implemented in the 2013-2014 academic year.

By any measure, such an approach to curricular change would be considered radical. It was especially radical because the initiative was not motivated by an immediate crisis but rather by the Dean's interest in seizing opportunities that would strengthen all departments and ensure their future growth and relevance. In an internal document for the Department of English and Fine Arts, the Dean's directive was forward-thinking:

> The Institute Writing Program presents an opportunity to respond to changing attitudes among cadets who are selecting more pragmatic majors as they consider their career options. Restructuring the ENFA Department to emphasize rhetoric will improve the utility to cadets of the major. Rhetoric is the process of developing writers and speakers in their efforts to inform, persuade, or motivate. This purpose can have wide appeal to those wishing to command troops, practice law, implement policy, or lead organizations. (Schneiter)

Given a blank sheet of paper and roughly six months to complete the task, faculty members began working toward what Caitlin Martin and Elizabeth Wardle would characterize as "first-order change," that is, "changes to behavior and practices" (47).[3] This process required faculty

to take the difficult steps necessary to move beyond their disciplinary perspectives toward a shared vision of an English major centered on rhetoric—a discipline that itself was a site of real contention. While a concerted effort was made to foster broad investment and involvement, there was a strong undercurrent of resistance (implicitly and explicitly) that would ultimately delay "deep change," that is, change in "underlying belief systems that in turn change behavior and practice" (Martin and Wardle 47). For our program, that type of change meant a commitment to the value of an interdisciplinary, rhetoric-centered English major.

National Context

At the time of the Dean's initiative in 2012, numerous books, like Martha Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity*, and many articles in national publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal* had all discussed the crisis of the humanities. Many wrote to defend the value of the humanities by arguing for the personal and economic benefits. As David Brooks notes, in an Academy of Arts and Sciences' report, the study of the humanities promotes not just improved thinking and writing abilities but also "internal transformation." In his essay in *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik succinctly summed up their unquestionable value: "they help us enjoy life more and endure it better."

In addition to pointing out the personal benefits, writers contended that the liberal arts degree prepares students well for careers. Following a 2010 AAC&U report, an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* stated that "while humanities and social-science majors started out near the bottom of all college graduates in terms of salary . . . older people who majored in those fields—many of whom also held graduate degrees—outearned their peers who'd picked professional and preprofessional majors" (Supiano). While one measure of such success might be salary averages, others observed that they are certainly not the only relevant measure, particularly since many of the professions that our graduates enter may not be among the most lucrative, even though they may be quite valuable to society.

Neither line of defense stopped the free fall of enrollments in humanities departments. English departments, then and now, have been losing majors and struggling to recruit new ones. Nathan Heller, in his 2023 article "The End of the English Major" published in *The New Yorker*, states that "[d]uring the past decade the study of English and history at the collegiate level has fallen by a full third," which has re-

sulted on too many campuses in a loss of positions, programs, and even entire departments.[4]

In revising the major at VMI, we were mindful of the enormous influence that English studies can have on the lives of our graduates and their futures. While not preparing them for specific careers, the curriculum can give them transferable knowledge and skills that will serve them well in a variety of careers. Moreover, it can prepare them for effective civic participation. With its emphasis on reflection and active engagement, our curriculum aims to develop students' understanding of these benefits and make apparent to them the links among these personal, professional, and civic benefits: if the humanities help us better understand ourselves, our fellow human beings, our values, and our ethics so should they prepare us to solve important problems together in our workplaces and communities.

Program Design

With input from the English & Fine Arts Department Head and the Institute Director of Writing, the Dean appointed a committee of faculty representing all of the disciplines to be included in the new English major and asked them to "[d]etermine the mission, goals, learning outcomes, and curriculum for a revised major curriculum . . . that emphasizes rhetoric" (Schneiter). With the help of Dr. Erika Lindemann, who at the time was Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education and Professor of English at UNC-Chapel Hill and a distinguished scholar in this field, we started from scratch and designed the new English major curriculum, which we launched in fall 2013. The Dean's charge was a both a great challenge and a tremendous opportunity to shape a more coherent curriculum that better prepared our graduates for the twenty-first century.

Our first steps were looking beyond our own institution to the national conversations about reinvigorating curricula, particularly those in the humanities. Most importantly, the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative of the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) provided excellent guidance for incorporating high impact opportunities.[5] Also in this report, the Hart Associates survey documented the abilities that employers needed in the workforce. Although we launched our new curriculum three years before the Association of Departments of English (ADE) came out with their report on the English major in 2016-17, we later noted that we had incorporated key recommendations:

1. Reassess how you understand and respond to local and institutional needs
2. Maintain a clear common vision and purpose for the English major
3. Mitigate adverse effects of segmentation
4. Give continued attention to writing studies and its connections to other parts of the major.

The first recommendation was a goal we had had firmly in mind: to ensure that the curriculum was fully aligned with our institutional mission, particularly its emphasis on producing citizen-soldiers. Looking to increase the number of English majors, we crafted our curricular goals in ways that would resonate with cadets and prospective applicants. Essential to this preparation of citizen-soldiers is the ability to think across disciplines, apply learning, and reflect thoughtfully on one's learning process. We therefore designed a mission statement that highlighted the aim of transcending both traditional disciplinary boundaries and the boundaries between the academy and the real world:

> *The English major at VMI prepares the citizen-soldier for civic and professional life through disciplined engagement with rhetorical traditions and applications, from the classical to the contemporary. Grounded in a common interest in the varied functions of language, the major integrates multiple disciplinary approaches, including the literary, the philosophical, and the aesthetic. Cadets' command of language is developed both critically and creatively through the study of a range of humanistic works and practice in effective forms of expression.* ("English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies")

With this mission in mind, professors of literature, rhetoric, art history, and philosophy began our curricular design by literally sitting around a laptop computer and working together to articulate aims for our English majors. During this collaborative composing process, we discovered anew just how much language matters. (One of the most spirited debates—between rhetoric and philosophy colleagues—hinged on whether language composes reality.) At the same time, we found just how much our disciplines had in common and how nicely those common features align with the institutional goals for our graduates. We also learned about the distinctiveness of each of our fields. As we developed a mission statement and our program, we tried to preserve the essential principles and practices of the disciplines, as ap-

propriate. Our primary aim, however, was to put those subjects in conversation with each other in the classroom so that the students could make connections among their learning experiences and appreciate the various ways in which they might interpret texts, construct knowledge, and communicate their discoveries.

We then created the learning outcomes for the English major:

> *Students who complete the English major at VMI should be able to*
>
> - *identify and use rhetorical strategies in academic, civic, and professional situations;*
> - *demonstrate an understanding of the ways in which cultural context influences the production and interpretation of texts;*
> - *use appropriate disciplinary terminology and methods of criticism to analyze texts;*
> - *evaluate and use sources to produce effective and ethical arguments;*
> - *analyze and produce creative works that express the richness of the human experience; and*
> - *reflect on multiple learning experiences in order to synthesize knowledge.*

Faculty then designed courses that incorporated as many of these outcomes as appropriate. Depending on the course subject matter and methodology, some outcomes were of more importance than others. Nevertheless, by having these common goals articulated on each syllabus, we reinforced for students and faculty the common aims across the curriculum.

English Major Curriculum

Foundational Courses

The newly named department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies offers courses in the four disciplines—rhetoric, literature, art, and philosophy (www.vmi.edu/erhs). The curriculum is designed to help students see the different approaches that can be taken to reading texts—all kinds of texts, in all kinds of modes. Throughout the

curriculum, but especially in the core courses, there is an emphasis on language, communication, and culture:

- *ERH 201 Rhetorical Traditions I (3 credits)*
- *ERH 202 Rhetorical Traditions II (3 credits)*
- *ERH 203 Ways of Reading (3 credits)*
- *ERH 204 The Language of Art (3 credits)*
- *ERH 205 British Literary Traditions (3 credits)*
- *ERH 206 American Literary Traditions (3 credits)*
- *ERH 207 Ethics (3 credits)*
- *ERH 301 Rhetoric and Public Address (3 credits)*
- *ERH 302 Civic Discourse (3 credits)*
- *ERH 323 Philosophy and Literature (3 credits)*
- *ERH 411 Field Work (3 credits)*
- *ERH 480-481 Senior Capstone I and II (6 credits)*

Upper-Level Electives

Majors must take additional upper-level electives in Rhetoric and Writing including Digital Rhetorics, Cultural Rhetorics, Language and Style, and Professional or Technical Communication. They also complete a Creative Elective requirement, which explicitly emphasizes not only analyzing texts but also producing them. To fulfill this requirement, they choose among genre studies (in poetry, fiction, or non-fiction) and visual arts studio (drawing, painting, and photography) courses. Other electives were created as interdisciplinary opportunities. ERH 230 Artistic Responses to Social and Political Issues, for example, might focus one semester on the literature, art, music, and films of World War I and another semester on responses to 9/11.

Learning in/with the Community

Embracing the AAC&U high impact practice of "field-based 'experiential learning' with community partners . . . as an instructional strategy," our required Fieldwork course cultivates student-centered, reflective learning with the aim of moving students' work beyond the classroom. These projects can take the form of a three-credit course or an independent study. Instructors provide learning opportunities in which cadets partner with a community organization (e.g., local schools, retirement communities, non-profits) or an on-Post agency (e.g, Library's Archives, Alumni Agencies, Museums, Athletics, and Communications and Marketing). The latter were particularly valuable

alliances during the pandemic when getting our students out into the community was even more challenging than usual.

On-Post Partnerships

We also cultivated connections with other on-Post agencies, including our ROTC departments. All cadets are required to take ROTC, and many receive commissions in the armed services. To complement what they learn in those courses, we offer a course in Professional Writing, which is focused on the kind of writing done in the military service, and a more advanced course titled "Rhetoric for Military Officers." Similarly, we have collaborated with the Biology Department to host discussions for cadets in both majors about the importance of integrating the study of arts and sciences and about the role of the humanities in medicine. Such efforts have opened some useful conversations across our campus that have reinvigorated the English major.

Keys to Sustainability

Student Recruitment

Cadets must declare a major before they matriculate; nevertheless, many of them change majors. Since many join our major in their second or even third year, we want to bring as many students as possible into our classes. We do so by offering electives that fulfill upper-level Core Curriculum requirements for writing-intensive and cultures and civilizations courses. We offer more of these courses than any other department. Therefore, in addition to taking the Core writing sequence and a public speaking course offered by our department, cadets typically take additional electives. Even if they decide not to major in English, a number of them choose to pursue one of our minors.

To broaden our reach, we created four minors: Rhetoric and Writing, Literary Studies, Philosophy, and Art History and Visual Culture. These are readily attainable degrees requiring eighteen credits each. To facilitate the pursuit of multiple minors, we ensured that some courses could count towards several minors. This was not difficult given the interdisciplinary nature of our curriculum. The number of minors has grown steadily across the past decade and is now twice what it was. When English majors pursue a minor in the department, it is called a "concentration." Most English majors earn multiple concentrations.

These degrees are all announced at graduation, thus giving further attention to our program and the range of options we offer.

Shared Focus: Recruiting and Developing Faculty

Hiring and developing a faculty well suited to this kind of integrated curriculum is crucial but can also be quite difficult. While graduate programs continue to be focused on preparing students for narrow specializations, sometimes you get lucky and find faculty that align beautifully with your programmatic aims. Happily, chances are that when you find them, they will be delighted to have been found. We are quite fortunate to have our current faculty. As one of our faculty members remarked, for all other positions she had to leave behind some parts of herself, i.e., some of her professional interests. The mutual enthusiasm at finding this match was energizing for all concerned.

Looking for faculty members whose preparation crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries requires re-seeing the entire process, starting with writing the job advertisement differently. Acknowledging the need for subject-area expertise for accreditation purposes, job descriptions must also invite candidates to reveal how they reach beyond their own field. When applications arrive, search committee members have to leave behind the usual sorting categories. It is easy to sort into yes, no, maybe piles if you are searching for a specialist in seventeenth-century British poetry; it is not so easy if you are looking for faculty in a program like ours. They must identify candidates who have both the appropriate disciplinary expertise and a disposition to cross disciplines. Ours is not a program that would suit all candidates. It is important to resist the temptation to extend an offer just to be able to fill an open position. Better to wait, even remain under-staffed temporarily (as long as institutional support exists) in order to find the best fit for the curriculum, departmental goals, and institutional culture.

Faculty Involvement

Once faculty are hired into an interdisciplinary program, they need opportunities to engage in programmatic activities that promote the mission as well as their own investment in it. To this end, faculty work on various department committees that provide such occasions. Those on the Communications and Marketing Committee, for example, produce materials that highlight student and faculty accomplishments, especially those clearly reflecting our curricular goals. They design brochures about the major, pamphlets highlighting various careers for

English majors, and create displays of student work. Those facilitating cadets' Career Development help them identify the connections between their studies and job opportunities. They also arrange for cadets to engage with alumni, thus not only establishing valuable connections for them but also cultivating an appreciation of the program even by those who graduated before the revised curriculum was established. Finally, the Admissions Support committee meets with all prospective students when they visit Post and arranges for English majors to make follow-up calls to them shortly thereafter. Both cadets and faculty are thus actively involved in spreading the word about the ERHS program.

Meaningful Assessment

Designing a meaningful instrument of assessing student learning can also be an effective strategy for sustaining programmatic focus by building shared knowledge among the faculty. We chose to use ePortfolio as a vehicle for assessing our learning outcomes because we wanted to make teaching and learning visible across courses for students and faculty. Turning to professional models for assessment that relied on authentic forms of evidence (e.g., the Association for Authentic Experiential and Evidence-Based Learning, AEEBL), we designed a process by which students populate a "working ePortfolio" with completed assignments selected from their major coursework and reflect on their "knowing in practice" by composing a reflective "tag"[6] that accompanies an artifact and explains how the work facilitated their learning (Schön 61). Eportfolio provides a digital space for students to discover the connections—intentional and unintentional—built into the design of the English major curriculum. As such, ePortfolio functions in "the larger context of whole-curriculum learning" (CCCC).

In the culminating capstone course sequence, cadets create an English Major Showcase ePortfolio—a rich, multifaceted portrait of evidence of their learning. As they select and reflect on a wide array of artifacts (text, image, audio), they demonstrate their achievement of the six learning outcomes. By focusing on the ePortfolio as a digital space for reflective learning—one of its key affordances—students and teachers visualize the "delivered curriculum" through selected pieces of evidence and the "experienced curriculum" expressed, in varying degrees, in students' reflective tags (Yancey 18).

Annually, members of the department's Assessment and ePortfolio Committee share results and recommended strategies for further improvement of learning. These moments are productive occasions for discussing course design, assignments, and learning activities. As we review assessment data, we identify areas that need attention and then

ask all to focus on improving them. Just as we included opportunities for reflective learning in our curriculum, we have used program assessment, workshops, and annual reviews to both keep us attentive to our common goals and foster our continuing growth as we deliver the evolving curriculum.

Resisting Disciplinary Drift

Sustaining a common focus among faculty in a department with multiple disciplines requires ongoing, concentrated effort on many fronts. Since we all have traditional graduate educations, reversion to silo-thinking is an ever-present threat to maintaining a more integrated vision for the major. As active scholars, for example, faculty members move in professional arenas that cultivate and value their distinct specialties instead of the multi-faceted identities embraced by the department. Faculty members' impulse to collaborate and communicate with departmental colleagues who teach the same core courses in the major can diminish simply with the passage of time. Likewise, as instructors develop new upper-level courses, they may drift towards their own disciplinary interests. Opening a dialogue about this pull away from the center can invite collective problem-solving and reinforce a sense of shared knowledge, as well as mutual investment.

Reflections

In the eleventh year of the revised English major at VMI, we are proud to say that we believe we have effected "deep change" (Martin and Wardle 47). The Department of English, Rhetoric, and Humanistic Studies is thriving. Though the number of English majors is still declining at many institutions across the country, our numbers of both majors and minors have increased.

Though aspects of VMI's revised English major are distinct, the vision of a rhetoric-centered undergraduate major is not entirely new. Two proposals, published almost thirty years apart, pitched rhetoric as an undergraduate major and thus offer valuable touchstones: "For Sale, Lease, or Rent: An Undergraduate Program in Rhetoric" (Tade, Tate, and Corder 1975) and "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key" (Yancey 2004). The first presents rhetoric as "architectonic."[7] The authors argue that "rhetoric is a proper central focus that can bring all forms of study together" and thus would not be "housed in a single department" or owned by "a single department's faculty" (Tade et al. 20). The role of rhetoric, though located differently, aptly describes the

vision that guided VMI's revised English major. Certainly, "[t]he alarm over fragmentation" in English studies in 1975 echoes more recent concerns (Tade et al. 20). The fate of the proposal, unfortunately, does as well. Tade et al. explain that the administration at their institution rejected the idea. An absence of *kairos*, you might say. Fast forward to 2004: Kathleen Blake Yancey describes the conditions facing English departments. Citing a study published in *PMLA*, she states plainly: "the number of departments called English" dropped 30% in twenty years (Yancey 302). The exigence is clear, Yancey argues, with fewer students choosing English as a major, reductions in tenure-track faculty positions, along with shifts in public opinion regarding higher education. "[A] tectonic change" in the very nature of literacy invites, if not demands, developing an undergraduate major in rhetoric and composition. "Sometimes, you know, you have a moment," Yancey recognizes (297).

She's right, of course. *Kairos* certainly played a key role, in our case, moving from envisioned to enacted change, as would be the case for any sort of large-scale institutional effort. However, even the most timely initiative to foster meaningful change in an English department, we would add, is likely to be complicated by the historical "rift between composition and literature" mentioned earlier (Schneider). *Kairos* alone, in other words, may be insufficient to motivate change when the disciplinary identities of literary studies and rhetoric and composition are at stake. The very premise of the transformation at our institution was read by some faculty through the filter of disciplinary identities, *not* as a muti-faceted strategic response designed to ensure the viability of the English major. It was seen simply as a move to elevate rhetoric at the expense of literary studies and thus the humanities more generally. As a result, the stakes felt high: "[t]he collision of rhetorics *is* change; change *is* the collision of rhetorics" (Corder 171).

For those charged with leading substantive curricular change, the opportunity can come at great cost—both professionally and personally. Agreement (about anything) among faculty is often difficult to inspire. In our case, faculty, even those who were not initially like-minded, united to undermine the efforts of any administrator associated with the initiative. They told their stories in newspapers, to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and in posts to Listservs and on social media.[8] As the two women administrators, the Department Head and Institute Director of Writing, we bore the brunt of their hostility. It took many forms, the most bizarre of which was a collective code of silence to avoid speaking to us even as we worked daily among them.

Though it may not always have felt like it at the time, we realize now that our experiences are not unique. In fact, in a cascade of schol-

arship published over the past ten or so years, narratives of women's experiences—in English departments, writing programs, and academe more broadly—not only validate but also provide a framework for understanding our own. These foundational works serve to theorize, contextualize, and, most importantly, document a wide range of behaviors (e.g., incivility, bullying, harassment) to which academic women have been subjected by co-workers, both men and women.[9] Our path forward, individually and collectively, has been fueled by steady institutional support, affirmation by respected professional friends, and an invaluable esprit de corps with current colleagues, who contribute their creative energies to strengthening the English major.

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The great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as to what direction we are moving: To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it—but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor.

–Oliver Wendell Holmes

In writing about this roughly ten-year period in the history of the English major at VMI, we confront the challenge of how to conclude a discussion of work that is still, by design, very much in-process. Inevitably, colleagues at other institutions with whom we've spoken will ask, "How did you do it?" Of course, institutional change of any sort is shaped by local contexts. No one situation will resemble the other. No one prescription will ensure success. The questions with which we began to revise the major at VMI were daunting ones: What is English? What is rhetoric? What are humanistic studies? The future of the English major and the humanities may, in fact, depend on our willingness to ask hard questions—and to risk answering them differently than we have before. For a curriculum to evolve, faculty must cultivate a reflective habit of mind that enables them to re-see it when circumstances or contexts shift, as they inevitably will. Above all, they must be willing to act collectively in service of the larger public good. We offer our story of accepting that challenge to others who might find it (in whole or in part) helpful, perhaps even hopeful.

Notes

1. A VMI "rat" is the term for a new cadet who has not yet completed the "ratline," i.e., the training process that takes about a semester.

2. In her 2002 *College English* essay, "More Than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work," Laura Micciche characterizes the Writing Program Administrator (WPA) as a target in some institutional and departmental climates: "The target of all that troubles student writing, the target sometimes too of faculty in English departments who resist rethinking, let alone changing, the way they teach first-year composition—WPAs daily find themselves immersed in anger, frustration, and disappointment" (434).

3. The authors draw on Adrianna Kezar's *How Colleges Change: Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change* (Routledge 2018); Adrianna Kezar and Elizabeth Holcombe's *Shared Leadership in Higher Education: Important Lessons from Research and Practice* (American Council on Education 2017); and Adrianna Kezar and Jaime Lester's *Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership: An Examination of Grassroots Leaders in Higher Education* (Stanford UP 2011).

4. It is worth noting that the Dean's initiative did not eliminate any faculty positions. Some faculty members who did not support the revision of the English major elected to leave the department. New faculty members, whose professional credentials and interests were well-aligned with the curriculum, were hired to fill those positions.

5. "The LEAP Vision for Learning: Outcomes, Practices, Impact, and Employers' Views."

6. For a broader discussion of the role of "reflective tags" in ePortfolio assessment, see Dellinger, Koons, and McDonald.

7. For further discussion, see McKeon.

8. In the Preface to her 2017 book, *Understanding and Preventing Faculty-on-Faculty Bullying*, Darla Twale points out that digital spaces sharply intensify the insidious effects of bullying: "As the electronic age increases the way and frequency with which we communicate, bullies need not confine their negative behavior to face-to-face public encounters. Instead, bullies can continue their assault on colleagues 24/7 anonymously using social media" (xii).

9. See Twale and De Luca's edited collection, *Faculty Incivility: The Rise of the Academic Bully Culture and What to Do About It* (Jossey-Bass 2008); Elder and Davila's *Defining, Locating, and Addressing Bullying in the WPA Workplace* (Utah State UP 2019); Patricia Ericsson's *Sexual Harassment and Cultural Change in Writing Studies* (The WAC Clearinghouse 2020); and Amy Robillard's "From Isolated Stories to a Collective: Speaking Out About Misogyny in English Departments" (2021), among others.

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