Composition's Ethic of Service, the Universal Requirement, and the Discourse of Student Need

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Since its beginnings in the late nineteenth century, university-level composition instruction has maintained an ethic of service. Its teachers and supporters have argued that composition instruction served the needs of the academic community, as well as those of students and the community at large, by teaching students to write error-free expository prose. Since the late nineteenth century, this instrumental ethic has provided most American colleges and universities with a rationale for requiring introductory composition courses of all students.

The instrumental ethic of the introductory course has been supplemented from time to time with other, more general, aims. During the 1920s and 1930s, for example, the introductory writing course was conceived as a site wherein students could be exposed to liberal culture (Berlin, Rhetoric). During the 1940s, in the aftermath of World War, the required course was reconceived as a venue for the inculcation of citizenship and the distillation of democratic values. Recently, radical composition theorists have urged that college teachers of writing use their classrooms to make its students aware of social inequities (Berlin “Composition”; Bizzell; Clifford; Cooper/Holzman). Despite attempts to update or expand the definition of its service ethic, however, the required introductory composition course has always been justified, at bottom, in instrumental terms: this is the site wherein those who are new to the academy learn to write its prose.

In an essay entitled “After Progressivism,” Michael Murphy argues that the service ethic of composition studies is so pervasive that it affects the thinking of even the most careful, and most radical, theorists of composition. Murphy claims, for example, that complicity with the service ethic mars the earlier work of James A. Berlin:

All that is potentially radical about Berlin’s deployment of “social-epistemic rhetoric” . . . seems to me . . . quickly coopted by its implicit association with composition’s progressivist baggage. The progressivist discourse of educational democracy—along with its allied senses of duty (“our responsibilities as teachers and citizens”) [“Rhetoric”
The problem with compositionists' subscription to agendas set out for them by the academy, according to Murphy, is that in the absence of sustained critique of those agendas "the compositionist is enlisted in the service of a transcendent good embodied in the proper function of the institution, and the composition student is left, once again like the discipline itself, inadvertently but undeniably disabled" (emphasis added, 356). In this analysis Murphy implies that composition cannot serve its own ends, or those of its students, as long as it serves the ends of the institution. And composition cannot cease to serve institutional ends as long as compositionists cannot critique their history of complicity with institutional values such as "faith in social progress" (345).

Murphy connects the service ethic of composition to its failure to achieve disciplinarity. However, Burton Bledstein's study of the rise of professionalism in America establishes that the inauguration and maintenance of disciplines are ordinarily justified by a service ethic (36-38). And so it might be said (although it is not, often) that most academic disciplines bear a service mission. The natural and social sciences can be construed to exist for reasons other than facilitating the disinterested pursuit of knowledge or the professional advancement of their practitioners, and it can be said that the research produced by natural and social scientists has, on occasion, contributed to human health and happiness. Too, the examples of medicine and law suggest that powerful disciplines can be developed around an explicit service ethic. In other words, a service ethic is not necessarily incompatible with disciplinary status.

What is distinctive about the service ethic associated with composition studies is its low status. Within the academic imaginary, the work done by composition teachers is not imagined to be as worthy as that of scientists, social scientists, musicians, artists, historians, literary scholars, or philosophers, all of whose professional work is imagined to perform some valuable service either for the academy or for the culture at large. Periodic attempts to alter the image of composition—by associating it with loftier goals like liberal culture or democratic values—have been unsuccessful in dislodging its connection to the laying of academic groundwork.

The Universal Requirement and the Status of Composition
Susan Miller argues that the service ethic of composition is held in low repute for social reasons. She situates her critique of the invention of composition within the historical evolution of American universities, after the Civil War, toward admission of persons who would formerly have been barred from university educations because they lacked the appropriate family connections. She argues that the pairing of composition instruction with literary
studies, under the rubric "English," offered growing universities with newly elective curricula a way to insure that traditional class boundaries were maintained:

The university, ambivalent about its formerly unentitled, newly admitted students, needed to establish an internal boundary, a way to stratify diverse participants in what had been perceived as one dominant American group. As the symbolic domain of a national vernacular literature was suddenly produced to control an actual public realm, an equally new but easily identifiable, low, and now alien "writing" could simultaneously represent a murky, improper realm of language. That is, nonliterary writing by the unentitled became an organized discourse on composition, the unentitled domain that would perfectly complete the formation of a newly conceived, privileged, and discrete literary canon. (27)

Writing done by the unentitled would be put under continued surveillance in required composition courses: students in Barrett Wendell's classes, for example, wrote daily themes. Students would remain in such courses, their writing subject to such scrutiny, until it displayed the requisite conformity or until they left the academy.

This is the instrumental service ethic of the required composition course: to make student writing available for surveillance until it can be certified to conform to whatever standards are deemed to mark it, and its authors, as suitable for admission to the discourses of the academy. When the Harvard overseers instituted English A, the target language was that spoken by the genteel white male upper class. Today, the target language is called "academic discourse," a term that testifies to the current importance of disciplinarity within the academy. But this change in focus has not altered the social point of the requirement: exclusive practices need someone to exclude. The marginalization of the entire freshman class (except, of course, for those few elect—usually English majors—who are exempted) serves to underscore and reinforce the exclusivity of academic discourse, both with regard to the academy's newest members (students and teachers alike) and with regard to the culture at large.

Even though the cultural roles played by universities and by literary studies itself have changed enormously since the instauration of English Studies, the lowly functions envisioned for composition instruction by the Harvard overseers still remain in place in American colleges and universities, fulfilled then and ever since by the universal requirement in introductory composition. Disciplines whose practices are as old as composition are now firmly established in the academy. This is also true of many disciplines that are newer than composition, such as the various social sciences. However, composition teachers and theorists did not make serious moves toward achieving disiplinarity until the 1970s—sixty to eighty years later than other equally venerable fields of study.

I think that the universal requirement in introductory composition, which is the institutional manifestation of composition's service ethic, has
kept the traditional goals of disciplinarity—the pursuit of knowledge and the professional advancement of practitioners—beyond the reach of composition studies until very recently. The difference made by the universal requirement is manifested in the history of the professional organization of composition studies—the College Conference on Composition and Communication—which was founded, not to advance knowledge, as were MLA or SCA, say, but in order to help its teachers manage the universally required course and to protect them from exploitation (Gerber). Accordingly, until 1970 or so, composition research concentrated on teacher practice and its effects on students' writing, and this research was usually undertaken, not in the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, but in order to improve teaching practices. By 1990, though, composition studies had developed a body of research and theory that differed from its more traditional work, and CCC has become a forum for the publication of scholarship undertaken primarily to advance knowledge about writing (Nystrand et al.). In this regard, composition studies can now be considered to have met the first traditional requirement for disciplinary status.

What remains is for composition studies to improve the status and working conditions of its practitioners. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, composition teachers made an effort to change these conditions for the better, working under the symbolic banner of the Wyoming Resolution (Robertson et al.). Despite this and local efforts on the part of committed part-time teachers of writing, teaching conditions have improved for only a few teachers on a few campuses across the country. Most of the more than 30,000 professional teachers of composition in the country work for substandard salaries, without benefits, and often without private offices or telephones.

Composition's recent bid for disciplinarity has been hampered not only by its history of unfair employment practices but by the emergence of post-Fordist hiring practices in the academy at large (Faigley 10-13; Murray). Post-Fordist institutions rely on part-time or other disposable faculty, such as graduate students, to do the teaching. The advantages to management of part-time faculty are economy (lower salaries, fewer benefits) and flexibility (layoffs in hard times are relatively simple). Whatever might be said about the evils of disciplinarity, until recently its institutional practices impeded the full-scale implementation of part-time instruction in the academy. Recently, however, tenured faculties have become complicit in their own demise; as tenured faculties continue to raise the standards for tenure—as they have over the last ten years—they accelerate the creation and maintenance of post-Fordist employment patterns in the academy. It remains to be seen whether post-Fordist employment practices will reduce or negate the power of disciplinarity in American universities. In any case, composition's bid for disciplinarity could not have been made at a worse time.
Ethic of Service 231

Moreover, the imagined construction of composition as "low" work exerts so much ideological force within the academy that even if composition were to achieve a disciplinary status that is recognized beyond its own borders, its image might not alter appreciably within the academy. Those few composition teachers who have achieved rank, commensurate salaries, office space, and lower teaching loads are aware that their colleagues in other disciplines still regard their work as not truly academic. And such perks do not now and probably will never accrue to the thousands of teachers who teach four, five, or even six sections of the required introductory course every semester, precisely because their work is perceived to be instrumental, even remedial.

Service and the Required Introductory Course
In the minds of most of its teachers and everybody else who thinks about it, composition instruction is firmly associated with the curriculum of the required introductory course or courses in composition. This is unfortunate, since the traditional pedagogy of this course maintains and promulgates a definition and ideology of writing instruction that is quite narrow, configuring it as a series of exercises in formal fluency plus instruction in usage, grammar, spelling, and punctuation (Larson). The fact of the requirement itself ought to be a tipoff that the work of the course is widely considered to be distasteful: modern universities require courses only when they think that students will not elect them.

When composition directors or teachers attempt to design syllabi for the required course that are not distasteful to students, they inevitably jettison or downplay the pedagogy of formal correctness. However, a case can be made that such attempts will fail to the extent that faculty outside composition, or the public at large, become aware of them. At the University of Texas/Austin, implementation of a challenging syllabus for the freshman course, called "Writing About Difference," was indefinitely postponed by the university administration after opponents characterized it as diverting students' attention away from what they really needed to learn: basic writing skills. Linda Brodkey, who collaborated on the design of the syllabus, writes that opposition to it emanated from the "common sense" that obtains about the required introductory course:

Common sense prevailed at Texas. Alan Gribben was later reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education as declaring simply: "If you really care about women and minorities making it in society, it doesn't make sense to divert their attention to oppression when they should be learning basic writing skills." Another professor of American literature circulated his own countersyllabus, based on principles of copyediting. A professor who writes handbooks published an editorial in the student newspaper identifying rhetoric as "the subject matter to be taught and learned," and defining an introduction to rhetoric as focusing "on the logic and validity of arguments, the development and enrichment of ideas, the appropriate arrangements of subject matter, and the power and correctness of language." (232-33)
Persons who protested the redesigned syllabus at Texas may have done so for political reasons, but they covered over their uneasiness with the syllabus by insisting that the required introductory course be firmly associated with the pedagogy of formal correctness, which is, incidently, widely perceived to be politically neutral.

Lest anyone think that such common sense obtains only in Texas, I quote a recent essay wherein David Bleich meditates on the ways in which faculty at the University of Rochester view the required composition program:

> It remains the case that most faculty, perhaps even most English department faculty, would like to continue their own work without changing the role that writing as a subject has had in the curriculum for perhaps more than a century. . . . I imagine that those reading this essay understand “this role” to mean: writing programs are a subordinate and lower status part of the English department. The teaching of writing is not considered to be a subject with a scholarly literature and a body of knowledge, but a service and training area, a staging area, perhaps, for the “real” work in science and technology. (136)

Despite its pedagogical innovations and its ambitions toward curricular expansion, then, because of the universally required course and its unique function within the academic imaginary, composition studies is still associated with composition’s earliest and most familiar pedagogy: the pedagogy of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and formal fluency.

Unfortunately, as Murphy points out, composition theorists and teachers themselves maintain faith in the universal requirement, thus participating in the continued maintenance of their profession’s low academic status. When I and others have suggested at professional gatherings that composition theorists and teachers rethink the continued usefulness of the universal requirement, the suggestion has been met with vigorous resistance. This resistance does not seem to stem primarily from fears that jobs may be lost if the requirement is lifted. (Indeed, with careful advance planning, the universal requirement could be phased out at many institutions in such a way that no one loses work. This has already occurred at one large state university.) Rather, the major argument used against lifting the requirement is ideological, and it invokes composition’s traditional service ethic. It goes like this: “Our students need what we teach.”

Sometimes this claim is buttressed by a second one: “minority students particularly need what we teach.” Setting aside for the moment the implicit and patronizing racism of this claim, let us consider its valence. Apparently, studies do exist which indicate that at-risk students’ chances of staying in college are increased when their initial coursework includes a small class with a supportive environment where they get a good deal of individual attention. This is welcome news; however, it is no tantamount to an argument for imposing a universal requirement in introductory composition. If such supportive environments are more typical of composition classrooms and writing centers than of other
disciplinary sites, that is a largely unsung tribute to persons who teach writing and who profess composition studies. But this evidence does not support the claim that at-risk students are specifically served by instruction in composition.

And when evidence about the retention of at-risk students is used to support the claim that minority students profit from required instruction in writing, at-risk status is equated with minority status—an equation that I resist. Indeed, it is my desire to resist equations like these that in part drives my resistance to the universal requirement, which tends toward standardization and away from the recognition of students' diverse abilities and desires. If I am right that the required introductory course remains in place in order to socialize students into the discourse of the academy, to the extent that it succeeds in this it supplements or even erases students' home languages. The universality of the requirement suggests to me that this is, precisely, its point.

In any case, the requirement has nothing to do with what students need and everything to do with the academy's image of itself as a place where a special language is in use. The discourse of needs positions composition teachers as servants of a student need that is spoken, not by students themselves, but by people speaking for powerful institutions. Like the narrative of progress, the discourse of needs interpellates composition teachers as subjects who implement the regulatory desires of the academy and the culture at large.

**Required Composition and the Discourse of Needs**

In her analysis of the discourse of needs, feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser remarks that "needs claims have a relational structure; implicitly or explicitly, they have the form 'A needs x in order to y'" (163). The needs claims made within composition studies take this form: students need composition in order to write better, to write error-free prose, to survive in the academy, to prosper in a job or profession, to become acquainted with the best that has been thought and said, to become critics of the society in which they live. Fraser posits that such relational claims about needs are noncontroversial when they are very general or "thin": thin needs include the human need for food and shelter, for example. But as soon as needs discourse descends to lower levels of generality, its claims become "thicker" and more controversial. For example: "Everyone needs an education in order to succeed." Most Americans might assent to this claim, and if so, this is a relatively thin claim about needs. But thicker needs claims can follow fast on the heels of this one: "Everyone needs the same education in order to succeed," or "Every American needs higher education in order to succeed." As needs claims become thicker, that is, as they descend from the plane of mythology to the plane of ideology, they invite contest.

However, even relatively thick needs claims cannot be contested if the relevant power relations silence those who might contest them. My readers
will have noticed, perhaps, that in current public discussions about the needs of welfare mothers and their dependent children, it is not mothers or children who define which needs are at stake. Nor do public discussions about teenage pregnancy construct teenage fathers as persons in need of state intervention into their sexual habits. Of course, current relations of power mitigate against welfare mothers being delegated the cultural authority or the channels through which to speak and be heard, and the discourse of patriarchy consistently overlooks the responsibility of men in the getting of children. As the unfair, myopic, and interested terms of popular discussion about welfare indicate, even thick needs claims can seem thin (that is, uncontested and uncontestable), if they are manifested within a network of relations that disguises their constructed, and hence political, nature.

Fraser observes that analysts of needs discourse often overlook the power relations within which it circulates, and as a result they overlook some fairly important political effects.

[T]hey take the interpretation of people's needs as simply given and unproblematic... they assume that it doesn't matter who interprets the needs in question and from what perspective and in the light of what interest... they take for granted that the socially authorized forms of public discourse available for interpreting people's needs are adequate and fair... they thus neglect such important political questions as Where in society, in what institutions, are authoritative need interpretations developed? and What sorts of social relations are in force among the interlocutors or co-interpreters? (163)

The claim that students need required composition instruction is situated in a nexus of power relations that often go unexamined within composition theory and pedagogy. As a result, the political, interested aspects of such claims are obscured, as a point-by-point consideration of Fraser's analysis demonstrates.

**First**: when power relations are not taken into account, *the interpretation of people's needs is given and unproblematic*. Now the claim that students need composition is deeply embedded in a number of institutional and cultural discourses: the academic discourses that affect or have affected composition instruction include liberal education, liberal humanism, general education, progressivism, and the discourses of skills, testing, and ranking, among others; the cultural discourses that affect composition include those of literacy, class, and race. That is to say, composition is administered and taught in a much thicker discursive network than are many other academic courses.

Despite its considerable ideological freight, however, within the current discursive climate of composition studies the claim that students need composition is treated as a thin claim. That is, it is very difficult to contest it without being written off as either an elitist, a troublemaker, or an insensitive curmudgeon. This is particularly frustrating because support for the claim is virtually unarticulated: no empirical studies have ever been done to test it,
and historical research reveals reiterated but unsubstantiated statements of it (e.g. McElroy, Templeman). I conclude that the claim that students need composition is "privatized," to use Fraser's lexicon once again; in other words, the claim is so widely accepted in the relevant communities that it is simply not available for argument.

Fraser argues that three kinds of needs discourses are presently in circulation: oppositional discourses, "which arise when needs are politicized 'from below'"; reprivatization discourses, which emerge in response to oppositional discourses and attempt to modify or halt their circulation; and expert needs discourses, "which link popular movements to the state" (171). All three discourses can be found in the history of composition studies, but they have emerged with unequal force. Curiously enough, reprivatization discourses have appeared periodically in support of the universal requirement, even though there has never been much concerted opposition to it "from below." And of course the perceived need for composition was administered, virtually upon its appearance, by experts such as Adams Sherman Hill of Harvard.

Opposition to compulsory composition instruction "from below" has never been successfully articulated and sustained. The student protests of the late 1960s, which resulted in the temporary abandonment of the requirement at a few universities, are the only instance of such opposition that appears in the historical record of composition. However, the lack of sustained opposition from below has not prevented reprivatization discourses from occurring. Examples of reprivatization discourses are the literacy crisis of the 1970s, which resulted in the reinstatement of the universal requirement at many universities; and post-war concern about the re-entry of GI's into American culture, which stimulated the introduction of required "basic skills" programs in a large number of American universities during the 1940s. Interestingly enough, in the twentieth-century, reprivatization discourses about composition have emerged with most vigor during post-war periods (1919, 1944, 1978), periods when America's ideological integrity was perceived to be threatened either internally or externally (Connors, Spanos).

The role of expert needs discourse, according to Fraser, is to connect social or political discourse to a bureaucracy in order that a perceived need can be administered. I suggest that the invention of required introductory composition at Harvard during the 1880s was an administered response to the perceived literacy crisis, as well as the unarticulated class anxiety, that permeated genteel American discourse of the period (Hill). By the 1920s, large composition programs, complete with administrators and elaborate testing apparatus and accelerated or remedial sections of the introductory course, had begun to take shape at many universities (Berlin, Reality 65-69). Today, writing programs constitute a huge administrative unit on almost every American campus that has no comparable peer anywhere else in the university.
According to Fraser, administered responses to perceived needs have the effect of repositioning the people whose needs are at issue: "They become individual 'cases' rather than members of social groups or participants in political movements. In addition, they are rendered passive, positioned as potential recipients of predefined services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions" (174). Certainly the required introductory course positions students as consumers of a predefined pedagogy. In composition programs that require teachers to adhere to a predetermined grading scale, students' performances are always already ranked against a predefined scale of possibilities. And I would argue, along with Richard Ohmann, that the mass-taught course also positions students as people who have no culture, no history, that might distinguish them in any way from the thousands of their peers who are also writing about abortion or capital punishment or their most moving experience. Required composition, in other words, configures students as people who exist only in the institutional present and who perform exercises that meet the institutional needs to rank and exclude.

Second: returning to Fraser's analysis of the politics of needs interpretation, her second point is that when power relations are not interrogated, It doesn't matter who interprets the needs in question and from what perspective and in the light of what interest. It is worth repeating, I think, that it is not students but the academy that is served by the universal requirement, insofar as the requirement fulfills the gatekeeper function I described above, and insofar as the symbolic capital accrued by the requirement relieves academics from the responsibility of teaching literacy in their own classes and programs. In addition, composition teachers' willingness to speak for their students' needs entails a suspicious politics of representation that has never been interrogated in the professional literature, as far as I know.

Third: naive claims about needs interpretation assume that Fair and adequate socially authorized forms of public discourse are available for interpreting people's needs. Aside from course evaluations, there is no authorized discourse within the academy that allows students to voice their concerns about curricula. Teachers use student evaluations of their courses to improve the course next time it is offered; administrators use them to evaluate teachers. But student evaluations are not considered to be valid input regarding the worth of a program or a requirement (unless, of course, students have good things to say, like "this course really taught me how to write"). Students do engage in many unauthorized discourses about curricula, of course: they circulate subrosa lists of good and bad courses and instructors; they complain to teachers or administrators about a bad experience in a course or program; they write letters to the campus newspaper; they call their parents, who sometimes call the Board of Regents. But none of these unauthorized channels give students regular and equal access to the groups who actually make curricular decisions: curriculum committees,
faculty senates, boards of regents or trustees.

**Fourth**: when the politics of needs discourse is not foregrounded, *Political questions are neglected, such as What sorts of social relations are in force among the interlocutors or co-interpreters?* The hierarchical social relations within the American university are quite clear cut, if hardly ever articulated in authorized public forums. There are hierarchies of disciplinarity (the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, applied or pragmatic fields such as education or home economics). There are yet more hierarchies within each of these divisions (physics is purer than chemistry and both are purer than biology; philosophy is superior to literature and both are superior to rhetoric or composition). There are hierarchies of position (president and provost, dean, senior faculty, junior faculty, staff, graduate students, undergraduates). Composition teachers and their students occupy the very bottom rungs of all these hierarchical ladders. Thus, Murphy’s suggestion that compositionists remain in thrall to the discourse of the institution might be fruitfully situated in a fuller analysis of their institutional position. Why indeed have composition teachers been so eager to adopt the institution’s definition of their role? Could it be that they have seen accommodation as a means of survival, however marginally, within the institution? As Fraser notes, “members of subordinated groups commonly internalize need interpretations that work to their own disadvantage” (169). Or could it be that composition teachers are themselves somehow served by their adoption of an ethic of service and the discourse of student need?

**Abandoning the Discourse of Student Need**

I think it is time for persons who profess composition studies to consider what would be lost, and what gained, if we dropped the discourse of student need as our legitimating claim. Throughout our history we have acquiesced to definitions of our profession, and our disciplinary goals, given us by others. We work in academic and cultural climates in which misperceptions abound concerning our work. I wonder why we think that our professional interests are best served by continuing to speak discourses that are imposed upon us, hierarchical and exclusive as they are.

We might make a start at speaking a more disciplined language by firmly distinguishing composition from writing. Composition is an institutional term that is thoroughly saturated with the discourse of formal correctness. Writing, on the other hand, names the practice that we study and teach. This is not just a matter of switching terminology, but of thinking of our students as writers, rather than as persons in need of linguistic fluency or corrected habits of punctuation. Linda Brodkey makes a compelling argument for observing this distinction:

*Literacy is not just skills, nor is it abilities. Literacy is attitude, entitlement, the entitlement that middle-class privilege makes in prescriptions but that writing lays bare*
in the sheer force of the desire to see and to get readers to see what can be seen from where the writer stands. Virtually everything depends on the desire for a hearing, for it is that desire that makes the learning of rules or anything else that might also clarify a position welcome to the writer. Writers take stands. (234-35)

Inspired by Brodkey, I conclude by taking this stand: let us not stake our professional future on an outmoded requirement that perpetuates the discourses of hierarchy and exclusion. Let us, rather, articulate the practices that do legitimate us: the study, practice, and teaching of writing. We can devise vertical and diverse curricula in writing that aim at the achievement of critical, public, literacy. We can also begin to teach writing and what we know about it outside the academy. In order to accomplish these tasks, I believe, we must abandon the institutional discourse of student need, abandon the service ethic of remediation, and abandon the universal requirement.

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Works Cited


Winterowd Award Winners Announced

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1994 was awarded to Jasper Neel for *Aristotle's Voice: Rhetoric, Theory, and Writing in America.*

The 1993 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to Kurt Spellmeyer for *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition.* Honorable mention was shared by C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon for *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy* and Valerie M. Balester for *Cultural Divide: A Study of African-American College-Level Writers.*

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. The selection committee was chaired by Irene Ward. Professor Winterowd presented the 1994 awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Washington DC.

Send nominations for the 1995 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Thomas Kent, editor; *Journal of Advanced Composition;* Department of English; Iowa State University; Ames, IA 50011.