In Defense of a Nation:  
The National Defense Education Act,  
Project English, and the  
Origins of Empirical Research in Composition

Margaret M. Strain

In the spring of 1961, congressional leaders, school administrators, teachers from every educational level, and representatives from the United States Office of Education (USOE) gathered in Washington, DC, to engage in a series of rhetorical negotiations. The focus of their attention was the extension and amendment of Public Law 85-864 (P.L.) better known as the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). Signed by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1958, the NDEA was instituted amidst the cold war politics of the Russian-launched Sputnik satellite—a signal to some that American educational standards, particularly those in math and science, required immediate attention. Over the next four years, the federal government authorized four billion dollars (Vinovskis) “to strengthen the national defense and to encourage and assist in the expansion and improvement of educational programs to meet critical national needs” (United States Statutes at Large v 72, 1580-1605). The Office of Education (OE) was responsible for administering many of the NDEA programs. Though not the first time the federal government intervened in educational matters, the NDEA demonstrated one of the most extensive and multifaceted attempts of the government to underwrite the education of its citizenry.¹

Proponents of the extension had only to point to the successes the legislation made possible: student loan and fellowship programs, curriculum study centers, and teacher institutes. Another constituency, however, faced a more formidable task: to argue for the inclusion of English under the NDEA.² Statements presented before House of Representatives and
Senate subcommittees during the spring and into the summer months characterized English as a subject essential to the nation’s defense program. In his letter to President John F. Kennedy, Abraham Ribicoff, Secretary of the Office of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), called English a “keystone discipline of the entire learning process. . . . Enhanced language skills are an essential ingredient of our educational system if we are to play our proper role in the world of the future” (qtd. in *Hearings before the Subcommittee on Education* 749–50). Not a few of our disciplinary histories have identified the 1960s as a period of foment and growth, noting the power of research to authorize writing studies as an intellectual pursuit. Stephen North calls Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer’s *Research in Written Composition* the field’s “charter” (135). James Berlin credits the authors along with editors of NCTE publications such as *Research in the Teaching of English* as contributing to the “creation of a discipline” (131). Is there a connection between this “keystone discipline” and the emergence of composition studies? What spurred research interest in writing and language, giving rise to charter texts and landmark studies?

To answer these questions, my essay explores an early moment in our disciplinary history. I examine the ways in which Congressional testimonies surrounding the inclusion of English in the NDEA reveal discussions concerning the nature and purpose of English studies, during which the field defined itself as “the Study of Language, Literature, and Composition” (*National Interest* 1). A few months prior, another set of negotiations was undertaken to incorporate English in a preexisting research program (P.L. 83–531) administered by the Cooperative Research Branch of the OE. We know this modestly-funded initiative as “Project English.” These two events—the delineation of English studies and the launching of Project English—can be recognized as authorizing moments in our disciplinary formation. Of the trilogy, it was language (reading, linguistics) and composition that succeeded in attracting national attention and research dollars, not through the NDEA as originally hoped (the bill signed in October 1961 omitted English), but through the workings of P.L. 83-531 passed seven years earlier. Furthermore, I argue that the visibility of Project English with its focus on reading and writing research helped pave the way for the eventual inclusion of English under the NDEA in 1964 and shaped the kinds of inquiries researchers in reading, linguistics, and composition were sanctioned to pursue. Finally, if we are to understand the rise of empirical research and its “chartering” role in our
history, we must consider the cultural, political, and material contingencies (outside the academy and within) that informed it.

In brief, I contend that the rise of a research community in English, but most significantly in composition, became entwined and, at times, synonymous with notions of nationalism and national defense—part of a program to fortify the United States against perceived threats to its well being and democratic foundation. To avail themselves of funding, education and English professionals engaged in rhetorics of negotiation—acts of resistance, persuasion, and compromise—with the federal government and with their own membership as they lobbied for a subject “incontestably essential to every other study” (Hearings Before the Joint Subcommittee on Education 59). Composition and reading, rather than literary studies, become the linchpins of an argument enacted before hearings on the NDEA and before a House Appropriations Committee that allocated funding for Project English. Accounts that trace the rise of our research community must take into account the collaborative and painstaking efforts of those in education as well as English studies. In this analysis, I hope to complicate our expanding history by illuminating some of the forces that shaped early research agendas and the knowledge they produced.

The first portion of the essay highlights differences between Presidential and legislative priorities regarding educational reform legislation across administrations. This background contextualizes the original NDEA discussed in section two, segueing into an examination of the strategies educators employed to gain federal assistance for English studies when the law came up for possible renewal. These debates also reveal a careful definition of what constituted the subject of “English.” The third segment examines Project English itself and the strategies employed by the Commissioner of Education to lobby for the program while not reducing allocations already earmarked for other research. Section four locates instances of persuasion and compromise within disciplinary frameworks. CCCC panels, research proposals, proposal review boards, and USOE reports of the time call for theoretically aware, method-driven studies. For many English scholars, meeting this criteria meant learning, then applying, the genre conventions and research practices of the sciences to questions about writing and language. And some were skeptical.

In this historical remapping, research in composition is part of a rich and complex network of changes within English studies that prompted shifts in economic, rhetorical and political relationships: the domain of
English studies became accountable to a force outside its academic boundaries; it brought together English educators at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels as collaborators working for educational reform; and it necessitated a series of delicate internal negotiations as English professionals sought to define the role of the federal government in its operations and clarify the usefulness of scientific inquiry to its research programs.

**National Educational Reforms of the 1950s**

Historians have often pointed to America's fractious relationship with its Cold War adversaries as the genesis for educational reform in the 1950s; however, the factors contributing to federal involvement in education in any period have as much to do with the tenor of presidential leadership and the office's alliances with the legislative branch as with international politics. While President Harry Truman was not opposed to federal support for educational reform, he nonetheless placed the responsibility for change in the hands of the education reformists. He stated,

> The task before the Committee on Education and Labor is to consider the need for Federal assistance to the schools, and the ways of meeting it, and then to devise a program which will... *prevent* Federal officers... from exercising a control over matters which, we are agreed, should be left to the States. (qtd. in “Federal” 487)

Despite Truman's support and prior passage in the Senate, a major education bill failed in the House Education and Labor Committee in 1950. Committee Chair, John Lesinski, noted that although most committee members supported federal aid, "no acceptable bill preventing federal domination of local schools can be drawn" (486). According to Janet Kerr-Tener, Eisenhower favored what she terms a “hidden hand” administrative style in which the President's decision either to promote or withhold his support was worked out behind the scenes among those closest to him (473). In the case of the NDEA, Kerr-Tener holds Eisenhower responsible for "fleshing out certain of its provisions" and "settling internal disputes" while letting the HEW appear to take the lead in creating the bill (473). On September 2, 1958, President Eisenhower signed the NDEA into law. The move established a direct link between the federal government and local school systems, inextricably tying educational reform to national preservation. The title of the bill itself
underscores this link as does the assessment of Neil H. McElroy (Secretary of Defense 1957–61), who declared at a 1955 White House Conference on Education, “Education has become as much a part of our national system of defense as the Army, the Navy or Air Force. . . . We must have good schools not only because of our ideals, but for survival” (qtd. in Dow 23).

Comprised of ten titles, the NDEA provided for increased availability of fellowships and student loans (Titles II and IV); grants for guidance counseling and testing programs (Title V); language development (Title VI); new educational media (Title VII); area vocational education programs (Title VIII); a science information service (Title IX); miscellaneous provisions for advisory and state committees (Title X); and most significantly, strengthened instruction in science, mathematics, and modern foreign languages (Title III) (United States Statutes at Large 72, 1580–581). Efforts to amend and expand the legislation began as early as the year following its passage when the humanities and social sciences began to call for the government to subsidize reform programs in their respective disciplines (Harrington 160). Perhaps understandably, English educators were among the strongest voices, arguing that enhancing language development and modern language study would make obvious the importance of knowing one’s “mother-tongue” (Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Education 31).

For its part, English studies had already begun its own initiatives—one internal, the other an external effort directed to the federal government. In 1960, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) took the first step, establishing the Research Foundation of the National Council of Teachers of English with an initial endowment of $50,000 amassed from council monies and a portion of its membership dues (Hook, Long 168–69). The Foundation became the discipline’s first organization to subsidize empirical investigations in writing and reading. In order to make their case to congressional leaders, members of the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Council of Education, the College English Association, the Modern Language Association, and NCTE collaboratively produced The National Interest and the Teaching of English: A Report on the Status of the Profession. Designed to bring national attention to the necessity of extending NDEA monies for English studies, the document characterized the condition of English instruction as a “national problem” whose need for reform was “compelling” and “urgent” and targeted discrete areas for improvement (15, 1). Over 10,000 copies were sold while free copies were distributed to
members of Congress, USOE officials, state education departments, and key media figures (Hook, Long 195); it was also reprinted in full in the Congressional records of the Senate and House (Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Education 593–742). The decision to triangulate English studies as “the study of Language, Literature, and Composition” (National Interest 1) may have been a means to represent the discipline in all its fullness. Some members of Congress, however, remained wary. They did not question the importance of English studies, but the case for its relevance to national defense issues remained to be proven. Research in English, to those outside the profession, was typically regarded as scholarship devoted to aesthetic, humanistically-oriented ends. Testimonies given by Sterling McMurrin, Commissioner of Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and Harold Allen, NCTE president, illustrate the tenacity of individuals who maintained the value of English to national educational reform while foregrounding the primacy of reading and composition.

Discussions to extend and amend the NDEA were held in May and June of 1961 in both the Senate and House. The Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare convened a Subcommittee on Education to hear arguments for seven new bills. Of these, S. 87-1228 called for the inclusion of English in Title III alongside existing support for mathematics, science, and modern foreign language. This bill affected Title II, calling for English to be among those majors for which students might receive college loans; it also argued for incorporating English in Title VI, largely devoted to the teaching of “foreign” or “neglected” (that is, non-English) languages. The House Committee on Education and Labor organized its discussion by creating three subcommittees, each one responsible for specific titles of the NDEA. The General Subcommittee on Education heard testimony for three bills (H.R. 6774, H.R. 4253, H.R. 7378) in connection with Titles III, V, VI, and VIII. The Special Subcommittee on Education sponsored two bills (H.R. 6774, H.R. 5805) for Titles II, IV, VI, and X. Legislation on three others (H.R. 6762, H.R. 4930, H.R. 4361) to create new titles was managed by a Select Subcommittee on Education. Occasionally, the three groups met jointly. Within the House, the debates most crucial to English were those conducted in the Special Subcommittee and its joint sessions.

On Being Heard: English and the NDEA
The Commissioner of Education was the first witness called in the Senate’s opening session. McMurrin’s strategy was succinct and me-
Margaret M. Strain

thodical: he summarized the purposes of the original NDEA titles, identified their respective achievements, introduced the new amendments under each title, and made a case for why they were needed. As he reviewed each proposal pertinent to English, McMurrin generally met with no great opposition; in fact, Senator Joseph Clark sympathetically lamented the basic premise of the original legislation and its narrow curricular focus:

I have been concerned ever since the National Defense Act was passed... that we were led astray by a rather, to my way of thinking, phony connection between aid to education and national defense. My lay connection with education would lead me to feel that it was extremely wise, in the interest of promoting a higher standard of civilization, to give whatever aid was desirable at the Federal Government level across the board... .

Now, I realize that in order to get a bill through, it probably is necessary to pay meek adoration to the national defense concept in this thing...

From where I sit, we need a lot more people competent in English. We may need some more musicians and poets and philosophers, just as much as we need people to advance scientific achievement. (Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Education 83–84).

Garnering the support of Clark (and Committee Chair Senator Wayne Morse), McMurrin reinforced English’s central role by linking it to Title VI where he hoped to endorse the inclusion of English to existing language institutes and teacher preparation programs. Allen added only slight modifications to McMurrin’s statements—requesting the inclusion of English under Title III of S. 1726 (as it currently stood in S.1228) and an additional provision for supplementing library development. Of special note is the paucity of space accorded the status of research in the teaching of English in the National Interest summary statement. Relegated to four lines near the end of the document, the section offers little actual evidence that research described as “hap-
hazard," "uncoordinated," and "accomplished on shoestring budgets" is an area "perhaps most grave of all" (372).

Discussion before the House of Representatives a month later went less smoothly. McMurrin made basically the same case, arguing for the inclusion of English under Titles II and VI. When Allen appeared before the House Special Subcommittee on Education, he endorsed the addition of English in Title III. It is difficult to determine from the available evidence what factors led to the diminution of English in the subsequent "clean bills" which came from these hearings and the eventual removal of English altogether from P.L. 87-344 that President Kennedy signed "with extreme reluctance" on October 3rd (Federal Legislation Concerning Education and Training 93). As I will show later, critics from both sides of Congress expressed misgivings about the amendments and extensions to the NDEA that had as much to do with internal political motivations as they did with the expressed inclusion of English. An exchange on June 13 between U.S. Representative Charles Goodell and Allen suggests an unease with the broad definition of English and the potential use of government funds for ends that did not fit the strictly pragmatic goals of the NDEA:

Mr. Goodell: Dr. Allen, I agree with you when you are talking about the 150,000 students that fail college entrance tests in English and the number of students who cannot speak our language or write it properly. But throughout you make it clear that you think that these funds should also be available for literature and the teaching of, presumably, poetry and novels and all the rest of it at these institutes in the summer. Is that correct?

Dr. Allen: The institutes may very well provide means for upgrading teachers with reference to the work in literature, although this is not the area in which the greatest efficiency [sic] occurs. It is in the area of language and in the area of composition.

Mr. Goodell: I understand that the English teachers generally have interpreted this bill as opening up Federal funds for the entire subject that we know of as English, as it is taught in our public schools. I consider this bill—and I hope we will clarify this point—as merely pointing to English as a language, and it goes right along with the modern foreign language provision also in the present act. I take it you disagree with that.

Dr. Allen: I would say that the greater emphasis would be on the two areas of language and composition. I do not think you would suggest, would you, that language composition be separated in this respect?

Mr. Goodell: No; not language and composition. I would say that the composition would go along with your teaching of English as a language itself. . . .
But when you are talking about composition in terms of interpreting poetry or novels, the thing that bothers me is that if we are going to authorize that and use Federal funds for that, how are we then going to tell the history teachers that the teaching of literature and poetry is more important than the teaching of history, or the economics teachers that it is more important than economics, or the social studies teachers that it is more important than an understanding of how our Government operates and how they can function as citizens? The act originally recognized science, mathematics, and modern foreign languages as being special areas in which we needed a spur in this country for national defense purposes.

I agree that it is important for our national defense that we spur English as a language, as a subject, as a tool. But the broad area of English I do not conceive we should include in this act. (*Hearings before the Special Subcommittee on Education* 758-59)

Neither Goodell nor Allen disputes the triadic characterization of English. Both define composition as a set of essential oral and written skills. It is the *use* of composition with which Goodell takes issue. The House Representative launches an Aristotelian argument, seeing language in its oral and written forms as rhetoric—a “tool” (or *techne* in classical terms), applicable to any discipline. Putting language to the service of “interpreting poetry or novels,” however, subordinates composition to literary ends—a move Goodell does not support. What is more, the use of composition in this way effectively undermines the complementary identity English studies originally put forward. At the risk of privileging literary studies, the field subverts the very uniqueness that distinguishes it from other fields in the humanities and social sciences (history, economics, political science). In the discussion to follow, Allen contends that “even though the word ‘English’ were not further defined,” he asks Committee to believe that monies would be “primarily given to the greatest need . . . language and composition” (759; emphasis added). By casting his statement in passive voice, Allen omits the agent who (NCTE? Goodell? Allen?) would (not) be willing to further compartmentalize English (language, composition, and literature). At the same time, he presumes that his own unnamed, but assumed, constituency can be trusted to parcel the funds in a way that benefits composition and language. Goodell proves to be a diligent rhetor, continuing to pursue the loopholes for literature under the “broad area” of what is meant by English. As an academic outsider, Goodell champions language and composition as essential literacy skills; Allen, within it, pushes for their fundability by
virtue of their lack (deficiency). We might also consider this historical moment as representative of the countless debates carried out between literary and composition studies—exchanges that altered the content of first-year writing courses, created doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition, and instituted independent writing programs.

Though discussion continued in various committees, by the end of July, the Senate had scrapped its seven bills in favor of a new bill, S. 2345. For their part, the House experienced similar disagreements, having ordered a clean bill, H.R. 7904, as a replacement for the contested debate over H.R. 6774 which involved English. The bill that surfaced relegated English to a minor role, providing funding for the teaching of English as a foreign language and for the preparation of teachers in this area (*NDEA H.R. Report 674 Part 1* 15–18, 26). Even this bill did not survive; it was tabled (or "killed") along with two other education bills by the Committee on Rules July 18 (*Congressional Record*, vol. 107–part 18, D382).

Reports filed by the House and Senate suggest that Congress was just as discouraged with the transformation of the legislation as the 35th President. Five members of the House Committee on Education and Labor claimed that "[e]lements of confusion, controversy, and duplication, perhaps by design, have been injected into them all" (the amended bills attached to the NDEA) (*NDEA H.R. Report 674 Part 1* 79). They feared too that, in its present form, H.R. 7904 accorded the federal government too much control over American educational system while unduly increasing the power of the Commissioner of Education (*NDEA H.R. Report 674 Part 2* 3). Both reservations suggest a cautionary response to the implications of the proposed bills.

Senator Morse, who had earlier expressed his support of English, faced criticisms of another sort over his proposal bill, S. 2345. In an extended personal statement attached to *NDEA Senate Rpt. 652*, Barry Goldwater and John Tower listed eight substantive objections. On a general level, both men contended that English was no more essential to the intent of the original bill than "history, economics, . . . art, music, even landscape gardening and interior decoration" (120). More disturbing to the senators, however, were the inconsistencies and inequities they identified when English appeared in the proposed amended titles. For example, while English was declared essential to the national defense under Title III, funding was extended only for programs in public, not private, schools. Physical fitness was added to the list of essential subjects areas in Title III, yet students hoping to apply for a federal school loan would not find physical fitness among the list of eligible subjects in Title
II. Though in the minority, Goldwater and Tower found such sloppy provisions discriminatory and demanded that further discussion of the bill be held over until the second session in January (122–23, 133). In a last ditch effort to salvage some progress for the NDEA, the Senate introduced S. 2393, a move that would buy the NDEA two more years, with no significant amendments. This is the legislation that President Kennedy grudgingly signed, a shadow of the plans he had outlined to Congress months before (Federal Interest in Education 1–5).

It appeared that English’s bid for inclusion in the NDEA was slipping through the cracks of a legislative process, fraught with conflicts over government control of education, administrative power struggles, inequitable use of taxpayers’ monies, and disagreement over what constituted “English.” Indeed, English would not be incorporated into the NDEA until three years later. But by that time, a program entitled Project English was well on its way to underwriting the research energies of scholars in a nascent field that would become known as composition studies. How did this happen?

**Project English**

One might reasonably assume that efforts to extend and amend the NDEA and the creation of Project English were part and parcel of the same persuasive effort. They were, however, two distinct rhetorical acts argued before quite different audiences for different purposes. In fact, McMurrin presented a proposal for Project English in April to the House Committee on Appropriations before testimonies concerning the NDEA ever got underway. His argument was both a pitch for the program and a request for an amendment to the proposed 1962 HEW budget to subsidize it. This venture was a new one for the OE, and McMurrin made that point clear. Eschewing a bureaucratic “top down” approach, Project English would transpire “not in the Office but in the field by university and high level secondary people . . . not with the idea of imposing these improvements upon the schools, but rather making them available to them” (HEW Hearings before the Subcommittee 330). What is more, the OE chose to fashion this new program on an already proven model: The National Science Foundation.

What distinguishes the set of arguments before the House Appropriations Committee from those of the NDEA is its specific focus: in McMurrin’s words, Project English “is an attempt to improve the teaching of reading and English composition in the schools through carrying out constructive research directed to obtain whatever knowledge may be
necessary, along with whatever is already available on the teaching of English in the areas of *reading and composition*" (331; emphasis added). Noticeably absent is the mention of literature—a detail not lost on Committee Chair John Fogarty: “Is it because our educational system has weakened, or is it the changing times that necessitates emphasis on this program?” (331). McMurrin’s response appears to justify the narrowed emphasis by underscoring the importance of a literate citizenry:

The changes in our society, the social situations in which the language is needed, . . . especially for a grasp of the principles of composition and facility in composition, all indicate that in some ways, we are not as well off, because more of our people are put in a position where they need a better grasp of the language than actually have it. (331)

In arguing for the funding, McMurrin had to present his own budget (allocations for a support staff, proposals reviewers, research awards, and follow up publications). The structure of the program was threefold to accommodate the research-informed-curriculum format the program fostered: (1) Research Planning would allow researchers to convene conferences and seminars to stimulate research in under-explored areas and develop research designs for projects. A small amount ($50,000) of the budget for this category subsidized noteworthy projects that were developed from the seminars and conferences; (2) Curriculum Study Centers (and Summer Institutes) had a decidedly pedagogical emphasis. Hosted at individual universities and directed by “an English professor of unquestioned academic stature,” the centers (with a staff of equally qualified teachers from every educational level) were responsible for developing, testing, and distributing English language and reading materials; (3) Basic and Applied Studies provided a critical avenue for empirical research in language, composition, and reading. The total budget for the first year of Project English was $605,000, of which over half ($330,000) was designated for Basic and Applied Studies (519–20).

In comparison to the allotment afforded NSF researchers or what English might have gained through inclusion in the NDEA, the budgetary allotment the Commissioner of Education requested was meager. Moreover, McMurrin made it clear that this undertaking was one that would require monetary and other material support at the state, local, and institutional levels (525). Whether this condition was intended to anticipate concerns over too much federal control over education remains to be
seen, but the monetary burden for research was, to some extent, contingent on the financial resourcefulness of the prospective researchers and their home institutions. The fact that NCTE had in 1960 already established its own research award program was perspicacious if not inspired.

Though the summary statement of *The National Interest* had been entered as evidence here too, the Commissioner stood on his own before the Appropriations Committee without witnesses from NCTE, MLA, or other academics. He argued the efficacy of his case by presenting a detailed budget, the promise of shared financial responsibility from the educational community, and aligning the new venture with the proven success—a national mathematic and scientific educational agenda. His rhetorical task here was slightly different than the one he would face before the Senate and House in the weeks to come. The arguments about amendments and extension to the NDEA required that he persuade lawmakers of incorporating English into legislation that had heretofore omitted it, and as the comments of Goodell, Goldwater, and Tower indicate, not all legislators recognized obvious ties between English and a defense-inspired curriculum. It is reasonable that the Commissioner of Education enlisted teachers, administrators, and other educators to bolster the case.

The suasive context before the House Appropriations Committee did not require the explicit arguments for the inclusion of English per se because the framework for including English (that is, reading and composition) was already in place. That is to say, the budgetary amendment McMurrin sought was for P.L. 83-531, passed in 1954. This detail had significant bearing for a new generations of writing researchers. Called the Cooperative Research Program, this legislation permitted the USOE “to enter into contract or jointly financed cooperative arrangements with public and other nonprofit universities and colleges and State educational agencies for the conduct of research, surveys, and demonstrations in the field of education” (*Congressional Record*, Vol. 100–part 6, 845). The language of the original legislation combined with the terms established by the Cooperative Research Program all but excluded literature as a subject for empirical investigation. With the focus upon reading and composition, what became critical was the way in which Project English defined and set the conditions under which research could be conducted. Applications for research grants and research proposals were bound by the guidelines established seven years earlier. And these guidelines (along with the assumptions about research method and the knowledge empirical inquiry produced) were written in the language
of the sciences. Hypothesis-based research designs equipped with objective standards of measurement and evaluation were required of proposals submitted to any of the Project English categories—whether one wished to conduct an experimental study, organize a curriculum study center, or set up a teacher preparation program. Federal funds, along with various institutional contributions, were awarded to those universities and colleges that agreed to serve as sites for these projects. Once the budget amendment was approved and signed in the fall of 1961, the largest (and perhaps most wary) audience left to be persuaded awaited outside Congressional chambers: the teachers who had to turn their collective energies to learning the language and practices of empirical investigation. Indeed, their collective efforts helped authorize composition studies as a field in which literacy became its raison d'être. The closing segment locates instances of persuasion and negotiation within the discipline, suggesting how the turn to empirical scholarship filtered through our internal disciplinary networks as scholars worked to shape a research community that was uniquely their own.

Internal Negotiations: Persuasion and Resistance

The necessity of educating English researchers to the political and scientific discourse necessary to garner research funding began months before decisions about Project English and the NDEA were finalized. In April 1961 at the annual convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Washington, D.C., Erwin Steinberg, who would serve as the second Project English Coordinator, chaired a general session entitled, "Writing For The Federal Government" (4). Panelists included representatives from the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture as well as the Atomic Energy Commission. CCCC programs and professional journals throughout the decade kept composition specialists attuned to the needs and purposes of the benefactors who subsidized their work as suggested by these panel sessions from the 1967 CCCC convention in Louisville, Kentucky: Daniel Bernd advised his audience to "Ask Not What You Can Do for the Feds, but What the Feds Can Do for You" (14) while Fred H. MacIntosh wanted to know "How Good Is Our Product? Feedback from Industry, Government, the Armed Forces, and Research" (15). Richard Larson, a director of three NDEA Institutes in English, reinforced for prospective researchers the importance of considering audience when composing their proposals. In a 1967 College English essay, Larson urged writers to consider "whether the proposed course of study will further the objectives of the National
Defense Education Act” and outlines a series of suggestions for writing successful proposals (317).

As McMurrin envisioned it, the initial year of Project English would be devoted largely to the “Research Planning” phase, undertaking exploratory conferences and seminars, aiming, in his words, “to identify the current status of knowledge in the field” (HEW Hearings before the Subcommittee 525). That fall, at the urging of the its Executive Committee, NCTE convened its own ad hoc committee. It was aptly titled “Committee on the State of Knowledge About Composition” and was led by Richard Braddock. Financed by a “Research Planning” grant from the USOE and a small subsidy from the University of Iowa, the committee compiled hundreds of published and unpublished research studies, analyzed them, and prepared to publish their findings in a “pamphlet” the following spring. The pamphlet is better known today by another name, Research in Written Composition, by Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer. By answering the challenge to prepare “a special scientifically based report on what is known in this area,” Research In Written Composition can be regarded as both a landmark primer whose five showcased studies and extensive bibliography exemplified what was then regarded as state-of-the-art-approaches to empirical inquiry (1). Just as important is its status as one of the first federally underwritten calls for composition research.

NCTE established several other committees related to composition and in the spring of 1962, a Project English-sponsored conference, Needed Research in the Teaching of English (NRTE), met to further outline areas for research and curricular agendas on reading and writing. While quantitative investigations seemed to be the surest means to secure research funding, not everyone agreed that empirical research could reliably answer questions about writing processes. Resistance can be detected in one skeptic’s criticism that comes from the pages of Research in Written Composition itself:

What is the sense of attempting an elaborate empirical study if there is no chance of controlling the major elements in it? I think . . . that the further we get away from the peculiarities of the sentence, the less stable our “research” becomes. I do not for that reason think that there should be no study and speculation about the conditions for teaching composition . . . but I do think that it is something close to a mockery to organize these structures as though we were conducting a controlled experiment. (5)
Some participants at the NRTE conference challenged the discipline’s empirical leanings and called for collaborative and interdisciplinary investigations. William McKeachie cautioned researchers about the problems inherent in controlled research on teaching (63–71). At the same meeting, colleague John Diekhoff identified what he saw as the “troubles” of research during the period: “When we undertake what we call research in the teaching of English, we become empirical; and we are not empiricists . . . [neither are we] scientists nor statisticians” (22). For him, the solution to ill-planned research designs was collaboration with colleagues in education and psychology. In addition to recommending becoming “intelligent collaborators,” Diekhoff borrows from the work of Jerome Bruner. He reminds English researchers that in order to understand the structure of a discipline, one must first define its fundamental principles and this includes the revaluation of the importance of “intuitive understanding” as a component of knowing (23).

The following spring, New York University hosted the Research Development Seminar. Louise Rosenblatt, Seminar Director, also endorsed interdisciplinary cooperation along with suggestions for projects in both applied and basic research (79). Some of these projects pursued such topics as the effectiveness of a rhetoric- versus a literature-based composition curriculum and the usefulness of conferences in revision of student writing (64–65). Others utilized both descriptive and case study approaches in addition to controlled experiments (78). These exploratory seminars indicate a move toward qualitative inquiry and the honing of research design, encouraging researchers to consider the relationship between research methods and the questions they sought to answer.

Just as they took the lead by creating their own research-granting program, NCTE launched another initiative to support the scholarship of its growing research community. In 1967, NCTE inaugurated Research in the Teaching of English, again headed by Braddock. The journal’s first two essays introduce key research terms and offer guidance in designing manageable research tasks. Thus, the field’s premier texts and even one of its foremost research journals can trace their origins to a national campaign for educational reform and to the federal government’s support of empirical research. And we can trace the government’s, perhaps unwitting, hand in the disciplinary formation of composition.

Differences over research methodologies were not the only conflicts new researchers faced. Time and again disciplinary literature of the period chronicles the ongoing efforts of those involved in Project English to assuage the misgivings of colleagues troubled by the turn in research
emphasis to reading and composition. Julius Hook, first coordinator of Project English, exhibits his own rhetorical savvy as he deftly explains the terms for English studies' involvement with the U.S. government's research platform to his *PMLA* readership:

> It was necessary at first to fit the various pieces of Project English into the existing machinery of the Cooperative Research Branch. This meant, among other things, adherence to the deadlines already established by that Branch, and meant also that the method of selection of proposals had to conform to the procedures then in use. ("Project" 33)

As a result of the "Research Planning" conferences, English identified four goals for Project English: create curriculum study centers to generate pedagogical approaches to English; establish demonstration centers to make new approaches available; initiate professional development programs for active teachers; and improve existing teacher preparation programs distribute new knowledge to distribute (33–34). Later in the article, Hook highlights the progress in each of the four research categories. Studies in linguistics and composition dominate the list of approved projects. At the same time, the Coordinator seems almost conciliatory as he reassures his audience that the study of literature has not been forgotten:

> The first thirty research studies to get under way do not fall very neatly into groups, but the following rough breakdown shows the tendencies: six of the studies are in reading; five are in college freshman composition; five are in linguistics; four are in high-school composition; two are in spelling; one each is in elementary composition, the high-school curriculum, and speech; and five are miscellaneous or cut across lines, e.g., a comparative study of the achievements in reading, writing, and spelling of English, Scottish, and American children. None of these studies is in literature *per se*, although research in reading has implications for literature. Congressional interest in English tends to focus on it as a utilitarian subject, but the legislation is broad enough that study of the teaching of literature is not excluded; the curriculum study centers, for example, necessarily devote some of their attention to this part of our work in English. (34)

Within the academy, English may have been accustomed to a position of privilege and authority, but to the federal officials who framed educational policy, the bywords for English at least for the time being, were accommodation and adaptation. Still, the curriculum study centers held out hope for those in literary studies, bearing out the very objections
Goodell raised when he called for further "clarification" of English under the NDEA.

Another area of accommodation was the submission process for research proposals. That is, while English professionals had identified four categories of research and sat on a "hastily gathered" subpanel to screen initial proposals, their input was excluded, ironically enough, from the decision making body that determined which projects received funding (Steinberg 50). Erwin Steinberg, who replaced Hook as Coordinator of Project English, reported in *PMLA* that "the 'real decision[s]' were] made by the Research Advisory Council, made up of people generally characterized rather indiscriminately as 'educational psychologists'" (50). No representative from the field of English sat on this council. The grand narrative concerning composition studies' development generally supports the belief that research established the field. While this generalization may be true, it seems an equally likely observation that our early research agendas were orchestrated by those not in English.

Steinberg, like his predecessor, proved a skillful arbitrator: he acknowledged the dual apprehensions of an audience who felt ill at ease in developing quantitative, statistical investigations but feared that the social scientists might very well appropriate Project English funds for their own research programs given their "scientific" advantage (50). He did, however, see room for cautionary optimism, reporting that the level of cooperation between English professionals and the Office of Education (OE) could boast "impressive gains." First on his list of important breakthroughs was his announcement that "literature is now an acceptable word," suggesting the OE's softening disposition toward proposals that dealt with approaches to teaching literature (50).

A revamped organizational structure established during Steinberg's tenure also gave English professionals a more active role in the review process when the Cooperative Research Branch of the USOE was replaced by a newly established Bureau of Research and Development, also in the Office of Education (1964). The Bureau created five programs to which an incoming proposal might be directed: Basic Research; Curriculum Improvement and Demonstration; Developmental Activities; Small Contract; and Research and Development Center. Project English proposals were then reviewed by individuals from the hosting university who recommended to a Commissioner that the project be approved, rejected, or revised and resubmitted. Proposals were then channeled to one of the five research categories where they were read by
another panel whose membership included at least one English professional. In 1963–64, the Basic Research category consisted of three members of MLA and NCTE, a reading specialist, and a psychologist (51). The Research Advisory Council still retained the final vote of approval for all funded projects, but it gradually assumed a less hands on, more supervisory position.

In the succeeding years, USOE did indeed accord English more control over Project English operations, and in October 1964, President Lyndon Johnson and Congress extended the NDEA for another three years. Not only that, Johnson amended the bill, directly incorporating reading, English and other elementary and secondary school subjects as additional recipients. For recognition of NCTE’s role in extending the NDEA legislation to include English, Kitzhaber, then President, and James Squire, Executive Secretary, were invited to witness the bill signing by President Johnson (Jewett 583). Title XI of the amended NDEA added provisions for the purchase of educational materials and equipment and for the creation of short-term institutes for advanced study at various colleges and universities (Shugrue 1). As originally conceived, Project English provided a multifaceted structure that addressed discrete quantitative research, curricular development, experimental testing of new pedagogical methods, and forums to establish ongoing research agendas. The Summer Institutes, as they came to be called, were often lead by prominent figures in rhetoric and composition and afforded English teachers at all levels a means to keep abreast of trends in the field and fostered new forms of research and scholarship. From the vantage of their defense-minded government sponsor, the Institutes provided a kind of “reserves training,” improving the teaching qualifications of participants through specialized programs and deploying new materials to instructors on the front lines of the nation’s classrooms.

The full impact of Project English—its “basic” experimental studies and curricular or “applied” counterparts—constituted then a considerable research initiative. To keep researchers apprised of ongoing developments, the Office of Education created the Project English Newsletter (PEN) which identified new grant and curriculum center recipients, cited capsule reviews of ongoing research projects and conferences, and published bulletins on completed research. The incorporation of any new form of inquiry into an existing system brings with it the prospect of new knowledge. Such optimism is often tempered by skepticism, hesitancy, or outright opposition by those who point to the shortcomings of the new methods. As we have seen, the excerpts from Hook
and Steinberg suggest that the first two Project English Coordinators exercised a strategic diplomacy to convince English studies members of the efficacy of an alliance with the government and the quantitative research methods they endorsed. By the time English studies was incorporated into the NDEA, research on writing under Project English had begun to carve out a community for itself. That community would not only be sustainable, but would become richly diversified in the decades to come.

The NDEA, Project English, and Beyond

The findings of the Project English research studies, no matter how tentative, offered a challenge future composition researchers rose to meet. By the decade’s close, researchers such as Janet Emig would begin to question and move beyond the work of their NDEA predecessors. D. Gordon Rohman and Albert Wlecke’s Project English study “Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formation in Writing” (1964) coined the term “pre-writing” to describe a preparatory first stage in a sequential process. Though Emig shared Rohman and Wlecke’s assumption that writing is a “process,” her 1969 dissertation, “Components of the Composing Process Among Twelfth-Grader Writers,” redefined composing as a more recursive, less accretive activity. Employing case study and talking aloud protocol methods to approximate students’ internal composing operations, Emig ventured into virtually untried methodological territory. While the editors of Research in Written Composition suggested the “probable values” of the case study method for exploring the psychological dimension of writing, none of the five “most soundly based studies” they cited employed it (1).

Today, research in composition has fostered investigations that have exceeded the parameters set by the NDEA and Project English. We have followed the counsel of those who called for interdisciplinary collaboration. And while quantitative research continues to thrive, a new generation of scholars has endorsed qualitative methodologies with vigor, exploring sites of inquiry within and beyond the academy. Our methodological pluralism, the rise of feminist research methods, and new research questions have fostered an impressive body of knowledge to complement empirical inquiry.

My aim in these pages has been to reanimate the general history of early empirical research, attending to how the federal government’s push for education reform affected the form and content of early composition research. A related goal has been to realize the economic, rhetorical, and
political consequences of that relationship. On the one hand, federal subsidy for research on writing provided financial support outside the academy that few educational institutions or departments could have sustained independently. It also established a structure for collaboration across disciplines and the distribution of knowledge to the larger population of educators. Compositionists took an important step toward disciplinarity as writing teachers turned their attention to the conditions, behaviors, and dimensions of producing written discourse. At the same time, English educators’ alliance with the federal government brought its own set of constraints and obligations, influencing the form and subject matter of scholarly inquiry and imposing in less-than-subtle ways a decidedly pragmatic directive for researchers. Government agencies wanted well-crafted project designs and demonstrable results that promoted educational excellence and democratic ideals, not enrichment programs founded on principles of liberal humanism.

By seeing historical events as a dynamic interplay of resistance and persuasion among groups of varied power, we are able to recognize and appreciate the competing interests that inform an historical moment. These interests become major players in a dramatic field rather than static, subtly-shaded backdrops. Reading and constructing histories as a rhetoric of negotiation makes a space for elements often overlooked in received narratives and raises questions about how more localized forums engaged issues of economic, rhetorical, and political consequence. While this essay has investigated the factors influencing the creation of composition’s research community, what remains most valuable about a rhetoric of negotiation is its appeal as a means to critique current issues—the evolving role of technology in literacy studies, the restructuring of English studies within the academy, the position of higher education in corporate and global economies—dynamic sites that might well comprise the histories we have yet to write. 21

University of Dayton
Dayton, Ohio

Notes

1. Initially, federal assistance for colleges and universities was solicited by the country’s lawmakers on democratic grounds to ensure that each state’s citizenry had equal access to institutions of higher learning. Theodore Rawson Crane’s anthology of public documents, The Colleges and the Public, 1787–1862 charts the development of higher education in America. Of particular note
is Jonathan Baldwin Turner's "Plan for an Industrial University, for the State of Illinois" (172–89) and its 1862 successor "The Morrill Act" (190–94). Over the years, however, government involvement took a more self-interested turn as federal monies—particularly funds earmarked for scientific research—were granted to universities with increasingly more strings, strings often tied to the government's national and foreign policies. For an overview of the history of American education, see Gutek. Sidney Tiedt's *The Role of the Federal Government in Education* examines key education legislation in America with particular attention to the 1960s and 1970s. *Congress and the Nation* reviews legislation passed from 1945-1964.

2. English was not the only discipline to argue for inclusion under the NDEA. Testimony from a number of constituencies lobbied successfully for physical fitness while Merrill F. Hartshorn, Executive Secretary for the National Council for the Social Studies, failed to garner support for history under H.R. 6774 (*Hearings Before the General Subcommittee* 437–40).

3. A number of historians have explored the professionalization of composition studies. In addition to the work of North and Berlin, see Miller; Connors; McQuade; and Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelts.

4. Peter Dow calls the belief that Sputnik launched the educational reform movement a "prevailing myth" (23). Dow argues that post WWII educational reforms predated Sputnik by at least a decade since a number of reform initiatives were well in place by the mid-1950s (10–23).

5. Senator Wayne Morse displayed active engagement regarding the federal government's relationship to education. Before testimony on the NDEA began in May, Morse requested a report entitled, *Operation of the National Defense Education Act and Proposals for its Amendment and Extensions*. This document identifies federal and nongovernmental agencies associated with the legislation, a digest of periodical literature on the NDEA, and issues of potential dispute. His *The Historic and Current Federal Role in Education*, published in August of 1961, offers close legislative summaries of the NDEA years.

6. The NSF was instituted in 1950 by an act of Congress to oversee research and training in mathematical and scientific areas. The NSF gradually increased the range of its financial support throughout the 1950s to include the Physical Science Study Committee (1956), the School Mathematics Study Group (1958), and the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (1958). By the 1960s, the NSF had joined with the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to support new subsidiary programs and to expand its curricular interests to include social science (Dow 25–27).

7. A "clean" bill is essentially a revised document. When a committee wants substantive changes made to an original bill, the "new" measure is introduced as a "clean bill" and assigned a new number. It returns to committee, which then "reports it to the floor for further consideration" (www.senate.gov/reference/glossary).

8. The Language Institutes, established under Title VI of the original NDEA,
were summer enrichment programs for elementary and secondary teachers of foreign languages. English educators wanted to be included under Title III (allowing for curricular and classroom expansion) as well as Title VI to "upgrad[e] the competency of teachers of English" (Hearings before the Subcommittee on Education 65).

9. Senator Goldwater was not as dismissive of English as his statement might suggest. In his individual statement published at the conclusion of NDEA Senate Report 652, Goldwater makes clear that what he opposes is the inequity of allocations under the various Titles of S. 2345. The bill, for example, would allow private and nonprofit elementary and secondary schools funding for physical fitness but not for English; public elementary and secondary schools, however, were granted monies for both. Goldwater criticized the lack of evidence marshaled to justify the discrepancy. Some weakly claimed that funding the construction of English classrooms violated the first amendment, the separation of church and state, but Goldwater pointed to a history of federal support for religious and nonprofit private schools (177–78). On the debates concerning NDEA funding for nonprofit private institutions, see Kizer.

10. In the 1961 NCTE Annual Report, President Allen summarized his experience as a witness before the Senate and House. Despite Congressional support for English, it was, in his words, "already becoming clear that the introduction of issues quite irrelevant to English was likely to thwart our hopes" (A–2).


12. In a report as Chairman of the Committee on the State of Knowledge About Composition, Braddock announced that the committee had been awarded a grant in the amount of $13,345 from the USOE. They also received a supplemental allocation of $4,397 from the University of Iowa to finance completion of the project (NCTE 1962 Annual Report C–5).

13. In addition to the Committee on the State of Knowledge about Composition, the NCTE 1963 Annual Report contains yearly reviews from the following: the Committee on Teaching Writing in Grades Four through Eight; the Committee on the Composing Process, and the Committee on a List of Composition Situations (C 8–9).

14. For the purposes of her report, Rosenblatt defines applied research as the activity of evaluating actual teaching techniques and the effectiveness of various classroom procedures or curriculum arrangements (11). Basic research refers to the construction of a hypothesis about some aspect of English teaching, or, in her words, "'basic' implies 'pure' research, free of any concern for future applicability" (11).

15. See Budd and Gunderson.

16. Albert Kitzhaber, one of the original members of the proposal screening committee, echoes Steinberg's complaint, noting, "Some research projects were
approved—but often not the ones we on the screening committee had recom-
mended” (137). Kitzhaber also recalls the overall poor quality of the initial
research proposals. His assessment illustrates composition’s early attempts to
negotiate the “proper” forms and content of well-designed research agendas
while raising questions about the direction composition research might have
taken had English committee members been more empowered and its researchers
more proficient in scientific discourse conventions.

17. Walker Gibson, while Director of Freshman English at New York
University, headed one of the Summer Institutes at NYU in 1965 (Memo to
George Winchester Stone). Richard Larson, former Director of Composition at
the University of Hawaii, assumed directorship of his third NDEA Institute in
1967 (317). The NDEA Summer Institutes should not be confused with the
Summer Institutes initiated by the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB)
in the summer of 1962. Their primary aim was to improve the teaching of English
at the secondary level, especially for college-bound students through better
preparation of high school teachers, the creation of teaching materials, and
increased involvement of university faculties in teacher training. But the CEEB
had an ulterior motive too: they hoped the success of their venture would
persuade other foundations (and the federal government) of the feasibility of
underwriting future Institutes (Gerber 9–10).

18. The following sampling reflects some of the research investigations
sponsored by Project English: The Correlation of Awareness of Structural
Relations in English and Ability in Written Composition (Roy C. O’Donnell,
Cooperative Research Project No. 1524, Mount Olive Junior College 1963); The
Effect of Practice and Evaluation in Improvement in Written Composition
(Joseph T. Sutton and Eliot D. Allen, Cooperative Research Project No. 1993,
Stetson University 1964); and Effects of Frequency of Writing and Intensity of
Teacher Evaluation Upon High School Students’ Performance in Written
Composition (Dwight L. Burton and Lois V. Arnold, Cooperative Research
Project No. 1523, Florida State University 1963).

19. In its first issue, PEN announced the creation of three curriculum study
centers: Carnegie Institute of Technology ($220,000) proposed to study English
for the “college-bound” in grades 10–12; Northwestern University ($250,000)
launched a 5-year examination of composition in grades 7–14; and the University
of Nebraska expected to focus on a program in composition for grades 3–13
(1.2). Each facility was required to submit yearly progress reports. As might be
expected, several institutions refined their emphases, often by limiting the range
of their study to exclude college writing. PEN’s publication record was short-
lived, producing only 6 issues. In that time, however, it provided readers with an
account of awards for various research studies and a venue for tracing the
unfolding research agenda of our emerging discipline. In its second issue, it was
reported that J.E. Tohtz and Gerhard Lang of Fairleigh Dickinson University
received $33,321 to compare the effects of out-of-class programmed instruction
and conventional assignments in teaching expository use of the English language
The effects of generative grammar upon language complexity was the subject of Frank Zidonis and Donald Bateman’s work at Ohio State University for which they received $31,174 (2.2).

20. The five studies canvased both British and Canadian researchers and spanned three decades. Roland J. Harris’s “An Experimental Inquiry into the Functions and Value of Formal Grammar in the Teaching of English, with Special Reference to the Teaching of Correct English to Children Ages Twelve to Fourteen” (1962) was completed at the University of London; Earl W. Buxton’s “An Experiment to Test the Effects of Writing Frequency and Guided Practice Upon Students’ Skill in Written Expression” (1958) was conducted at the University of Alberta. Research by Doris V. Smith, “Class Size in High School English: Methods and Results,” was done in 1931. Gerald Kincaid’s “Some Factors Affecting Variations in the Quality of Students’ Writing” (1953) was an unpublished dissertation while Samuel Becker produced Communication Skills: An Experiment in Instructional Methods (1958).

21. I have several individuals to thank for their thoughtful readings and useful recommendations in the preparation of this text: Brian Conniff, Jane Detweiler, M. Therese Lysaught, Rebecca Potter, Elizabeth Wardle, Betty R. Youngkin, and the JAC reviewers. Not to be forgotten are the librarians at Ohio State University, the University of Dayton, and the University of Louisville Law Library.

Works Cited


Gibson, Walker. Memo to George Winchester Stone. 9 September 1965.


