Upacking Assumptions, Providing Context:  
A Response to Marc Bousquet

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As a composition and rhetoric scholar, a college writing teacher, and a writing program administrator, I can agree with some of the basic points made by Marc Bousquet in his essay, "Composition as Management Science: Toward a University without a WPA": the material conditions of many college teachers of composition are unsatisfactory, and there needs to be some fundamental changes in the system. The deplorable labor conditions for those teaching first-year composition have been well documented, lamented, and fought against since the late nineteenth century (see, for example Brereton, Connors, Crowley, Ede). Changing the system, although not necessarily in the same way as Bousquet suggests, has been discussed and even tried for just as many years, as Fred Newton Scott’s career illustrates (Stewart and Stewart) and other scholars discuss (for example, Crowley; O’Neill, Crow and Burton; Sledd). I can also agree with the idea of a university without a writing program administrator, if by WPA Bousquet means what Sledd and others describe as “boss compositionists.” I can even acknowledge (and sometimes agree with) the legitimacy of many aspects of Bousquet’s critique of the “heroic WPA” and his use of Marxism and labor theory. However, Bousquet’s essay finally leaves me unconvinced (and troubled) because it is based on contestable—even erroneous—assumptions about the field of composition and rhetoric, it inadequately represents the discourse of composition and rhetoric and the field, and it fails to address the historical and contemporary contexts that have created the current
conditions for many writing programs, WPAs, and composition instructors.

Overall, Bousquet bases his argument on assumptions that are either contested or just wrong. To assume that because the Porter et al. essay won the Braddock Award means that it is somehow represents the entire field of composition and rhetoric is a misreading. As Lisa Ede explains in her introductory essay in *On Writing Research: The Braddock Essays, 1975-1998*, it is important “to acknowledge the element of serendipity in the decision-making process that results in a CCCC appointed committee recognizing one essay (and not another)” and that each essay “narrates a particular moment in the development of composition studies as a discipline—but the significance of that moment is multiple and overdetermined . . . and thus not subject to a single or univocal reading” (4). While she recognizes that receiving the Braddock confers some importance, she cautions against placing too much value on it. In fact, Ede even questions the significance of the Braddock given the working conditions of those actually teaching composition (5). However, in many ways, Bousquet’s critique does exactly what Ede advises against. He positions the Porter et al. essay as representative of the discourse of composition and rhetoric instead of seeing it as one instance, one position, that has been recognized by peers as noteworthy. And while he attempts to put the Porter et al. essay in conversation with other texts from the literature in composition and rhetoric, he represents only a small sliver of the work that addresses writing program administration and labor conditions. Ede even suggests reading the Braddock essays against other key texts—such as the CCCC program, the CCCC Chair’s Address—to “call attention to [the Braddock essays] situatedness as textual and professional artifacts while also providing opportunities for rereading the development of composition as a discipline” (23). Bousquet’s reading of one Braddock winner and a handful of selected texts is a misrepresentation of the discourse of the field. Yes, a part of composition and rhetoric is concerned with program administration and management (and, as Ede and others show, this has been a longstanding interest), but that does not represent the variety and depth of the scholarship produced under the rubric of composition and rhetoric.

Bousquet makes another problematic assumption by locating rhetoric and composition in English studies. Not everyone agrees on where the field belongs, with many composition and rhetoric scholars challenging the idea recently (see O’Neill, Burton and Crow for several examples and discussions). Although most writing programs seem to be located in

*Response Essays*
English departments, this is merely an "historical accident," according to Louise Phelps, a composition and rhetoric scholar and founding chair of Syracuse University’s Writing Program (qtd. in O’Neill and Schendel 204). After all, as Janet Atwill explains, composition and rhetoric is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing from education, history, philosophy, linguistics, and English (644). To her list, I would add many other fields, such as communication, sociology, and anthropology. In addition, the desire to locate composition and rhetoric outside of English departments is far from a new or radical idea: Fred Newton Scott formed an independent department of rhetoric at the University of Michigan in 1903, many independent departments and programs exist today, and some writing programs are even located in departments other than English. The location of composition and rhetoric within universities and English departments is more often aligned with politics and power than disciplinary theory: upper administrators, as well as English department chairs and tenured faculty, desire to control the composition program, its courses, and its instructors for their own ends. (For example, see Anson’s discussion about the takeover of the writing program by the English Department at the University of Minnesota; and Stewart and Stewart’s account of the loss of Michigan’s Rhetoric Department.)

While Bousquet seems to be operating from an assumption that composition and rhetoric is part of English studies, he only holds composition and rhetoric professionals—specifically folks like Richard Miller, Joseph Harris, and James Porter and his coauthors—responsible for working conditions and potential solutions. In fact, he blames the entire field of composition and rhetoric for promoting a “management science.” By failing to understand the way composition and rhetoric is most often positioned in universities and English departments, Bousquet neglects a very important part of the issue. Porter et al. even address this in their essay, for example when discussing Sullivan and Porter’s Professional Writing Lab (633-34). But Bousquet fails to engage in the discussion of how English departments, their administrators, and the tenured literary scholars contribute to the exploitation of writing instructors. Bousquet places all the blame and all the responsibility on composition and rhetoric instead of looking at the positioning of the discipline of composition and rhetoric, its scholars, and its courses, by literary scholars, English departments, and institutions. By not acknowledging the roles of other fields and professionals—other lower level “managers,” administrators, and tenured faculty—that have created and perpetuated the exploitative labor conditions associated with composition, he fails to
understand how the working conditions developed and why they have continued. If Bousquet demonstrated a better understanding of the history and positioning of composition and rhetoric in the American university, he would understand why the labor issues are intimately connected to the concerns about disciplinarity. Locating the exploitation of labor associated with first-year writing instruction in practices of the last thirty years is shortsighted. The same practices—maybe not to the same extent as today—were instituted at the very time that formal writing instruction in English became widespread in colleges and universities (see, for example, Brereton; Connors). The same prejudices against composition and rhetoric scholarship and writing instruction that exist today were also present in the early 1900s (Stewart and Stewart; Brereton; Connors).

Because of the ongoing prejudices against composition, Bousquet is wrong to assume that composition and rhetoric scholars and WPAs are to blame for the current situation. Bousquet doesn't acknowledge that tenured faculty in English who are not composition and rhetoric scholars or professionals (in other words, those more like him) benefit from the exploitation of composition in very real, material ways. And they have been enjoying these benefits—such as support for their graduate students, freedom from the labor-intensive teaching of writing instruction, and more opportunities to teach graduate seminars—for a long time. The tradition of labor in first-year composition courses includes awarding adjunct positions to graduate students, specifically those in literary studies, critical theory, and cultural studies. While graduate students in composition and rhetoric are also included in the contingent labor pool, their position is fundamentally different from students in other disciplines who only teach writing to support their studies. For composition and rhetoric students, graduate teaching assistantships are more akin to internships, apprenticeships or residencies because what they are teaching is closely aligned with what they are studying. Assistantships, in fact, are a valuable part of their graduate education (although I agree that in many institutions, working conditions and compensation needs to be improved). However, graduate students do not need to be teaching assistants or adjunct instructors: they can—and many do—pursue degrees without the benefit of assistantships or without jobs as adjunct instructors.

Well-documented practice of overproducing PhDs in English for the jobs available—not to mention the enculturation many of the students receive while in graduate school—allows the exploitation of labor to
continue. Many of those PhDs in the contingent labor pool are not those who have earned doctorates in composition but rather those with specialties in literary studies and critical theory. Many can’t find viable jobs in their preferred fields, so they work as adjunct faculty teaching composition as they continue to hope for a break. After studying trends in graduate education and job advertisements, Gail Stygall argues that there are not enough composition and rhetoric doctorates produced to fill the available positions, leading her to conclude that every year many jobs advertised as composition positions are filled by those with other specialties. (While Bousquet might argue that the problem is not with the production of doctorates but in the employment practices of the university, I see that as ultimately a futile and ineffective response to the lived realities of the people involved in the system.)

Without addressing the overt and tacit role that English departments and their faculty (most of whom are not composition and rhetoric scholars or WPAs) have played in composition labor practices, Bousquet’s argument is not only unconvincing but inaccurate. His critique of work by Porter et al., Murphy, Harris, and others ignores the role that the discipline of literary studies and its faculty have played in the positioning of composition, and this longstanding, complex relationship is not going to be remedied necessarily by joining the organized academic labor movement. At times, Bousquet seems like he might make this connection when he concludes that compositionists’ concern over disciplinary status cannot be separated from its labor problems (502, 518) but again, he fails to recognize the origins of composition in the academy and the role of English departments and literary studies faculty in maintaining the system. Bousquet also neglects to mention the well-documented contentious relationship between composition and literary studies (see Enos and Bishop for examples). Failure to acknowledge the deep and divisive relationship between these two areas demonstrates a failure to understand the work of WPAs, writing instructors, and composition scholars as well as the scholarship and professional realities of the field. To assume that the ongoing antagonism between these very different areas of study is not a factor illustrates to me that Bousquet not only hasn’t fairly represented the situation but doesn’t understand the issues. The elitist attitude of literary scholars to composition teaching, writing programs, and composition and rhetoric research has had profound effects on not only the field but working conditions and the material reality of many composition and rhetoric scholars (whether WPAs or not). Bousquet, after all, is not a composition and rhetoric scholar: he identifies himself as a cultural
Response Essays

studies scholar in this essay (512) and his profile on the University of Louisville English department Web site identifies him as a literary scholar who is also interested in academic workplace issues. There is no mention of composition and rhetoric and nothing to indicate that he has studied the field.

As a literary scholar, Bousquet maintains his outsider stance throughout most of the essay. For example, he distances himself from the field in his critique of the Porter et al. essay. He wonders "what has gone on in rhetoric and composition discourse" that has led to the essay receiving "the disciplinary equivalent of a standing ovation" (495), and he also critiques the field’s concern with its disciplinary status (502). The message to the reader seems to be that clearly Bousquet wouldn’t be guilty of these acts, and he isn’t part of those who would. In fact, his attitude toward composition and rhetoric is nothing new—literary scholars have been denigrating the study of composition and rhetoric for more than a century (Enos; Stewart and Stewart.) Evidently, Bousquet’s limited survey is going to disclose the “problem” with the discipline of composition and rhetoric and its discourse and tell us how to remedy it. Although not a composition and rhetoric specialist, he is a former adjunct instructor of writing and an English department faculty member, so he is not really an outsider. As a participating member of the discipline of literary studies, he as complicit with the exploitative labor system of composition and rhetoric as those he critiques (and some of us would even argue as a non-composition and rhetoric scholar he is even more responsible having benefited even more than composition and rhetoric folks). He speaks from a certain position with particular disciplinary biases having experienced the system as other than a composition and rhetoric scholar. Yet, he is able to identify the “core subjectivity of the discipline of rhetoric and composition” (508). While the this maybe arguably “the core subjectivity” of writing program administration, his assertions—backed up by a very limited survey of the literature—are not enough to convince me that this is an accurate portrait of the entire field. Bousquet not only feels entitled to critique the entire field of composition and rhetoric—which he misrepresents—but he also feels entitled to speak for composition and rhetoric scholars and writing instructors and tell us what we want and how to get it.

Although Bousquet seems to feel that he can adequately represent the desires and positions of composition and rhetoric, Bousquet does not address one of the primary long term desires of the field: providing effective instruction in writing for undergraduate students. He ignores
this issue and assumes that joining the labor movement will address all of our concerns. Organized labor doesn’t ensure the quality of the work that labor produces. To assume that organizing contingent faculty—whether adjuncts or graduate students—will translate into writing courses that are theoretically informed and effectively taught is naive. To think that eliminating the WPA will be desirable is similarly mistaken. The majority of instructors (whether tenured faculty members, graduate students, or contingent faculty) teaching composition and other undergraduate writing courses are not specialists in composition and rhetoric. They may have received on-the-job training—most likely conducted by a WPA—or taken one required seminar/practicum in teaching college writing but that doesn’t make them specialists, and it doesn’t mean they have a scholarly interest in the field or that they participate in the scholarly community. Even when writing courses are taught by full-time faculty, a WPA can play an important role in professional and curricular development, especially in large programs, so that there is some consistency (not uniformity) across sections (as other departments with a large number of sections of a single course). And while many English instructors might be very effective writing teachers, many aren’t doing what their graduate education prepared them to do. In fact, many contingent faculty are busy trying to finish their dissertations, writing another essay on a literary or cultural studies topic, or publishing another book of poetry in an attempt to secure a tenure track job in their own specialty, leaving the laborious task of teaching writing to others.

While Bousquet acknowledges the usefulness of institutional critique and participation in public policy advocated by Porter, et al., Harris, and others, he derides their “pragmatism” as being complicit in the exploitative system. Instead, Bousquet calls for the field to join the organized academic labor movement which “has been struggling, often effectively, for decades” (518). But WPAs and composition and rhetoric have been struggling with the issues for over a hundred years. Calling composition to join the academic labor movement is an unsatisfying and simplistic response to a situation that is in essence more than an issue of labor. Because he doesn’t survey the field adequately, Bousquet does not acknowledge the long tradition and commitment to improving labor conditions that the field has. He looks at only one of the field’s responses to the labor problem that plagues undergraduate writing instruction, and he contrasts it with what he sees as the one and only acceptable option. But composition scholars and WPAs have been discussing several different possible approaches. For example, many composition scholars...
believe that a more effective way to address the exploitation of this contingent labor would be to eliminate first-year composition as a universal requirement (see, for example, Crowley). Some are calling for a reform in graduate education in composition and rhetoric as well as English studies (for an example, see Marback; Miller et al.; North). Some echo Bousquet's support of the labor movement, although their position isn't completely aligned with his. For example, James Sledd, advocates unions but also the abolition of tenure (an institutional practice that Bousquet does not critique but rather endorses):

Instead of the compositionist's struggle for upward mobility in the pecking order, I propose 1) a meltdown of academia's detestable frozen hierarchies by the abolition of rank and tenure, 2) the formation of militant, inclusive unions of faculty with staff to battle swarming administrators in corporatized education, and 3) the serious teaching of the general-purpose prose that our students need and our colleagues want. (Sledd 11)

And some, who also agree that we should support the labor movement, acknowledge the particular history and experience of composition and rhetoric in the American university. As Donna Strickland, who discusses the influence of management science in writing programs during the early twentieth century, contends, "Who teaches composition is inextricably linked to why composition remains a required course and what the university community expects to be taught in the course. The contingent status of composition teachers is thus more than a labor issue . . .." (76). Robert Samuels explains that "we need a national movement that would defend the particular cultural knowledge, experience, expertise, and degrees defining the professional status of compositionists" (350). Samuels continues, contending that this movement would have to counteract the fact that the growing interest in political and economic theory in the university has most often been coupled with the growing exploitation of educational workers. I am not arguing that we should get rid of theory or theorists; rather, we should stop using theory as a virtual way of escaping our own real practices. (350-51)

Bousquet, in contrast, argues for organized labor only; he doesn't address issues of qualifications and expertise. He doesn't include the long and rich debates that have been carried on in composition and rhetoric for many years. Without this kind of contextualization, I'm not convinced
Bousquet understands the issues or has the same interests as composition and rhetoric. I really don’t believe that we can assume that English department faculty as a whole (not to mention their graduate students or former graduate students occupying the contingent labor force) are going to demonstrate enough fairness and genuine concern to make the difficult decisions necessary to improve labor conditions associated with undergraduate writing instruction while ensuring the quality of this instruction because these issues affect their own professional, lived realities. Besides, the primary aim of organized labor is to improve working conditions for laborers, not to improve the quality of their labor. It doesn’t follow that the field of composition and rhetoric nor the quality of undergraduate writing will be maintained or improved by joining the academic labor movement. It might be, but it might not be. However, surveying the history of composition as a teaching subject in American universities makes me skeptical that Bousquet’s position will enact positive change for composition and rhetoric scholars, the undergraduate writing curriculum, or the field.

So while I can find common cause with Bousquet—just as he does with Porter et al.—I am left unpersuaded. He offers his vision—a vision formed and informed by literary and cultural studies not the study of writing—of composition and rhetoric: “In my view, composition’s best chance to contribute to a better world and to achieve disciplinary status depend on learning to write as colleagues among colleagues—a condition predicated on working toward a university without a WPA” (518). Bousquet articulates what he thinks composition and rhetoric scholars desire: “Perhaps what professional compositionists really want is to lay down the ‘requirement’ to serve as WPA instead and to become a colleague among colleagues?” But, perhaps, we want other things. Perhaps, we want different colleagues. Perhaps we want English departments and English studies to change. Perhaps, we want to stop being told by literary scholars what we should be doing. Perhaps, Bousquet can’t even imagine what we want.

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Notes

1. I don’t think Sledd’s (as well as others’ in composition and rhetoric) use of the metaphor of slavery and the language of slavery is justifiable. While it is rhetorically effective in communicating the conditions and status of writing instructors and programs, it devalues the very real system of slavery that existed
in the southern United States and mocks the suffering of the enslaved people and their legacy. I use it here because it has become a commonplace in the field.

2. Throughout this essay I use composition and rhetoric scholars to mean those whose primary graduate education and or primary scholarly and teaching interests are in composition and rhetoric. This includes more than WPAs but doesn’t necessarily include all those who are teaching composition and rhetoric courses (nor all those serving as WPAs). I am not always sure how Bousquet defines compositionists, professional compositionists or composition and rhetoric scholars or the field. While he critiques the field for this very ambiguity, he doesn’t clarify his own use of terms. With the development and growth of the field, especially in terms of graduate programs and undergraduate departments, the distinction between some one teaching first-year composition and someone who is a scholar in composition and rhetoric is not only obvious but also important. In addition, many composition and rhetoric scholars are not defined as WPAs and their is many areas of study that have nothing to do with management science.

3. Atwill’s response is in the same issue of JAC as Bousquet’s although she is responding to Samuels’ essay in an earlier issue. Ironically, her response speaks to Bousquet’s because it not only addresses some of his critiques of the Porter et al. article, it also explains what constitutes the field of composition and rhetoric which is also relevant to Bousquet’s essay.

4. Some adjunct faculty, as Eileen Schell explains, are content to be part-time instructors. Many also are excellent teachers and colleagues. My point is not to question the performance or ability of contingent laborers, but rather to explain that most have not initially chosen to specialize as composition and rhetoric instructors or scholars.

5. Of course, I consider organized labor as a very pragmatic response although Bousquet seems to think it doesn’t fit in this category. He contrasts his proposed solution—join the labor movement—with the pragmatic and unsatisfactory proposals of others.

Works Cited


A Discipline Where Only Management Gets Tenure?

Marc Bousquet

As I write this in the first week of March 2003, five thousand of Yale's employees have walked off the job together in a planned and deliberate show of solidarity across job descriptions—professional metaphysicians in solidarity with plumbers, pipefitters, software engineers, and administrative assistants. It represents the latest act in a collaboration well into its second decade between three intelligent, activist, unions, all of whom have different demands that they hope to realize in the action (pension for one, salary for another, recognition to begin the bargaining process for another), but who collectively realize that their power comes from understanding that their interests are united even where their demands are diverse. What these workers understand is that their "community of interest" is with each other, while their employer—in its own community of interest including other university employers such as Columbia, Brown, and Penn—continues to hope that a Bush-packed National Labor Relations Board might revoke the right of graduate employees to unionize.