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Chapter Thirteen

"You Both Looked the Same to Me"
Collaboration as Subversion

Amy Goodburn and Carrie Shively Leverenz

This story is about collaboration and its role in preparing graduate students in rhetoric and composition to be professionals. It is our story of how we came to collaborate in the dissertation stage and, simultaneously, in our searches for tenure-track jobs and (only a little later) in our scholarly activities. In particular, this story is about the complications of collaborating within academic institutions—as graduate students and then as untenured faculty—given the intractable values associated with those institutions, most obviously, the privileging of individual accomplishment and the valorization of competition resulting in a zero-sum game of academic success. Although the dominance of social constructionist theories of knowledge-production that suffused our graduate training in the early 1990s led us to view collaboration as an obvious and necessary good, our subsequent experiences suggest that the revolution has not moved very far out of our old neighborhood. We want to go beyond an idyllic portrayal of collaboration in graduate programs to consider how collaborative practices shape professional identities and the consequences of these identities when graduate students move into other departmental cultures. Ultimately, we argue that the choice to collaborate within an institution that inhibits or devalues such collaboration must be made in full awareness of the risks as well as the potential benefits.

While the heyday of research and theorizing about social constructionism now appears to be over, one lasting benefit of that work was its uncovering of the deeply rooted historical and philosophical resistance to collaboration. Kurt Spellmeyer (1998) describes the culture of English departments as highly stratified and competitive bureaucracies where "Learning how to be an English studies professional requires the beginner to emulate those who have 'made it' … from the standpoint of the individual career" (169). Scholars such as Patricia A. Sullivan (1994) and Elizabeth Ervin and Dana L. Fox (1994) have illuminated how this construct

of the independent scholar devalues collaborative activity. In *Lifting a Ton of Feathers* Paula J. Caplan (1995) lists as one myth about academia that "people's search for knowledge is done cooperatively and not competitively, and that this cooperation is rewarded" (53). The culture itself, then, helps account for the difficulty in providing spaces for collaborative work despite the calls for its general value.

The question of how to prepare graduate students for academic jobs has received a great deal of attention recently, primarily because of the dismal job market for English PhDs.[1] Although graduate students with concentrations in rhetoric and composition continue to fare better than their counterparts, many of the available jobs include heavy administrative responsibilities or high teaching loads. In "Present Perfect and Future Imperfect," Scott L. Miller, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Bennis Blue, and Deneen M. Shepherd (1997) report the results of a national 1993 survey of graduate students in rhetoric and composition. An important finding is that while more than 80 percent of the graduate students surveyed said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their graduate programs, most also admitted that they knew little about what their futures would look like. These researchers argue that "programs need to be (more) accountable for the 'future perfect tense'[9] of graduate students" (400), noting that "the real question is how programs can enact both needs—to be honest and overt about professional realities and to create and maintain stimulating, enriching, and welcoming places in which new scholars can develop" (399).

Much of the recent attention on professionalizing graduate students in rhetoric and composition has focused on preparing them for administrative responsibilities (Pemberton 1993; Long, Holberg, and Taylor 1996)—one area where, because of the complexity of the task, collaboration is encouraged, even required. (A double issue of the journal *Writing Program Administration* was devoted to the subject of collaborative writing program administration.) Such collaboration is often portrayed as particularly beneficial to graduate students in developing collegiality, experience in decision making, and an analysis of the complex relationship between writing programs and institutional cultures (see, for instance, Anson and Rutz 1998). Collaborative administrative work is not without its difficulties, however, in part because it remains within an institution where power is still organized in a strict hierarchy. Eileen Schell (1998a) points out that "the scholarship on collaborative writing program administration … has, for the most part, remained strangely silent about the tensions and conflicts that accompany collaborative leadership efforts, often painting collaborative administration as a Utopian or progressive, non-hierarchical practice" (77). Few scholars address the professional reality of moving from a highly collaborative graduate program to take a job in a more traditional English department that is suspicious of collaborative work.

Past

Our experiences with collaboration began fairly early in our graduate careers, both formal and informal structures shaping our understanding of collaborative practices in graduate school and in academic work in general. Perhaps it's important to mention that we were first colleagues, then friends, that it was our collaborative work in a number of different forums that led to our friendship, with our unintentional but inevitable competition on the job market being the work we did collaboratively that most tested and solidified our personal relationship.

Although we took only one graduate class together, we each had numerous opportunities for collaboration before we began collaborating ourselves. In Carrie's first graduate seminar, students produced an annotated bibliography interwoven with anecdotes about their own gendered writing experiences. All thirteen coauthors shared the excitement of seeing "Gender and Writing: Biblio(bio)graphical Stories" published that year. The following term, Carrie worked with a group of students and her professor to publish a collaborative interview with the author of a book they had read for the course. Similarly, much of Amy's graduate coursework encouraged collaboration. In one seminar, Amy collaborated with peers on a conference paper that analyzed the students' group dynamics in a graduate course. In a literacy seminar within the education department, the class compiled an edited collection of its projects juxtaposed with papers presented by visiting scholars. Amy also worked with the basic writing program to collaboratively author a sourcebook for the program's review.

There were also informal opportunities to collaborate. Our dissertation advisor held meetings with her advisees so that we could present our work in progress and comment on our peers' work. In addition, we both joined a small women's study group that had been meeting for several years. There we discussed readings on our exam lists, practiced for our orals, commented on prospectuses and conference proposals, and provided support during the dissertation and job-hunting phases of our careers. Collaborative work so thoroughly permeated our graduate training that we took it as the norm, at least in rhetoric and composition programs. When the journal *JAC* sought proposals for a special issue on collaboration and change in the academy, the editor was surprised by the number of people from our program who sent proposals. Perhaps this should have been our first inkling that our intensely collaborative graduate experience was not typical.

Not until we began preparing our materials for the job market did we see the possible costs of this collaboration. Responding to each other's job application letters in our dissertation group, we were shocked to find that our letters were strikingly similar, forcing us to realize that prospective employers would compare and choose among us. At that moment, Carrie felt a panicky need to distinguish herself and decided not to use university stationary for her letters. The same thing happened with the red suits. On a collaborative shopping trip, Carrie talked Amy into buying a red suit and the next day bought one in a different style for herself. Then she promptly took it back, thinking it would be too easy for "them" to mix us up, even though we look nothing alike.[2] It was a premonition that ultimately came true, when we ended up having eight MLA interviews and three on-campus interviews with the same institutions. Indeed, a graduate student at the university where Carrie accepted a job later praised her presentation on student response to Toni Morrison—the presentation Amy gave. Another graduate student admitted that after we visited campus, he had voiced equal support for each of us—we seemed the same to him.

In retrospect, it is not surprising that we didn't become conscious of our need to compete until we began preparing our job applications. Until that point, there had been adequate resources to allow both of us to succeed. We both received grants to support our dissertation research. Both of our proposals for the *JAC* special issue on collaboration were accepted. We were both hired as research assistants for the rhetoric and composition program. Perhaps just as important, everyone who had previously completed a PhD in rhetoric and composition from our program had landed a tenure-track position. Although at that point we weren't conscious of a rationale for working together, we both assumed that our collaboration would make us more marketable.

It wasn't until we saw ourselves as prospective employers might that we had to confront some negative consequences of our collaboration. Worse than our worry that we would be seen as "the same" was the fear that they would look only at our differences and inevitably rank us. Our increasing awareness that others were choosing between us had the potential to affect the way we saw ourselves in relation to each other and in relation to the academy. As female graduate students who were the first in our families to go to college, we each fought tremors of self-doubt as we moved from an experience of academe as a wide-open prairie big enough for both of us to a sense that we were climbing a vertical ladder that narrowed as the rungs got higher.

Feminist scholars have recently begun to theorize the impact of competition between academic women. As Evelyn Fox Keller and Helene Moglen (1987) argue in their contribution to *Competition: A Feminist Taboo?*, academic women often have a more difficult time negotiating competition, particularly when they see competition and collaboration as binaries. Keller and Moglen suggest that this dualism prevents women from developing strategies to work through and with competition (34). In the same collection, Helen E. Longino (1987) articulates two very different models of competition. One is that of the race, where differences in ability lead to winners and losers— though everyone generally finishes and runners are often motivated to beat their best time, even if they aren't likely to win. The other image is that of the zero-sum game, exemplified by the game of baseball, where "the rules and structure of the competitive situation itself" means someone has to lose (249). As Longino sees it, the zero-sum game model of competition is based on an

assumption of scarce resources and an ideology of individual ownership, and it is this version of competition that most feminists abhor as a "competitiveness forbidden by ideology." The challenge, then, is to harness the productive power of competition, to allow those with greater experience or skill to spur us to do our best work without losing our ability or desire to work with others rather than only in competition with them.

Though the tension between collaboration and competition is rarely discussed in the literature on graduate student professional development, it's a tension we experienced in graduate school as we worked to maintain a collaborative relationship while operating within an institutional structure forcing us to compete. In fact, choosing to collaborate—to work together, to help each other—was one way we sought to diffuse competitive feelings and to subvert the zero-sum game. As we have come to realize, a system based on the primacy of individual ambition will succeed only as individuals buy into the system. It takes a collaborative effort to change the system, especially when what we want to change are the constraints against collaboration. For us, collaboration meant—and continues to mean—a connection with each other as well as a struggle against the forces that threaten collaborative work.

When the *MLA Job List* was published in October, we identified our "dream jobs" and then agonized over the prospect that one of us would get the job that the other wanted. One way we dealt with these competitive feelings was by talking openly about our searches and by strategically sharing information. (Here *collusion* might seem a more appropriate term than *collaboration.*) For instance, when one of us would get a request for materials and the other wouldn't, we would help each other try to determine how our materials were being read. While our analysis may not have been accurate, pooling information gave us a sense of control over a process that, for the most part, was out of our control.

We again pooled information about the schools we would be interviewing with at MLA. We also decided to share a hotel room at the convention, against the recommendation of our peers, who thought that having to face each other at the end of a day of interviews might prove too stressful (although nothing proved as stressful as driving together in a blizzard to get to the conference in Toronto). One episode in particular illustrates the pain of trying to cooperate in an inevitably competitive venture. When Carrie returned to the hotel room after a day of interviews, she found that an invitation from the University of Nebraska for an on-campus interview had been left at the switchboard. Ecstatic at first, she then realized that she did not know whether the call had been for her or for Amy. When she checked, she found that the message had indeed been left for Amy. Carrie gave Amy the message and then left the room so as to avoid having to listen to Amy make plans for her interview, only to return to her hotel room to discover that although Nebraska had left the message in Amy's name, they were inviting both Amy and Carrie for campus interviews. The academic world was once again (this time somewhat lit-

erally) a wide-open prairie with room for us both. Until we remembered that only one of us could get the job.

The anxiety we felt over competing for the job at the University of Nebraska was connected to how we viewed ourselves as collaborative scholars. Part of the appeal of the Nebraska job stemmed from a recruitment letter sent to both of us before our MLA interview. This letter, signed by all three composition faculty, described their writing program in collaborative terms, emphasized the interconnected nature of teaching, scholarship, and service, and touted the opportunities for collaboration awaiting the person they would hire. As the job search went on, we realized how few jobs offered a potentially collaborative experience—even at places with established rhetoric and composition programs.

Somewhat ironically, our collaboration during the job search was seen by some search committees as a way of playing games with a process that was supposed to be secretive and individualistic (and in the control of the institution, not the job seeker). When we were the two candidates brought to campus for three schools, one school was left without a candidate for that year and ended up closing the search. Some recruitment committee members fumbled awkwardly at our references to our work together, seeming to want to ignore that we knew where the other was interviewing, perhaps so that the illusion of the individualistic competitive game could be maintained. But we not only knew where the other was interviewing, we debriefed each other about how our interviews had gone and gave each other tips on how to prepare for visits that we had already made. When Florida State called to tell Amy that they were offering the job to Carrie, the chair acknowledged, "Of course, you probably already know this." Carrie found out that Amy had received the Nebraska offer from a mutual friend who was baby-sitting while Carrie's husband picked her up at the airport. These moments were painful, but they would have been far more painful if we had not been committed to sharing information and maintaining our friendship. And it certainly helped that we both had early job offers. No doubt our commitment to collaboration would have been more sorely tried if only one of us had a successful job search. Indeed, Keller and Moglen tell a story of two women colleagues whose jobs at a state college involved heavy teaching loads that left them little time for their research. When one was offered a position at a more prestigious institution, her guilt over betraying her friend led her to decline (30).

Once we both signed job contracts, our collaboration entered a different stage. No longer competing against each other, we were competing madly against the clock to finish our dissertations, to move in opposite directions across the country, and to develop research programs. This is the point at which our dissertation writing became most overtly collaborative. What began as an occasional check-in phone call became a daily ritual. We'd report on what we had written, read aloud paragraphs, test out interpretations of data, and listen to alternate interpretations. We shared citations and almost shared a title, when our dissertation director

suggested the same key words to both of us. The phone calls prompted us to re-turn to our computers and solve whatever writing problems we were having. At this point, competition was a help rather than a hindrance—if one of us had been writing well, it spurred the other to get back to the keyboard. If we were in a race to finish, we were both going to cross that line.

It was during this time that Amy noticed a call for proposals for a collection of essays on feminism and composition. Looking forward to our soon-to-be futures as tenure-track faculty, we decided we wanted to have a new project in the works. And so began our first coauthored article. Our daily talking and writing together during the dissertation-writing phase made the prospect of co-authoring an article especially appealing. Not surprisingly, we decided to write about our recent experi-ences as part of a team that collaboratively revised the first-year writing curriculum and TA training program. Collaborating on this essay also enabled us to stay con-nected as friends and to support each other in our efforts toward gaining tenure. It provided a sense of community for us when we did not yet feel a part of the com-munity we were working in. And feeling a part of a community was important—we'd been trained to think so.

Present

Which brings us to our "present tense": our current identities as faculty who con-tinue to collaborate in all facets of our scholarly work. How did the sense of iden-tity we developed through our collaborative professionalization in graduate school connect with, complicate, and contradict our expectations for our faculty lives? How is collaboration viewed by our current institutions? And what do our experi-ences mean for the ways that we mentor graduate students?

At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), there is no official policy about collaboration and how it is evaluated for tenure and promotion. But true to the way the composition program at Nebraska advertised itself, opportunities for collaborative work abound. In Amy's first year, she and a colleague collaboratively designed a syllabus for a first-year writing course and met weekly as "teaching part-ners." The following semester, she and this colleague team-taught the introduction to composition theory and college teaching courses for new teaching assistants. During her first summer, Amy team-taught with three other faculty members in the Nebraska Writing Project. Collaboration is also the model for administration of the composition program— Amy and a colleague serve as co-coordinators of the first-year writing program, and they collaborate with two graduate student assis-tants in this work. Roughly half of Amy's publications are collaboratively authored, and she collaboratively writes with colleagues and graduate students.

While this world seems almost idyllic, Amy often faces the perception that collaboration is a practice wedded to the discipline of composition itself and is not the result of her individual choices as a teacher/scholar. In other words, because

UNL composition faculty collaborate so heavily, there is a sense among some of Amy's colleagues that this is "something that those comp people do." This percep-tion diminishes the extra energy that she and her colleagues expend not only in collaboration but also in providing evidence of its value in an institutional reward system that privileges individual status. Amy finds herself constantly trying to sub-vert institutional structures, such as the grant application that has only one line for a researcher or the Arts and Science form that has no way of valuing team-teaching. This identification of collaboration as an exclusively composition concern also has implications for graduate school programs, where one group of students is likely to be encouraged to collaborate while other students are not. Despite Amy's ongoing collaborative work in every area of intellectual inquiry, collaboration still is not viewed by department colleagues as especially valuable for graduate student professionalization.

Like Amy, Carrie sought opportunities for collaboration when she arrived at Florida State. As director of the reading/writing center, she worked closely with the director of the first-year writing program to train and supervise the 100 gradu-ate teaching assistants who taught in their program, and she regularly collaborated with her graduate assistants to create teachers' guides, run staff meetings, plan re-search, and prepare conference presentations. But though Carrie was praised in her annual evaluations for her ability to work cooperatively, she was also warned to limit her collaboration with colleagues on scholarly work. She knew from discus-sions with other department members that such collaboration was viewed as nep-otism, especially when junior faculty collaborated with senior colleagues (calling into question whether the term *colleague* should really apply when a hierarchical re-lationship is assumed).

Although the official promotion and tenure guidelines at Florida State allow for collaboration, they also make clear that collaboration is acceptable only in some areas of English studies and that the person who collaborates must make special efforts to "seek advice early and often about how the department is perceiving your independent reputation." The guidelines offer this more specific warning:

> While the Department recognizes the value of collaborative projects, we empha-size the importance of establishing an independent reputation. The Department has no guidelines about what proportion of your work should be independently authored, but you are undoubtedly in a better position if you have some clearly definable texts of your own in print (articles and book chapters) when you are considered for tenure.

As Carrie prepared to go up for tenure, she was asked several times by colleagues who supported her case how many of her published articles were singly authored. Given that a colleague whose scholarship was heavily collaborative had been re-cently denied tenure, they had a right to be wary. An additional cause for con-cern was the provost's public declaration that he would make sure that high tenure

standards were applied, and for most faculty in the humanities, high standards means one thing: a singly-authored book (or books) from a well-regarded university press.

So why do we collaborate? Because, to borrow an old expression, you can take the girls out of the collaborative community, but you can't take the collaborative community out of the girls. Those early opportunities shaped our sense of who we are as professionals, as teachers, researchers, administrators, and mentors. Although we have produced and will continue to produce individually authored work, the stimulation we get out of working together—and with others—helps us feel at home in a profession that functions more often like a narrow ladder than like a wide-open plain. Our continuing collaboration also helps us to get things done. Because we want to help advance each other's career as much as our own, we are motivated by our accountability to each other. And the work can go forward even when our administrative loads or teaching loads or family responsibilities demand our immediate attention. One week Carrie does more work on our research project, and the next week Amy does more work. Such an arrangement has been especially important because each of us has had a baby since we've taken our jobs and neither had her tenure clock delayed.

Future

We started this essay by promising to explain how and why we collaborated throughout our graduate training and into our professional careers. But a larger question remains: Should we foster collaborative practices within the graduate programs we're now part of? Given the competitive job market, the hierarchical structure of most departments and universities, and the scarce-resources model of rewards in higher education, do we dare tout the benefits of collaboration? Well, yes, of course. The difference, though, is that we need to articulate clear rationales for scholarly collaboration and, at the same time, let students know that collaboration is still a risky enterprise—one that might mean working harder and publishing more and being asked to spend a chunk of your precious research time Grafting rhetorically savvy justifications for your collaborative work. In spite of these challenges, we believe there are clear philosophical, personal, and political reasons to advocate collaboration throughout graduate training.

First, there is the philosophical argument that language, knowledge-making, and text production are inevitably social and collaborative processes so we might as well make the process explicit rather than hidden. Patricia Sullivan (1994) points to the dissertation in particular as a site of this inevitable collaboration: "The institutional contexts that frame and circumscribe the processes of the writer locate the dissertation in a social context that is fundamentally collaborative. The author of the text literally writes the text *with* others" (25). But since this argument doesn't provide sufficient justification for collaborative work to those outside social con-

structionist circles, especially when done by those who have not yet proven themselves as "independent" scholars, we also want to point out that there are personal benefits to collaborative work. For example, Janine Rider and Esther Broughton (1994) describe how they began their collaboration when they both worked as adjuncts alienated from the rest of the department, their collaboration continuing when they decided to pursue PhDs at a distant university, even though it meant being separated from their families for months at a time. For these women, collaboration gave them the support they needed to forge professional identities and take up academic challenges.

Collaborative work has provided the same kind of support for us and for many who were our peers in graduate school and who have now gone on to academic careers. In one meeting of our graduate student study group, when the subject of quitting graduate school came up, we were surprised to discover that each of us had quit school once, for a myriad of reasons that could be boiled down to the fact that we didn't feel we belonged. Collaboration gave us a way to feel we were making over the academy in our own image—making the place more like a place where we *wanted* to belong.

Rider and Broughton's (1994) collaboration also served as a means of interrogating existing institutional structures when they went so far as to propose coauthoring a dissertation (249). Although their proposal was not successful, it brought to the attention of faculty and students the institutional structures that inhibit collaborative work, a necessary first step in the process of changing those structures. Indeed, Ervin and Fox (1994) see collaboration as a means of political action, a means of taking "responsibility for the structures of our own institutions, structures that determine our professional identities and activities" (54). It is these same structures that we continue to struggle to transform.

So we say again, yes, we should encourage graduate students to collaborate, but we hope also to make students aware that the kind of collaboration we advocate is that which is intentional, theorized, potentially subversive—not "natural," not "inevitable," and not without consequences.

Postscript

In the spring of 2000, Amy Goodburn was recommended for tenure and promotion to associate professor of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, where she continues to collaborate on a wide range of projects. In spite of receiving the strong support of her department, Carrie Leverenz was ultimately denied tenure at Florida State University. Because current university policy forbids promotion and tenure committees from meeting to discuss cases (committee members cast ballots privately), there is no way to know how collaborative research was evaluated. Carrie continues to collaborate, however, with Amy and with others, in her new position as associate professor and director of composition at Texas Christian University.

End Notes

1. According to an MLA census of job placement rates for PhDs completed in 1996—1997, only 33.6 percent found tenure-track employment (Laurence 1998). For rhetoric and composition specialists, that number was somewhat better—64 percent.

2. If it seems a stretch to think that job candidates are distinguished by their clothing, one of Carrie's colleagues who was in her MLA interview remembered telling the others on the interview team that she liked the one in the red coat.