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# Maintaining a Humanistic Center: Rhetorical Humanism as a Holistic Framework for Writing Programs

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**Abstract:** This profile describes how the Writing Program at Southern Utah University enacts a rhetorical humanist framework in its administrative and curricular structures. At the administrative level, rhetorical humanism offers a collaborative governance model that gives all faculty a voice in programmatic decisions, while managing the cacophony created by those voices. At the curricular level, rhetorical humanism balances the benefits and critiques of traditional humanism with outward-facing social constructionist writing pedagogies of the last few decades.

> "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold"
> -W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

Localized in their contexts yet broadly ecological in their operations, writing programs can be slippery academic units: sprawling in focus, varied in their aims, overwhelmed by stakeholders (both student and institutional), and metamorphic in the curricular space they inhabit. From single course first-year composition programs to two course sequences to Stretch English to Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing in the Disciplines, and beyond, writing programs do diverse and significant labor in the contemporary university. Despite the widening gyre of stakeholders and mission statements and learning outcomes, writing programs need not be directionless in the gale. The following profile makes a case for rhetorical humanism as a holistic framework for guiding writing programs at the theoretical, administrative, and curricular levels. Such a framework balances the traditional aims of rhetorical education with "the professionalization and specialization that now characterize the American academy," as Sharon Crowley puts it (10) —all while maintaining, as I argue in this essay, a humanistic center.

Humanism—particularly Arnoldian humanism so understandably maligned by scholars like Crowley, Gerald Graff, Thomas Miller, and many others—has become a bit of a disciplinary bogeyman, standing in for a literature-focused, insular approach to writing pedagogy that is mutually exclusive (or at least largely unconcerned) with principles of civic mindedness and experience-based learning. However, recent work on *rhetorical* humanism offers a productive reconceptualization of the H-word that accounts for its introspective impulse toward self-discovery while maintaining an outward-facing, generative foundation for a multi-course writing curriculum. Such a framework at Southern Utah University's (SUU) growing, mid-size public campus has expanded beyond its curricular origins, however, informing a faculty-centered approach to program governance and administrative structure while maintaining the university's strong commitments to civic engagement and experiential education across disciplines.

To explicate the workings of rhetorical humanism as a holistic framework for writing programs, I first provide a theoretical grounding for what rhetorical humanism is. I then provide an overview of the institutional context in which the SUU Writing Program enacts that framework and a description of the program itself, focusing on the application of rhetorical humanism in our governance, administrative structures, and curriculum. Having served as SUU's Writing Program Administrator (WPA) for the past three years, I hope in particular that the specifics of our program (and my perspective on them) might serve as a productive case study of rhetorical humanism more generally. Finally, I offer points for further consideration concerning the deployment of such a framework in a variety of contexts.

Ultimately, as a discipline, our well-traveled debates over Arnoldian humanism and "imaginative literature" in first-year writing classes (see Berlin; Tate; Lindemann; Crowley; Gamer; S. Miller) reflect a larger transdisciplinary apprehension with humanism's role in the landscape of higher education. These debates might be revisited,

however, in light of recent historical and theoretical work on rhetorical education as well as broad-scope programs like the Association of American Colleges & Universities' (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, with its goal of radically expanding access to liberal education{1} in American public universities. In doing so, I am not suggesting we return to a literature-based writing curriculum, as I hope will be evidenced in the following profile. Instead, I am arguing that we consider rhetorical humanism as a productive grounding framework for the many contexts, instantiations, and configurations of writing programs, and how such a framework might aid us in shaping larger campus culture.

## Erasmus Isn't Dead: An Overview of Rhetorical Humanism

The critique of Arnoldian humanism as a basis for writing pedagogy is perhaps best outlined in Crowley's *Composition in the University*: 1) it privileges reading over writing, 2) it privileges completed (rather than in-process or unwritten) texts, 3) it is, itself, a privileged and exclusive tradition, and 4) it has more in common with metaphysics than rhetoric and has historically been outright hostile to the persuasive art (13). To be certain, these critiques have been well-exemplified in the history of our discipline, as such an Arnoldian humanism undergirded the current-traditional pedagogies of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries with biases toward completed texts, formalistic requirements, and decontextualized modes of writing. However, even James Berlin's germinal history of twentieth-century writing instruction—critical as it is of current traditional pedagogies—concludes with a two-fold goal of writing courses: to prepare students for citizenship in a democracy, but to "also enable students to learn something about themselves, about the often-unstated assumptions on which their lives are built" (189). I submit that a rhetorical—rather than Arnoldian—conception of humanism might achieve both of these goals: that rhetorical humanism as a grounding principle for a writing program accounts for outward-facing, social constructionist, and genre-based pedagogies while still allowing for inward-facing self-exploration and expressivism.{2}

Recent theorizing of rhetorical humanism reveals its aptness to both the administrative and pedagogical aims of writing programs. In his 2014 article on rhetorical humanism and object-oriented ontology (OOO), Ira Allen conceptualizes a rhetorical humanism "characterized by a self-consciously ethical approach to its own search for effective levers" of rhetorical change rather than the point-based, certainty-focused thinking of OOO (78). For Allen, rhetorical humanism paradoxically grounds itself in *un*certainty, demanding a knower "who is intensely attuned to the contingency, temporality, and potential effectivity of her own position" (68). Furthermore, Steven Mailloux argues that rhetorical humanism requires "a mixture of interpretive strategy and rhetorical argument" (143), balancing the productive, argumentative functions of rhetoric with the interpretive functions of humanism that help us understand the texts and contexts around us (including ourselves). Finally, in connection to the Ciceronian tradition, Michael Leff delineates other common features of rhetorical humanism (or what he calls *humanistic rhetoric*):

> a suspicious attitude toward abstract theory not only in respect to rhetoric but also to ethics and politics; a conviction that discourse, especially discourse that allows for argument on both sides of an issue, has a constitutive role to play in civic life; a valorization and idealization of eloquence that entails a strong connection between eloquence and virtue; and a conception of virtue that is decisively linked to political activity. (136)

In combining these conceptions, we get a rhetorical humanism rooted in the contingency of knowledge, balanced as both an interpretive and a productive theoretical framework, and intimately concerned with the rhetor's individual identity and values as they relate to civic life. Perhaps more importantly, rhetorical humanism keeps the human (students, faculty, administrators) in focus, serving as a constant reminder that our shared enterprises in higher education are for the betterment of actual flesh-and-blood lives.

Such a conception of rhetorical humanism addresses three of Crowley's primary charges against Aronldian humanism: rhetorical humanism revels in the fluctuous and contingent *process* of textuality and knowledge-creation, is radically open in its interdependence on audiences for meaning creation,{3} and clearly aligns itself with rhetorical epistemology rather than metaphysical ontology. As for Crowley's other charge—the privileging of reading over writing—I concede that rhetorical humanism does still privilege reading to an extent, though not as a pedagogical tool to improve writing. But how might this theoretical framework of rhetorical humanism look in practice? In the following sections I detail the institutional context for SUU's Writing Program, as well as the application of rhetorical humanism within that context, focusing on the structure and governance of the SUU Writing Program and the curriculum of our two-course required writing sequence. In doing so, I provide a model for putting rhetorical humanism into practice at different institutional levels.

# Institutional Context and Program Overview: Rhetorical Humanism Applied

To further explore the implications and practices of rhetorical humanism as a holistic framework for writing programs, I use the Writing Program at Southern Utah University as a case study. SUU is a selective, public, mid-sized comprehensive university with a campus-wide emphasis on experiential education, project-based learning, and civic responsibility. Primarily an undergraduate-serving institution with approximately 8,500 baccalaureate candidates and a small (<1,000) graduate student population, SUU offers over 140 undergraduate and 19 graduate programs of study. Because of our emphasis on experiential and project-based learning, we also maintain a variety of public centers, partnerships, and initiatives (e.g., an educational partnership with the National Park Service), as well as a graduation requirement known as the EDGE program that asks all students to design, implement, and document a substantial project over the course of their degree.

As a member of the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE), SUU is also committed to the AAC&U's LEAP Initiative. An ambitious program, the LEAP initiative at its heart aims to radically expand traditional conceptions of liberal education from a philosophy focused narrowly on non-vocational intellectual and personal development to an adaptable course of study essential for success in "a global economy and for informed citizenship" (AAC&U, "What is Liberal Education"). The vision statement for the LEAP initiative highlights more specific goals:

> LEAP responds to the changing demands of the twenty-first century—demands for more college-educated workers and more engaged and informed citizens. Today, and in the years to come, college graduates need higher levels of learning and knowledge as well as strong intellectual and practical skills to navigate this more demanding environment successfully and responsibly. LEAP challenges the traditional practice of providing liberal education to some students and narrow training to others. The LEAP Challenge is designed to flexibly allow all students—whatever their institution or chosen field—to gain this blended model of liberal education and the outcomes so important for success and well-being in today's world. (AAC&U, "The LEAP Challenge")

Though broad in its language, the LEAP initiative's aims echo those of rhetorical education, from the *viva activa* of Roman public life to more contemporary definitions of an education that (ideally) shapes citizens for public participation (Glenn viii). However, as Cheryl Glenn points out, rhetorical education (like the LEAP initiative), is "inherently slippery—as a concept, theory, practice, or application" (viii). On SUU's campus, the LEAP initiative provides a structure of Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) that allow for coverage across a large General Education (GE) program of 12-13 core credits (six of which are required writing courses) and 20-22 additional credits across six broad knowledge areas (SUU General Catalog). The ELOs provide consistent curricular goals in the larger context of the General Education program{4} while leaving the attainment of those goals largely in the discretion of the Writing Program and the writing faculty themselves.

Housed in the Department of English, the Writing Program at Southern Utah University is a multi-pronged ecology of writing courses and resources designed to provide holistic writing instruction (and support for that instruction) across disciplines and across the undergraduate experience at SUU. The core of the Writing Program is a two-course required sequence (ENGL 1010 and 2010) taken in the first 60 credit hours. In addition, the Writing Program oversees a two-credit lab course (ENGL 0990) that supplements certain sections of ENGL 1010, a business communication course (ENGL 2040: Writing in Professional Contexts), and an interdisciplinary Technical Communication certificate program. Across these courses, the SUU Writing Program serves approximately 3,000 students per year with support from a vibrant Writing Center that serves all of campus and a Writing Fellows program that targets upper-division disciplinary writing beyond the required two-course sequence.

As I hope is evident, in such a tangled web of stakeholders at the university, state, and western regional levels, the SUU Writing Program nonetheless enjoys an equally robust web of support. The two-course writing sequence, as part of the core GE curriculum, means we see almost every SUU student at least once, and most of them twice. The ELOs allow for standardization of outcomes while leaving curricular specifics in the hands of capable, full-time writing faculty. And six credits of required writing give us space to broadly consider exactly *what* required writing courses can and should do for students, challenging the disciplinary accession, as Geoffrey Sirc puts it, "to the notion of the composition classroom as a place to do the so-called business of the academy" (36). At face value, all of this may not seem terribly unique: the two-course sequence is not uncommon, outcomes-based learning is not particularly revolutionary, and a writing program embedded in a complex university ecology is par for the course.

However, via a framework of rhetorical humanism, our writing program is able to deliver a version of liberal education usually seen at smaller private institutions to a larger student population at public school sticker-price. Through this framework we have balanced consistency of curricular outcomes with radically participatory faculty governance and course individualization. Furthermore, the rhetorical humanist curriculum we have developed addresses our tangled

web of stakeholders while foregrounding the individuality of our students. Before discussing our rhetorical humanist curriculum in greater depth, I first turn to the aspect of our program that makes such a curriculum possible: our governance and labor structure.

## Putting the Human in Humanism: Faculty Governance and Program Structure

Developing a rhetorical humanist writing curriculum first requires rhetorically humanist (and humane) material circumstances, labor practices, and administrative structures. Such structures should 1) be multivocal, placing classroom faculty at the center of curricular and governance decisions, 2) allow for deliberation, uncertainty, and slippage in the operations of the program while still providing mechanisms for efficiently accomplishing shared tasks and standardized goals, and 3) account for the individual values and identities of the faculty who make up the program. In addition to enacting the rhetorical humanism outlined previously, these principles also account for the well-documented ecological and variable nature of writing programs (Cooper; Kipling and Murphy; Ryan) as well as the ecological models used to assess them (Wardle and Roozen; White, Elliot, and Peckham). Of course, such broad principles always sound nice in theory; their implementation, however, comes down to local contexts and programmatic particulars. What follows is one model for a programmatic structure that enacts its rhetorical humanist framework in the ways outlined above.

To begin, a rhetorical humanist writing program is multi-vocal, placing its classroom faculty at the center of its governance. As anyone who has served in an administrative or supervisory role can attest, though, this is easier said than done because SUU's Writing Program, like most, is a complicated ecology. It consists of twelve full-time writing faculty and two adjunct lecturers. Full-time non-tenure track (NTT) faculty are eligible for rank advancement to Assistant Professor without tenure after four years and Associate Professor without tenure after six years. We also draw on the teaching and expertise of fourteen tenure-track faculty from a variety of specializations within English studies. The standard teaching load is four courses per semester and the class size is twenty-five students or lower for all writing courses.

Despite this complexity, the multivocality of our program is made possible by the material resources at our disposal. Because 95% of our classes in a given academic year are staffed by full-time, benefited faculty, we are able to hire experienced educators (our least-experienced faculty member is in her sixth year of teaching) who, by virtue of their experience, are able to fully participate in the development and shared governance of programmatic policies and curriculum. The experience of our faculty also allows for a significant amount of autonomy (and by extension, creativity) in meeting the Essential Learning Outcomes of their individual courses, with the ELOs acting as a standardizing force on the larger curriculum. Furthermore, the possibility of rank advancement for NTT faculty allows for wider participation in pedagogically innovative programs like cross-disciplinary collaborations, integrated General Education courses, external partnerships with community and government organizations, and study abroad programs.

Even with these resources, though, we encountered the difficulty of focusing the cacophony—respecting and accommodating so many voices in the governance process while still *getting business done*: updating curriculum, approving experimental course designs and integrations, developing (and re-developing) assessment plans, etc. Previously, the writing faculty simply voted on business matters as a whole in monthly program meetings, making finer-grained work difficult in such a large setting. By streamlining the governance structure, we arrived at a middlepoint that balances efficiency and multivocality: the Writing Program Subcommittee (the formal, university-recognized voting body for Writing Program matters within the English Department) and a series of *ad hoc* workgroups focused on individual programmatic issues (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Writing Program Subcommittee Structure

| Writing Program Subcommittee | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Permanent Seats (2)**<br><br>Writing Program Director<br><br>Writing Center Director | **Rotating Seats (3)**<br><br>Three (3) Seats Rotated from NTT Faculty | |
| **Curriculum Workgroup (4)**<br><br>• Work with 0990, 1010, and 2010 faculty and Writing | **Writing in Prof. Contexts**<br><br>**Workgroup (4)** | **Assessment Workgroup (4)**<br><br>• Develop (1) initial and (2) ongoing assessment plans for 0990, 1010, |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Center Director to research potential curricular developments.<br><br>• Formalize relationships among 0990, 1010, and 2010 curriculum.<br><br>• Develop 0990, 1010, and 2010 curricular recommendations for Writing Program Subcommittee.<br><br>• Work with Assessment Workgroup to develop curricular revision recommendations. | • Formalize recommendations for 2040 curriculum.<br><br>• Formalize relationship of 2040 curriculum to Writing Program curriculum (1010 & 2010).<br><br>• Work with Technical Writing Certificate subcommittee to develop cohesive curricular recommendations for 2040.<br><br>• Work with Business School to develop cohesive curricular recommendations for 2040. | and 2010.<br><br>• Work with Curriculum Workgroup to interpret assessment findings.<br><br>• Work with General Education Assessment committee on university-level assessment programs.<br><br>• Develop (in conjunction with Writing Program and Writing Center Directors) annual assessment report on 0990, 1010, and 2010 curriculum<br><br>• Analyze alternative course evaluation systems. |

The Writing Program Subcommittee is a five-seat committee consisting of three rotating seats held by NTT faculty in three year terms, one permanent seat held by the Writing Center Director, and one permanent non-voting seat held by the Writing Program Director. As a voting body, the purpose of the committee is to formally approve or deny proposals from the *ad hoc* work groups on curricular and policy matters. As a regulatory body, the subcommittee provides oversight for curricular and policy change, serving as a liaison on Writing Program matters between classroom faculty and the English Department Curriculum Committee. In short, all policy and curricular changes that affect the Writing Program start here, giving the writing faculty direct and immediate governance over the larger institutional life of the program.

The Writing Program Subcommittee, however, is primarily an advisory and voting body, not a productive one. The *ad hoc* work groups are constituted on an as-needed basis and allow for fine-grained policy review, curricular development, and assessment planning and implementation. Composed of four NTT faculty, each workgroup focuses on specific business matters of the Writing Program that are too unwieldy to be addressed in monthly meetings of the entire faculty. For example, the current workgroups are a Curricular Workgroup that is reviewing and proposing curricular updates to the core required writing sequence, an Assessment Workgroup charged with integrating current Writing Program assessment with larger General Education assessment initiatives, and a Writing in Professional Contexts Workgroup charged with reviewing and updating the curriculum of our business communication course. Furthermore, workgroups can be formed in response to larger institutional demands{5} or to perform regular maintenance, such as reviewing and updating existing curriculum.{6} While the Writing Program Subcommittee serves a formal institutional function for writing faculty, the workgroups serve a productive one, allowing any faculty member to initiate curricular or policy changes to be voted on by their immediate writing faculty peers.

**Table 2.** Writing Program Core Course Curricular Map

| Learning Outcome | 0990 | 1010 | 2010 |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| READING: | | | |
| Develop Critical Reading | R | R | R |
| Apply Critical Reading skills in peer review | R | R | R |
| WRITTEN COMMUNICATION: | | | |
| Compose effective arguments that demonstrate awareness of purpose, audience, and context | R | I | R |
| Organize and use relevant content for | R | I | R |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| specific audiences and purposes | | | |
| Conventions of Standardized American English | | I | R |
| INFORMATION LITERACY: | | | |
| Understand MLA, including formatting, works cited, and in-text citations | R | I | R |
| Identify and locate credible information | | I | R |
| Correctly use primary and secondary sources | | | I |
| CRITICAL THINKING: | | | |
| Evaluate and interpret sources | | I | R |
| Analyze assumptions about evidence and argument | | I | R |
| INQUIRY AND ANALYSIS | | | |
| Break complex topics or issues into parts to gain understanding | | | I |
| Arrange and synthesize evidence to reveal insightful patterns, differences, or similarities | | | I |

I = Introduce

R = Reinforce

M = Master

To this point, I have shown how our program is multivocal in its governance while still accommodating change and uncertainty, enacting the first two criteria for a rhetorical humanist administrative structure detailed previously. However, a rhetorical humanist writing program should also account for the individual identities and values of the faculty who comprise it. Put another way, in addition to having a central role in the day-to-day governance of the program, faculty should also play a central role in its intellectual enterprise. The structures of such a program reflect large-scale the individual and collective values of its faculty, allowing for a rhetorical humanist, faculty-driven curriculum that remains adaptable to student interests and goals. Such a curriculum, built around exploration of faculty and student interests alike, is introspective in the Arnoldian humanist sense, but avoids the pitfalls of what Crowley calls "bourgeois subjectivity," so focused on inward-facing self-improvement that outward-facing civic responsibilities fade into curricular background noise (34). Balancing such lofty and seemingly antithetical curricular goals of introspection and civic engagement, however, requires time—and time in the world of higher education means curricular space, found at SUU in our two-course required writing sequence.

## A Rhetorically Human Curriculum

The two-course writing sequence at SUU is—like many structures in public education—one part historical artifact, one part legislated requirement, and one part creative flux. While all schools in the USHE system have a two-course writing requirement (and it is worth noting here that all USHE schools also share common course numberings), ENGL 1010 and 2010 get approached differently in their curricula, placement procedures, and student populations at each institution. At SUU about 60% of our students take ENGL 1010 in residence (the other 40% receiving credit through Concurrent Enrollment and Advanced Placement [AP] exams), with an average of 25 credits at time-of-

completion, indicating most students complete the requirement within their first year of enrollment. Approximately 95% of students take ENGL 2010 in residence (with transfer credits accounting for the other 5%), and an average of 45 credits at time-of-completion, indicating most students complete all of their writing requirements by the end of their sophomore year.

Within this statistical context, we have developed a two-course sequence that articulates with other versions of ENGL 1010 and 2010 from across the state, supports SUU's larger mission of experiential learning and civic engagement, and enacts the theoretical grounding in rhetorical humanism outlined previously. The first course in the sequence, ENGL 1010, like many first-year writing courses, focuses on teaching broad rhetorical skills implemented in short argumentative essays that scaffold over the course of the semester. More importantly, 1010 is also a microcosm for the inherent tension found in rhetorical humanism between individual introspection and outward-facing, audience-focused writing.

The scaffolded assignment sequence for 1010 (see Appendix 1){7} begins with a Narrative Self-Portrait, where students construct an argument about who they are. The most traditionally humanistic of the assignments, the Narrative Self-Portrait allows students to begin with introspective, exploratory writing (though still with an argumentative dimension) about a topic on which they are expert: themselves. Building on this knowledge of self, students then use the values expressed in the Narrative Self-Portrait to choose a topic for their next essay, a Position Argument where they take a stand on a specific issue of importance to them. In using the core values from their Narrative Self-Portraits to help guide them to localized issues with specific audiences (e.g., the uneven applications of water rationing on avocado farms in Southern California), students bridge outward from the narrow introspection of Arnoldian humanism, creating connections between their own identities and the world around them. This bridging makes explicit a central tenet of rhetorical humanism detailed previously: the rhetor's individual identity and values as they relate to civic life. With these relations made explicit, students finally compose a Proposal Argument, offering a (partial) solution to the central problem of their Position Argument. Though guided up to this point by their core values, the Proposal Argument asks students to engage in more outward-facing writing practices—research, fieldwork, audience-awareness, context-awareness, etc.—in order to solve a complex real-world problem.

Ultimately, through this curriculum, students first must qualitatively express their core values, apply that introspection to a specific external problem, and write their way to a solution specific to their chosen localized issue. In doing so, students move from an introspective, Arnoldian humanist model of writing to an outwardly-focused, context-driven model, building connections along the way between their own identities and the problems of the world. Furthermore, such a curriculum also balances expressivist approaches to writing instruction (see Elbow; Macrorie) with more recent social constructionist and genre-based pedagogies (for a detailed overview of this pedagogical divide, see Fishman and McCarthy), preparing students for a variety of exigencies and rhetorical situations that they may encounter.

Such an approach is of course labor-intensive for faculty on an intellectual and emotional level. It requires teachers to actively and deeply *know* our students as people—their values, interests, and evolving stances toward the larger world. It requires our own embracing of uncertainty as faculty, as we cannot be expert in municipal public policy and federal natural resource management and rural health scholarship and writing instruction simultaneously. It balances the reflective and productive aspects of rhetoric, asking our students to reflect on their sense of self and apply that sense to external problems and solutions. And it grounds the inward and outward functions of writing in localized, immediate ways (the problems our students choose to solve, the issues they take stances on, the avocado trees they water in the face of state-wide rations), reminding us again of the real, human effects of the symbolic arts we teach.

The second course of the writing sequence, ENGL 2010, expands the rhetorical humanist curriculum of 1010, bridging into the specialized disciplinary writing of students' advanced major coursework while still foregrounding the individual interests of students. Like 1010, the assignments in 2010 are also scaffolded (see Appendix 2), with a series of smaller assignments grounded in the pedagogies of Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS) that culminate in a major (10+ page) research-based argumentative paper. This basic assignment sequence, which can be radically adapted by each instructor, includes a short exploratory essay, a formal research proposal, an oral progress report presentation, and the final extensive research-based argument.

More importantly—and in keeping with our rhetorical humanist framework—each section of ENGL 2010 at SUU is based around a theme of the instructor's choosing, for example, Writing about Poverty, Writing about Race, Writing about Identity and Culture, Writing about Environmental Issues, Writing about Technology, and Writing about the Occult.{8} These themes, reviewed and approved annually by the WPA, require a surprising delicacy and subtlety in their development and implementation: too broad, and they do little to help students engage with specific disciplinary discourses; too narrow and they become content classes in Victorian Literature. Furthermore, in true RGS fashion, the individual 2010 themes greatly influence the shape and elasticity of the smaller genre-based assignments, reflecting the "simultaneously fixed and potentially flexible" nature of genred activity systems (Adams and Jenkins).

For example, a formal research proposal in Writing about Technology looks quite different than a formal research proposal in Writing about Disney due to the different student populations attracted to the themes, the different disciplinary contexts of their future academic trajectories, and the different conventional biases of existing scholarship centered on those themes. Within our rhetorical humanist framework, the thematic curriculum then foregrounds the contingency of disciplinary knowledge(s) as a feature of—rather than a hindrance to—writing instruction.

In addition to enacting the principles of rhetorical humanism outlined previously, the thematic approach to ENGL 2010 has resulted in another benefit: greater cross-disciplinary connection to non-English classes as well as the interdisciplinary project-based EDGE program. First, the thematic offerings facilitate overlaps with other disciplinary foundations courses, allowing for natural integrations and team teaching opportunities. For example, we regularly run a section of 2010 with a science theme in partnership with the Engineering department, allowing freshman engineers to take their required writing earlier than their peers and in a cohorted learning community.{9}

Thematic 2010s also allow students to self-select based on interest, so that the significant research-based writing they do is more likely to bridge to their academic and personal trajectories. Because all students at SUU must create and implement a major project as part of their graduation requirements, many find that the research they begin in their ENGL 2010 (and even 1010) classes extends to this multi-year EDGE project. For example, a non-traditional single parent in one of my writing classes focused her research on campus childcare (which was non-existent at the time). After discovering the problem was more complex than she could feasibly tackle in one semester, she decided to continue her research as her long-term EDGE project. This caught the attention of SUU's Nontraditional Student Center, who hired her as an intern to help with a state-level childcare grant. Of course, not every case is as dramatic as this anecdote, but it is nonetheless quite common to see the work students begin in our writing classes come to fruition three years later with the completion of their EDGE projects. Furthermore, this kind of transdisciplinary application of knowledge is exactly the point of a rhetorical humanist writing curriculum: by exploring their own values and how those values apply to their larger world, students might demonstrate greater metacognitive awareness and transfer when it comes to language use in a variety of contexts.

Over the course of the entire ENGL 1010-2010 sequence, students produce 35-40 pages of formal prose based on hundreds of pages of drafts and revisions. Their assignments range from introspective personal narratives to genre-based research proposals to significant research-driven writing projects. They meet the AAC&U learning outcomes of written communication, information literacy, and critical thinking in ENGL 1010, and written communication, information literacy, and inquiry/analysis in ENGL 2010. And for the most part, they do so with great succes and little complaint, relatively speaking, as both ENGL 1010 and 2010 have consistently high student satisfaction rates.{10} And while I would like to selfishly attribute this entirely to our rhetorical humanist curriculum, I once again believe material circumstances are at least part of the explanation: Utah is consistently one of the lowest-ranking states in terms of overall debt-burden upon graduation, and SUU's average student debt in 2017 was about $16,000. I recount these statistics because they are, I suspect, integral to the outcomes of our curriculum and student satisfaction with it. When the financial structures of higher education create space for introspection and civic engagement by alleviating economic pressure to make every class "count," then the type of rhetorical humanist curriculum I have detailed here can generate attitudinal buy-in from students—that is, when the total cost of their education is only slightly more than a reliable used car, students can begin to see required writing courses as more than a several-thousand-dollar barrier to entering the professional world.

## Lessons Learned

The purpose of this profile is not to argue for rhetorical humanism as *the* dominant theoretical framework for program administration or curricular development, but to instead offer a model that partially accounts for the shortcomings of humanisms-past while staying true to the larger promises of liberal education in 21st-century America. Nonetheless, rhetorical humanism as a holistic framework offers an adaptable grounding for writing programs in a variety of institutional contexts, and implementing such a framework has come with generative lessons:

### 1) Humanism is difficult…but worth it.

The labor-intensive nature of rhetorical humanism is apparent at every level of SUU's Writing Program. Administratively, the faculty-centered nature of the curriculum means no two courses look the same, though all meet the same learning outcomes. The thematic 2010s in particular create added labor of individualized administrative oversight while necessitating more adaptable assessment procedures than other, more standardized writing curricula. But most of the added labor comes in the classroom. Humans are messy, and foregrounding that humanity (our own and that of our students) is, to put it simply, hard work. After all, it was Erasmus himself who wrote, "Human

affairs are so obscure and various that nothing can be clearly known" (84). And that uncertainty can be exhausting, particularly for faculty whose own expertise might feel shaky in the face of all we can't know.

However, from this human scramble emerges an anchoring emphasis on the individual humans involved, especially faculty and students. Giving veteran teachers freedom to focus on curricular experimentation, pedagogical creativity, and cross-curricular or community-based learning projects provides students with an individualized experience while keeping teachers excited, invested, and innovative. Because as Lisbeth Chapin details in her profile of the writing program at Gwynedd Mercy University, an intense and individualized focus on faculty goes a long way in generating dynamic and evolving writing courses that provide transformational experiences for students and faculty alike.

### *2) Rhetorical humanism is about more than just curriculum.*

As a holistic framework, the implications of rhetorical humanism speak fruitfully to administrative practices, curriculum development, and even assessment in disciplinary and transdisciplinary ways. For example, a glance at the articles in the most recent issue of *Intersection*, the publication of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, reveals a strikingly frequent question: are we "fooling ourselves" (as David Eubanks puts it, quoting Richard Feynman) with current assessment procedures and methodologies that elide faculty expertise and involvement (Waterbury et al.) in favor of poorly gathered, poorly validated, and overall poor-quality data (Eubanks 4)? Such data, decontextualized from the human students and faculty it seeks to measure, cyclically leads to ineffectual or unnecessary changes (curricular and administrative) as a way of justifying its own poorly gathered existence (Eubanks 5).

It's no secret that assessment has a significant PR problem among faculty (see Erik Gilbert's recent *Chronicle* essay —or better yet, the comments section of that essay—for evidence), precisely because of the issues mentioned above that assessment researchers are seeking to remedy. However, from a rhetorical humanist perspective, assessment might be viewed as both an interpretive and productive enterprise that seeks to explain uncertain processes (student learning) for the betterment of the human stakeholders involved. In other words, a rhetorical humanist approach to assessment could truly offer, as Brian Huot and Ellen E. Schendel argue, a means for proactive change (208). The humanist side of such a model could help maintain focus on the individual actors involved (avoiding the data-for-data's sake cycle of trying to close unclosable loops) while the rhetorical side begs questions of the large-scale aggregate picture through a variety of research-validated methodologies.{11} The danger such a model should seek to avoid, of course, is precisely what Eubanks warns against in his article: falling back onto a "common sense" approach to assessment interpretation and implementation that ellides statistical validation and well-tested methodologies under the guise of faculty-centered humanism.

### *3) Rhetorical humanism might guide where we're going by drawing on where we've been.*

Rhetorical humanism offers writing programs a way of navigating not only the larger disciplinary tensions of Writing Studies, but also English Studies and the humanities as whole. In light of the many critiques of traditional humanism(s) over the years, rhetorical humanism allows us to speak fruitfully with colleagues across the humanities/liberal arts while maintaining our own disciplinary commitments. In short, rhetorical humanism offers a way to have our cake and eat it, too—keeping the positives of western humanism and merging them with a century of research in composition and rhetorical education. And as many writing programs are the largest General Education component at their institutions, rhetorical humansim offers a clear theoretical grounding for influencing our larger campus communities in positive, thoughtful ways.

With these lessons in mind, it has been our experience at SUU that the benefits of rhetorical humanism at both the programmatic and pedagogical levels outweigh any potential limitations. At both the structural and curricular levels, rhetorical humanism has helped us build a program that begins to fulfill the LEAP initiative's broad goals, chief of which is providing radical access to liberal education in America. Perhaps more important for Rhetoric and Writing Studies as a discipline, rhetorical humanism breathes new life into old models, taking advantage of curricular space to teach writing simultaneously as a mode of self-exploration and symbolic communication amidst that greater gyre of American higher learning. Because if the ultimate goal of rhetorical education is to affirm in our students the power to change the world with their words, humanism (and specifically rhetorical humanism) can and should play a centering role in that enterprise.

## Appendices

## *Appendix 1: Template Major Assignment Sequence for ENGL 1010: Introduction to Academic Writing*

### Paper 1: Narrative Self-Portrait (15%) (3-5 pages)

Who are you? It is one of the most fundamental and important questions you will ever face. For this assignment, you will use narrative to craft an argument about who you are in 3-5 pages. That's not a lot of room, so you'll have to be strategic: what are the most important aspects of your identity, what are your deepest core values, and how can you convey all of that clearly and succinctly while telling a good story?

### Paper 2: Position Argument (20%) (5-7 pages)

In this paper, you will build from the traits/values you identify in your Narrative Self-Portrait to take a stand on an issue important to you. To do so, you will identify an interesting problem or issue, explore your own position on that issue, translate your position into a clear thesis statement, support your position with specific details and examples, and marshal rhetorical appeals to persuade others.

### Paper 3: Proposal Argument (25%) (5-10 pages)

For this assignment, you will build from your Position Argument to advocate for a solution to or way to address the problem (or problems) identified in the previous assignment. The Proposal Argument will require that you use credible sources (among other appeals) to supply the data and authority that often persuade contemporary audiences.

### Reflective Rhetorical Analysis (10%) (~2 pages)

A rhetorical analysis examines and explains how an author attempts to influence an audience. For this assignment, you will complete a short rhetorical analysis of your final Proposal Argument. Your analysis should not simply paraphrase or summarize what you have said, but should provide a way of understanding how the text persuades its audience. This analysis will draw on readings from class to examine and explain your decisions and argumentative strategies in the essay you wrote. It might also draw on successes and failures from previous assignments and how you have capitalized/improved on them for the Proposal.

## *Appendix 2: Template Major Assignment Sequence for ENGL 2010: Writing about Poverty*

### Definition Argument (15%) (~5 pages)

To write fruitfully about poverty, we must first define exactly what we mean by the term. For this assignment, you will compose a substantial, persuasive, and complex definition of "poverty," drawing on readings from class as well as independent research. This definition will aid you throughout the course as you propose and develop a topic for your Major Research Paper related to poverty (as you have defined it).

### Research Proposal + Annotated Bibliography (20%) (5-7 pages + 10 sources)

Large research projects never exist in a vacuum. For this assignment you will write a formal proposal for your Major Research Paper, demonstrating your familiarity with and thoughtful consideration of the topic you are proposing. In doing so, you will begin to think formally about the scope and organization of your larger argument, as well as the sources required to support that argument (evidenced in your annotated bibliography).

### Progress Report (10%)

In addition to the initial Research Proposal, part of developing and executing a large project is reporting on your progress along the way. For this assignment, you will develop a short (~5 minute) presentation explaining (1) what you have done, (2) what you have left to do, and (3) what you have omitted with regards to your Major Research Paper.

**Major Research Paper (30%) (15-20 pages)**

The culmination of your work this semester, this significant research paper will adhere to the conventions of academic discourse, display mastery of the rhetorical and stylistic skills discussed in class, and advance a coherent, complex argument on a topic related to the course theme that is supported by appropriate research and documentation.

**Citation Presentation (10%) (Group)**

This group assignment is designed to familiarize you (and your classmates) with citation and publication styles other than MLA. Each group will work together to develop and deliver a short presentation and handout on an alternative style (APA, Chicago, Turabian, Associated Press, IEEE, etc.) that you might encounter in college (and beyond).

## Notes

1. The AAC&U defines *liberal education* as "an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change" ("What is a Liberal Education?"). ([Return to text.](#))
2. For a thorough reconciliation of genre theory and humanism, see Brauer. For a reasoned argument about the "paradoxical role of rhetoric and composition within belletristic English" (477), see Zwagerman. ([Return to text.](#))
3. Allen points out that the ideal rhetorical humanist knower "owes other symbol-users rather a lot" in the creation of their knowing (68). ([Return to text.](#))
4. An additional layer of complexity that the ELOs help alleviate is the fact that all GE credits must articulate mutually with all eight USHE institutions, and must articulate outside of the state as part of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Passport program. By placing focus on outcomes rather than disciplinary curricular points, the ELOs support such broad articulation while still allowing for curricular variety at the individual course level. ([Return to text.](#))
5. For example, integrating writing program assessment with newly developed GE assessment procedures. ([Return to text.](#))
6. For example, the Curriculum Workgroup developing a curriculum map (see [Table 2](#)) that better articulates the relationship of courses in the required writing sequence. ([Return to text.](#))
7. In keeping with the liberal approach to faculty curricular governance outlined previously, I should note that experienced faculty often build on, adapt, and even depart from this assignment sequence (it is by no means monolithic), though it nonetheless serves as a template for curricular consistency. ([Return to text.](#))
8. A full list of currently-offered topics and course descriptions can be found on [the SUU English Department's website.](#) ([Return to text.](#))
9. Because of their extensive foundations courses and rigid prerequisite systems, engineers are more likely to take their required writing significantly later in their college careers than non-engineering students. ([Return to text.](#))
10. For example, aggregate data from Fall 2015-Spring 2017 show that ENGL 1010 averaged a 4.05 rating (out of 5) and ENGL 2010 averaged 4.07 (out of 5) on the "Excellence of Course" measure. This data also showed that for both courses, students had low "desire to take this course," indicating that student disposition at the end of term was significantly better than their self-reported, remembered disposition prior to enrollment. In other words, we have consistently found that students don't *want* to take the required writing sequence, but ultimately report enjoying the courses on end-of-term measures. ([Return to text.](#))
11. It is no surprise that Eubanks cites Joseph Moxley's work with the Writing Program at the University of South Florida as an exemplar of the type of assessment he is calling for in his article. ([Return to text.](#))

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