Toward Vocabulary for Collaborative Work

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**NC State’s Commitment to Collaborative Scholarship**

Our diverse English Department is located in an institution that highly values interdisciplinary, problem-centered, and community-engaged research practices. NC State’s 2021-2030 mission statement describes collaboration as a key value of the institution, calling for collaboration “across colleges, disciplines and perspectives, and in how we partner with a broad range of organizations to find solutions to challenges at home and around the world.” Goal 2 of its strategic plan calls on us to “ensure preeminence in research, scholarship, innovation and collaboration.” Furthermore, Goal 6 calls on us to “Be recognized as the leading university for innovative partnerships, entrepreneurial thinking, and problem solving.” In order to achieve these goals, the plan suggests that we “aggressively pull down barriers” to establishing “innovative partnerships that bring together the brightest minds in industry, government and the academy to creatively tackle the great global challenges.”

**Collaboration as an Established Practice in Humanistic Inquiry**

Collaborations are now an established practice in the humanities. Collaborative scholarship enriches and extends knowledge through incorporating multiple perspectives and voices in the research process (Eble et al, College English, March 2019, p. 344). To name just a few examples, this focus on multiple perspectives has been particularly important for

* collaborations that de-center the university’s role in solving community problems through engaged partnerships;
* collaborations that position humanities, social science, and scientific disciplines on equal footing in relationship to solving complex problems of public concern;
* collaborations that bring together multiple university stakeholders toward research focused on student success or basic needs;
* collaborations in Digital Humanities that draw on multiple forms of expertise; and
* collaborations that create networks of scholars across institutions to address questions of a scale that could not be addressed by an individual.

Beyond its benefit for particular kinds of research problems, collaboration has other intrinsic benefits. For example, it offers the opportunity to mentor undergraduate and graduate students and those new to the profession in ways that enhance their careers and job prospects. Assigning a “percent contribution” to work of this type obscures the substantial additional work required and mentorship achieved when compared to single-authored pieces, which provides a disincentive for faculty to include students in their research and publishing.

CCCC’s 2018 “Report on Scholarship in Rhetoric, Writing, and Composition” outlines how humanistic collaboration can be at odds with scientific and social-scientific conventions such as percentages of effort and/or ordered authors: “Scholars in rhetoric, writing, and composition often conduct and publish work collaboratively, and often eschew traditional notions of ‘first author,’ both because the field typically regards work as **equal partnerships** and because the order of names may not indicate contribution levels.”

Furthermore, the 2007 MLA “Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion" positions collaborative efforts as useful for tackling interdisciplinary questions and addressing problems of a scope too large for an individual to address. The report stresses that “[s]uch opportunities to collaborate **should be welcomed rather than treated with suspicion because of traditional prejudices or the difficulty of assigning credit.**” They stress the need for “a system of evaluation for collaborative work that is **appropriate to research in the humanities**” and suggest that the "the guiding rule, once again, should be to **evaluate the quality of the results**" (57).

**Building a Department Vocabulary Around Collaboration**

Our institutional commitments to interdisciplinarity and our disciplinary commitments to collaborative research offer an opportunity to more clearly articulate our cultures of reward around collaboration, particularly when making decisions about how co-authorship will be valued in reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions. As the MLA Report suggests, we should take a welcoming stance toward collaboration, rather than treating it with suspicion. Second, we should continue to develop new vocabulary to describe how individuals from the humanities contribute to collaborative scholarship. In doing so, we should be mindful that successful collaborative scholarship is often as significant as single-authored writing and often requires **more time** and **more effort**. Successful collaborations must end up with stylistically and structurally seamless texts, which adds discussion, negotiation, and editorial challenges to the writing process. This process creates long-term benefit, as collaboration involves iterative internal peer review and revision during the writing process (O’Meara 2018). Percentages of effort are often misleading for representing these contributions to collaboration in the humanities.

As with single authored publications, collaborative publications should be evaluated in terms of their quality, and we should recognize that contributions to collaborative scholarship take diverse forms. Individuals under review may have participated in collaborations that result in co-authored publications that should be viewed with the same weight as a single authored publication. As a guide, four such categories are detailed here. **Equal partnerships** describe team-style collaboration in which collaborative writers work together in equal parts toward research and publication co-authorship. In this model of collaboration, all parties understand contributions to be equal, even if they participate in the writing and research process in different ways, drawing on disciplinary and/or individual strengths. In other situations, individuals under review will be **leaders in co-authorship** who take on significant responsibility for organizing, facilitating, and carrying out authorship of a given publication. Next, individuals under review may be **essential contributors** to a publication whose expertise was necessary to accomplish the co-authored scholarship. The MLA Committee on Information Technology reminds us that essential contributors to Digital Humanities collaborations participate through “the creation of infrastructure,” alongside more traditional forms of content (MLA Committee on Information Technology). Thus, we should bear in mind that essential contributions to collaborative scholarship can include the establishing and maintenance of critical research infrastructures (project management, community liaison or outreach, methodological design) or media infrastructures (interface/database design and implementation). Finally, many faculty are engaged in **mentoring via publication** with undergraduate students, graduate students, or those new to or outside the profession. In these partnerships, the work of teaching professional research and writing standards can be substantial, and the cumulative effort for this type of publication may be well beyond what is required for singularly author publications.

If individual contributions to collaborative publications meet **any** of the previously described conditions (i.e., equal partnerships, leaders in co-authorship, essential contributions, or mentoring via publication), these publications should count as equivalent to single-authored work for purposes of reappointment, tenure, or promotion. In addition, these collaborative publications should be viewed at the same weight as single-authored publications, regardless of publication type (i.e., article, book chapter, edited collection or volume, book). Candidates should use narrative statements in association with their CVs to help department colleagues and external reviewers understand whether they participated in equal partnerships, as leaders in co-authorship, as essential contributors, or as mentors for collaborative publications. As Julie Thompson Klein and Holly J. Falk-Krzesinski argue, narrative explanations of collaborative and interdisciplinary scholarship are crucial:

If the mantra in real estate is location, location, location, for candidates seeking promotion and tenure for interdisciplinary and collaborative research it is explain, explain, explain. The tenure dossier has a crucial educational function because members of review committees and external letter writers are often unevenly familiar with a candidate’s accomplishments. Candidates are urged to include a description of the nature of their work in personal statements coordinated with annotation of relevant items in the curriculum vita (CV). In addition, the nature of the knowledge domain should be explained, especially in the case of cutting-edge interdisciplinary research, along with the pertinent epistemic community, qualified peers, genres of scholarship, venues of publication and presentation, funding sources, awards, public or stakeholder engagement, translational activities, and any extra service a position requires. (p. 3)

In dossiers, candidates should provide narrative explanations that describe their contributions to collaborative projects. When appropriate, they may also annotate their vitas to indicate equal partnerships or to indicate co-authors were students. In cases that do not fall into the four categories previously described, such as an article with many authors in which a candidate has made a small and discrete contribution, the narrative statement should be an opportunity to explain the candidate’s relative contribution to the whole, which may not be seen as equivalent to a singly-authored manuscript. The goal is not to have candidates use narratives or CVs to justify collaborative work, but rather to help colleagues both within and outside NC State better understand the nature of the collaboration and how individual candidates’ expertise shaped the resulting work.

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