

Interviewee: Michael Feehan [F]  
Interviewer: Laura Jones [J]  
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams  
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### Transcript

J: I'm Laura Jones from Georgia State University. And you are?

F: My name is Mike Feehan. At the moment, I work for the Arkansas state legislature.

J: Okay, very good.

F: I have an ulterior motive here.

J: Oh, boy! Okay! [laughs]

F: I want to talk about Charles Kneupper.

J: Okay.

F: Because he's really important and not many people know how important he was. And he's no longer with us to talk about himself. In order to understand why I want to talk about Charles, I need to start with myself.

J: Okay.

F: Because [pause] the important point is how different RSA was before Charles. Okay? I joined in 1975 because my teacher, Ross Winterowd, was one of the originals. At that time, RSA was more of an aspiration than an association.

J: Okay. [chuckles]

F: People have talked about, "Well, we did these things." Well, we didn't do much.

J: Alright.

F: We might get one session at SCA.<sup>1</sup> We might get one session at 4Cs.<sup>2</sup> We might get nothing. But the real RSA was the few people who were in it getting together in one of the other senior people's hotel rooms, and over a few drinks, talking about what it would be like to have a real rhetoric culture in American academia.

J: Yeah.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech Communication Association, now the National Communication Association.

<sup>2</sup> Conference on College Composition and Communication.

F: Because it didn't exist. In fact, by 1975 there may have been five *real* rhetoric PhDs in America.

J: Okay.

F: Ross Winterowd's was the first at Southern Cal.

J: Wow.

F: For years, that was all that it was. And George Yoos would mimeograph the newsletter and staple it and mail it out to people.

J: Yeah?

F: And as a few people have mentioned, most of it was bibliography. Because nobody was actually in a position to be able to actually do anything yet.

J: I see.

F: In the early 80s, Charles Kneupper, Victor Vitanza, and I were at University of Texas at Arlington.

J: Okay.

F: Victor had created a new rhetoric program there. Charles decided that he wanted to create conferences for the Rhetoric Society. So he called George Yoos and said, "Can I do this?" And George said, "Well, I don't have any authority to say one way or the other."

J: [laughs]

F: You know, technically, he was only the editor.

J: Uh huh.

F: But actually, he was the core.

J: Okay.

F: George Yoos was *the* core. Everything went through George. He said he didn't have any authority to do this. "If you want to have one, have one."

J: Right.

F: So he created it. Charles just created it. We had the first one at UTA<sup>3</sup> in 1984.

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<sup>3</sup> I.e., The University of Texas at Arlington.

J: Okay.

F: And he got a small grant from the school. And it was so small that we had the meetings in the nursing school at UTA.

J: Oh wow.

F: And the rooms were—you could not hold a conversation. Even the tables were bolted to the floor. Some of the rooms were those stadium rooms that they have in medical school. The meeting rooms were—a bunch of really good people came, we had good papers. The theme was “1984” ‘cause it was 1984, right?

J: Okay! [laughs]

F: And we had Ronald Reagan as president, so it’s like 1984! [chuckles] But that wasn’t the key.

J: Okay.

F: The key was after the conference, Charles gathered together most of the papers from that conference. And he went around trying to get somebody to publish them. Months and months and months, he was knocking on doors, calling people, beating his head on the walls like a junkyard dog.

J: [laughs]

F: He finally got the National Council of Teachers of English to agree to distribute it.

J: Okay.

F: So that volume said “distributed by.” So he got it together, he created the volume. He got NCTE to publish it, make it available, and so it was at College English [Association] conference and it was at 4Cs. Started being at SCA. It was physically there, which meant it was a *publication*.

J: Yeah.

F: That changed. That fact that all of a sudden you could get a publication through RSA made *this*.<sup>4</sup> Charles never lived to see the scale.

J: Yeah.

F: ‘Cause we had maybe 50 or 60 people.

J: Okay.

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<sup>4</sup> I.e., the scope of the program for the 2018 RSA conference.

[04:54]

F: The second one—there were like four times as many people. Enough money that we could actually have it at a *real* hotel, with *real* conference rooms.

J: [laughs]

F: And it was just—for us, it was massive. They couldn't have this for the size we were back then.

J: Right.

F: But [pause] and Charles gathered the papers from there, and so—when they were complaining last night about the president has to go out and do this, well Charles was doing that because he *created* it. And so it's always just been what Charles created. Whoever's running it does all this stuff, including get a volume together and find somebody to publish it. That's why there's never been one publisher.

J: Okay.

F: Because he created this thing that just keeps getting bigger. But it's *Charles's* creation. And the greatest thing that started happening, even at the second conference, people started complaining that UTA was hogging the glory. [laughs] Well, they had four and then people started picking it up, as they were saying last night.<sup>5</sup> But the people who were complaining didn't realize that Charles created it. He wasn't hogging it.

J: Right. [laughs]

F: He was trying to get people to take it!

J: Yeah!

F: He was going around trying to get people to take it. But it was the fact that after the first one, he knew that if he could get a volume out, it would change everything. And he was right. And he died while he was building the fourth one.

J: Okay.

F: And so, you know, they named the prize for best article after him.<sup>6</sup> But that's all that's left, really, in this culture, of Charles.

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<sup>5</sup> Presumably at the Keynote Address (J01 in the 2018 RSA conference program) and/or the RSA 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Reception (K01 in the program).

<sup>6</sup> I.e., RSA's Charles Kneupper Award, given annually to the best article published in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.

J: Okay.

F: There isn't that Charles *made it*.

J: Right.

[papers shuffling]

F: [voice shaking] That's what I'm here for, so—don't ask me any other things about it. But once Charles stopped—this is the first one I've gone to since Charles died.

J: Oh, wow.

F: And I'm going to retire, so that's why I'm here. So that's why I'm here: to say goodbye to everybody.

J: Yeah.

F: So I've got this huge gap from when Charles made it to this [flips quickly through conference program].

J: Yeah.

[both laughing]

F: This book they put out is bigger than the books he put out for the first two conferences.

J: Right.

F: Just the program is bigger than the books.

J: So, what are some of the additional ways that you think that RSA will continue to change in the years? Just in terms of magnitude—

F: Count the graduate students. It's the graduate students. If there's enough energy in the graduate programs that the students want to do this, it will survive.

J: Okay.

F: It isn't the old guys.

J: Okay. [laughs]

F: Or the old women. It's—we're fading out, and we've had all the fun.

J: [laughs]

F: If the fun isn't there in the graduate students, it'll die.

J: Okay.

F: The most important thing is the interdisciplinary stuff they're talking about.

J: Yes.

F: It used to be just English department and speech. And it was because [pause] English departments rabidly hate their rhetoric aspect. And of the four I was involved with while I was in academics, three are gone, including the one I got my doctorate in.

J: Wow. So rhetoric departments?

F: They don't exist anymore.

J: Wow.

F: One of them, the one at Southern Cal, technically still has a rhetorician on the faculty, Larry Green. The others are completely gone.

J: Huh.

F: There's not a trace left of them. One of them is still alive—the one that Kathleen Welch runs at Oklahoma.

J: Okay.

F: A lot of them, in the early days, the rhetoric program survived by taking freshman English and splitting off to become a separate entity.

J: Right.

F: And so the money line kept them alive. In the best ones, there's been enough strength of the rhetoric faculty to stand up to the crap they took from the literature faculty.

J: Right.

F: The same thing's true in the speech department. And we first start seeing this at Southern Cal with Ross [Winterowd] because he didn't actually have—it was in the English department—but he didn't actually have a rhetorician in the English department. So we took our rhetoric classes from Walt Fisher in the speech department. The other people in the speech department wouldn't talk to Walt Fisher 'cause he did that weird stuff, he didn't do "speech."

J: Right.

[10:01]

F: You know? And so that kind of thing has always been—and so that's what became the soul of RSA. It's what started it out when it was just groups of people having a drink in a hotel room, was that quality that, "You're in speech, but I'm in English, but we're all in rhetoric." As long as that stays, and it's fun for the graduate students, this thing will survive.

J: Do you have any other prominent memories or, you know, experiences that you want to share for this interview?

F: I didn't—well, like I said, I've got this huge gap with RSA.

J: Yeah, right.

F: Inside that, I've only been going to the Kenneth Burke stuff, and all my work has been on Kenneth Burke, okay?

J: Right, right.

F: So I haven't been with RSA except for reading the journals and knowing some of the people who are connected with it.

J: Gotcha. Sure.

F: So the memories I have aren't in this particular organization, it's in the allied organization, the Kenneth Burke Society.

J: Gotcha. Okay.

F: So I don't know that what I have would actually contribute to an oral history of this, after Charles.

J: Yeah. Well is there anything else that you want to share that comes to mind? That you think is important for us to record or document?

F: I've been thinking so much about talking about Charles that I haven't really thought about it. [pause] The next thing is to start talking about the generations.

J: Okay.

F: And another of my gaps is, I left academics after Charles died. So I've been working as an employee of the state legislature for 20 years. I haven't been in a classroom, so I don't know—so there's effectively two generations of graduate students I don't know.

J: Right.

F: So if there's a generational thing it's going to be—there's what, four or five now in the history of rhetoric. The first generation, there's very few left. Ed Corbett. Ross Winterowd. You know, almost all of them are gone. George Yoos was too sick to come to this. Janice Lauer is still here—she's one of the originals. So that generation is almost gone. The next generation, that I was in—Andrea Lunsford, Victor Vitanza, various other people—the people who were around at what was really the second phase of RSA when it became a real, functioning association when Charles created this, that generation is aging and moving. Andrea's technically already retired, though. The senior ones' retirement is, you know—I don't do the administration anymore but I'm around all the time—but that generation is about to close down. So the next generation is taking over. Your generation is now coming in.

J: Yes. Okay.

F: So one of the things the oral history should be watching as these are going on is how are the generational issues, qualities, emotions, changing for the generation and for that generation's impact on the society.

J: Sure.

F: But again, I got that gap so I don't know!

J: Yeah.

[both laughing]

F: I haven't been around to watch it.

J: Right.

F: So the people I know are that older bunch who were here in the 80s and early 90s when the thing started. So those people I know some about.

J: So you mentioned building and sustaining excitement in the graduate student community. What are some of the other things that you can imagine graduate students doing to help build and sustain this organization?

F: Well, sadly, for me, [laughs] the thing that graduate students generally don't have is an understanding of the politics of this whole thing.



J: Okay.

F: And how it damages the potential of rhetoric.

J: Okay.

F: Graduate students generally don't understand how deep the resentments are of the non-rhetoricians in the departments we're all part of.

J: Okay, yeah.

[14:49]

F: And it starts, of course, because the people [who] aren't in rhetoric see the rhetoricians as stealing their graduate students.

J: I see.

F: And, the number of courses you teach is dependent on the number that are *graduate* courses. So people work harder if they've got less—so it's really personal how pissed off people get about things. And graduate students don't understand that. So as graduate students, the excitement for the graduate students comes in their work, in discovering new things about how language creates and destroys communities, that kind of thing.

J: Right, yes!

F: But the other side of it—of sustaining the rhetoric—is that so few of them are themselves academically protected.

J: Okay.

F: For instance, UC Berkeley has a real rhetoric program in the ancient Greek sense.

J: Right.

F: It's a separate entity and has been for decades, a *unit* of the university—the *rhetoric* program.

J: Okay.

F: And so it has people who are essentially speech people, people who are essentially philosophers, sociologists, English people, but they're all—the core of their work is rhetoric. It's just a fundamentally different conception from what everybody else is getting because you're in some department whose orientation is X, and you're taking

the rhetoric portion of X. Okay? So almost all of the programs have that kind of sideways connection to the academic structure they're in.

J: Okay.

F: But it's not something the graduate students are particularly cognizant of because it's not part of the work that they're doing.

J: Right.

F: It's this umbrella thing that doesn't really impact them viscerally the way the study does.

J: Okay.

F: So there's always this—the danger for rhetoric is always this squeezing of the departments, of the rhetoric portion.

J: Right.

F: If graduate students create graduate program associations inside their departments—that while they are graduate students there's a graduate student association of the rhetoric students—one of the things those associations should be watching is those political, accordion kinds of qualities in the departments. Some are so established like, you know, Ohio State was established by Ed Corbett, so— [makes small explosion sound effect]

J: Yeah. [laughs]

F: But one of my best friends, Tim Crusius, came to Ross's program at Southern Cal from Kinneavy in Texas in 1972—well, 1974 when we started—because Texas wouldn't give a rhetoric program to *Jim Kinneavy*.

J: Huh!

F: And in fact, Corbett's came after Ross's.

J: Okay.

F: And the main thing was that after about three years of Ross's being at the point where he was producing PhDs, he was able to announce that 100% of all his graduates exited with full-time, tenure-track four-year college [positions]. 100%.

J: Wow.

F: And at Southern Cal, the literature PhDs scored zero. *Not one job* in all those years. Okay? When Ross was able to tell that to a drunken party at RSA, everybody was able to go back to their schools and say, “Yo! Jobs!”

J: [laughs] Right!

F: And so Corbett had one about twenty minutes after that, the one that Andrea was talking from.<sup>7</sup> Okay? And it still took Kinneavy, like, four or five more years at Texas to get a doctorate [program], okay? And Janice Lauer was able to get one very quickly, but she had to be at a different school, not at Purdue.

J: Huh! Wow.

F: And that kind of thing kept happening for a number of years, and then as I said, the “shootings” started: “You’re stealing our graduate students!”

J: [chuckles]

F: So at a whole bunch of schools, they’re gone, and at some schools they’re flourishing. And at some they [makes noise indicating equivocation]. So if the graduate students have associations where you really know, “There’s a time when we’re gonna get together and we’re gonna talk about whatever”—

J: Yeah.

F: One of the things to have in those conversations is, what is the strength of this program in the university we’re in?

J: Okay.

[19:58]

F: Not—well, you always want to talk about what is the strength of this program in terms of what we want to accomplish as students, but another thing for the long-term health of *this thing*<sup>8</sup> is, is this program safe? Is our graduate program safe in our school? In our department? ‘Cause some are and some aren’t.

J: Yeah. Yeah!

F: And there’s almost no chance that the kind of thing that’s at Berkeley is going to happen anywhere else.

J: Okay.

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<sup>7</sup> I.e., Lunsford discussed Corbett’s program at Ohio State in her keynote address, delivered the preceding evening, at the 2018 conference.

<sup>8</sup> I.e., RSA.

F: So they're always going to be a corner in another department.

J: Sure. Huh! Alright. I think that actually covers, broadly, in some way, shape, or form most of these questions.

F: Yeah, I think that's about all I've got to say. [laughs]

J: Thank you very, very much.

F: Okie doke.