

THE STATEMENT OF PURPOSE IN APPLICATIONS TO PHD PROGRAMS
IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION:
AN ACTIVITY THEORY
ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

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The applications process to PhD programs is complex, as signified by the number and variety of application requirements, including written texts. Of these texts, the statement of purpose in particular is regarded by recent scholarship as an occluded genre, one for which rhetorical purposes and resulting formal and content-related maneuvers are not apparent to applicants. This genre is a high-stakes genre in admissions to many PhD programs, acting as writing sample, evidence of disciplinary knowledge, and tentative proposal of future research. This thesis employs activity theory to investigate and analyze representative graduate programs' admissions processes as activity systems and the role the statement of purpose plays in these systems. This role includes the ways the statement of purpose generates new texts and actions. The author makes both a nonspecific activity system model of admissions to PhD programs in rhetoric and composition and their use of the statement of purpose, and a contrastive model of one program and its use of the statement. The study's findings demonstrate one potential cause of the occluded nature of the statement of purpose as a genre; that is, the expectations for and use of the genre in admissions practices vary from program to program, even within one discipline. Ultimately, this thesis examines the critical role student writing plays in the transition to a PhD program, concluding that the specific nature of this role is context-driven.

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The only gift is a portion of thyself. –Ralph Waldo Emerson

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Each fall, for many college students pursuing advanced study, the prospect of entering a PhD program engenders excitement and, perhaps, trepidation. Simply getting into a program is only one step on a path of increasing difficulty into unknown scholarly territory. Students who have completed Bachelor's and, in many cases, are just completing Master's degrees, now encounter the rigorous tasks of selecting and applying to advanced degree programs. While these students have encountered academic applications before, the PhD with its focused, independent study and concentration on research, presents novel challenges. For many individuals, selecting and applying to PhD programs is an arduous process, demanding the applicant's time and careful thought and consideration, even soul-searching, to find the best program or the best fit, to decide on the focus of future studies, to question whether advanced study is even the best option for himself or herself. This decision process is aided by conversations with professors and advisers at the applicant's current school and prospective future schools, and savvy applicants may even position themselves by corresponding with scholars whose research interests reflect their own or finding other appropriate ways to network in their disciplines.

Selecting and applying to PhD programs is motivated by conversations with self and others. It is also aided by conversation with texts. Students learn about their research

interests, in part, through reading and also synthesizing the work of other scholars in the course of advanced undergraduate and early graduate study. Additionally, some scholarship speaks directly to the PhD application process, such as journals which publish special issues or articles highlighting the strengths of doctoral programs. In the case of rhetoric and composition, special issues of *Rhetoric Review* have surveyed the breadth and variety of doctoral programs in the discipline several times in the past three decades, with the most recent survey issued in 2008. Via the Internet, applicants to programs in this discipline have the Consortium of Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition, whose website aims to include information about and links to all of the programs in North America. The Internet also presents new ways of reading and understanding programs through universities' homepages, which provide abundant information about the programs themselves in context of their home institutions. The homepage is a portal that provides many points of entry to information, giving the reader the opportunity to create his/her own understanding of its content (Kress 9). On program websites, applicants have the ability to selectively navigate the wealth of potential knowledge about the program at will. A thorough exploration of any given program's website reveals detailed program and course descriptions, rules and guidelines for dissertations and comprehensive examinations, information about assistantships, introductions to faculty, current and recent PhD students and their scholarship and accomplishments, and much more. At the very least, the prospective applicant will use this portal to locate a list of requirements and begin compiling the necessary texts and information in order to apply.

Even a casual survey of PhD program admissions web pages reveals that the process of applying to advanced study is complex, requiring the student to submit a number of different texts, some in duplicate or triplicate, to admissions officers in separate offices or departments of any given university. Each school's requirement, such as Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores, transcripts, curriculum vitae (CV) and writing samples, may be relatively familiar. Students who may currently be enrolled in Master's programs could complete this process practically by rote. Still, a list of requirements draws only a sketchy picture of a perhaps esoteric process that ensues after an applicant has sent her materials to the program. If only by virtue of the similarities among admissions processes across universities and disciplines, it appears that the endeavor to accept and admit students to PhD programs is a regulated and highly developed process. Based on observation of admissions requirements alone, this process begs a number of questions. How do universities accept students best suited to their programs? What actions do individuals and textual genres perform in helping universities achieve these goals? What purposes do texts such as the writing sample and statement of purpose serve in this process? Who reads and assesses these texts, and what are their evaluation criteria? And perhaps most important: In what ways can an applicant create agency and establish scholarly identity in the texts he or she submits to PhD programs?

In raising questions about PhD admissions in this manner, I wish to continue interrogating the variety of texts required by programs in rhetoric and composition, in particular, as an indicator of the highly developed complexity of the admissions process. With regard to this process, recent scholarship notes the unique role of the statement of purpose. In several recent genre analyses, scholars observe that students typically receive

little to no instruction or guidance in writing the personal statement, or statement of purpose, and therefore they have labeled it an “occluded genre” (Brown 242; Samraj and Monk 194; Ding 369).¹ The statement of purpose is a brief (typically 200-500 word) account of the applicant’s experience with and future goals for work in the discipline to which s/he is applying. Despite the fact that this genre is unfamiliar to most students before they begin applying to graduate programs, it is one of the highest stakes texts submitted as part of the applications process to programs in many disciplines (Ding 369) and one over which the applicant has immediate, extemporaneous control during the admissions process (Brown 243). Applicants write the statement of purpose for specific programs and may individualize their responses, using the statement to explicitly explain their purpose(s) in applying to doctoral work at a given institution.

In contrast, students also submit documents such as transcripts and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, over which they no longer have immediate control. Even a writing sample is not necessarily fine-tuned for a specific program. The statement of purpose appears to be unique for all these reasons. For rhetoric and composition in particular, a sampling of programs from those highlighted in the 2008 *Rhetoric Review* “Survey of Doctoral Programs” identifies the statement of purpose as the highest ranking factor in admissions criteria across the programs surveyed there (Brown, Enos, Reamer & Thompson). In all, the statement of purpose is a highly rhetorical text that performs a number of duties for the applicant, including conveying research interests, valuable experience, future goals and relating these to the program’s goals. For the many individuals who read, assess, and evaluate the statement of purpose, this text also provides a formal example of scholarly writing required in advanced study. Despite the

apparent contradiction between the importance of this genre to admissions processes and its unfamiliarity to students, the statement of purpose has only recently drawn attention from applied linguists and other composition scholars.

The 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), “The Remix: Revisit, Rethink, Revise, Renew,” called, in part, for submissions that address this particular gap in research, asking:

Is it time to revisit and revise our approaches to graduate education? Do we think enough about pedagogical issues when it comes to the training of graduate students? How might a remix better prepare our graduate students for the job market? For their professional careers? (1)

The questions posited by CCCC indicate the need to study the communication practices of graduate students. This call may include texts written by graduate students in transition to and within PhD programs, the function of workplace texts in the university, and transitions from graduate work to independent scholarship. Given the dearth of scholarship on graduate writing, I believe that it is best to begin at the beginning. One aspect of the transition to a PhD program (henceforth, specifically to PhD programs in rhetoric and composition) which remains to be investigated—and which is the first aspect of any given program that a student encounters in transitioning—is the application and admissions process. Within this process, the various required texts can be assumed to serve unique purposes. The purported aim of the statement of purpose, for example, is to introduce the student and his/her research interests and goals to the program, positing that the student is a good fit to the program and should be accepted. This document, therefore, is uniquely rhetorical, intended solely to convey specific ideas to a specific audience to

elicit a specific response. How does this genre perform those functions and do the work of generating responses from readers leading to acceptance or denial of admissions?

Several scholars, sensitive to the rhetorical nature of the statement of purpose, have analyzed the genre in terms of its rhetorical qualities and its reception by its intended audiences. In “Genre Analysis of Personal statements: Analysis of Moves in Application Essays to Medical and Dental Schools,” Huiling Ding uses John Swales’ concept of “move” to analyze standardized rhetorical maneuvers in the genre with the intent of explaining the genre to an audience of scholars (with ESL graduate students specifically in mind). Ding’s emphasis on the context and audience of the genre highlight how textual genres and their characteristics respond dynamically to situation (370). While most graduate students’ sense of many classroom genres is thoroughly developed, to succeed they must begin anew to create texts that will be revised, reviewed by peers, published, and presented. These genres encompass, in many instances, higher stakes with regard to career than many of the classroom genres. Ding problematizes the personal statements in medical and dental school applications as such:

No matter whether they are native speakers or non-native speakers, the applicants are involved in composing a completely new genre to appeal to an unfamiliar audience, namely, medical/dental school admission committees or privileged professors. Applicants suffer from the unfamiliarity with the conventions of the genre, readers’ expectations, and the need to promote themselves as perfect candidates for target programs. (371)

It is important to acknowledge that it is the specific individuals and groups who read the statement of purpose, as well as the systems surrounding those individuals, that affect

how statements of purpose are read. Because the genre is occluded, these individuals are very powerful in making decisions based on applicants' statements of purpose. Ding, like many scholars who uses activity and/or genre theories, sees the inherent power dynamic in this situation as problematic, stating explicitly that the knowledge she gathered in her research is not readily available to most program applicants.

Like Ding, Robert M. Brown asserts in his genre analysis and critique, "Self-Composed: Rhetoric in Psychology Personal Statements," that faculty who read personal statements are extremely familiar with the genre in its many possible forms, but applicants are not. Brown's initial focus on the sources of advice offered for this genre leads him to critique the genre for its inherent claim of "personal." The successful examples he found focused on the applicants' future public and professional identities and demonstrate the stance required of psychologists, that is, "the traditional objective orientation of scientific inquiry" (245). Brown's readers were not looking for personal information but for indications of disciplinary knowledge. However, Betty Samraj and Lenore Monk found in "The Statement of Purpose in Graduate Program Applications: Genre Structure and Disciplinary Variation" that some readers were interested in statements that conveyed personal information, in an attempt to see the applicant as a well-rounded individual (207).² Thus, expectations vary significantly across departments, disciplines, or even possibly particular programs within a discipline.

Ding's analysis is linguistic and textual in nature, but her conclusions about successful and unedited examples of personal statements include a pedagogical implication—that the effective moves should be taught (386). According to Ding, the five moves made in successful examples of the genre include first stating the reason for

pursuing the degree, including academic interest, showing comprehension of the discipline, and demonstrating one's motivation (376). The second move demonstrates credentials, including achievements, scholarly research practice, and experience in settings related to the discipline. Move three discusses life situations that are relevant to the discipline or program. (377). In the fourth move, the applicant specifically states his or her goals for the future, and Ding describes the fifth move as such: "This move explicitly describes or demonstrates the applicant's unique experience and personality to distinguish him/herself from the large pool of applicants" (378).

Brown's analysis focuses on two topics evident in the successful personal statements: Research experience, research interests, and a third topic which was much less evident in his sample, due to the research-focused nature of the program he studied—practical experience (248).³ All three of these topics overlap with Ding's moves, but successful texts for psychology applicants appeared to maintain the more empirical stance Brown describes. One question arising from the trends across this genre, as described by both Ding and Brown, is "How do the successful applicants know what moves to make?" Much as I have referred to the admissions process as complex and esoteric, Ding describes the genre of personal statement as "mystified and occluded" and suggests there may be a need for "guidance . . . on how to write these texts to meet their multiple obscure communicative purposes" (387). Like Ding, Samraj and Monk observe that the statement of purpose is at least a semi-occluded genre, noting that at least one of the readers they interviewed thought that if applicants were suited to advanced study, they should have a tacit knowledge of what to write and how to write it (208). Further, it appears that individual programs may be insular and have their own unique preferences,

which illustrates how individual activity systems are constituted by an idiosyncratic set of social dynamics which affect their construction of genres. Apparently, the applicant must not only know tacitly how to write a statement of purpose, but also how to fine-tune it to fit the distinctive perspectives of the unknown individuals who may read it during the applications process. Because of a lack of communication by these individuals across disciplines regarding this most critical genre in the applications process, I submit the genre of statement of purpose (or personal statement) may suffer a stunted growth as a dynamic and responsive genre. The work of Ding, Brown, and others, including this thesis, seeks to contextualize this genre.

Scholars have shown that the character of the statement of purpose varies significantly from context to context. These contexts have included applications to graduate programs in several fields as well as medical and dental schools, but compositionists have yet to turn their lenses on their own field. Further, while scholars have applied methods of analysis that acknowledge the social context of written genres, they have yet to view the use of the statement of purpose by its intended audience. That is, while previous studies have asked readers about the content of successful and unsuccessful statements of purpose, they have yet to situate the genre within the process of PhD admissions. By using analytical procedures that tie the genre to the action it performs within this process, new knowledge about the statement of purpose may emerge. For instance, the factors (disciplinary, institutional, economic, or other) that contribute to how statements of purpose are used may affect the nature of this genre, if it is indeed dynamic and responsive to these factors.

Using admissions requirements and the statement of purpose genre as evidence, I argue that the process by which students are admitted to doctoral programs is a highly dynamic one. It is ongoing, and conducted by individual members of a community (e.g., faculty, administrators) with shared goals. These individuals use a number of tools, including language and linguistic tools, to perform their duties. Further, the process is governed by “rules” (e.g., deadlines, minimum GRE scores, formal and stylistic expectations of the statement of purpose genre), and relies on the division of labor among individuals and communities. For these reasons, the admissions process lends itself to designation as an activity system. I use term “activity system” to refer to a network of individuals who work continually toward common goals (Engestrom). If the admissions process is an example of an ongoing and regulated system, then the texts and textual genres which move within that system can be assumed to act to motivate specific, regulated responses, moving an entire system toward its goals. The statement of purpose does work within this process, providing a point of access to the system and motivating individuals toward the system’s ultimate goals. One goal of the director of graduate studies and acceptance committee for a given program may be to admit the best prospective students to the program, and the students’ personal statements or statements of purpose may aid in fulfilling this goal. This process raises a constellation of questions regarding how these texts are read and evaluated to generate these judgments. This thesis uses activity theory and genre theory to investigate and analyze the nature of representative graduate programs’ admissions processes as activity systems, the role the statement of purpose plays in these systems, and the ways the statement of purpose acts

as an agent to generate new texts and actions. Ultimately, this project examines the critical role student writing plays in the transition to a PhD program.

Research Questions

This thesis encompasses two primary objectives: First, I analyze the nature and function of the statement of purpose in applications and admissions to PhD programs in rhetoric and composition. A second objective is to discern the implications of this study for further research in textual genres and activity systems of the university and/or for writing instruction of graduate students. Thus, this thesis addresses a number of questions:

- To what extent does the statement of purpose have agency in the activity system of rhetoric and composition PhD admissions?
- What actions are initiated and what other texts are generated by readings of the statement of purpose (e.g. acceptance letter, denial letter)?
- What is the relationship between the use of the statement of purpose in the PhD application and admissions process and the development of the statement of purpose as a textual genre?
- What is the relationship between the representation of a rhetoric and composition program as expressed in its own promotional texts (e.g., program website and brochures) and the ways in which the statement of purpose is used?

I will use activity theory and genre theory to analyze the data gathered from a survey of several programs and then posit a more defined model of one case-study program. Since my investigation is focused on creating a model of sample admissions to rhetoric and composition PhD programs and to describe the use of the statement of purpose within

these activity systems, the textual genre will not be sampled further or analyzed lexically or linguistically for the purposes of this study. I will rely upon certain assumptions, based on genre theory and also drawing where necessary upon the studies by Brown, Ding, and Samraj and Monk to draw conclusions about the use of the genre. I will state these assumptions explicitly as the necessity arises from my data and analysis.

Activity Theory and PhD Admissions as Activity System

To study the processes of admissions to PhD programs in rhetoric and composition, I apply activity theory and an activity system model to these processes. Onto my model, I map the statement of purpose genre, illustrating many of the factors that illustrate its use. Activity theory is a useful lens for analyzing ongoing work by groups, because it provides a model that accounts for the social, historical, and cultural factors that are involved in human activity. These factors contribute to how we divide labor, use tools (material and semiotic), and set and amend goals, but especially to how we learn and innovate. Because activity theory contextualizes human endeavors in this way, it helps scholars demonstrate that knowledge is co-constructed in the process of achieving the goals of these endeavors. The activity system model is a unit of analysis that accounts for the complexity of knowledge, which is situated in the transactional spaces between individuals and groups as well as within the human mind. Further, the activity system model is one that shows how humans both influence and are influenced by their environments.

In the first section of this thesis, I discussed the highly complex and ongoing (i.e., both stable and continually developing) nature of graduate admissions as evidenced by the similar and elaborate submission requirements of programs in rhetoric and

composition. The historical nature of program admissions suggests that a given graduate admissions process qualifies as an activity system according to the tenets of cultural-historical activity theory. Activity theory is a legacy of the work of Lev Vygotsky's constructivist theory, by which knowledge is understood to be constructed through interaction. Through development by Vygotsky's apprentices and their students, activity theory accounts for the context of thought, connecting it to the social milieu (Engestrom). A branch of scholarship in rhetoric and composition in the past two decades has employed this theory, especially in crafting arguments about needed changes in writing instruction in and across the academy.

As I stated above, activity theory is grounded in Vygotsky's work, which also demonstrates that for a number of reasons, work in the real world (i.e., the world outside of school, especially elementary and secondary school) provides the most effective model scenario for learning. This is because goal-oriented human work is dependent on networks of individuals; the social and goal-oriented aspects of this work contribute to motivation for learning, transfer, and retention. Adding to Vygotsky's work, his student, A.N. Leont'ev developed what activity theorists refer to as second generation activity theory (Roth and Lee 189). Yrjö Engestrom developed and clarified Leont'ev's work and the activity system model in *Learning by Expanding* in 1987. In an introduction to the German edition of *Learning by Expanding* published in 1999, Engestrom briefly describes the work of Vygotsky and his students, who maintained "a bold experimental attitude rather than the attitude of a casual observer and facilitator." That is, the Soviet researchers not only acknowledged, but in fact focused on, the effect of their own interventions and the potential tools they supplied to their study subjects. Engestrom

contrasts this with other schools of psychological research that attempt to create a sterile environment and to ignore, suspend, or negate the social milieu.

Engestrom's model, based on his development of the theory, focuses more closely on the moment in time, space and activity that yields a problem to overcome or a need for learning. A problem space, moment of need, or space of cognitive dissonance—what Vygotsky termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), gives individuals and groups motive to develop new ideas and new ways to solve problems. In the ZPD, the individual or group experiences a psychological double bind, in which previous knowledge cannot account for the present problem, and wherein new development, Engestrom's "learning by expanding" may occur.⁴ Importantly, the entire activity system rather than the ZPD is the unit of analysis for the conduct of groups and individuals. By expanding the field beyond the ZPD itself to the activity system, it is possible to see how the ZPD and psychological double bind develop and how the individuals or groups involved in the activity develop new ideas, tools, and/or methods to overcome the situation and continue their development (Engestrom). This use of the system as unit of analysis is important to my use of the theory in studying graduate admissions.

The activity system is most frequently illustrated using a triangle. This model visually foregrounds the dialectical nature of activity systems and their components. The simplest version of the triangle illustrates only the tools (also, instruments or mediational means) at the top, subjects at left, and the object/motive at right, leading to outcomes. In other words, the most basic illustration available does not situate the activity system with reference to its rules, community, and division of labor. However, Engestrom's more

complex version is more useful in illustrating the full complexity of activity, and it is the model I have selected to use here (see fig. 1).

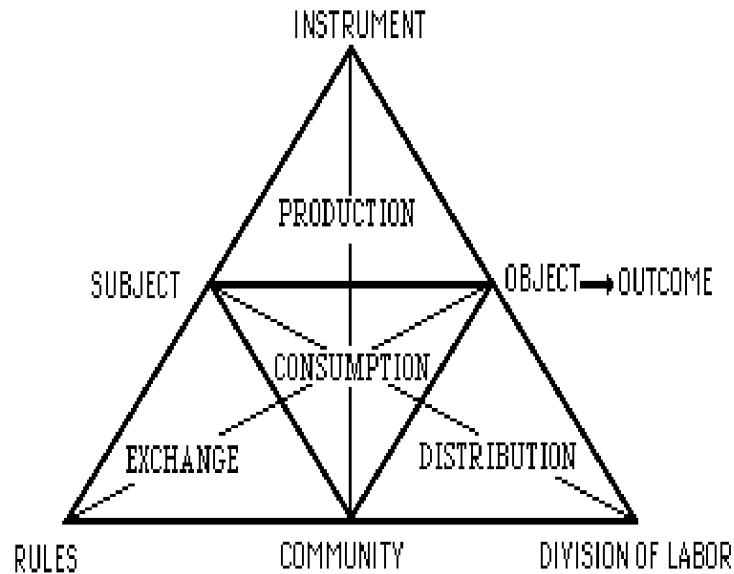


Figure 1 Engeström, Yrjö; *The Structure of Human Activity; Learning by Expanding: An Activity-Theoretical Approach to Developmental Research; Mind, Culture, and Activity Homepage*; University of California, San Diego Laboratory of Human Cognition; Web; 14 January 2010.

The activity triangle illustrates the components of an activity system:

- **Instruments or tools (also material means)** include both material and symbolic tools, such as language systems or other systems of signs. Tools are used by subjects in the activity.
- **Subject(s)** are the people who participate directly in the activity. The subjects are also the people whose activities are the focus of study in an activity theory analysis.
- The **object or objective** is what is being acted upon in moving toward the motive. It encompasses materials and problem spaces.

- The **outcomes** are the actual results, which may differ from the intended object(ive)s and motives.
- **Rules** are similar to motives in that they include both official governance and implicit or unofficial rules such as norms, mores and other unspoken, socially-mitigated expectations.
- The **community**, of which discourse community is a potential subset, is a group which is involved in the activity due to shared goals.
- **Division of labor** is the allotment of tasks or actions to individuals and groups.

Activity, as shown, is composed of production, distribution, exchange (including communication), and consumption. All of these elements, processes, and categories are necessary to understanding the activity system. The inclusion of all of these elements also illustrates the dialectical nature of these processes and categories, by which any element cannot be understood without attention to its components or to its relationships with other elements. A recent meta-analysis of activity theoretical scholarship by Wolff-Michael Roth and Yew-Jin Lee demonstrates the utility of this theory and its model in studying learning within the realms of human activity. In their discussion of the implications activity theory has for praxis, Roth and Lee point out that it is the dialectical nature of activity that helps us understand how “entities such as classrooms, school departments, and workplaces can perform seemingly individualized acts of learning like persons” (197).⁵ It is important to remember that activity, in the case of activity theory, is ongoing, collective, and goal oriented, and is not to be confused with actions or tasks, which nonetheless comprise parts of activity. Described in this way, the ongoing, collective, and

goal-oriented work of collecting and evaluating applications to doctoral programs may be surmised as activity.

The Mapping of Genre onto Activity Systems

In probing the actions, transactions, and knowledge of individuals and groups in activity systems, some scholars have mapped the concept of textual genres as dynamic entities onto these systems. The fusion of the rhetorical theory of genre with cultural-historical activity theory was developed by Charles Bazerman and David Russell, along with others. The interelucidation of the two theories is explained in Russell's "Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis."⁶ However, as with graduate student writing in general, the theory has been used little to analyze graduate students, their writing, and the dynamic systems of activity that make up their experience.

Genre theory draws on a lineage of work and is particularly dependent upon Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic theories and the assertions of Carolyn Miller and others who explore the historic and social nature of genres. Most recently, scholars such as Russell and Wardle have explored the compatibility of genre theory and activity theory. The result of integrating the two theories has proven particularly useful in studying human communicative interactions, including (and especially for this discipline) writing. Even in the act of defining themselves, these two theories help the scholar synthesize her own understanding of text and context. According to scholars, both theories also have pedagogical implications. Activity theorists have recognized textual genres as tools and objects in activity systems (Russell 513, Wardle 767, Kain and Wardle 122). Activity systems can model human development, learning, and behavior (including using tools such as writing and textual genres) based on the goals of groups of individuals. Like

Brown, Ding, and Samraj and Monk, I argue that the study of the statement of purpose must account for the social contexts of the genre.

Theorists have worked to map textual genres on activity systems, drawing on work that shows genres construct meaning through complex relationships within genre sets, and more broadly, through genre systems. Like activity systems, genre systems are social, historical, and cultural in nature. In these systems, genres act and are acted upon, and meaning is continually constructed within, among, and throughout the communities involved. Graduate students and their written texts act in genre sets that are at the periphery of their prospective disciplinary community/ies, but their texts may rarely move beyond the professor-student dyad and into the larger community. This situation is problematic because the textual genres that move students into the community are often those same occluded texts, like the personal statement, that students are under-prepared to compose. The successful applicants to a program might use rhetoric that echoes the professional writing of the professionals produced by that program, but these applicants could intuitively do so. In turn, these statements of purpose might elicit intuitive or subconscious positive responses from their privileged readers. As I implied in the introduction to this thesis, the entire admissions process (and therefore its genres and activity and genre systems) is often less than transparent.

The statement of purpose presents an excellent example of how genre is both acted upon and its own action; the use of one genre is an exigence for yet another rhetorical action in admissions activity systems. This new action is performed through what Devitt has called “uptake.” Uptake helps connect writers and readers through their conversation, both as textual conventions and conceptual objects of study (583). Uptake

also helps define how readers and writers use genre sets in consistent ways, as well as in innovative ones. Thus, while some readers of statements of purpose (especially those outside the field(s) of rhetoric and composition) may not explicitly recognize the moves made by successful texts, they nevertheless read the applicants' statements and react to them based on whether the texts do or do not make these moves. These readers then produce responses which promote the applicant to the status of "prospective student" or relegate them to "declined." Brown also highlights that the personal statement only became important to admissions criteria when the psychology department at his university instituted a mentor-based PhD program (245). When it became important to know students' research interests in order to match them with faculty members, the genre itself was appropriated through uptake, and, as Brown demonstrates, developed in response to the program's specific needs. This is just one illustration of the mapping of genres and genre systems on activity systems, where aspects of the systems influence on another transactionally.

In the case of the personal statement or statement of purpose, complex spheres of transaction and influence could account for some of the discrepancies between successful and unsuccessful texts in both the Brown and Ding studies. Brown especially devotes great attention to the differences between students whose interests in psychology are not presented as research interests but as clinical or personal interests (257).⁷ Since these students were applying to a program with a heavy emphasis on research, their statements of purpose were deemed inappropriate if their goals were stated in personal or clinical terms (for example, students might state that they want to help others). As Brown was declined the opportunity to access information such as students' undergraduate majors, it

is difficult to be certain but possible to surmise that the students' previous experiences had led them to misrecognize cues from the program literature, generalizing in their own minds that all psychiatry is clinical practice. In this example, students may be influenced by transactions in previous activity systems to misrecognize genres within a new one. It is only one example of the ways in which systems, individuals, and genres interact with and influence one another.

In the remainder of this work, I will use activity theory and genre theory to model the admissions processes to PhD programs in rhetoric and composition and analyze their use of the statement of purpose. Rather than analyzing samples of the statement of purpose genre, I focus on the genre's place in activity and genre systems. I do so to probe the social construction of the statement of purpose through its use in these systems, adding to a more complete understanding of this occluded genre. In addition, I recognize the use of the *concept* of the statement of purpose genre as a tool in the activity systems of PhD admissions. Within those activity systems, readers apply their own concepts to the textual examples of the genre they read in order to evaluate them. As I show in my analysis, this use of the concept of the genre as a tool is of utmost significance to both the activity of PhD admissions and conversely to the genre itself, particularly its occluded nature.⁸ In the next sections, I state my research questions and methods. In the ensuing chapters, I model admissions processes and their use of the statement of purpose and other genres submitted by applicants, and then I look at a representative program as a specific context within which to observe the transactions that influence genres, individuals, and systems

Methods of Research and Analysis

In order to construct an activity system model that illustrates the nature of the respective programs' admissions processes, including the role of the statement of purpose in those systems (e.g., its use by directors of graduate studies, its agentive role in the systems, its relation to other texts, the concept of the genre as a tool), I began by selecting PhD programs in rhetoric and composition to contact and survey. My initial survey was brief and asked the contacts to describe their programs and the statement of purpose genre, as well as give a few details about the use of the genre in admissions (e.g., number of faculty members who read the statement). Selecting from the most recent *Rhetoric Review* survey of doctoral programs, I sent an initial survey to the contacts for those programs that listed the statement of purpose among their top three admissions criteria. In addition, selecting from the website of the Doctoral Consortium in Rhetoric and Composition, I sent the initial survey to all of the contacts for programs that were not included in the *Rhetoric Review* survey. From these, fourteen program contacts responded to the survey and form the basis of my general model of program admissions in Chapter II.

To access more detailed information, I sought to speak with several of the respondents to my survey. To that end, the survey form also included a request for contact information for a follow-up interview. Nine of the survey respondents supplied their information. I was able to conduct telephone interviews with five of these respondents, which I tape-recorded.⁹ The information from these interviews informs my analysis in Chapters II and III. From the five interviews I did conduct, I selected one university (hereafter, East Mountain U or EMU) and program to model in Chapter III. To

more completely comprehend the activity system there, I found it useful to contrast the program at EMU and its admissions process with those at other sample institutions. Using the contacts' descriptions of admissions processes, *Rhetoric Review's* current and past surveys of programs, and the literature available on the programs' websites, I construct an activity system model of EMU's rhetoric and composition PhD admissions process and its use of the statement of purpose. In Chapter IV, I discuss the implications of this work for future scholarship, pedagogy, and the political dynamics of the discipline and the academy.

CHAPTER II

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS: GENERAL SURVEY OF PROGRAMS

To give a general picture of the character of rhetoric and composition PhD programs, the activity systems of their admissions processes, and those systems' use of the statement of purpose, I rely upon the responses from the survey I conducted of contacts to these programs. These contacts were the individuals whose names were provided by either the *Rhetoric Review* survey or the Doctorial Consortium website. In some cases the respondents were individuals whose information was provided by these initial contacts. Throughout this section, I compare my own results to the 2007 survey by Brown et al. Even within this relatively small sample there is some variation between settings. A total of fourteen contacts responded to my survey.¹⁰ Of these respondents, I conducted telephone interviews with respondents from five universities. The respondents' institutions and their rhetoric and composition programs vary in structure and approach, as well as in region. These interviews were invaluable to my analysis of the data from my own survey and data collected from other sources, and function significantly in Chapters II and III.

In this chapter I use the components of the activity system to assess the results of my general survey, supplementing this information with information from the 2007 *Rhetoric Review* Survey as I describe above. Ultimately, this chapter draws upon this information to make general model of PhD program admissions. This model illustrates

the uses of the statement of purpose in admissions across programs. It also helps discern and locate possible influences of these uses on the statement of purpose as a genre.

The Activity System(s) of PhD Admissions

In the case of PhD admissions to a rhetoric and composition program, the activity system is comprised of the community surrounding the system—the academy, the university, the discourse community or communities involved, and/or the community in which the university is located, depending on the character of the particular institution and its environment (see fig. 2).

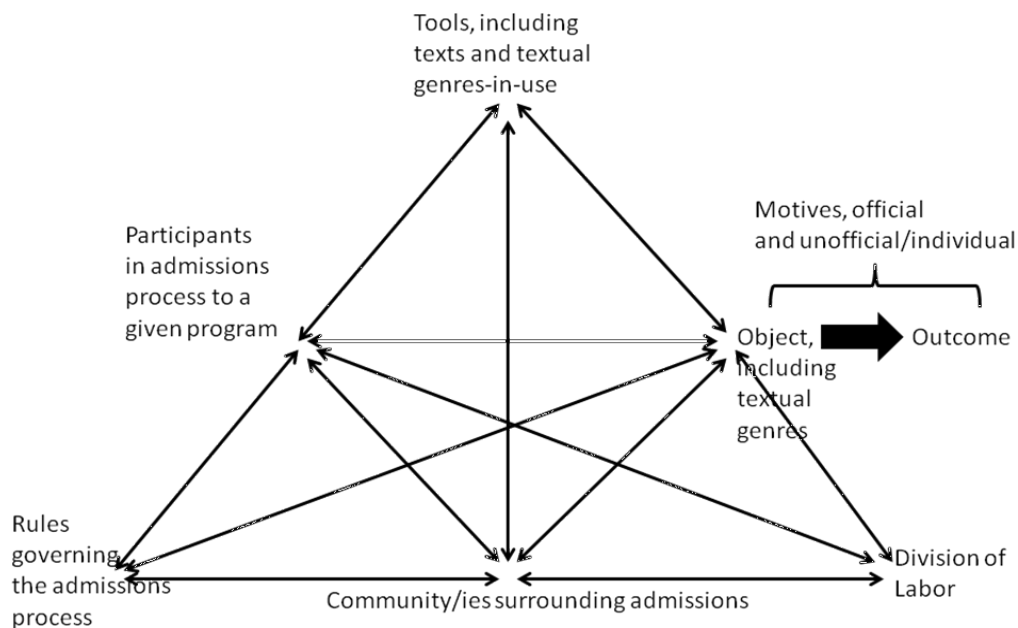


Figure 2, Activity System: Admissions to a PhD Program in Rhetoric and Composition

Here, the subjects are those actors whose work comprises the activity of admissions, typically the director of graduate studies, department chair, and other faculty. The texts used by those actors, including the statement of purpose, may be tools and/or objects in the process of admissions. In describing the work of a university activity system, David Russell explains that tools, or “mediational means . . . and—most important—the division of labor enabled by tools mediate humans’ interactions, separate[e] biological motives

from the socially constructed object/motives of activity” (511).¹¹ Following Russell, Wardle, and others, I include **motives** in this model, which encompass both the official and unofficial purposes that guide the activity and the intended and actual outcomes of the activity.

Activity is hallmark of civilization, culture, society, and history—which is illustrated by the longer name of the theory, that is, cultural-historical activity theory.¹² While a general model of PhD admissions such as the one I have proposed may be useful as a starting point, it is important to acknowledge the uniqueness of social, historical, and cultural contexts or milieus. Thus, while activity theory may be used to observe and explain a general category of activity such as PhD admissions to programs in rhetoric and composition, the activity system model is best used to describe only one particular program’s admissions process. In addition, since different programs may have developed individualized ways to achieve their object(ives)/motives, writing in general as well as specific textual genres in particular may work differently from one activity system to the next.

Subjects: Survey and Interview Respondents

Of the fourteen respondents to my survey, all except one were faculty at their institutions. One respondent was a recruitment coordinator (a non-faculty professional staff position). Of the remaining thirteen respondents, six were directors of graduate studies or an equivalent, two were writing program administrators or an equivalent, and three were department chairs or an equivalent. While all of these individuals were listed as program contacts, the fact that they differed in rank and administrative role demonstrates some differences in the structure of program admissions and the division of

labor within these systems. By chance and not design, the five respondents in my interview sample included four directors of graduate studies and one department head. As I discuss in more detail in the section on division of labor, the other individuals involved in the processes of PhD admissions and the use of the statement of purpose also varied to some degree.

Community: Institutional Settings

The communities within which PhD programs in rhetoric and composition operate are diverse and widespread. First, all of the universities are located in North America, and the list of universities on the Doctoral Consortium website indicates that PhD programs in rhetoric and composition are spread across the U.S. and concentrated to some extent in the regions where population is also concentrated (see fig. 3). Thus, there are many universities with rhetoric and composition programs east of the Mississippi River, with numbers dwindling toward the Plains States. Across the southern U.S. and on the West Coast, there are many programs, but there is not as high a concentration as in the states east of the Mississippi River. The total group of universities that house rhetoric and composition PhD programs include a number of large public and land-grant institutions and other research level one schools, polytechnic institutes, and a few smaller private institutions. From the nine respondents who volunteered their institutional affiliations in response to my survey, I find some regional and institutional variation in my sample.¹³ In all, the university settings of my sample of fourteen institutions appear to vary. Considering diverse settings and differences in institutional types, I surmise that the statement of purpose functions uniquely within these programs' admissions processes.



Figure 3, Map of North American Universities with PhD Programs in Rhetoric and Composition.¹⁴

There is also a correspondence between institutional structures and the communities which more closely surround rhetoric and composition programs. Within my sample of programs, eight of the fourteen institutions' rhetoric and composition PhD programs are housed in English departments. Other institutions have programs housed in interdisciplinary departments or communication departments. Similarly, in the discipline as a whole, according to Brown et al., slightly over half (43) of the degrees offered by the programs surveyed are PhDs in English with a concentration or PhD in English. My sample programs demonstrated a range of important concentrations or focuses, as rated by the respondents to my survey, which appear to correspond to the range of dissertation topics listed in the *Rhetoric Review* survey. For example, a number of respondents in my sample rated pedagogy as “essential” (five) or “important” (nine) to their

program/curriculum. Meanwhile, rhetoric and composition pedagogy was the topic of the largest number of dissertations delivered between 2000 and 2007 (152 of 1025). Many topics that relate closely to the category of pedagogy were prevalent in the *Rhetoric Review* survey as well, including writing center studies (21), technical/professional communication pedagogy (20), writing across the curriculum (20), and writing program administration (12). Other focuses were given a range of ratings in my survey, reflecting the range of approaches to advanced study both in my representative sample and in rhetoric and composition as a discipline. Once again, this variety of characteristics corresponds in many ways to the dissertation topics listed in the *Rhetoric Review* survey. This range of concentrations among programs may affect the admissions process and the way statements of purpose are interpreted by admissions personnel. For example, similar to the psychology students in Brown's study, applicants to rhetoric and composition programs need to comprehend the differences among programs and their concentrations, demonstrating in their statements of purpose that their own aims match the programs'. Interview responses corroborated this assertion, stating that students whose statements of purpose did not show an understanding of program goals were the most obvious to eliminate from the list of desired applicants.¹⁵ Demonstrating an understanding of differences among programs is essential to writing effective statements that persuade readers to accept an applicant. Since rhetoric and composition draws on the knowledge bases (and therefore methodologies and approaches to scholarly discourse) of a number of different disciplines, students may need to demonstrate awareness of how those methods and discourse attributes are imbedded in program missions and concentrations as well as in their own research interests.

Doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition vary significantly in size, in terms of both the number of faculty and the number of students. This variation may also affect the use of the statement of purpose in applications. My respondents reported numbers of current doctoral students ranging from five to fifty-eight. While these figures may be due in part to the ages of various programs, it is also apparent that it may be in response to many other factors. These factors may include a sense of responsibility toward the individual students with regard to faculty and other (including budgetary) resources. According to Brown et al., the number of students enrolled in rhetoric and composition programs fell slightly between their 2000 and 2007 surveys. Meanwhile, they found that some new programs were created while other programs appeared to have been phased out; thus “in all, the profession seems to be maintaining stasis in the number of programs that offer doctoral education in rhetoric and composition.” Further, the discipline has shown high rates of job placement throughout the period the surveys have been conducted. It appears, then, that the discipline of rhetoric and composition as a whole displays accountability toward its PhD students by being responsive to the job market for its graduates, as called for by Miller et al. in their 1997 survey of graduate students in rhetoric and composition.¹⁶ If this is the case, it may not be true that older programs are always larger or that program growth is evidence of a competitive program.

One other component of program size can convey a sense of the competitiveness and accountability of programs as measured by the number of students accepted; that is, the number of applicants versus the number of students admitted. A glance at the numbers of applicants and admitted students across the field shows that approximately one-third of all applications result in students being admitted to PhD programs in the

discipline as a whole, and this ratio has held steady over the 2000 and 2007 *Rhetoric Review* surveys (Brown et al.). However, this number does not account for the ratio of applications to accepted students program-by-program, which may be much higher for both smaller programs and highly competitive ones. Nor does it account for the number of programs to which any individual applies. Therefore, it is difficult to make generalizations about the number of applications read across programs or to identify the effects of these numbers except to say that many of the factors discussed here may influence the use of the statement of purpose in applications.

The community bases of PhD programs in rhetoric and composition range widely, if we first consider the discipline itself as a larger discourse community. Other disciplines and their discourse communities, which interact with and contribute to the activity and genre systems of rhetoric and composition, add to the community basis of individual programs. In addition, the universities and departments that are home to programs in rhetoric and composition, and their surrounding cities and regions, are part of the programs' communities. It is reasonable to state, then, that the activity systems immersed in these communities, including the activity systems of admissions to doctoral programs in rhetoric and composition are uniquely responsive to their far-ranging community bases.

Rules: Governing with Complexity

As I discussed in Chapter I, the rules governing an activity system include official rules, unofficial norms, and mores that operate within that system. In this chapter, I show that the rules governing the admissions process for a specific program are complex and reflect the unique nature of that program. Here I will focus on those rules regarding

rhetoric and composition PhD program admissions in general, demonstrating similarities and differences from my survey and interview data. Certainly, an important set of rules that indicate the point of departure for this thesis is the ranking of admissions criteria across programs in rhetoric and composition. In fact, many of the components of community implicate the rules governing the admissions process and its use of the statement of purpose, as discussed in the previous section. Other rules include those official rules governing confidentiality, and interpretations of them by individuals, departments, and universities.

Some rules govern the time allotted to the process of admissions, whether externally imposed (e.g., federal deadlines concerning funding) or internal (e.g., university application deadlines). Departments and committees also govern time through fluid and/or unstated rules. Rules may also grow from the relationships among the graduate school, academic departments, and committees within those departments. As I discussed in Chapter I, one aspect of PhD applications that complicates the applications process for students is its requirements. While these are somewhat consistent in their complexity (e.g. three letters of reference, writing sample, GRE scores, statement of purpose, transcripts), their uses are different across programs. The diversity of rankings of applications criteria is one indication of their varied use across systems. If a graduate school has a GRE score cutoff, for example, this standard immediately reduces the number of applications, whether students do not apply at all, or if they do send their materials despite not meeting the score requirement. If programs identify GRE scores or GPA as the most important criterion, it is because these data comprise a hard-and-fast

rule about whether applicant's other materials (including and especially for my purposes, their statements of purpose) are even viewed at all.

In contrast, for the programs which designate the statement of purpose as the most important or one of the most important criteria in PhD admission, this text is viewed as contributing significantly to the concept of "fit" for a perspective applicant. When asked "Briefly, how would you characterize the statement of purpose as a genre?", four respondents explicitly stated that the statement of purpose is used in part to determine fit (of the student to the program and/or vice versa). Four other respondents referred to the statement of purpose as a genre wherein students demonstrate fit, but without using the term "fit" directly. For instance, one of these respondents stated that the genre provides, in part, a place for the applicant to show "how this particular school's PhD program, faculty, curriculum, and opportunities will move the candidate from where he or she is to where he or she wants to go." This response provides a working definition of the concept of fit and also shows how many elements contribute to fit in a given setting. Another respondent to this question referred to the statement of purpose as such: "[the statement of purpose is] an introduction and overview of research interests connected in specific and meaningful ways to the core principles of the program and the strengths of the faculty." The concept of fit, then, is reflected in demonstrations of program knowledge and research interests as depicted by the applicant's statement of purpose. It remains difficult to convey exactly what "fit" means as a concept, whether to potential applicants or within an analysis of program admissions processes. The concept of fit, as demonstrated by my survey and interviews, is also characteristic of a holistic view of the applicant and applications materials. Thus, while my sample was chosen primarily from

“Which of the following statements accurately depicts your program’s view of the statement of purpose with regard to accepting PhD candidates?”	Number of Respondents
It is the highest ranked criterion in accepting candidates.	2
The criteria for individual candidates are viewed holistically.	9
Other criteria are more important than the statement of purpose.	1
Quantitative data (GRE scores; GPA) is more important than the statement of purpose.	0
Other (respondents added this information):	
“It is the most important component for assessing ‘fit’; other materials help us to assess other important qualities (e.g., preparedness).”	1
“It is important—along with letters of recommendation.”	1

Table 1, Survey Data, The Statement of Purpose as Admissions Criterion

programs that had previously ranked the statement of purpose in their top three criteria for admissions, nine of the respondents to my survey selected the response “The criteria for individual candidates are viewed holistically” to my question “Which of the following statements accurately depicts your program’s view of the statement of purpose with regard to accepting PhD candidates?” (see table 1). Further, one respondent explicitly stated a connection between the statement of purpose and “fit” within his or her response to this question. The conceptual linking among fit, a holistic view of candidates, and the statement of purpose further complicates understanding rules regarding admissions criteria.

While rules about admissions criteria tend to be program-specific or are at least generated independently by programs when they are similar, rules governing confidentiality draw primarily upon federal law and university regulations. These rules contribute to the occlusion of the statement of purpose as a genre and to the limitations of scholarship on this genre. Since it is difficult to attain personal information about students for study, the studies I discussed in Chapter I all encountered unique versions of these

limitations. This demonstrates that despite attempts to regulate the processes for study of human subjects, interpretations of these regulations vary. While Samraj and Monk were able to obtain only successful statements, Brown was able to obtain both accepted and rejected samples of the genre (246). Meanwhile, Ding was unable to obtain applicant texts directly and instead relied on a corpus of “successful” and “unedited” texts from websites that provide editing services (372). These laws also govern my study, but affect my data collection differently, since my focus has been on the activity system of admissions.¹⁷ Whether the interpretation of privacy laws may contribute more significantly to how the applications process and statement of purpose genre are *studied*, they nonetheless contribute to how the statement of purpose and other application materials are treated in the applications process. Further, activity theory researchers acknowledge that by studying an activity system, they contribute to its changing motives and objectives, much as Vygotsky and his students found that their interventions affected their subjects. According to activity scholars and genre theorists alike, these interventions are intended, especially when they illuminate occluded genres and subvert seemingly arbitrary power structures.

However, regarding privacy law as rule *within* admissions, from my interviews it is apparent that while applications materials may be viewed by a committee and/or by several faculty members who are invested in the admissions process for various reasons, the privacy of the materials is always protected. For instance, programs that use paper copies of materials may place them in files in a locked office or file, accessible only to the designated faculty readers. Programs that use electronic means of compiling admission materials may have password access to the materials. Some programs used

Program	Applications Collection Method(s)	Privacy Procedure
Southeast U	Electronic	Electronic copies in password-protected data management program
East Mountain U	Electronic	Electronic copies in password-protected data management program
Old South U	Paper	Hard copies in locked files
Midwest U	Paper and electronic (According to program website, applicants are “strongly encouraged to apply online.”)	Hard copies in locked office; electronic copies in password-protected data management program
Southwest U	Paper; electronic application to graduate college only	Hard copies in locked files

Table 2, Interview Data, Application Material Collection and Privacy Procedures

technology in different ways to collect applications materials (see table 2). At East Mountain U, all materials except for transcripts were collected electronically, and thus recommenders were asked to fill out an online form. In contrast, at Midwest U, recommendation letters and transcripts were collected on paper but then scanned into the online database of applicants. Interestingly, at Midwest U alone, all of the materials were collected into the online database, but they were also printed and hard copies were kept in a locked office. My respondent said that in their case, members of the committee viewed the electronic folders almost exclusively, rather than the hard copies of applicants' materials. No matter how materials were compiled by their programs, respondents made it abundantly clear that their privacy was carefully guarded throughout the applications process. Thus, technological changes also contribute to the understanding and application of rules governing the collection and privacy of admission materials, but these rules are applied across programs.

In addition to sharing rules that come from higher authorities, American universities also reach consensus and establish additional rules governing admissions. For example, an important deadline that is agreed upon by schools nationwide is the April 15th deadline for student acceptance of funding.¹⁸ By this date, a student who has been offered a fellowship or other kind of funding must notify the institution of his or her decision to accept or decline the offer. Graduate schools and departments cannot require and should not urge applicants to give note of their acceptance before this date, which affects how programs strategize their recruitment efforts and admissions processes. In addition to this date, graduate schools have a range of deadlines for applications, with a sparse few programs accepting applications on a rolling basis. Most programs across the discipline have applications deadlines between December 1 and April 1 (see table 3). Even to my interview respondents, it was not self-evident why different programs have different acceptance dates; it is possible, however, that these dates correspond in some manner to the number of applications typically submitted to the programs. If admissions committees, which, in my sample, all included four to eight participants, are required to read greater numbers of applications, they may simply need additional time to do this work. Some programs do have separate, earlier applications deadlines for students seeking funding in the form of fellowships and/or assistantships. While an earlier, separate deadline may reflect the limits of fellowships and assistantships available, it is clear, at least from my interview sample, that students who attend rhetoric and composition PhD programs without funding are very few and very far between. These separate deadlines (and the variety of deadlines across programs as well) may distinguish the urgency, stringency, or other factors informing how application materials are viewed.

Survey Respondent #	Applications Deadline	Special Deadlines
1	Fall/Summer, January 1	Spring, August 15
2	February 1	N/A
3	December 31	N/A
4	December 1	N/A
5	January 15	N/A
6	Reviewed throughout the year; no deadlines for domestic applicants	Summer, February 15; Fall, May 15; Spring, October 1 for international applicants
7	January 5	(suggested: to graduate school 3 weeks prior)
8	Domestic applicants, 30 days prior to beginning of term; international applicants, 90 days prior to beginning of term	Assistantships, March 1 and November 1 Fellowships, February 15
9	February 1	N/A

Table 3, Deadlines for Identifiable Survey Respondent Programs, from Websites

Deadlines may also be regarded as more fluid from program to program or even from committee to committee within a program. Thus, some of my interview respondents alluded to deadlines that are “soft” or flexible, at least within their own departments and committees. For instance, a hypothetical example of a soft deadline, as explained by one interviewee, would be if most of a student’s applications materials had been received by the application deadline, but the committee were to receive one of his recommendation letters after that date. Flexibility may be more available to students who have communicated with committee members about the late situation and/or who have very strong applications, according to at least two interviewees. Even with deadlines subject to institutional rules, departments and committees may vary in their ability and willingness to be flexible with regard to deadlines.

As deadlines vary, so do many of the ways in which funding is perceived and distributed. Often, funding was linked to hard and soft deadlines within the admissions

process and was a matter of business between departments and the graduate schools or colleges at their institutions. For the programs in my sample, all interview respondents stated that the graduate schools or colleges at their institutions held sway over the allotment of funds for PhD candidates. The graduate schools or colleges at these institutions were responsible for distributing TA and RA lines to different departments, undertaking this task in subtly unique ways. The availability of funding or even how funds are distributed to programs and departments may adjust with even slight changes in administration or administrative decisions from year to year. For instance, within the past few years at Old South U, the admissions committee has either been first offered a certain number of assistantships and then asked for acceptance recommendations by the graduate school, or asked for recommendations and then offered assistantship lines based on those recommendations. Regardless of their approach, the graduate school appears to be the seat of this economic power. Yet, their year-to-year decisions about how to use this power impacts how admissions committees make decisions about applicants, on what timeline they are made, etc. This is just one example of the way changes in rules affect an activity system, such as PhD admissions, at a micro-level while it remains stable at a macro-level.

While timelines are governed by both powers outside of, and activity systems tangential to, the activity systems of admissions, manifest in individuals and groups, they can also govern time on a small scale in an adapting and changing fashion. Admissions committees may allot a certain amount of time for committee members to read and initially respond to applications materials and schedule meetings to discuss these responses and make ultimate decisions. According to my interview respondents, this time

period is a few weeks to a month. This initial reading span was characteristic of all of the interview programs, regardless of the numbers of committee members or applications read. Timing decisions may be affected by the work situations of the committee members or even situations outside of members' control. For instance, in a recent harsh winter, the committee at East Mountain U was delayed from its agreed-upon deadline for reading applications by weather conditions that caused the university to close for several days. Again, this demonstrates how the rules of a system may be flexible or plastic in relation to exterior factors.

A set of rules that are essential to this analysis are the rules, both official and unofficial, that govern how the statement of purpose is read by committee members in the process of admissions, that is, the actual actions of reading the text. The guidelines for the use of the statement of purpose as a tool for discerning whether applicants are fit and qualified vary from setting to setting. Attitudes about the statement of purpose and the concept of fit appear to be linked closely to decisions about when in the applications process the statement of purpose is read, for example. In this case, I turn again to my survey, where respondents were asked, "At what point in the admissions process is the statement of purpose read, and how does it affect/is it affected by the other submitted criteria/texts?" Three respondents said that the statement of purpose was the first text read and affected whether readers read an applicant's complete file. The remaining respondents said that the materials were all read at approximately the same time. This difference in timing appears to reflect attitudes of those who regard the statement of purpose as part of a holistic picture of the applicant, giving the statement of purpose different weight in establishing fit by situating its reading within the timeline of the

admissions process. For the programs that do read the statement of purpose prior to reading other materials, it is used primarily to assess fit—that is, to make the initial judgment of whether the applicant’s goals are/can be met in the program. In addition to using unofficial rules about when the statement of purpose is read to promote specific goals of the admissions process, programs also use official and unofficial guidelines to assess the statement. The participants in the admissions process, who apply these guidelines, as individuals and groups, also shape the course of PhD admissions through the division of labor.

Division of Labor: Increasing the Complexity

All activity systems involve decisions about the division of labor amongst individuals, groups, and community members. Within a PhD admissions activity system, unofficial and official rules partially determine both the allocation of labor and its object(ive)s (i.e., in activity theory, the *anticipated* outcomes of activity). First, both academic departments and graduate schools collect and assess data from applicants. According to my interview respondents, graduate schools or colleges may compile some or all of the students’ application materials, and they always check the validity of GRE scores and transcripts. They also conduct background checks on applicants to determine that there are no significant legal or identification issues with applicants, or, as one interviewee stated it, “to make sure there are no ‘red flags.’” The graduate school also has some control over at least the information about funding, if not actual control over the allotment of funds, which has a direct impact on the numbers of students offered fellowships and assistantships. At the departments’ recommendation, graduate schools accept students. While the labor performed by graduate schools in admissions is clearly

important, it pertains mostly to the administrative functions of the admissions process. For my purposes especially, graduate schools do little to process the statement of purpose; in some cases, but not all, the graduate school compiles applicant data and checks that all materials, including the statement of purpose, is included before passing on the materials to the department. However, in many cases, materials like recommendation letters, writing samples, and the statement of purpose are sent directly to the department and compiled there. This information is evident from program websites, where applicants are instructed to send these materials to various parties—here there are many differences from program to program. With regard to the compiling step of the process, labor is divided differently among individuals from program to program. For example, at both Midwest U and East Mountain U the program directors compile applicant data, but at Southwest U the department's graduate program assistant performs this duty. In all cases, the bulk of the work done (i.e., reading, assessing, and responding) to the statement of purpose and other written materials is done by committees within academic departments.

Tracing the admitting cycle chronologically, committee members begin an admissions “season” with a variety of recruiting practices. While my initial survey does not account for recruiting practices, respondents in follow-up interviews indicated that programs differed significantly in their approaches. First, while some interviewees identified program website and flyers or brochures distributed to colleges as their primary recruitment measures, others focused on more active and personal approaches. These included contacting representatives of programs who had supplied the previous years’ new PhD students or the individuals who had written recommendations for those students

(Southeast U), calling and emailing students who had made inquiries (Southeast, Midwest, and East Mountain Us), and meeting with students at regional and national professional conferences (all interviewees' institutions). Often it is a prominent committee member such as the director of graduate studies who performs these recruitment duties. The nature of recruiting and the attitude toward this important work likely affects the process of analyzing students' applications materials. It is clear, in turn, that recruiting is also affected by admissions, at least in the instances where directors of graduate studies contact recommenders or seek more students from the current PhD students' Master's programs. Additionally, students who have met or spoken to faculty members may be more likely to compose statements of purpose that express their familiarity with them, one of the more desired qualities of a statement of purpose, also connecting these tangential processes (systems).

Once students have submitted their applications materials, my survey sample shows that these files are read by members of a committee (eleven responses). The number of committee members varied: there were anywhere from three readers to more than ten for the entire application across my sample, with five programs reporting two to four readers and five more reporting eight to ten readers. In sum, seven of the respondents reported that more than five readers view a typical applicant's statement of purpose.

In most programs, faculty who hold specific stakes in the students' future endeavors are also among the readers of statements of purpose. The readers of the include the director of graduate studies, according to nine survey respondents. It is clear that this individual is involved in most aspects of the admissions process. Also, since many

rhetoric and composition PhD students teach composition courses, writing program or writing center directors or their equivalents are among these readers. In institutions with a research focus, the readers include faculty who have been approved for research assistants, and in some programs, faculty whose research interests converged with the applicants' read them. In two cases, graduate student members of the admissions committee are among the readers. At Midwest U, a graduate student union elects one student to the committee, and at Southwest U, the English graduate students elect one graduating MA student and one graduating PhD student to serve each year. In all of the other programs represented in my survey, only faculty members serve as admissions committee members and read statements of purpose. Thus, there are rules, both official and unofficial, that govern who reads the statement of purpose and which must have an impact on how it is read. From this list of readers, too, it becomes apparent that the statement of purpose is read in myriad ways and for a variety of purposes. It is a tool with many functions in the activity system of admissions and one which wields significant power in deciding an applicant's fate.

While some clear-cut rules direct the division of labor between academic departments and graduate schools, the division of labor within departments is difficult to generalize, and point to various uses of the statement of purpose and other texts as tools within admissions processes. I have demonstrated that individuals and groups make diverse decisions about the process of making admissions decisions and the role of the personal statement in that process. Adding to the complexity of predicting how personal statements will be used is that the labor involved in the process is divided differently

among individuals from program to program. These individuals may incorporate tools and interpret object(ive)s differently from program to program as well.

Tools, Object(ive)s, Motives: Diverse Systems Beget Diverse Results

What becomes clear from an attempt to draw a general model of PhD admissions processes based upon activity theory is that to do so is to provide an incomplete and unclear picture of these processes. From the discussion of survey results and interview data in this section, it is also clear that the best way to illustrate the activity systems of PhD admissions is to look more closely at the representative programs. Programs share the not-so-clear-cut objective of “seek to admit the highest quality students who are best fit to the program.” Acting toward this objective, though, the activity of admissions committees from program to program individually reflects all of the idiosyncratic aspects of community, rules, and division of labor discussed in this section. Overall motives, including the actual, intended and unintended, results of activity are certainly different from program to program, as demonstrated in part by the fact that not all programs admit their “fantasy teams.”

From analysis of the base of the activity system model (i.e., rules, community, and division of labor) for all of the sample programs, both patterns and diversity emerge, corresponding to unique uses of tools by subjects within these systems. Thus, an investigation of the use of the tool of genre to define rules regarding how specific textual examples of the genre are assessed is problematic. In some cases, the defining characteristics of the genre are not agreed upon even by individuals within one system. In these cases, the tool or concept of the genre is inconsistent within that system.

The statement of purpose is read and interpreted to form some subjective or “slippery” ideas about potential candidates. In addition to the concept of fit, survey respondents alluded in their descriptions of the statement of purpose to other concepts that cannot be easily defined. One concept reiterated in the genre descriptions is the scholarly growth of the student. For instance, one respondent stated that the statement of purpose not only helps the admissions committee “guage the fit between [the] program and an applicant’s interests and goals” but also allows the applicant to show “how much they have grown from being an undergraduate student to a graduate student embarking on doctoral study.” This idea of growth or readiness is echoed in several of the descriptions, and yet is difficult to define, like the concept of fit. Some descriptions did mention some of the rhetorical aspects of the genre that affect stance, structure, content, or formal aspects of applicants’ texts. The most tangible information about what respondents look for were in the area of content, such as “narrative of previous academic experience and expression of interest in studying in our department” or “a plan/set of goals and how these are situated within scholarly conversations in the field.” However, another slippery idea, “voice,” was raised in a few of the descriptions. A description read, “a piece of persuasive prose almost always meant to combine a personal with a professional voice,” and another, “it indicates more about the ethos or voice of the applicant than anything else in the application.” While this idea of voice is important to writing, it is difficult to define and particularly problematic for nonnative speakers of English. As Ding demonstrates, these applicants are interested in the specific formal and content maneuvers that make successful statements (369). However, this desire, I argue, is problematic as well. Statements of purpose are interpreted by their readers to differentiate and

demonstrate the uniqueness of both applicant and institution/program. This results in the variations in successful statements of purpose from context to context, but as Ding and other genre analysts have shown, successful statements of purpose often share a number of similar rhetorical moves. One genre description from my research stands out in that it echoes this scholarship, claiming the statement of purpose is “one-third intellectual biography, one-third statement of research interest and professional objectives, and one-third argument” of fit of the student to the program and the program to the student. This description highlights some of the more important moves portrayed by Brown, Ding, and Samraj and Monk. However, no description of the genre is able to be both specific and general across samples of the genre and across disciplines. I argue that it is not possible to do so because of the exceedingly unique rhetorical situation of any sample of the statement of purpose.

Descriptions of the genre are rhetorical and demonstrate subtle differences in the ways the statement is read and interpreted by different individuals and groups, depending on the aspects foregrounded by the respondents. In addition, when asked to describe their programs’ or committees’ guidelines for reading the statement of purpose, the respondents said that they were assessed in light of both the mission statement of the program and a heuristic or other “unofficial guideline,” and a few reiterated that the statement is read in light of the admissions materials themselves. It remains evident that the statement of purpose presents an individualized problem to admissions committees and that it is difficult to identify rules about such a “messy” genre. Given the idiosyncratic descriptions of the genre and of reading and assessment practices among these institutional committees, the ongoing use of the statement of purpose contributes to

its occluded nature. There is not necessarily any reason to expect immutable rules about how the genre is read, but from the genre studies reviewed in Chapter I, it is apparent that generic and linguistic similarities may be present among successful statements submitted to at least any given committee.

The lack of clarity regarding how the statement of purpose is read among sample programs is not the only source of disparity with regard to the statement of purpose. There is also some disparity among respondents' assessments of what is important in a statement of purpose. When asked "How do you rate the following characteristics in forming an assessment of an applicant's statement of purpose?", most important to all of the respondents was that the statement mentions specific research interests. Twelve respondents reported this is "very important" and two reported that it is "somewhat important" (see table 4). Beyond that, many of the responses were divided, but half of respondents found an applicant's discussion of specific past activities "very important," and half also reported that familiarity with the program and faculty are "very important" in the statement of purpose. Otherwise, faculty found that most of the characteristics were

Characteristic	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral/Not Important	Undesirable
Shows who the applicant is as a person	6	6	1	0
Mentions specific past activities	7	6	1	0
Mentions specific future research interests	12	2	0	0
Follows writing conventions of the discipline(s) in question	3	5	6	0
Demonstrates familiarity with the program/faculty	7	5	2	0

Table 4, Survey Data, Importance of Characteristics of Statements of Purpose

acceptable or even important. These faculty members appear to acknowledge through their responses that the statement of purpose is a flexible genre. Situation may contribute to how acceptable the various components of statements of purpose are to them. In one example from my interviews, for instance, a student might be interested the rhetorical or pedagogical aspects of a personal situation, but might write about the desire to study the phenomenon in an academic context. In Brown's analysis of rich text features, it was inappropriate for psychology applicants to express desire to study in the program as a result of personal experiences. However, in this example, a brief personal anecdote may serve to explain the student's drive toward this study in a unique, memorable (and yet scholarly) manner. The statement of purpose genre, serving as a tool in the activity system of admissions, is malleable in response to readers' conceptions of the tool.

While in this chapter, I set out to make some generalizations about PhD program admissions, in the next, I model the activity system of PhD admissions to one representative program in contrast with a sample of its peers, to highlight the effects of the differences among programs on their admissions activity systems as well as on their use of the statement of purpose.

CHAPTER III

ACTIVITY SYSTEM MODEL OF A REPRESENTATIVE PROGRAM

The overview of survey and interview data in Chapter II provides a basis for understanding the variety of programs in rhetoric and composition. It also illustrates the divergent and convergent aspects of the subjects' views of admissions processes and the statement of purpose. This characteristic divergence and convergence muddies the picture of the admissions process to PhD programs in rhetoric and composition. It also makes evident the need for a close analysis of an individual case study program and its admissions processes. As I demonstrate in Chapter I, activity theorists and other rhetoric and composition scholars tend to regard human interactions as context-dependent. Thus, while some conclusions may be drawn about program admissions in general, the diversity of programs and their approaches to admissions and the statement of purpose invite further study of individual cases in greater depth. Case study of individual activity systems may further complicate an understanding of admissions processes and their use of the statement of purpose. From this study and these complications, though, useful understandings of both the processes and the genre may emerge. These emergent understandings may inform continued study of this occluded genre and the esoteric activity surrounding it.

To that end, in this chapter I evaluate one representative program based on data from the program website, the *Rhetoric Review* survey, my own survey, and interviews

with the program contact. Throughout, I again use the components of the activity system to describe this dynamic system. My primary objective is to discover aspects of the activity system of PhD admissions that are unique to the program, especially those that are reflected in the use of the statement of purpose as genre (i.e., concept) and as discrete text. Where it aids my argument, I contrast this doctoral program with the other programs in my survey and interview samples. Overall, I find that there are several aspects of the program that contribute to its uniqueness. In the dialectic fashion of activity theory, one can best comprehend this uniqueness by contrasting the activity system with others like it.

Community and Setting: East Mountain U

Throughout this chapter, the primary institution of study is East Mountain U, a large, land-grant university located in a smaller city east of the Mississippi River. However, I contrast EMU and its PhD program in rhetoric and composition with those at the five other interview respondent institutions in order to provide context (see table 5). East Mountain U's rhetoric and composition PhD program is very new (it was initiated between the publishing of the 2000 and 2008 *Rhetoric Review* surveys) and operates, like most programs in the sample, within the English Department. The program focus at EMU is "Rhetoric in Society," and the survey respondent asserted that this encompasses a number of essential characteristics or values with a firm base in rhetorical theory and classical rhetoric. Cultural studies, social and civic responsibility, publishing and presenting, and professional development are "essential" to the program, according to the respondent. The respondent also stated that pedagogy, technology and literacy are

University Pseudonym	Type of Institution	Rhet-Comp Program Focuses	Number of PhD Students in RC Program (Range)
Southeast U	Land Grant	Interdisciplinary and Media Studies	25-35
East Mountain U	Land Grant	Rhetoric in Society; Research and Practice	15-20
Old South U	Public	Pedagogy; Rhetorical Theory and History	5-10
Midwest U	Land Grant	Rhetorical Theory and History, Application in Cultural Settings	25-35
Southwest U	Land Grant	Pedagogy; Cultural and Civic Engagement	55-65

Table 5, Relevant Data from Interview Respondent Institutions

“important” to the program. While the program is research-focused, it is not essential that students conduct empirical research/experiments. EMU values a theoretical approach based in real-world uses of language.

East Mountain U accepts only a small number of PhD students each year, but I was interested in modeling the program in part due to its relative youth and the unique attributes of the program apparently resulting from that youth. Because the program is relatively new, in creating it, faculty collectively drew upon their own experiences as graduate students and in previous positions to shape what they perceive to be a program of best practices. This collective decision promoted my interest in creating an activity theory model of the program’s admissions process, since activity systems are historically

mediated in a unique manner. In the case of EMU, the program was not intended to emulate any one other program as an ideal, but constructed from a range of valued ideas and practices. The program is designed, and it is clear, with flexibility and change in mind. I certainly do not wish to insinuate that older programs and their admissions committees are incapable of change; in fact, this assumption would undermine the understandings that activity theory lend to this thesis. Instead, I investigate the effects of EMU's faculty introducing what they consider best practices into their activity system.

Subjects and Division of Labor: The Admissions Committee

One relatively unique aspect of admissions at EMU is the voluntary admissions committee. Rather than assigning or electing members to a committee on a rotating basis, as with other institutions in my sample, all of the rhetoric and composition faculty are invited to participate in the admissions process. While the respondents at Southwest U and Midwest U both solicit volunteers for the admissions committee, they also conveyed that serving on the committee is seen as a fairly undesirable chore. At both institutions the requirements for committee representation (with regard to concentrations and assistantship opportunities) deemed the "voluntary" aspect of committee membership moot. In all cases, certain faculty members are required to take part, such as the directors of graduate studies. At EMU, over half of the faculty have volunteered to serve on this committee each year and this approach leads to committee sizes of eight to ten willing participants. Committee structures differed significantly amongst the programs in my interview sample, and these structures appear to have a significant effect on how rules are applied and tools are used in reading applications packets. As with other programs, directors of graduate studies at EMU play a significant role in guiding the

process and in contacting applicants at various stages throughout the process. The committee members are all involved in reading and assessing application packets from the first stage through the last, and decisions are made as a group. The programs in my interview sample followed similar processes at the committee level with regard to reading the application materials as a whole, giving committee members some time to look at them independently prior to meeting. However, it is the individual rules and values of the programs that affect how the materials are read—and the value of the statement of purpose within this process.

With programs that profess to view the applicants holistically for program fit, like EMU, it appears that the committee members read complete applications materials. This practice was evident in several the programs in my sample. At Midwest U and Southwest U, all of the committee members read *all* of the applications for the first, “rough” read.¹⁹ Both programs receive relatively large numbers of applications (typically more than sixty for each program). In contrast, although EMU has a smaller applicant pool, committee members do not initially read every application packet, using instead a process by which they divide the applications and each read several groups of applications. This process is similar to the approach used by both Southeast U and Old South U for the initial read. For example, Professors X, Y, and Z might read application groups A, B, and C respectively, with each group containing five or six applications. Prior to meeting in committee, then, they might rotate groups A, B, and C, giving each application several rough reads. At this first stage, the most highly ranked criteria take precedence, and at EMU, that means there is considerable focus on the statement of purpose. In programs where other criteria, such as GRE scores or GPA, are used initially to narrow the applicant pool, application of

those tools (criteria) might be conducted by the graduate school or by another compiler, such as the graduate program assistant at Southwest U.

For the programs in my sample, committee members begin perusing applications materials during the week or two prior to the applications deadline, when applications come available, and especially the two to three weeks immediately after this deadline. Regarding approaches to this step in the process, two trends emerged from my interview data. At EMU, Old South U, and Southeast U, committee members read several groups of applications in order to have overlap, as I describe above. I return to describe EMU's approach to the "rough cut" stage, but first I wish to explain the other process that emerged from my data. At Midwest U and Southwest U, each committee member are required to read every application packet for the "rough read," and the numbers of applications submitted were the highest in my interview sample (typically around sixty, according to these interviewees). Both programs' committee members then respond to a brief survey of five or six criteria. These criteria are intended to assess the fit of applicants and include categories such as strength of academic record, quality and program fit of research interests, and teaching and service experience. All of the committee members respond on a Likert scale, and the compiler (the graduate program assistant at Southwest U and the director of graduate studies at Midwest U) calculates an overall numeric score for each applicant. At Midwest U, this process is entirely electronic, while at Southwest U, it is conducted entirely with hard copies. Meanwhile, at EMU, the readers divide up applications packets and read and respond to them in a qualitative fashion, focusing their efforts at this stage on the statement of purpose. However, the ensuing "rough cut" that takes place at the initial meeting of admissions

committees is similar across all programs. At the initial meeting, either the qualitative (descriptive) or quantitative data on applicants is analyzed in order to make the rough cut. The committees look over this data, regardless of its nature, and divide the applications into three groups. These groups are 1). the applications that all committee members ranked high or approved, 2). those that all committee members ranked low or deemed poor or inappropriate for the program, and 3). those in the middle or those that provoked a range of responses from committee members. In all of the programs in my sample, the first committee meeting was devoted primarily to reaching consensus first on groups 1 and 2, and then working through group 3 to reach consensus on those applications as well. In all cases, this process appeared to value the diverse opinions of all group members. Despite differences in approaches across programs, this stage appears to stabilize the individual programs' systems of admissions. I suggest that this stage and the tools and rules applied here, in part, lend to the stability of the larger, surrounding systems and to the disciplinary community as well.

At the first meeting of admissions committees, all of the committees' objective was to compile what I came to think of as their "fantasy teams." I find this sports metaphor apropos since, as in sports, many schools' fantasy teams include the same applicants, who ultimately may end up on different teams altogether. This factor affects the programs that are viewed as less competitive, in that they may accept and offer funding to students who decline, affecting students who have been accepted without offers, who then may later receive the funding. Results from my interviews suggest that the strongest applicants to PhD programs hold power of which those applicants may not even be fully aware. Their decisions affect a number of schools as much as they feel the

schools' decisions affect them. In addition to the individual decisions of individual applicants affecting the system of admissions at a given institution, these decisions also link programs' admissions systems to each other; in cases where students are accepted to multiple programs, these programs' admissions processes become part of the context for other systems. This is not to say that the programs' admissions committees are in correspondence, but that they are interconnected by the impact of (especially the most competitive) applicants' decisions. Again, a dialectical understanding shows that in activity systems, no source of power, or rules, or tools is without an opposing force.

While programs offer the strongest applicants acceptance to their programs with offers of funding, a second group of applicants are also accepted without funding—a practice often referred to as waitlisting. If the institutions in my interview sample are indicative of the discipline as a whole, it is not uncommon that some of these waitlisted students will later be offered funding. This is due in part to the power of those “fantasy team” applicants who may be accepted and offered funding at several programs, but who can obviously only choose to attend one of them. With regard to funding and accepting waitlisted applicants, some programs may give back or receive additional TA/RA lines in order to balance departmental budgets, as well. This work is done by department chairs and/or the graduate school in the cases of my interview respondents' programs, and may affect whether waitlisted students are offered funding, and the time frame within which this takes place.

A number of factors affect who takes part in admissions and how labor is divided among those individuals, but the committee of willing participants at EMU appears to be distinct among its peers. While in other programs the directors of graduate studies,

department chairs, and/or writing center or program administrators have official roles, the makeup of this committee affects its changing goals and its perceptions of student applications. In some sample programs, specific committee members and their corresponding funding appear to have a greater impact on which students are viewed holistically as the best fit. As with other programs, EMU offers PhD students opportunities for assistantships and fellowships, which, as discussed in Chapter II, can influence the admissions process and its use of the statement of purpose. However, the range of assistantships was viewed by the program contact as a tool that functions most in recruiting rather than in the acceptance process. This distinction of assistantships as recruiting tool is in contrast, for example to Southeast U, where the TA and RA lines evidently have a stronger effect on the admissions process—creating rules for which applicants are considered best fit, which stakeholders sit on the admissions committee, and so forth.

At Southeast U, the rhetoric and composition program is overseen by two departments, and the chairs and directors of graduate studies of both departments, along with one other elected member from each department, sit on the committee. The rhetoric and composition program at Southeast has its own funding, separate from either department, however, complicating the funding picture in some ways. In Southeast's program, the effects of funding on the selection process were much more apparent than at EMU. Funding did not as strongly affect whether a student was perceived as a good fit at EMU as it did at Southeast, where it played significantly into applicant selection. Thus, even though all of the interview respondents spoke of the concept of fit, the concept

remains extremely fluid and context-specific, and it is affected by a number of factors, including funding.

Object(ive)s and Motives: A Reassessment of the Concept of Fit

Since EMU's program is not alone in seeking applicants of the best fit, what is it that distinguishes the perception of best fit from program to program? The factors that help define best fit from program to program include funding, but they are human factors as well. A combination of the program mission, the available faculty, their research interests, and administrative duties help define which students best fit a program. Other factors such as GRE scores and GPA are also considerations that hold different weight from program to program. Certainly, all programs desire good students and scholars, but the concept of fit is different depending on the process of admissions and what it says about a program's values. Thus, at EMU, the statement of purpose is considered one of the strongest criteria in defining whether a student is a good fit, which is why the committee at EMU foregrounds its use in the applications process.

At EMU as at other institutions, fit has the dialectic quality of influencing both the applicant's fit to the program and the program's fit to the applicant. This dialectical feature leads program admissions committees to value students' familiarity with the program and the fit of their possible research interests, as displayed in their statements of purpose. A very strong applicant may have research interests that diverge significantly from the faculty and research resources available at a given institution, in which case the program is not a good fit for the applicant. A student who demonstrates little comprehension of the program in his or her statement clearly is not a good fit; even programs where the statement of purpose ranks lower on a scale of important applications

requirements, it still matters. For example, at Old South U, where the PhD is a generalist degree with different focus areas, students who desire a program with a great deal of research are considered off-target. Conversely, while pedagogy is important to the programs at EMU and Southeast U, students solely interested in pedagogy are not necessarily a best fit for those research-oriented programs. Although the statement of purpose is foregrounded at EMU, it is valuable to all of the programs in my sample in assessing applicants' fit. By attending to convergent and divergent understandings of fit, then, we approach a better understanding of how the statement of purpose as a genre works in individual situations and collectively. The use of the concept of the statement of purpose genre as a tool in admissions processes also supports a simultaneously individualized and generalized description of the statement of purpose, which I discuss in the conclusions to this thesis.

Rules and Tools: Genre and Genres

The use of genre as a tool in the admissions process is most evident in the use of the statement of purpose, and yet, as demonstrated by the work on the statement by applied linguists like Brown, Ding, and Samraj and Monk, the use of this tool varies from context to context. As I discuss above, even the point in the admissions process at which the statement is read affects the genre (as a concept and tool in the process). The ranking of criteria like the statement of purpose in the applications process also has political and social implications. As with the consideration of funding, whether the individual stakeholders or their funds are foregrounded in the applications process demonstrates certain assumptions about the university, the discipline, applicants, etc. The use of the statement of purpose, then, becomes a marker of both overt and unintended attitudes

toward applicants, the program, and the discipline. As applied linguists and genre and activity theorists have shown, genre helps construct power within those systems (Ding 369, Samraj & Monk 209). At EMU, according to my interview respondent, the statement of purpose is “the single most important document” in processing PhD applications. While the program shares a number of generic expectations of the statement of purpose with other respondents, the use of genre in making decisions at EMU demonstrates the ways in which genre helps construct situation and allocate power. The value of the individual to the program at EMU is apparent in the respondent’s explanation for why the statement of purpose is so important to the admissions process there:

This gives us a sense of where somebody came from, a sense of [the applicant’s] current level of awareness of the profession as a whole, where they might end up and what they want to do; it gives us sense of who they are as a researcher: what they value, what they want to know. It certainly gives us the very best sense of who they are as a person . . . otherwise, based only on a thick stack of papers, we’re choosing a person whom we’re going to work with very closely for the next five years.

The newness of the program may contribute to this attitude and application of the genre in at least two distinct ways, both of which the respondent acknowledged. First is the unique faculty-driven design of the program based on best practices. Second is the fact that the program has not gained recognition (by applicants within the discipline) as one of the most competitive.²⁰ Some of the programs in my sample are considered to have a bit more of a competitive edge and what I would consider a blended attitude toward fit—

Southeast U, Southwest U, and Midwest U, as I have discussed, are good examples of this.

For the programs in my interview sample, the writing sample is viewed in tandem with the statement of purpose; however, much as there were differences in the ways committees read and perceived the statement of purpose, there were distinctions among programs in how the writing sample is perceived. At Southeast U, for instance, the respondent discussed the two as closely linked, reporting an expectation that an applicant's writing sample demonstrate the type of work in which s/he professes an interest in the statement of purpose. Meanwhile, at Old South U, the writing sample took precedence over the statement of purpose in demonstrating writing ability—a most important factor to this program, reflecting the fact that the most competitive concentration in Old South U's English PhD program is creative writing. For the respondent at EMU, the writing sample demonstrates that an applicant can write at the graduate level. Here, graduate level writing means using sources to make arguments, that is, “working authoritatively with ideas rather than being pushed around by them.” Again, this attitude reflects the nature of the program at EMU, with its focus on rhetoric in society. Students there are expected to generate ideas from and apply analytical tools to the messages around them, and it is acceptable for applicants to demonstrate these abilities outside of the context of their proposed research. The respondent's attitude toward the writing sample also demonstrates the openness toward accepting the best fit students from various disciplinary backgrounds to the program at EMU.

From an understanding of how genres reflect rules and are used as tools in the admissions process, it remains evident that the nature of a given program, in all of its

complexity, influences this process. In order to use the statement of purpose to demonstrate that they are best fit to any program, then, applicants need to learn as much as possible about programs to which they wish to apply. The more applicants can learn about prospective PhD programs, the better they can concentrate their efforts, especially in writing statements of purpose.

Although there are differences among programs, the statement of purpose has considerable agency in the admissions activity systems of the interview sample. The genre is a tool in evaluating applicants' worth and especially their fit to the programs. There is no other text or genre in the packet that applicants can as effectively use to convey or readers can use to understand the applicants' fit, especially with regard to their interests for future study or concentrations. The statement of purpose generates action by committee members, with similar but unique responses across programs and across the timeline of admissions. As with the committee process in general, two trends arise that may reflect program attitudes, but may also reflect the numbers of applications with which a program must contend. This distinction is worth further study and consideration. If a statement indicates that a student is clearly not a good fit, it might, in the case of EMU, be read by a second reader to corroborate this conclusion. However, with programs like Southwest U and Midwest U, even statements of purpose for applicants that are clearly and discernibly not fit will be read by all members of the committee. In cases like EMU, where the focus of the "rough read and cut" is on the statement of purpose, committee members will read other applications materials attached to acceptable statements of purpose. However, for other programs, reading the statement of purpose generates another genre, that is, a combination of Likert scale scores.

The link between program missions and their uses of the statement of purpose in admissions processes is somewhat evident but not clear. Further study, perhaps applying genre analyses to literature about programs (e.g., websites and brochures) in light of the admissions process, may reveal more about this relationship. However, what is clear is that admissions committees use the statement of purpose to discern whether applicants grasp their programs' philosophies and missions, and whether the applicants' own philosophies and missions mesh with them. Since the personal statement is an occluded genre, it is difficult to attest to whether its use by admissions committees directly affects the development of the genre. Again, further study may reveal that the genre develops as individuals who are involved in admissions processes give feedback to their own students as they apply to MA and PhD programs. Scholarship on the genre, which is peripheral to the activity systems of admissions (in that scholars interview and observe admissions stakeholders), is intended to influence the development of the statement of purpose as well.

Similarity and Contrast: What Can One Quantify?

In this chapter, I have viewed a program and its admissions processes as distinct from its peers. However, I have also shown that there are patterns and correspondences among programs. As the interview respondent from EMU said of PhD programs in rhetoric and composition, "at some level, the professional opportunities and the courses and the support for research will be about the same." The distinctions that individuals encounter must come from other factors, including the communities and individuals who act within those programs. Here, by communities, I mean both the cities/regions and the university settings themselves, down to department and program factors—and especially

the individuals who act within the systems. As I have shown, individuals and textual genres, among other elements that enter the activity system of PhD admissions, contribute to those systems and their ongoing perceptions of how to divide labor, apply rules, and utilize tools to reach their (also changing) objects and motives. These individual and contextual factors complicate the systems and make them difficult to generalize, but they also contribute to the unique qualities of these systems. Thus, in attempting to discuss only one program, I found it necessary to discuss all of them to some extent.

The social, historical, and cultural factors that distinguish programs in rhetoric and composition include communities, the size of the programs, their focuses, missions, and philosophies, and the individual decisions made by the participants in the programs' activity systems. All of these factors affect the admissions processes, which in turn affects these factors. Within admissions processes, of course, the statement of purpose and its use is impacted by the entire system and all of these factors. In the case of EMU, the statement of purpose genre is a powerful tool from both student and program perspectives. This tool is unique and program-specific, though, in demonstrating fit.

CHAPTER IV:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this thesis, I have investigated the statement of purpose as an occluded genre. The genre's occluded nature is linked to its power in activity systems of admissions and its ability to participate in the distribution of power in the academy. I have sought to illuminate the uses of the statement of purpose in activity systems of PhD program admissions in part to interrogate both the occlusion and power of the statement of purpose, in the hope it will add to the literature on the genre in meaningful ways. To that end, the selection of activity theory as an analytical lens was a pointed one, as I discussed in Chapter I. Since genre theorists have analyzed the statement of purpose and made some indications to the social uses of the genre, it was pertinent to look at these social uses using activity theory. Activity theory lent to the contextualization of the statement of purpose in the system where its work is done.

Through the use of activity theory, patterns of connection between aspects of the admissions process and greater departmental goals emerged. For instance, the dynamics between the economic pressures of academe and committees' comprehension of applicant fit became apparent. The question of funding is a major contributor to the entire admissions process, especially in a discipline like rhetoric and composition, where very few students attend PhD programs without funding. Closely related to the funding

question is that of filling needed labor, including composition instructors and research assistants. Even in programs that professed a priority on research, applicants were evaluated in part for teaching positions, and for programs that had RA lines, the professors who directed those positions were vocal members of admissions committees. However, the concept of applicant fit was not only linked to these economies, but also to a number of other factors. Students were perceived as fit to the department if their aims matched those of the program mission and ethos, for instance. These perceptions arose from compiling all of the application data to create a holistic view of an applicant, but also from reading the statement of purpose. It appears that there is a close linking among a holistic view of applicants, the concept of fit, and the statement of purpose for all of the programs in my sample.

In conducting this work, I sought to develop a clearer picture of how universities accept students best suited to their programs. As the lengthy discussions of the concept of fit in Chapters II and III demonstrate, this concept is inextricably linked to how admissions committees perceive the applicants to PhD programs in rhetoric and composition. However, the concept is troublesome in that it, like the statement of purpose used primarily to analyze and interpret it, is context specific. The positive aspect of this specificity is that PhD programs may truly be suited to individual applicants, and that symbiotic relationships between these individuals and communities may be beneficial. The troubling possibility arising from the application of the concept of fit is that it can be used irresponsibly or unethically in admitting students to advanced programs of study. In identifying with scholarly research and practice that acknowledge the social milieu, though, it is not possible to subscribe to purely empirical approaches in evaluating human

endeavors, especially writing. Again, the use of analytical approaches descendent of Vygotsky's work demonstrates my commitment to education that honors the whole person and the whole community. The personal statement potentially embodies such approaches, as shown by the descriptions of this genre and the work it does within PhD admissions.

Another aim of this work was to discern what actions individuals and textual genres perform in helping universities achieve their goals of determining students who are best fit to their programs. Both members of admissions committees and the tools they use, especially, for the purposes of this thesis, the statement of purpose genre, are essential to the process of accepting students to PhD programs. The members of admissions committees read and evaluate applications, but it is also clear that they, individually and in groups, develop the rules that guide the admissions process. These rules include official and unspoken criteria for assessing applications, and committee members interpret these rules throughout the process. Committee members' actions are nonexistent, though, without the actions of textual genres upon them. Without their exposure to great numbers of statements of purpose, for example, these individuals, like many writers of statements of purpose, would have little basis upon which to draw their evaluations of the genre.

This thesis also investigated the purposes of texts such as the writing sample and statement of purpose in the admissions process. As shown, while some readers view the statement of purpose as a sample that demonstrates writerly ethos, voice, and organizational ability, it also is read to aid in determining the sense of the student as an individual and scholar, yielding that elusive idea of "fit" to the reader. The writing

sample, though, is used to further develop an understanding of the applicant as a scholar. Both texts serve these broad purposes across programs, but the responses to my interviews showed that within these purposes, unique nuances exist. The value of the writing sample could be in showing that the student can use sources to his or her own ends, and/or it could be in showing that the student knows how to write about specific content or with “disciplinarity.”

I also sought, in this work, to understand what ways can an applicant create agency and establish scholarly identity in the texts he or she submits to PhD program. As I stated in Chapter III, one conclusion of this study is that to write effective personal statements, students must learn about programs and their distinctive characteristics. Students will do themselves a service by understanding how the programs can meet the students’ needs and vice versa, saving themselves the time and effort of writing statements of purpose to programs that are not a good fit. Conversely, programs should make transparent some of the ways in which their program philosophies and missions differ. By pursuing responsible and honest language in their program materials and especially by corresponding with interested applicants, programs, which wield power in this situation, may help prospective applicants meet their needs. This course of action could also help the programs themselves, by reducing the number of and improving the quality (especially the fit) of applicants. By both accepting and clarifying that the statement of purpose is a context-specific genre, programs can take the responsibility to eliminate power structures that result from the occlusion of the genre. Rather than making the genre part of an elusive game, programs could also benefit from educating students about the genre prior to the admissions cycle, giving students the opportunity to display

authentic program knowledge and understanding rather than floundering for the right approach.

Changing attitudes about the statement of purpose, then, is linked to changing attitudes about power in academia. Both students and admissions committee members stand to benefit from a reduction in irrelevant or ill-directed activity, if an academy-wide paradigm shift were to take hold. The activity system model accounts for all results of activity, both intended and unintended. The actions that comprise both composing and evaluating ill-suited applications (and especially statements of purpose) divert time and efforts from the overall object(ive)s of admissions processes and significantly of the scholarly work within programs. This work is best conducted by those who are otherwise called upon to be committee members as well as by PhD students (who were once simply successful applicants). The elucidation of processes for evaluating statements of purpose and other important aspects of the genre, by freeing participants to work cooperatively, could contribute tangentially to completing even more significant work in the field.

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

A small corpus of recent work in Rhet-Comp and Applied Linguistics investigates the statement of purpose or personal statement as an occluded or semi-occluded genre. While most of this scholarship focuses on the characteristics, including rhetorical moves, of successful and unsuccessful statements of purpose in several disciplines, my focus is on the genre's use within the activity system of PhD admissions in rhetoric and composition. To that end, I would like to ask you describe the process of admissions to your program in some detail. If you cannot answer any of my questions completely, I would appreciate any response that will help me understand this process.

- What steps are taken to recruit and notify prospective applicants prior to the beginning of the applications process?
- To what extent is your applications process an electronic one and to what extent is it a paper process?
- Once applicants submit all of their application materials, what happens?
- How are the tasks that make of the process divided amongst faculty in your department(s)?
- How are funds allotted to your R/C program (does it have its own money or is it English money, e.g.)?
- How are committee members selected and how long do they serve, if there is a committee?
- How often do faculty meet to discuss applications?

- How much of the work do faculty members do individually, and how much do they do as a group?
- How long does the entire process of approving or denying acceptance take?
- During the process, how do faculty correspond with one another regarding applications?
- What is the place of the statement of purpose in this process?
 - How many copies of a given statement of purpose circulate through the process?
 - What is the link between the statement of purpose and the writing sample?
 - How are applicants contacted for acceptance and/or rejection (phone, email, mail)? What genres are generated in acceptance?
 - What is the role of the graduate school? The department?
 - Who contacts applicants (department members, administrative assistants)?

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Notes

¹ Though both terms are used, hereafter I follow the 2008 *Rhetoric Review* survey and use the term statement of purpose, except where the document is referred to as something else in my sources. For example, Ding and Brown both use the term “personal statement” in their genre analyses, but Samraj and Monk use term “statement of purpose” in their study. Perhaps this distinction reflects the language of the disciplines or even the specific programs studied.

² Of informants interviewed by Samraj and Monk from three disciplines (Linguistics, Electrical Engineering, and Business Administration) the Electrical Engineering informant was the most interested in personal information. Meanwhile, Samraj and Monk also found that readers in Business Administration favored statements that explicitly state what the program could do for the student; the readers in the other two departments found this distasteful (206). Their study is intriguing and contains numerous excerpts from successful statements of purpose.

³ Brown also hypothesizes that successful applicants tended to foreground the most important feature for the program he studied, that is, research. He finds evidence to support this hypothesis in his sample personal statements, where successful (accepted) samples mentioned research within fewer T-units of opening than unsuccessful texts.

⁴ Engestrom’s use of *Huckleberry Finn* to illustrate the concept of Zone of Proximal Development is intriguing and worthy of note. Here, he shows how coming-of-age in general, and especially Huck’s growth to new understandings of concepts such as race and social structure are mitigated by situational needs and occur as the result of an

individual's or group's ability to develop new approaches (including new understandings) to problems as a result of the situation and its requirements.

⁵ Roth and Lee narrow their own review to discard but acknowledge the importance of work that “adhere[s] more to a discursive, semiotic, or multimodal perspective drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin or Michael K. Halliday” (191). The ensuing list of authors and works includes David R. Russell’s 1997 article “Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis,” which I find seminal to the use of activity theory in rhetoric and composition and to my own work. Although I comprehend Roth and Lee’s rationale for excluding this scholarship, I nonetheless find it problematic, since it appears to disregard the fact that the real-world work of academics in rhetoric and composition is using discursive, semiotic, and multimodal means to communicate, and studying communication through and within these means. Roth and Lee’s influence on my work, though, is apparent in my decision to parse out activity theory and the interelucidation of genre and activity theories.

⁶ This joining of theories has been used by Charles Bazerman, David Russell, Elizabeth Wardle, Donna Kain, Ken Hyland, and many others to investigate the development and generic qualities of technical, bureaucratic, and scholarly genres, transition from high school to college and to university classes for ESL students, and the transition from college to workplace writing.

⁷ Brown did find a correlation between the psychology department’s composition and the character of successful personal statements. Citing the *Insider’s Guide to Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology* 2002-2003, he states that while no members of its faculty aligned with a psychoanalytic approach, 75% aligned with a cognitive-behavioral

approach, which would focus on the empirical data as evidenced by the successful texts (258).

⁸ See Kain and Wardle for discussion of the concept of genre as a tool in activity systems (128).

⁹ See Appendix for the interview questionnaire.

¹⁰ In the methods section of Chapter I, I explained my sampling rationale. While my initial group of contacts did not include those whose programs did not rank the statement of purpose among their top six criteria, it is now clear that this rationale eliminated only 20-25% of the total programs in Rhetoric and Composition.

¹¹ That is, as Engestrom takes careful effort to demonstrate, activity does not account for the actions of animals, based solely on biological imperatives, or even hominids prior to the formation of rudimentary civilizations.

¹² Or, less commonly, socio-historical activity theory. Roth and Lee, as well as others, use the acronym CHAT for this theory. Still others use only the acronym AT. Given this variety and the distinction made by Roth and Lee (see note 6), I have avoided the use of acronyms altogether.

¹³ Specifically, the responses to my survey include at least three land-grant institutions, two polytechnic institutes, and geographic representation of the East Coast, Southeast, Deep South, Midwest, Western states, and Southwest.

¹⁴ I used Google Maps' My Maps function to create this map. It is available online to the public with a Google account.

¹⁵ My respondents gave examples I consider to be similar to Brown's distinction between research and clinical psychology; for example, since many programs are in English

departments, student statements asserting an interest in studying children's literature or creative writing were clearly off-target and show a lack of understanding and attention to subdisciplines.

¹⁶ I discuss the Miller et al. survey in my brief history of scholarship on graduate writing in Chapter I.

¹⁷ In my own data collection, my thesis was granted exemption by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). However, one contact emailed that after discussing my survey with a colleague, she decided not to respond because she and her colleague both felt it would require personal information about applicants to adequately answer my questions. This response also demonstrates the inconsistent interpretation and application of rules and raises questions about the ability of institutions and individuals to interpret and apply them consistently in different contexts. Such questions may lend themselves to another activity theory analysis.

¹⁸ Interestingly, though, my interview respondents were unsure where this deadline originated. After some research, I remain uncertain how this deadline was generated, but it appears to have existed as an unofficial guideline made prior to an agreement by the Council of Graduate Schools that deemed it a more official policy.

¹⁹ The terms "rough read" or "rough cut" were used by all interviewees to refer to the initial reading and ranking of applications materials.

²⁰ Anecdotally, literature on applying to graduate programs, various professors whom I have met, and my interview respondents alike have expressed either overtly or implicitly that the most competitive programs have reputations for poor treatment of their graduate students. I do not wish to give unfair leverage to smaller and less competitive programs,

though and would be glad to model larger programs and their admissions processes as well.