

## **An experimental program to increase the efficiency of freshman composition at Montana State University: An initial report**

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Two years ago the English Department at Montana State University began experimenting with a more efficient system for teaching freshman writing. Our experimental program, relying on a progressive writing center, a coordinated sequence of assignments, an elaborate network of upper division tutors, and a commitment to collaborative learning, has allowed us to raise the size of Freshman English sections from 25 to 60 students. Each section demands no more instructor time than a traditional 25-student section.

News of our experiment has begun to spread around the country--to the understandable horror of writing program administrators, many of whom have spent much of their professional lives justifying small writing classes to cost-cutting deans and financial officers. We are concerned that our experiment may tempt upper level administrators to impose our program at other institutions where it would be entirely inappropriate and unworkable. This concern was shared by our two outside evaluators, Harvey Wiener of CUNY-LaGuardia and Andrea Lunsford of the University of British Columbia, who recently reviewed our experimental course under the Exxon-supported WPA Evaluation Program. Wiener and Lunsford's first recommendation, which we quote verbatim so readers can sense the urgency of their tone, is as follows:

The Writing Program director should write and publish a report, outlining the strengths and pitfalls associated with the experimental design of the [new freshman writing] course, particularly stressing the inadvisability of imposing this design on programs at other universities and cautioning against an oversimplified or overly optimistic view of what such a course can practically achieve. We give this recommendation our highest priority.

We of course agree with the evaluators that our methods should not be imposed on other institutions. Nevertheless, because we seem to be demonstrating that writing can be taught more efficiently than the composition community currently believes, our program raises profound issues for writing program administrators, for the English profession itself, and for education in general.

### **Background and development of ideas**

An external review of the MSU English Department in 1979 identified heavy teaching schedules and the threat of midlife burnout as pressing problems for our

staff. Having no graduate program in English to provide teaching assistants, an English Department with 18 full-time faculty and 4-7 part-time faculty had been trying to meet the composition needs of more than 11,000 students enrolled at MSU. Despite carrying among the heaviest teaching loads in the university, the department had been able to offer freshman writing (a one-quarter, 4-credit course) to only half of the freshman class, turning away more than 1000 students per year. Faced with this demand for more sections of freshman writing and encouraged by a FIPSE grant in writing-across-the-curriculum, several members of the writing staff began "conceptual blockbusting" on the paperload problem, working simultaneously on ways to increase the size of freshman writing sections and to permit essay assignments in large classes throughout the curriculum.

During Winter and Spring Quarters, 1982, the department offered two pilot versions of its newly conceived experimental course, settling on 60 students per section as a workable number. During 1982-83, the department offered twelve additional experimental sections taught by twelve different instructors. To measure the effectiveness of the large sections, the department compared final examination essays and student evaluations from the large sections with final exam essays and student evaluations from traditional small sections serving as controls. During the same year, the department began the operation of a newly funded writing center designed to support both the large sections of freshman writing and an aggressive writing-across-the-curriculum effort. As explained in the following pages, the department considered the experimental year to be successful, and voted to implement the program completely beginning Fall Quarter, 1983. The English Department, for the first time in the institution's recent history, will now be able to offer freshman writing to the entire freshman class. As a result of the new program, the teaching loads of full-time faculty will become commensurate with teaching loads in other departments, and the professional status of part-time instructors will be enhanced.

### **A brief description of the new program**

The basis of the more efficient curriculum is a method for conducting 60-student sections of freshman writing. These sections require approximately the same number of instructor-hours per week as an average 25-student section, but eliminate most paper-grading for the instructor. Rejecting the lecture method as an ineffective means for achieving efficiency in composition courses, the writing staff has adapted the collaborative learning model of Kenneth Bruffee of Brooklyn College, CU NY, one of the outside consultants for the university's FIPSE-funded writing-across-the-curriculum project. Under the collaborative model, the sixty students in each section are divided into ten groups of six students each. Instructors devise collaborative tasks that require peer interaction at all stages of the composing process--interaction that provides training in listening, reading, and critical thinking, as well as in writing. Each instructor is assisted by at least two undergraduate tutors, who are paid by the writing center after completing an upper division course in peer-tutoring.

The hub of the program is the university's new Writing Center, where both course tutors and instructors hold their office hours. Because writing assignments are relatively uniform across all sections, students can receive help on drafts from

any instructor or tutor in the program, making it possible for the department to offer individual or small group assistance in the writing center during all hours that it is open. The regular presence of instructors in the writing center provides backup support for course tutors and underscores our department's decision to make the writing center the visible center of writing activity on campus. Although there are 60 students for each instructor in the program, the "help ratio" for Fall Quarter, 1985, is approximately 1 to 12 because of our abundant supply of tutors.

The program depends on a coordinated sequence of writing assignments with clearly specified purposes and criteria. The essays assigned during 1982-83 are described in the first year's course textbook, Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing*. During 1983-1984, most instructors are experimenting with a wider range of assignments designed to overcome limitations found in Bruffee's approach. Besides writing individual essays, students write occasional group essays providing practice for the kind of team writing frequently required of business, scientific and technical communicators.

Feedback on students' writing comes from individual or small group conferences at all stages of the writing process rather than from instructors' comments placed on finished products. While drafting essays, students can come to the writing center at any time for help. Instructors convert to conference hours the time they would normally spend marking and grading papers for a 25-student section. The course tutors hold frequent consultation hours also, so that students in the large sections have considerably more opportunity for one-on-one tutorial help from an instructor or tutor than did students in our former system with conventional small sections. Students also receive feedback on their drafts during peer-editing workshops in class. Throughout the course instructors refer students with sentence-level problems to a special program within the writing center for individual tutoring, small group mini-courses, or computer-aided instruction (to be operational on an experimental basis during 1983-84).

Finished essays are graded by trained teams of upper division students who, under the supervision of the Director of the Writing Center, staff-grade them holistically on a 6-point scale. (Many of the tutors are also graders, but the roles are kept distinct.) The essays are returned to students with grades but without comments or other marks. Students who wish to challenge the grade make appointments with the instructor; others are free to see anyone in the writing center for further feedback on their finished products. Because all students are doing the same kind of writing task, instructors can provide considerable feedback by discussing selected essays in class.

### **Issues raised by the new program**

The model we have developed raises many theoretical and practical issues, some of which we believe we have resolved, others of which continue to trouble us. The following are examples of the kinds of issues with which we have been wrestling:

*--Is the use of upper division students for grading freshman essays reliable?*

We can now offer a fairly certain "yes." Data collected during our experimental year suggest that with a moderate amount of training and supervision, student

graders can reach agreement rates of above 90% on holistically graded essays with clearly defined formats and features. This figure exceeds, in fact, the agreement rate we achieve with faculty scorers. (Independent checking of students' scoring by instructors and writing center personnel supports the validity of these scores.) We have found, however, that such agreement is possible only if instructors across all sections give similar assignments with similar directions.

*--Is the use of student graders ethical?*

This is a knotty problem, and we confess to several hours of heated debate with Ken Bruffee over the issue when he spent a week on campus as a consultant for our writing-across-the-curriculum project. Bruffee contends that being part of a grading team compromises the tutors' roles as fellow students and learners by identifying tutors both actually and symbolically as extensions of the teacher. We argue in return that staff-grading establishes a uniform and hence reasonably just grading system, and that in practice none of our tutors feel compromised by the dual roles nor less able to form a congenial peer relationship with students. Because these pedagogical and philosophical issues continue to concern us, the department has been especially scrupulous in its attempt to keep the present system fair. Every essay is read independently by two trained graders, all essays with split grades are referred to a faculty member, both student writers and student graders remain anonymous to each other, the graders never evaluate the writing of students whom they tutor, and the department has a systematic review procedure for students who think their grades are unfair. Throughout the process, the instructor remains responsible for every grade and regularly checks the work of the graders. This system produces more uniform grading across multiple sections of the course than was possible in our previous system, wherein the instructor was both coach and judge. (we should add that although the ethics of our system remains an arguable issue, the legality of the department's procedure seems assured, based on conversations between the department head and the university's attorney.)

*--Are instructors themselves compromised in giving up their role as graders?*

No longer weighed down by the burden of grading and marking papers, instructors generally report a new enthusiasm for teaching writing and an enjoyment of conducting tutorial sessions in the writing center. Thus, most instructors have felt liberated in becoming full-time coaches of their students' writing. Hostility about grades is generally deflected away from the instructor and individual course tutors, who can then counsel students objectively without needing to be defensive. But it should be understood that instructors can change the graders' score on an essay if an injustice is apparent, so that the final responsibility for grades remains with the instructor. That so few grade changes have been necessary suggests that centralized staff-grading can lead to a sense of shared philosophy and common goals. We should note, however, that some instructors have bridled at the system and have had considerable difficulty during norming sessions accepting the standards agreed upon by other colleagues.

*--What is the effect of not giving individualized written comments on each student's essay?*

This is probably the most controversial issue in our program. Many teachers have long suspected that the benefits students receive from teachers' written comments do not justify the teacher's time. It was with a feeling of liberation, therefore, that we agreed, as a community of teachers, to experiment with increased conference hours in place of individual comments on essays. And in many ways we have been satisfied with the result. Person to person conferencing, we have found, allows us to respond more richly, subtly, and humanely to our students' writing, and we have been especially pleased to discover that students come to us increasingly for help with drafts in progress rather than for critiques of finished products. The effect of our not placing comments on essays has been an enormous increase in the amount of personal conference time a student seeks and receives--a benefit we would lose if we returned to commenting on essays in lieu of holding conference hours in the writing center. Currently, each student has available a minimum of 20 minutes of personal conference time for each required essay. Many students receive more help, as much as one or two hours on a single essay.

And yet students still long for written comments. On student evaluations during 1982-83, the most frequently cited suggestion for improving the course was "Please put comments on essays." Harvey Wiener and Andrea Lunsford, as external evaluators, also recommended that instructors personally comment on at least a few of the essays each term. And, indeed, most teachers in the program feel guilty about returning essays without comments, partly because they believe written comments can sometimes be effective in showing students how to improve their writing, and partly because written comments may provide a "sense of a reader" more essential for beginning writers than we at first appreciated. An essay returned without comments can seem anonymous, void, "unread"; ironically, perhaps live conferences do not give students the same sense of a real reader as does an occasional "awk" scribbled in the margins of their essays. Finally, at least ten to twenty percent of our students do not take advantage of the conference time available in the writing center. In our program, these students get no formal feedback at all on their writing. We are left, then, with a dilemma. At present we believe that the advantages of omitting comments from essays--happier teachers, greatly increased numbers of student conferences, a shift in emphasis from product to process--outweigh the disadvantages; but we still regard this problem as one of the unresolved issues in our program.

*--Can student tutors provide adequate feedback on drafts and on graded essays?*

Our tentative answer is that tutors do give effective feedback once they complete our peer tutoring course, especially since they have written essays similar in form to those expected of students, and since they participate with faculty in regularly held norming sessions. We have had unfortunate instances, however, of tutors giving poor advice, and while we believe we can minimize such instances through improved training and supervision, we cannot expect tutors to replace experienced instructors.

*--Do students learn to write in the large sections?*

Our data so far are encouraging. A pilot 60-student section taught Spring

Quarter, 1982, was carefully monitored, with two sets of essays from the large section compared with essays from small sections serving as controls. (See Figure 1 for results). On both sets of essays, students in the large section scored somewhat higher than those in the control sections. Controlled testing also occurred during the 1982-83 experimental year. Eleven large sections were compared with sixteen small sections. The testing instrument for each quarter was a two-hour in-class essay written during finals week. The essay task was constructed to permit process work such as generating ideas and planning a design prior to the exam itself. (Details of our experimental design, the construction of the final examination including copies of exam topics, forming criteria, staff-grading procedures, and so forth will gladly be supplied upon request.)

The results for the experimental year are shown in Figure 2, which displays comparative mean scores from large and small sections. Although the differences are not statistically significant, the experimental groups did slightly better than the control groups, re-affirming the results of the first pilot experiment in Spring, 1982. These results suggest that the large sections are apparently as effective as the small sections in teaching composing skills and may perhaps be slightly more effective.

*--Do students like the large sections?*

Here the data suggest that students, on the whole, prefer small sections. Student ratings of the course were collected on Montana State University's standardized student evaluation form, which allows students to rate teachers from 4 (high) to 1 (low) on eight items. Figure 3 shows comparative scores for experimental and control groups on four of these items: stimulation of interest, availability for assistance, concern for students, and overall effectiveness. Figure 4 shows the comparative distribution of scores, section by section, throughout the year, on "overall effectiveness" for experimental sections versus all small sections, including controls.

As these figures show, small sections scored, on the average, somewhat higher than the experimental sections on "overall effectiveness," "availability for assistance," and "concern for student," and considerably higher on "stimulation of interest," suggesting that the writing staff should address itself seriously to improving the attractiveness of the course as perceived by students.

Several features of the evaluations are encouraging, however. More than half of the large sections (7 of 11) scored above the university average for "overall effectiveness" (based on averages from Winter Quarter, 1983, of all university courses larger than 25 students), and at least two of the sections received impressively high scores. These results suggest that skilled teachers can make the large sections attractive to students. Moreover, all of the large sections were taught "for the first time" by teachers new to the concept of large composition courses. Most instructors are looking forward to eliminating their initial mistakes and thus improving their teaching of the course. We should point out also that in optional written comments students did not complain so much about the large size of the classes as about group work itself and about the occasional confusion of the teachers who had not yet mastered classroom techniques for conducting collaborative sessions. (It is clear that students themselves are not used to studentcentered classrooms with all the attendant responsibility that students must take

for their own learning.) One of our chief fears--that students would find the large sections depersonalizing and anonymous--was not borne out since students rated "concern for student" and "availability for assistance" consistently above the university average although lower than the small section average.

### **Implications and significance of our program: pitfalls**

The potential Impact of our program at both the local and national level is considerable. By nearly tripling the size of typical small sections of writing, the English department has transformed freshman composition from one of the least cost-efficient courses on campus to one of the most cost-efficient. Other institutions adopting our methods could expect similar improvements in student credit hour efficiency for an entire English department. There are, however, a number of disquieting consequences that must be considered before any English department could be expected to experiment with, let alone implement, our model. While upper-level administrators are likely to be attracted to the budgetary efficiency of our program, composition specialists must point out that it has features that limit the possibility of its being adopted elsewhere, and that it may yet self-destruct from its own internal complexities. This is therefore an appropriate place to list some of the major problems associated with our program--what our external evaluators called "pitfalls."

First, the amount of coordination required demands enormous administrative time, mainly in the form of staff meetings for designing and coordinating assignments, agreeing on goals, setting criteria, holding forming sessions, and training and supervising tutors. Unfortunately--and this continues to be a major problem for us--the burden of making the program work at MSU has fallen disproportionately upon our small staff of part-time faculty, who teach the course each term, and much less upon the full-time faculty, who teach the course periodically in rotation. The department is now trying valiantly to redress this inequity by improving both salaries and employment conditions for part-timers. But other departments should be forewarned not to attempt a program of our kind unless their own houses are in order regarding part-time faculty.

Second, the program depends on instructors' giving up their individual freedom in favor of a centrally planned curriculum. Many of our faculty have been willing to do so because the new curriculum offers a sense of coherence missing in our former decentralized writing program. But some faculty are not happy with the new program, objecting both to the lack of flexibility in the way the course must be taught and to the whole notion of "efficiency," which seems a sellout to the budget makers. Unless a department can count on the goodwill of most of its full-time faculty, and the voluntary cooperation of all instructors who will teach in the program, it should not even consider adopting our method.

Third, the need to staff-grade essays and to provide uniform assistance in the writing center requires--or at least so we currently believe--specified formats for essays, such as Ken Bruffee's three and four-paragraph argumentative writing tasks. Such formats seem uncomfortably close to the traditional 5-paragraph essay, tainted as it is with all its accompanying symbolic baggage. The left wing of the process movement will never be persuaded that tasks with prescribed forms can truly be integrated into a process approach to writing, although our writing staff

now believes it has developed a set of form-specified assignments that accommodate a process approach and yet remain amenable to consistent scoring from staff graders. Nonetheless, our program will invite criticism from many process teachers.

Finally, our program demands highly skilled instructors who know how to conduct collaborative sessions in a room packed with students, who can design challenging tasks that guide students through each stage of the writing process, who can conduct individual and small group conferences efficiently while remembering all their students' names and their individual writing and thinking problems, and who can remain contented, year after year, teaching composition in such a high stress environment. Each new teacher in the program needs extensive orientation and at least one term of on-the-job training before beginning to master techniques for teaching the course successfully. Traditionally, writing programs can tolerate a few poor teachers, but a poor teacher in our program sets off a chain of troubles with tutors, graders, other writing center personnel, and 60 visibly disgruntled students. Moreover, the ineffective teacher can readily blame his or her troubles on the system itself. The program thus provides us frighteningly little flexibility: we don't dare hire part-timers at the last minute, and we don't know what to do about the full-time faculty who dislike the new program in light of our department's longstanding policy that every faculty member teach freshman writing on a regular basis. Moreover, our reliance now on a truly professional staff of part-time instructors exposes more sharply than ever the way higher education can exploit its low status teachers.

#### **Implications and significant of our program: why didn't we do something else?**

As we should have now made clear, the large sections of freshman writing at Montana State University have arisen out of particular historical circumstances largely unique to our own institution. Let us review again the constraints under which we were working: a freshman writing program that could enroll in any given year only half of the freshman students on campus; an English faculty already burdened with too many writing courses; a federally funded, highly visible writing-across-the-curriculum program which was highlighting the need for MSU students to take more writing; the absence of a writing center and hence the absence of means to continue writing-across-the-curriculum once grant money was depleted; and the availability of very limited extra resources that could be given the department because of severe overcrowding in many other curricula across campus.

Given these constraints, we had no opportunity to design an ideal curriculum, only to improve on a system that turned away half of MSU's freshmen from freshman writing. We would argue, however, that our decision to raise class sizes--while hardly an ideal method for teaching composition--should nonetheless give WPAs around the country a troublesome awareness of freedom. For our experiment at least raises the possibility that writing can be taught effectively in sections much larger than the limits prescribed by the WPA, NCTE, or MLA guidelines on class size, which may now appear, unfortunately, as self-serving to skeptical administrators. In existential terms, the significance of our experiment is

that small classes can no longer be comfortably regarded as an essence, an unquestioned "given, of an effective writing program. Rather, small classes are choices, like other choices institutions must make for their writing programs, such as the amount of pay they will give part-time faculty or the percentage of sections they will allow to be staffed by graduate students. Thus the implications of our experiment for other institutions can be fully appreciated only in light of the choices we didn't make. What other options did we have?

Our first option was to do nothing. For years, the status quo had been part of our "strategy" for change. According to this gambit, we tenaciously clung to classes of 25 while turning hundreds of students away each quarter--as visibly as possible, urging the disgruntled to stack their zapped registration cards outside the dean's door. In this way we tried to call dramatic attention to our plight and justify a number of new FTE's. We pursued this strategy relentlessly for eight years. It didn't work. It couldn't work at an institution like ours where everyone's resources are similarly strained. For example, increased enrollment in the Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Programs at MSU have placed even greater strains upon their faculty than those felt by the writing staff because those faculty, teaching required courses within a popular major, have not had our attractive option of insisting upon small classes.

"Pressuring" administrators by turning masses of students away is effective only if an internal reallocation of resources is possible. But when an entire institution suffers shortfalls, then we find ourselves competing for nonexistent resources with the very departments which we supposedly "serve" by teaching freshman writing. Only if increased funding were made available by the legislature (and only if we were at the top of the pecking order) could the status quo strategy possibly bear fruit. We decided not to hold our breath any longer.

Our second option was to expand our entire staffs teaching load, moving from 12 to 16 hours, and replacing low enrollment literature courses with composition sections. Why not? Many other public institutions place this kind of teaching burden on their English staff. Unfortunately, it would mean that our staff could not measure up to the escalating research standards imposed by the university for both promotion and tenure. Lip service to the importance of teaching notwithstanding, tenure and promotion decisions were increasingly made on the basis of scholarly productivity. We found ourselves being compared to scientists with half the teaching load; we'd already had a couple of close calls on tenure cases. And among older faculty, a 1979 external review of the English Department had cited the possibility of widespread burnout as a growing problem. So we considered the odds of selling an increased teaching load as nearly nil, whatever its wisdom.

Next there was the "more part-timers" alternative. Instead of demanding money for expensive full-time lines, we could use less money more efficiently by hiring cheap labor. But several considerations both practical and philosophical ruled out this alternative. A practical consideration was that Bozeman, a small community more than 350 miles from the nearest institution with an English doctoral program, couldn't supply enough potential composition teachers to triple our part-time staff. And philosophically, while we were clearly violating the WPA, NCTE, and MLA guidelines on class size, we were trying to take very seriously their guidelines against the exploitation of part-time faculty--what Wayne Booth has called "the worst scandal in higher education today." Moreover, we doubted that an expanded staff of insecure part-timers, even if we could find them, would really

provide a stronger writing program than our 60-student method. While smaller classes are surely preferable to larger ones for the teaching of writing, could we justify spending many thousands of dollars to create the kind of program that our profession is coming increasingly to regard as scandalous? Mightn't the university be better off placing extra money into a state-of-the-art writing center that could support writing-across-the-curriculum? In short, we thought our 60-student sections, combined with an effective writing center, a better option than small sections taught by a heavily expanded part-time staff.

As a fourth option, we also considered resurrecting our proposal for a graduate program from the legislative scrap heap where it had been thrown two years previously. For some of our faculty, the appeal of this option was strong. Not only might we be blessed with a platoon of low cost TAs to teach freshman writing, but many regular faculty could trade their freshman composition courses for graduate seminars.

In truth, however, given the prevailing economic, political, and educational realities of Montana, we had no chance of starting even a small graduate program, let alone one large enough to staff freshman writing. And for some of us, the idea of solving our problems with this model was more philosophically distressing than any of the other options we considered. Whatever the ethics of staffing freshman writing with unseasoned teachers or of urging more graduate students into an already overcrowded profession, the message that T.A.-staffed writing programs give to the educational community is clear: Writing can be taught in a low priority compartment of the curriculum requiring a minimum of expertise and thus a minimum of university resources. The equally clear message being given to TAs is that freshman composition is a grunt course, and if a person is smart she'll get to a large research institution where she won't have to teach it. The gap between high status literature scholars and low status composition teachers--a gap socially created and perpetuated by large research institutions, where research means literary scholarship and where the teaching of writing is a job for graduate students--is a dangerous one, as several articles in Winifred Horner's recent *Literature and Composition: Bridging the Gap* make painfully clear.<sup>2</sup> English departments can hardly create innovative writing programs if their most prestigious researchers disdain the teaching of writing. Nor can English departments become models for writing-across-the-curriculum if their literature scholars turn over the trench work of writing instruction to their graduate apprentices.

We also had to weigh the quality of teaching the TAs might do against the quality of our trained part-time staff, all of whom would have to be let go. As our outside evaluators wrote in their report, we are "in the unusual position of having [a small core of] committed and highly-trained part-time instructors." The issue which we faced here was one we ran up against repeatedly in our deliberations: how to weigh quality of instructor against quality of methodology and class size.

In particular, when we were considering the large section notion, we were attracted by the fact that through increasing the size of the sections, we could limit the number of sections. Ten sections per quarter could hold as many students as 24 traditional sections. Because it is much easier to staff 10 sections per quarter, rather than 24 sections per quarter, with talented writing instructors (drawn from both the full-time and part-time staff), we could put our best composition teachers into the classroom more frequently. The effect of this is hard to gauge. Most empirical testing in composition measures some aspect of methodology. Instructor

quality is typically "controlled for" in such experiments, It's difficult to say what the relationship might be between instructor quality and student learning. We hope that it is positive, for we proceeded on the assumption that 10 large sections taught by 10 highly trained professionals would be preferable to 20-30 small sections taught either by M.A. candidates or by largely itinerant and underpaid part-timers over whom we had little quality control.

A final option we considered was to bring into the department a half dozen post-doctoral lecturers on three-year non-renewable contracts. The appeal of this option is that it would allow us to bring in bright, energetic young teachers just out of graduate school who might share with us their expertise. We might also be performing a humane service--as UCLA and other places with post-doctoral writing programs appear to be doing--by giving young professionals a start in the profession.

Unfortunately, to get any kind of cost-efficiency out of this option, we would have to ask these people to teach three composition courses per quarter at low wages. Given the load we'd have to impose upon them, it's doubtful that we could get the full benefit of their expertise. It also appears doubtful that they'd be able to do the sort of research necessary to obtain a tenure track position. Unless we could offer significant post-doctoral training, a reasonable load and salary, such a system would simply be exploitive, offering more false hopes than fresh starts. And once again, to be able to hire these full-time temporaries, we would have to dismiss most or all of our present highly qualified part-time staff.

These then were the major options we considered before entering into the large section experiment. In a world of limited resources, we found ourselves engaged in a number of zero-sum games, where every gain seemed to entail an equivalent loss. What we wish to emphasize for other WPAs is that we placed much of what goes on in other writing programs--large part-time staffs, excessive use of TAs, temporary full-timers on in-and-out contracts, a mind-crushing paper-grading burden for permanent faculty--in the negative column of our deliberations. We concluded that having sixty students in a section may not be, in the long run, as detrimental to the goal of improving student writing as other choices regularly made in writing programs around the country. We would have preferred to pursue other alternatives first had they met our multiple and conflicting needs. But in our view, the large sections met more of our needs, at a smaller cost, than any of the other options.

#### **Implications and significance of our experiment: Benefits**

But adopting large sections did more than simply meet needs. It created an enormous amount of goodwill for our program among administrators and freed further resources to strengthen our program. And here a crucial point needs to be made. From the very outset of our experiment, we negotiated with our administration to ensure that dollar savings would return to the department. We found that our willingness to experiment with 60-student sections gave us a surprisingly powerful bargaining chip in the negotiations for university resources. Though budgets are still tight, we were able to gain a number of benefits through our efficiencies, including: (1) a new FTE position for a tenure-stream Writing Center Director; (2) operational funding for our newly developed writing center;

(3) a research laboratory for computer applications in composition; (4) funding for an innovative outreach program in writing-across-the-curriculum; and (5) reduced teaching loads for English faculty, permitting more research and professional development. In the future, we hope to secure a permanent budget for our part-time staff and to continue increasing their professional status within the university.

In addition, we may also be discovering some curricular advantages to the program that we hadn't fully anticipated--advantages accruing directly to students rather than to budgets or faculty. We would like to conclude our report by suggesting some of them.

For example, if our program demonstrates that students can learn to write within a less teacher-centered environment, we may facilitate an increase in the total amount of writing students do in college. Moreover, since nearly all students in higher education take freshman writing early in their college careers, a significant change in the structure of that course could have widespread effects. Our model, in training students in small-group problem-solving and in peercritiquing at all stages of the writing process, as well as in writing group papers and short essays designed to increase thinking skills, lays the foundation for a writingacross-the-curriculum program that can work at a large university. Because freshmen at Montana State University will now share the common experience of a course focusing on independent, small-group learning, faculty in other disciplines can perhaps experiment more confidently with alternatives to the traditional lecture, such as guided design (Charles Wales), Piagetian inquiry techniques, or team problem-solving.

In fact, several faculty in other disciplines at MSU are examining our 60-student model as an alternative, not to small classes in their own departments, but as an alternative to mass lectures. Although Ken Bruffee may understandably cringe at the way we have bastardized his collaborative learning model, we may yet have a substantial impact in promoting collaborative learning across the disciplines at a large university. And surely the notion of 60 to 100 students sharing their writing in small groups seems like a progressive idea if the class is Business Management 219, say, rather than English 101. If we believe that faculty in all disciplines should require some writing in all their courses--no matter how large--our willingness to teach writing enthusiastically in 60-student sections may do more for writingacross-the-curriculum than any other single act we could have taken.

As a result of our method, faculty outside of English can also feel more comfortable designing writing assignments to enhance learning and thinking--and use them in large classes--because students will be accustomed to writing for each other without expecting extensive teacher comments. Most of the techniques for assigning writing in large classes, developed by faculty outside of English during the FIPSE grant, will now be introduced to students in freshman writing. Thus the department's large sections of writing might be an entirely appropriate way to teach introductory composition at a large university where regular writing is a part of all academic life--assuming, of course, that faculty in other disciplines create appropriate writing tasks that build upon the skills we develop in freshman writing.

In sum, then, we don't wish to apologize to the profession for our experiment. While we agree with our external evaluators that our experimental program should not be "impose(d)" on other departments and that no one should have "an

oversimplified or overly-optimistic view" of its potential, we do think that the positive as well as negative features of the experiment ought to be carefully considered and weighed by other WPAs. Perhaps the most positive consequence of all, and one that we have so far only implied, is the enormous professional development that our new curriculum has brought to our department. The act of creating the curriculum has generated an air of excitement about the teaching of writing that we imagine few departments in the country can equal. While much of the ferment of change has been unsettling, it has also been productive and exciting, and we hope to retain as much of that excitement as possible as we now move from the experimental stage into the implementive stage of our program.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"A Cheap, Efficient, Challenging, Sure-fire and Obvious Device for Combating the Major Scandal in Higher Education Today." *Writing Program Administration*, 5(1981), pp. 35-39.

<sup>2</sup>*Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap*, Winifred Bryan Horner, Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). See especially Horner's introduction and the articles by Richard Lanham and Wayne Booth.



**FIGURE 3**  
**Comparison of Student Evaluations for Experimental and Control Sections of Freshman Writing and for all University Courses with Twenty-five or more Students**

	Overall Effectiveness	Concern for Students	Availability for Assistance	Stimulation of Interest
Average for Experimental	2.90	3.10	3.16	2.44
Average for Controls	3.00	3.28	3.21	2.68
University Average for Courses with Twenty-five or more Students (Winter 1982-83)	2.86	2.94	2.91	2.65

**FIGURE 4**  
**Comparative Distribution of Student Evaluation Scores for "Overall Effectiveness," Experimental Sections, Control Sections, and All Small Sections**

Experimental	All small sections
	3.73
	3.68
3.57	3.55
	3.47*
3.46	3.44
	3.42*
	3.38
	3.37
	3.37
	3.35*
	3.27
	3.25
	3.24
	3.23
	3.22*
	3.22*
	3.21
3.20	3.15*
	3.15*
	3.14*
3.14	3.06
	3.05*
3.05	3.00
3.04	3.00
	2.95*
	2.95*
	2.94*
2.91	2.90*
	2.86
2.78	2.79
	2.74
	2.64*
	2.59
	2.55*
	2.43
	2.35
2.29	2.35
2.28	2.24
	2.17*
2.16	2.10
	2.05
	1.76
Experimental Mean: 2.90	All small sections Mean: 2.96
Median: 3.04	Median: 3.06
	Control Mean: 3.00
	Median: 3.05

\*Control sections