

WPA on Campus

With this issue of *WPA* we are beginning a new section of the journal devoted to short articles of a practical nature. "WPA On Campus" will provide a forum for discussing issues that are important to WPAs but not readily suitable for publication as full-length, scholarly articles. What follows is a discussion of the WPA Consultation-Evaluation program from the point of view of those involved in two recently conducted campus visits.

The WPA Evaluation: A Recent Case History

Peter G. Beidler

"What I really want to know is whether there is some way we can do this thing more cheaply." That is what Lehigh University's provost David Sanchez said when he called Ed White, head of the Council of Writing Program Administrators' consultant-evaluator team. "This thing" was freshman English, and I was newly in charge of it.

All I knew on July 1, 1989, my first day as the department's new WPA, was that (a) the provost wanted our writing program reviewed before the next budget cycle began, (b) I was responsible for gathering answers to ten pages of questions called "Guidelines for Self-Study to Precede a Writing Program Evaluation," (c) my deadline for getting the report finished and in the hands of the evaluators was mid-August, (d) a two-person team would come to campus in mid-September, talk with lots of people, and turn their report in within two weeks after their visit.

When Lehigh's provost calls for an outside review to be completed just before budget time, the troops get moving. The Chair of the English Department, the Assistant Chair, the Learning Center Director, the ESL Director, and I mobilized ourselves to start the frenzied and hasty collection of data and descriptions that the report called for. Although the task seemed impossible, one by one we answered all the questions as best we could.

Meanwhile, as the Lehigh "point man," I had made a call to Ed White, head of the WPA consultant-evaluator team. He and I agreed on the names of two consultants who would be appropriate for our situation and our kind of university, a private doctorate-granting university that enrolls some 4000 undergraduates. I called them to arrange an appropriate time for a campus visit in mid-September and to discuss the nature of the visit and the people they would see: the Dean, the Provost, the Department Chair, the Director of the Writing Center, the ESL person, our graduate teaching assistants, our adjunct professors, our Director of Departmental Graduate Studies, and virtually all of our faculty.

By the time we had finished, revised, and then revised again our twenty-five-page, single-spaced report, I was convinced that—provost or not—we needed a

program evaluation. Even as an insider, I could see the value of compiling the information that went into the answers. Merely by trying to answer the questions, I could begin to see the strengths and weaknesses of our program. I had a far better sense than I had before of our needs, and I began to welcome the kind of advice and support that a team of outside consultants could give us.

The actual visit seemed to go well enough. Although I did not attend most of the meetings I had set up for the consultants, I was their escort as they moved around campus on their two-day visit, and I chatted with them between appointments. I slowly grew hopeful. The consultants were knowledgeable and friendly. They saw needs that I had not seen. They observed excesses that I had not noticed. They had ideas for redistributing funds in ways that would make our whole program more efficient. They saw, more boldly than I did, the need for new funds. My vaguely paranoid sense that I, not the writing program, was under review gradually gave way to a sense that these consultants could really make a difference. As outsiders they saw things I did not see, and they were to have the ear of the dean and the provost. Unlike me, they could make suggestions without sounding like empire-builders.

Two weeks after the consultants left they sent in their written report to the provost. I received a copy. The report was eight single-spaced pages long and contained many recommendations. To give readers of this journal a sense of the kinds of recommendations WPA consultants make, I list below, in bold face, six of their recommendations. After each recommendation I give a brief history of the problem that led the consultants to make it. Then I review the progress we made by the following year—the early fall of 1990.

Consultants' Recommendations

1. Regularize funding of the freshman English program. The major problem our writing program had faced in the past twenty years was irregular funding. In that two-decade period, we had never been able to count on a sufficient number of regular (that is, budgeted) slots to cover the freshman program. Accordingly, the Department Chair had to scrounge, pillage, and beg each semester for enough people to run the program. Always, one way or another, we succeeded in funding the freshman program, but always it was a time-consuming, and sometimes harrowing, experience. The irregular funding, of course, prevented effective long-range planning in our graduate program. *Progress:* In a very tight budget year, the university administration granted to the department of English an additional ten slots for graduate teaching assistants. This was virtually the only significant new budget allocation in the university for the 1990-91 academic year.

2. Develop staffing patterns for the freshman English courses in accordance with the guidelines set by the CCCC Committee on Professional Standards for Quality Education. In the spring of 1989, 45% of the freshman sections were taught by adjunct faculty. Although the instruction given by these faculty was almost always excellent (virtually all of our adjunct faculty were graduates of our own

Ph.D. program, and we hired only those we knew to be good teachers), the situation was not a good one. There were problems of morale because the pay for adjunct faculty was on a per-course basis, without benefits. Besides, we knew that the percentage of our courses taught by adjunct faculty was far higher than recommended by the Conference on College Composition and Communication. *Progress:* In the fall of 1990 only 26% of our freshman sections are taught by adjunct faculty.

3. Appoint a senior faculty member in rhetoric and composition to give the developing writing program national visibility and stature. In all but the most recent past, the Department of English had staffed the writing program and appointed its leadership from among faculty trained in literature. Even Ed Lotto, our Learning Center Director, a relatively recent appointee, had done a dissertation in medieval literature, though his professional work since then had been almost entirely in writing. Two years ago, faced with a retirement, we decided to shift a slot in Renaissance literature to a writing position, and in the fall of 1989 we brought on board Richard Jenseth, a PhD in writing, to fill that slot. We could scarcely be said to have a nationally visible program in rhetoric and composition. *Progress:* Although some members of the department preferred the adjective "rising" or "established" to the term "senior," we were eager to give our writing program more scope and wider reputation. Where would we find the new slot? The dean urged us to discuss with the staff of our development office how to match our needs with those of an interested donor. We have done so, but to date no donor has been located.

4. Establish a university-wide committee to coordinate the various components of the writing program. Considered broadly, Lehigh's writing program was unfocused, decentralized, and uncoordinated. The various parts of the university that dealt directly with writing worked in virtual isolation: the Freshman program, the writing minor, the Learning Center, the Rauch Center for Business Communications, the writing across the curriculum program, the program in English as a second language, teacher training in the College of Education, the Journalism Department, the communications studies program. *Progress:* The dean endorsed this recommendation and proposed to the provost's council that a university-wide committee be set up, to be chaired by a senior faculty member who would report to the provost. Acting on his recommendation, the provost appointed a committee with a faculty member from each of the four colleges. I was asked to act as initial chair of the committee. We had a series of meetings and made a set of initial recommendations to the provost about the nature and function of the committee. Alan Pense, our new provost, has not yet acted on our recommendations.

5. Establish a graduate student organization. Our graduate students did not have an active organization. Previous attempts to involve them in departmental colloquia and committee assignments had not met with enthusiastic support. *Progress:* Due primarily to their own efforts, the graduate students of our department began a series of colloquia in which they presented papers on various topics related to teaching, writing theory, literary studies, and the profession. The organization belongs to the graduate students. It has no regular charter, bylaws, funding, or faculty adviser. The graduate students seems to prefer it that way.

6. **Reconceive the writing minor as a sequence rather than as a collection of courses.** When we instituted our departmental writing minor several years earlier, we merely listed several of our courses in writing and told students wanting a minor in writing to take any five of them. The rationale for the program was uncertain and the advising inconsistent. *Progress:* The writing committee rewrote the departmental writing minor so that it consisted of three introductory courses in any of several areas (creative writing, practical writing, business writing, journalism, etc.), and followed them with two required upper-level capstone courses, one on theories of writing, the other on intensive writing for publication. The program encouraged serious students to prepare a writing portfolio at the end of the minor program.

So You Want a Program Evaluation?

I close with some advice for WPAs who are thinking of doing a program self-study or asking for a visit from consultants from the Council of Writing Program Administrators:

1. **Go ahead, do it.** You have nothing to lose and a great deal to gain. The self-study will take you some time, but even if you stop with that, you will have learned something. As for the on-campus visit, well, you will find it to be rigorous but stimulating.
2. **Adapt the self-study questions.** I began answering the self-study questions as if it were an examination and I was the humble examinee. As my confidence grew, however, I discovered that some of those questions on the ten-page list did not apply to Lehigh. I discovered that a couple of other questions that did apply to Lehigh were not on the list. I decided to think of the questions not as "exam questions" but as part of a dialogue. I silently deleted a few questions, silently added a few more. Feel free. It is your program, your self-study. The questions are wonderfully well-thought-out, but if they are not quite right for your program, adapt the list.
3. **Consult.** Get help from as many people as you can as you prepare your self-study. Show copies of your self-study to as many people as you can before you send it out to the consultants. Include the dean and provost. Make this a program self-study, not a program director's self-study.
4. **Be confident.** Remember that as WPA you are probably the best writer around. You can explain the history and the deficiencies of your program with great subtlety. Eventually armed with a consultant's report that you will have helped to shape, you will have what most other programs at your university will not have: a responsible outside review, with responsible recommendations. That makes tough competition for other programs on your campus.
5. **Respect your administrators.** If you go into this process thinking your dean and provost are closed-minded dummies, you will not only be wrong, but you will not

get very far. Think of them as just what they are: bright, caring people who have to disperse limited budgets to more good programs than there are funds for. What you have to do is explain your needs, show that your needs are important to students, and show that you are aware that many other programs also have needs. I began the self-study convinced that our provost was out to get us. By doing a careful self-study and by taking the whole review process seriously, we persuaded him that we had real needs, that our needs were as important as anyone else's, and that by making certain changes we would not only change our writing program, but improve the education of every Lehigh undergraduate. I am not sure whether the provost ever really was "out to get us." I am sure that by the end of the process he was one of the staunchest advocates of our writing program, and of the budgetary needs associated with it. Because of a long and careful process, by the end, he was less concerned with making our writing program cheaper than he was with making it better.

Requesting a Consultant-Evaluation Visit

Susan H. McLeod

Many outside evaluations of writing programs are requested by deans or provosts rather than by writing program administrators. There are situations, however, in which program administrators request an evaluation themselves. A case in point is my own: I negotiated for a Council of Writing Program Administrators' Consultant-Evaluation visit when I took my present position as the Director of Composition at Washington State University. What made me do such a thing? Let me describe the institutional and programmatic context in which the evaluation was requested, my reasons for asking, and the evaluators' recommendations and subsequent changes that have taken place. My sub-text, which I shall here reveal, is to get readers to think about whether or not they should request a WPA evaluation for their programs.

Washington State University is a public research institution (the state's land-grant school), enrolling about 17,000 students each year. I joined WSU's faculty in 1986, during a time of transition in departmental and division leadership. The Division of Humanities and Social Sciences had an acting dean and was beginning a national search for a permanent dean. The English Department was conducting a national search for an outside chair to replace the incumbent, who was retiring after sixteen years in the position. There was an air of anticipation about these changes in leadership, and also some apprehension among the composition faculty. Would the new people in these positions understand and support the department's writing program? There were also two university-wide initiatives afoot: a reform of the general education program and an initiative to establish a comprehensive writing-across-the-curriculum program. Both of these initiatives promised sweeping change in the way the institution delivered its undergraduate education. How would these programs look in their final stages of development, and how would they affect the department's writing program?