

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?

The writing program was already a strong one.<sup>1</sup> Developed under the leadership of two senior members of the department (who were still on the faculty), it boasted an undergraduate curriculum based on current theories of composition and a thriving graduate program in composition and rhetoric originally funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Furthermore, there had been two previous evaluations: the introductory composition course was evaluated internally in 1981 by Rich Haswell, who was then Director of Composition, and the graduate program had been evaluated as part of the NEH grant project in 1983. Both evaluations were very positive. But even with a strong program and previous positive evaluations, there can be good reasons for requesting an evaluation; my reasons were as follows.

1. **To highlight the strengths of the existing program.** Understandably enough, the writing program at WSU was accepted by department members and the university community as the norm; many did not know just how good it was. (Compared to the program at the institution I was leaving, it was a WPA's dream.) I wanted attention paid and recognition given where it was due. In particular, I wanted to document for the new departmental and division administrators the fact that others besides myself thought the program was a good one.

2. **To give the changes I hoped to make some external sanction.** As long as I was a candidate for Director of Composition, I was an expert (i.e., someone more than fifty miles from home), but I knew that once I was hired I would quickly dwindle into just another faculty member; I wanted the collective weight of the Council of Writing Program Administrators behind the changes I hoped to make. I knew, for example, that the planned writing-across-the-curriculum program needed a strong writing lab for faculty support if the program were to succeed, and I knew that the present lab (given its departmental funding and the fact that its director was on a temporary, half-time appointment) would not serve. I was sure that the consultant-evaluators would agree that we needed a full-time, permanent writing lab director and some funding from outside the department for tutors. I also felt the need for a reality check. I wanted to make sure that the needs for change that I saw were the same needs seen by trained consultant-evaluators and to find out whether there were needs that they could spot where I was blinded by enthusiasm for my new position and department.

3. **To learn my new job as quickly as possible.** Administrative lore has it that it takes a year to learn a new job, or to learn the same job at a new institution. The outside evaluation was a vehicle for speeding up my learning process. I could ask for information that was not otherwise readily available to me or that might be awkward to request (budget data usually seen only by the department chair, for example). I could ask for such information without seeming to be a nosy newcomer, because I had a self-study to write before the consultant-evaluators could come to campus.

4. **To document how things worked—or didn't.** Like many programs, the writing program at WSU had evolved over a number of years, relying on procedures that were more a matter of custom than of policy. I wanted to document the procedures that worked well, for the benefit of future WPAs who would sit in my office, and document how other things were not working well, so that they could be changed.

An example of the latter was the way the composition program was overloading the support staff. Over the years the program (and the accompanying paperwork) had grown, but no extra secretarial help had been added; secretaries routinely worked overtime at certain times of the year, often coming in on weekends and after hours. Such an overload, which the support staff handled in a remarkably cheerful way, could not continue as a matter of course.

5. **To start a faculty conversation that went beyond matters of procedure to matters of curriculum and articulation of courses.** As at many institutions, our undergraduate writing program grew to fit specific needs; it was more a collection of courses than a carefully crafted program. The outside evaluation—in particular, the self-study—gave those of us involved with the composition program an opportunity to step back from the day-to-day pressures of running it and discuss it in a focused, holistic way. It also gave me, as the new WPA, a chance to learn in a relatively structured setting from my colleagues who had been involved in the program for some time. This process of discussion and consensus-building before the consultant-evaluators ever arrived was, I believe, one of the most important parts of the evaluation.

Once the self-study was done, the consultant-evaluators arrived and spent two days asking probing, important questions. They met with the Composition Committee, the English Department Chair, the Dean and Associate Dean of the division, the Vice Provost for Instruction, the university committee that was working on the writing-across-the-curriculum initiative, the Writing Lab Director, the graduate teaching assistants, and of course, with me. Their professionalism and expertise were impressive; it was clear that their purpose was to help us in our efforts to think through and then try to improve the program.

The consultant-evaluators' subsequent report began by emphasizing the strengths of the program, in particular the graduate program in composition. Such documentation was useful when discussing the program's needs with administrators; we could show that we wanted to make a good program even better. The report also made a number of recommendations for change, all of which centered around making the writing program what they termed one of "real distinction." Let me detail here what their recommendations were, and what has happened since their visit.

The first recommendation had to do with placing students in our introductory writing courses and then certifying (both for ourselves and for the university community) that they were capable writers. Our method of placing students in freshman composition or in basic writing was workable but rough and ready—based on the verbal portion of a standardized multiple-choice examination and/or self-placement. We compensated for the lack of a direct measure by administering a diagnostic essay the first week of class, but by then it was too late for many students to change their schedules. As a result, a small but significant number of students found themselves in a writing class that did not meet their particular needs. The consultant-evaluators recommended that we institute a placement essay for all entering freshmen. The logistics for this placement instrument are complicated (we have about 2500 entering freshmen each year, close to half of whom do not register until the week before classes start), but we are close to

implementation. The consultant-evaluators also discussed other forms of assessment with us, endorsing the idea of a portfolio system to establish proficiency at the end of freshman composition. The portfolio system was piloted the year after the evaluation and has been in place for all classes since 1988. We have found that this system not only establishes students' writing proficiency, it also helps build collegiality among those teaching the course, and normalizes grading standards across sections (student complaints about grades—that staple of the WPA's diet—have dwindled remarkably since we instituted portfolio assessment).

The consultant-evaluators also recommended that we review the articulation of our writing courses. When our new chair was hired, he instituted an internal review of the department's entire undergraduate program, a review that provided the context for the review of our writing courses. We spent two semesters discussing the curricula of those courses and designing a sequence that was really a sequence: a basic writing course that helps students develop fluency and control over their writing; a freshman composition course that introduces students to writing in the university (this course is, thanks to a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, tied to our new general education core course in World Civilizations); a sophomore-level course that focuses on writing research, both primary and secondary; an upper-division course in writing argument; an upper-division course in writing about literature for our majors; and an upper-division course in technical and professional writing for students outside as well as inside the department. The consultant-evaluators recommended that we look carefully at our ESL classes, which were organized in "separate but equal" tracks to our basic writing and freshman composition courses. We have revised our program to track ESL students into the regular freshman composition classes when they are ready. We also hired an Associate Director of Composition to help with the coordination of all courses, most particularly basic writing, and now have extra secretarial help to handle this coordination.

One of the consultant-evaluators' recommendations had to do with TA training. We had, compared to other institutions, a relatively light teaching load for TAs (three classes a year); we ran a training session for new TAs the week before classes started, and held once-a-week meetings with them to discuss their teaching. But the consultant-evaluators encouraged us to think about what a model program would look like, one that would thoroughly ground our graduate students in composition theory and pedagogy rather than just helping them stay afloat during their first year of teaching. Thanks to our provost, we now have funding so that we can release our TAs from teaching their first semester with us so that they can take graduate seminars in composition theory and pedagogy. During this first semester they also work as tutors in the Writing Lab, and they observe a freshman composition class taught by a Mentor TA, keeping an observation journal for their own reference when they teach themselves. The TAs' first year thus combines theory, observation, and practice in what we hope will become a model training program for teachers of college-level writing courses.

Finally, the consultant-evaluators had a series of recommendations about our proposed writing-across-the-curriculum program. They endorsed a proposed faculty seminar; I was able to set up and run one the following summer, with overflow attendance. They also pointed out far more eloquently than I could the

fact that the proposed revisions to the general education program and the new WAC program would give the Writing Lab a significant new role. The Director of the Lab is now a full-time permanent member of the staff, and there is now funding to support tutorials for students in all university classes, not just English courses. As I write, we are working on expanding the physical space for the lab, so that tutorials do not have to spill out into the hallways during peak hours.

In sum, we have made some far-reaching changes in the four years since the evaluation. I do not mean to suggest that there was a direct cause-effect relationship between the recommendations from the WPA consultant-evaluators' visit and all the changes we have made since that time. Change was in the air when the visitors came to campus, and we were lucky enough to hire a dean and department chair who were both responsive to our proposals for change in the writing program. We also had a good biennial budget, without which we would not have had the resources to fund many of these changes. But the visit did serve as a catalyst, as a means of singling out and focusing on the writing program so that its strengths were highlighted and its needs documented. We used, and continue to use, the sensible advice upon which the recommendations of the report were based. For example, some difficulties have recently arisen involving our proposed "rising junior" examination to establish proficiency; it looked as if the examination might be instituted before the curricular elements of our writing-across-the-curriculum program were in place. The report from the consultant-evaluators' visit recommended a rising junior instrument only after the placement instrument and curricular requirements for writing were instituted (in other words, only after students are properly prepared for a proficiency examination). Just this week I dusted off the report and used this recommendation to back a case for delaying the announcement of a rising junior exam.

I would like to close with a few words about program evaluation in general. Often, program directors see an outside evaluation as a threat—something like being graded when you are not sure exactly what the grading system is or what decisions will be made about you based on those grades. On the contrary, program review is an essential part of any university's ongoing self-assessment; it should be treated not as a threat, but as a process we should respect, one we should learn about and then learn from. In my experience with a program review at another institution, the writing program was examined (read, slighted) as just one part of a larger (read, more important) review of the English Department. The strength of the Consultant-Evaluator's program is that it focuses entirely on the writing program, whether that program is confined to one department or extends beyond departmental boundaries. It can highlight the program's strengths as well as recommend changes to address its needs, and it can give WPAs the documentation they need to ask for improvement. It can, in short, help make a difference.

<sup>1</sup>An interesting historical footnote: Washington State University's undergraduate writing program as it is presently constituted was pioneered in part by Albert Kitzhaber, who received his MA at WSU and taught on the faculty for a time after World War II.

