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# Politics Redux: The Organization and Administration of Writing Programs

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Imagine a large Midwestern university where a hard-working, dedicated, charismatic WPA has built a model writing program. She supervises nearly 100 teaching assistants, coordinates a large placement exam, oversees an elaborate mentoring program, refines writing curricula, and accomplishes it all with grace and aplomb. When an associate dean's position suddenly comes vacant, the astute dean taps her for the position. Suddenly the writing program is left with a huge vacuum. How can any one person possibly fill the void? The English department chair wonders belatedly if the department has been wise to invest so much of the program's success in this one person. Would there have been a better way for the writing program to be organized and administered?

In WPA circles the question of how best to organize the administration of writing programs has not been widely debated. Many programs are the result of forceful personalities or historical accidents rather than conscious planning. It occurred to me that the possible ways that writing programs could be organized and administered were roughly analogous to the ways in which "political systems" can be organized.<sup>1</sup> In this article, through the extended analogy to political systems, I will explore various models of writing program governance in an attempt to critique the dominant models found in higher education today. Through this discussion, I also hope to shed some light on the conditions in a writing program that are needed for a more democratized model of administration to flourish.

## 1. Monarchy

Political monarchies come in two forms, (a) strong, with an absolute ruler, and (b) weak, with a ceremonial head of state. Monarchies in English department administration are most closely analogous to the Department Head or Division Chair, who is often a forceful ruler over an entire department or division; or the Department Chair, who may be a more ceremonial leader of a department.

In many colleges, especially in two-year colleges, the department head or division chair administers the writing program and thus is analogous to a department monarch. (However, unlike monarchies, department or division chairs are not often legitimized by blood descent.) Relying on the department/division head/chair to administer all of the undergraduate programs, including both literature and writing, has obvious advantages. A department monarch certainly has the "big picture," as it were, of the whole department; but by the same token, this person can permanently alter a program depending on personal

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belief systems, political leanings, or even by whim. The notorious British monarch, Henry VIII, for example, instigated the reformation of the English church and its break with the Roman Catholic Church not for reasons of religious conviction, but rather because the Pope would not grant him a divorce from the first of his six wives. Similarly, an English department monarch convinced that English studies should adhere only to the traditional literary canon (and that writing programs are but unfortunate "service" entities) could systematically dismantle a writing program or effectively cripple it by seizing its assets or controlling its budgets.

In their revealing survey of department chairs' attitudes towards writing programs and WPAs, Olson and Moxley show convincingly that department chairs often seek to keep writing programs and their directors in subservient positions by limiting their authority, much as Henry VIII tried to limit the authority of the church: "The survey responses indicate that chairs value general administrative competence on the part of the director over substantive policy making or direct administrative control of the program" (52). Olson and Moxley point out that in many departments, the chair (read monarch) maintains the control. In effect, the debate in the survey responses centers on who has effective control of the writing program, and most chairs feel that the writing program director should not possess such control. Presumably, the director can "recommend" policy and even "express policy in written documents," but he or she, at least in the eyes of many chairs, must not create that policy (55).

## 2. Dictatorship

We are all familiar with notorious political dictatorships around the world. Dictatorships are characterized by a single mass party or a charismatic leader, an official ideology, often terrorism, a regulated press, and the use of science/technology to control the economy and behavior of individuals. Perhaps the dictatorship most familiar to Americans is Castro's Cuba.

Some colleges and universities have greatly extended the authority of the director of writing, making this person the administrator in charge of all writing programs or in charge of writing across the curriculum. In some instances the WPA may be housed administratively outside of an English department, a sort of campus "writing dictator" or "writing czar." One would hope that such writing czars are "benevolent dictators" who do not resort to the tactics of terrorism and coercion. However, not everyone in English departments, nor on campuses at large, sees writing program directors as benign. On the contrary, WPAs are often perceived by faculty to be threatening dictators, power-mongers hungry to snatch up territory and secure allegiances.

The main advantage of having a writing dictator is that one person coordinates all of the various arms of the writing program, perhaps ranging broadly from writing across the curriculum to developmental English. The writing dictator can standardize curricula and supervise faculty and staff, thereby ensuring students a comparable experience from section to section or

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course to course. Dictatorships can certainly be efficient. But the citizens of the state lead by a dictator or the staff in a writing program lead by a writing czar may feel disenfranchised, particularly if the writing program is staffed largely by part-time lecturers and teaching assistants. As Jeanne Gunner points out, the "WPA-centric administrative model . . . has a troublingly anti-democratic cast. Most writing instructors working under this model are unlikely to have a voice in the WPA's appointment or to participate in establishing program policies" (9). Olson and Moxley share her concern:

We are not advocating transforming the composition director into an autocrat. No faculty wish to be coerced into adhering to someone else's syllabus or into adopting a textbook antithetical to their own pedagogical philosophies. (57)

However, as Gunner also points out, in many writing programs, the instructors are in a power relationship subservient to the director by virtue of their academic status or rank. She even argues that "this centralized model may ironically be itself one possible source of the professional status problems that continue to plague us" (8). Trimbur and Cambridge phrase the dilemma of the WPA as dictator this way:

The professional recognition for which we have fought so hard, however, also brings with it the risk that our field will reproduce the dominant academic logic that privileges research "opportunities" over teaching "loads" and will perpetuate a two-caste system of researchers, scholars, theorists, and program administrators at the top of the field and classroom teachers below. (16)

Another problem with dictatorships is one of personality. Often a dictator is a charismatic leader whose program is solely dependent on the persuasive powers and personal charm of its leader. Once this person is gone, a program dependent on a personality can disintegrate. Castro has no option of resigning from his position as leader of Cuba, even though he hinted in a recent interview that he would prefer to retire. Similarly, some writing programs are so dependent upon a particular person's leadership that Director of Writing becomes a lifetime assignment. Such a dictator faces the unenviable choice of remaining the leader of the program forever, or leaving only to see the program he or she has worked hard to develop disintegrate.

Some colleges have created "mini-dictators" by confining the director's oversight to a particular course or level; examples include "Director of Freshman Writing" or "Director of First-year English." Other programs include the administration of an undergraduate writing program under the auspices of the "Director of Undergraduate Studies" or the "Director of English General Studies." Such a structure can work well, particularly in smaller programs, so long as the director of undergraduate studies does not harbor personal biases for or against particular courses within the program.

However, a system using mini-dictators runs the risk of being fragmented. Articulation problems may also occur when, for example, a director only

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has oversight for first-year writing, but has no say in any writing courses beyond the freshman year. For a system using multiple mini-dictators to work, there needs to be much attention to communication and articulation, particularly across borders and between territories.

### 3. Oligarchy

Although we don't often refer to political systems by using the term oligarchy, defined as rule by a small, elite group, the military juntas in Latin American countries such as El Salvador are notorious examples of oligarchies in our hemisphere. Oligarchies are also extremely common in the higher education setting. An example of a writing program oligarchy is one administered by a writing program committee, which may be an elected or an appointed group. For example, many campuses have elected or appointed WAC committees to oversee their writing-across-the-curriculum programs. Such committees typically approve proposals for writing intensive courses and/or review WAC curricula and assess WAC faculty.

There has been some discussion recently on the WPA e-mail list about program administration by committee, most of it negative, pointing out the obvious problems with policy implementation in a committee structure. WAC programs overseen by a committee, for example, can be the victims of aimless "drift," as happens on many campuses depending on who the committee chair happens to be in a given year. An oligarchy does have the advantage, however, of spreading out some of the responsibility for the program to others in the department or across the campus. But whether a program committee works for or against the writing program will depend on the makeup of the group itself and how the group, and its chair, is chosen.

Some programs include a writing program committee in addition to a WPA. If the program committee is more than advisory to the director, if the committee is actually responsible for setting and implementing program policies, my experience is that the writing dictator can be the victim of a coup by the power elite, as we have seen all too frequently in Latin America recently.

Some years ago at another university I found myself operating under such a system; I remember feeling much like I imagine Bill Clinton must be feeling these days as he tries to drag a Republican Congress along on his "liberal" agenda. As the Director of Freshman and Sophomore English, I was given a tremendous responsibility over a very large, diverse program, including general education courses in both writing and literature. However, I was not given the authority to staff the program or to carry out the policies and procedures that I felt were necessary to bring the program along. Rather, every step I took was met with tremendous resistance or outright opposition by an oligarchy of self-appointed department "elites" who were determined to keep the world safe from the comma splice.

Many of the political oligarchies in the world are trying to become more democratically organized. Haiti, for example, attempted democratic elections,

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but democratic rule was frustrated for a time by a military junta, preceding the eventual U.S.-backed return of the democratically-elected president, Aristide. The transition from an oligarchy to a democracy is fraught with difficulty. Some political theorists have even argued that democratically organized groups can never remain pure, but must inevitably become oligarchies (a theory called the "iron law of oligarchy"). This phenomenon is the result of the growing complexity of modern societies which necessitates reliance on experts who then come to wield tremendous political clout. The *Britannica* puts the dilemma this way:

Even in constitutional regimes, no fully satisfactory answer has been found to the question of how these bureaucratic decision makers can be held accountable and their powers effectively restrained without, at the same time, jeopardizing the efficiency and rationality of the policy-making process. ("Political Systems" 1015)

When oligarchies controlling writing programs act irresponsibly, in my experience it is very difficult to wrest the power away. Furthermore, even the democratically organized writing programs may be at considerable risk to become oligarchies.

#### 4. Anarchy

Anarchy, of course, is the state of affairs when there is no governmental control. In a recent survey some colleagues and I conducted of undergraduate writing programs in English departments, one survey respondent said that "no one in the department administers or advises" the writing program (Chapman et al). I'm not quite sure if this school is an example of anarchy, but certainly it is a novel approach to have no one in charge. Or perhaps by answering "no one," the respondent meant to convey a shared responsibility wherein decisions are made collectively rather than hierarchically.

In fact, one definition of anarchy is "a social philosophy whose central tenet is that human beings can live justly and harmoniously without government and that the imposition of government upon human beings is in fact harmful and evil" ("Anarchism" 371). This more positive definition of anarchy (Webster's, in contrast, defines anarchy as "the absence of government resulting in political disorder and violence") brings us close to our fifth categorization, one that as Americans we find preferable to all others, the democracy.

#### 5. Constitutional Government

In higher education in America we like to think that we rule by constitutional government, by a faculty code that outlines a fixed set of norms or principles to guide our actions and influence our decisions. Ideally, a constitutional government includes reciprocal controls with no one person or group dominating. However, we know from experience that higher education is often not democratic but rather hierarchical, with department chairs reporting to deans who report to vice presidents, and so on.

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Many writing programs have followed this kind of hierarchical structure without really examining the alternatives. In contrast to a hierarchy such as a monarchy or dictatorship, a constitutional democracy allows those who are governed to be represented at every level of the government. An egalitarian, representative democracy is something that English departments which are working well often have adopted. Some version of a department constitution, describing administrative procedures and outlining philosophies and goals, may help. A writing program guide should be an essential component of any department's constitution.

In such a program guide, the WPA, in conjunction with the writing program personnel, would be able to articulate common course goals and consistent standards of assessment. As Jeanne Gunner envisions it, the democratic writing program, "gives all instructors a voice in program governance and professional responsibilities for the program" (14).

As we also know from our American political system, there is a downside to a constitutional democracy. It is often cumbersome and glacially slow (gridlock, as Ross Perot would say). A monarchy, dictatorship, or even oligarchy is infinitely less messy than a democracy, because decisions can be made and implemented rapidly. We also know that the populace is not always necessarily as informed as their leaders and may be in a less advantageous position to make judicious decisions. In a talk recently on my campus, a speaker made the point that she thought it ridiculous for politicians to say they would follow the will of the American people. After all, she said, the American people are still looking for Elvis.

Jeanne Gunner referred to this concern for preparedness as the "myth of the novice," in her argument for a more democratic writing program. However, as many WPAs know from years of experience working with teaching assistants and literature faculty assigned to teach writing courses, the novice writing teacher is no myth. Whether we like it or not, we are often faced with "training" a cadre of teachers who are woefully underprepared for the task. And until we can effectively change the system that asserts "anyone can teach writing," those who direct writing programs are given the unenviable job of helping each year's crop of novice teachers develop teaching confidence and competence, a job we accomplish with more or less success.

## Conclusions

Wouldn't we all like to be involved with a program that is organized around voluntary cooperation in pursuit of common goals? But what conditions are necessary in writing programs for us to achieve the utopian ideal, if indeed it is achievable?

*First, we would need a constitutional democracy wherein everyone is represented at all levels.* In such a program, arbitrary distinctions between teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, and tenure-track faculty would be abandoned. Every group would have an equal voice in the running of the program and would be inti-

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mately involved with all facets of program design and implementation. A solid apprenticeship program would insure that novice teachers were brought along until they became independent educators in their own right. Reciprocal controls over the program and the program's director would be implemented so that no one person or group was able to dominate the others. Cooperation and good will between various entities in the program and among outside constituencies would be strongly encouraged and fostered through ongoing staff development and outreach efforts.

Sound too good to be true? In reality, there are several barriers that may prevent writing programs from becoming representative democracies. Such a democracy assumes an educated, informed populace; however, in large programs staffed by T.A.s and lecturers, the WPA is all too often the composition scholar *for* the staff, who may remain largely uninformed about the composition theories needed to make intelligent program decisions. How much of a voice, then, should such teachers be given? And how long does a teacher need to "apprentice" before he or she is no longer a novice? We know, too, that even teachers who have been teaching for a very long time may still in effect be novices by virtue of a failure to remain current in the field. And some programs are staffed by non-specialists whose professional fields range from literature to linguistics and who have no desire or interest in composition theories; yet, they are experienced teachers who feel a legitimate stake in the program.

Such a democracy may also assume that the WPA is somehow the "representative" of the writing program staff and hence accountable to them much as an elected official is accountable to the electorate. Yet there may be legitimate differences in points of view among compositionists. The WPA may find him or herself in a minority position vis-a-vis crucial program decisions; then what? We recently faced this problem at my institution as we attempted to revise the writing requirement in concert with a reformation of general education. As it turned out, our WPA had a vastly different conception of the writing program's role in the university than did the majority of his writing staff. These philosophical differences became clear as we collectively, as the composition committee, attempted to hammer out the details of our writing program philosophy. The WPA is now in the unenviable position of supporting a program philosophy with which he has basic philosophical differences.

*Second, we would need a writing program director who is broad-minded, visionary, learned, and compassionate.* The WPA should ideally be a tenured, permanent faculty member who is secure enough in his or her academic position to be able to implement needed changes. The trend in our profession to thrust recent PhDs into the firing line as WPAs is lamentable; although such persons are doubtless well-prepared academically, they are not well-prepared politically and are vulnerable to departmental power elites. Furthermore, we need to be doing more toward apprenticing WPAs in our graduate courses and programs so that they will come to writing programs better equipped to deal with the political realities they may encounter some day as administrators.

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Does this perfect candidate for program director exist outside of WPA mythology? And if this ideal person is the WPA at your school, what about the danger of a "cult of personality" with which I began this article? Perhaps a program can become too dependent on one person's leadership. The reality is that the very best WPAs often move ahead in the power structure at their institutions, becoming department chairs, deans, provosts, directors of honors programs, and so on. Hence the position of WPA may be a revolving door. At my school, we have found ourselves several times without a writing program director as promotions drew our good people away to other jobs. We have had to, sometimes for an entire year, foist the job off on either vulnerable tenure-track faculty or lecturers who were marginally prepared for the task.

*And finally, we would need a staff of well-trained, professional writing experts who are as concerned and involved with their students as they are with the program's governance.* In most writing programs today, we have a long way to go before achieving this ideal. Many writing programs are left with a staffing nightmare that has developed over several decades and that will not be easily solved. At my institution in recent years we have found our experienced writing faculty being pulled away from teaching in the composition program as the number of majors in the undergraduate writing track has ballooned.

Our composition program is currently staffed almost entirely by teaching assistants and the occasional lecturer. Our WPA encounters a large new crop of novice teachers every fall who must be "apprenticed and mentored" under less than ideal circumstances. As part of our recent philosophical discussions, we have had to face the issue of possible declines in program quality created by pressures of quantity. We are trying to incorporate into the new general education structure at least one term of "apprenticing" wherein the new T.A.s are given the opportunity to study writing theory and observe experienced writing teachers without the burden of teaching their own classes; our desire is to address the dubious current practice of dropping new teachers into the classroom with but a week of advance preparation.

Encouraging strides toward professionalizing composition staffs are being made at some colleges and universities; however, we are no where near rectifying the widespread misuse of adjunct faculty and teaching assistants in writing programs across this country. The profession at large must fight to ensure that such efforts continue.

Will we see such utopian writing programs in our lifetime? Probably not. But it certainly doesn't hurt for us all to keep in mind where we are headed and not just where we have been. Looking at the broader context, Trimbur and Cambridge point to "the need for wider and more sweeping changes in the role of English Studies and the priorities of higher education." And they remind us that to achieve such sweeping changes in higher education means "a revision of the current hierarchy . . . so that reading and writing can become public and empowering activities for both students and teachers" (17).



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## Note

1. The classification of governing structures used throughout this article has been adapted from the section on "Political Systems" as found in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 1992, Macropaedia 1004-1031.

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