

Travelogue

Imperative as a River: Interview with Heidi Estrem

Shirley K Rose

Shirley Rose (SR): Thank you, Heidi, for talking with me about the first-year writing program at Boise State University. This interview is the fifth in a series *WPA: Writing Program Administration* has devoted to conversations about the writing programs at the home institutions of the WPAs who serve as local hosts for the summer conference of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. The conference will be in Boise this July, and I'm eager to hear about ways you think the writing program there reflects its institutional and geographical location. Let's start with some demographic information about your writing programs at Boise State. What are they? How are they organized? Who leads them? How does the organization of the writing programs reflect the larger institution in which they are located?

Heidi Estrem (HE): I think of our first-year writing program's relationship to the university as similar to a Venn diagram. We have an intellectual and budgetary home in the English department and strong curricular connections to our new Foundational Studies Program. This new approach to general education has shifted both the visibility of first-year writing on campus and the attention to writing across an undergraduate experience. This has been a really big conceptual shift for us and an important one. Prior to about three years ago, we had a general education curriculum that was a very old, smorgasbord model, and it had areas that weren't even named. So, in Area 1, you took an Area 1 course, but that wasn't even designated humanities or sciences. It was just an area.

The general education revision was undertaken at the administration's request, but it really was a faculty-driven process. First-year writing wasn't even listed on the old core. It was just this extra university graduation requirement. It is now very clearly and explicitly identified under Learning Outcome 1, which is Written Communication. Embedded in that Learning Outcome 1 are first-year writing

courses; second-year, university-wide courses that use writing (University Foundations 200); communication in the disciplines courses (200 to 400-level courses in the major); and capstone courses (also in the major).

SR: That seems like a really important change in terms of the visibility of the program: to become so clearly aligned with something that has been identified as a curricular goal or outcome versus an item on a “well, everybody has to take this” list that is not even rationalized in any way.

HE: Right. It was a huge change. I always used to say, “We’re literally not on the map. We’re not in the catalog.” First-year writing was just this appendage.

SR: That was huge. Could you talk a little bit about the history of basic writing at Boise State? I know that Karen Uehling, who has been there a long time, maybe thirty years or more, has had a very high profile in the Conference on Basic Writing, and I know from my visit to your campus that she has been a big influence. Could you talk a little bit about that?

HE: One critical piece of her legacy is that basic writing was always taken really seriously here. People who taught it volunteered for additional training and mentoring, and they also often completed an entire extra course after their masters program with Karen on the pedagogy of basic writing. At the same time that Karen has been such a critical part of national conversations about basic writing, she’s also experienced another kind of institutional shift on our campus. Not that long ago, our university was a junior college. Then, Boise State became a four-year institution, but it kept the community college mission. In the past five years or so, because of the development of a local community college, Boise State’s mission has shifted to that of a metropolitan research university. Karen has lived through these changes. The teaching load has changed, the research expectations have increased substantially, and the student body has grown relatively quickly. That is sort of a microcosm example of how the entire tenor and *ethos* of Boise State in some ways has shifted pretty dramatically during Karen’s tenure here.

SR: That’s very interesting.

HE: Karen really made the teaching of basic writing something purposeful and something that people did and felt a real professional commitment to. Now, perhaps ironically, we no longer have basic writing courses. We have English 101 Plus, so we have a model where students place directly into English 101 with an additional one credit, one hour

per week studio course. I feel like our transition into that class's success was only possible because Karen had done so much groundwork and set an expectation that, of course, you would engage in professional development, and of course, we would have meetings and workshops to prepare for this new model. She was able to provide leadership and support for that model even though it was a really radical departure. I love her for many reasons.

SR: Me too. I've known her since 1980.

HE: We have been able to keep our commitment to serving less confident or experienced writers but in a different course format. People—and Karen, particularly—were willing to re-see how our curriculum might support those students. She's really an amazing example to me.

SR: That attitude toward the teaching of basic writing—the understanding that it requires more preparation, not less; that you need to know more to do that, not less; and that the students themselves need a bigger share of the attention—that insight about the need for basic writing teachers to have credentials is a really, really important part of her legacy for the profession.

HE: I agree.

SR: I want to know more about place in your writing program, so could you speak from your perspective about how your writing program teachers and students reflect the local and regional culture and economy of Idaho and of the Northwest more generally? Does your curriculum reflect the institution's location in the state capital? That may be two different questions, really. One is about the government and politics side, and the other may be more cultural. Let's talk about the location.

HE: It is a really great question. When I first moved here, it was so clear that I was back in the West. Boise is an interesting location because we are the largest metropolitan area in the state, and we are the largest city between Portland and Salt Lake City. Our students come from fascinating backgrounds. A growing number are from neighboring western states. Many Idaho students are either from nearby suburbs or are from very tiny towns—extremely rural towns in Idaho. Sometimes they come to Boise and are shocked by the diversity or by the tall buildings or by stop lights. Really. They often have had to—even if they look like traditional students on the surface—they often already have worked very hard on ranches or doing manual labor in ways that more urban or suburban kids might not have done. Many of our students, even if they are only a few years past eighteen, have families or are already married. They have really full lives. Most of them

have jobs. Many of them care for family members. They are not afraid of hard work, and they're also very mindful that what they're doing in college needs to count for something. They are very focused. They're willing to engage in doing difficult work, but they want to know why. They want to know why because it matters to them financially, and it matters to their families and their communities. We still have a high percentage—too high of a percentage—of students who are the first in their family to come to college. Idaho as a whole has an undereducated population in comparison to other states, so our students bring a wide range of life experiences and a wide range of expectations about the role of college in their lives. And I would say, some of them even struggle with it. There is both a message in Idaho that college is important and everybody should go to college, and there's a message that the learning that takes place at college isn't always that important: that college is both necessary and kind of undercut sometimes.

SR: You make a really interesting point there. I'm not sure how much that is a western attitude and how much is a rural attitude. *Western* and *rural* may be hard to pull apart. Maybe I'm making *rural* mean the same as *western* partly because it's primarily the West now that is rural. The small towns are—rurality is—disappearing or have disappeared across the rest of the country as well.

HE: People who come into Boise from elsewhere for the conference this summer will only experience Boise as this charming little medium-sized city. But if you drive twenty minutes out of town, you lose cell service, and you're out in nowhere. You won't see a person for hours. It is so different once you leave this area specifically. There is a clear, rural-urban shift and dynamic in our state.

SR: Does that ever make it feel like Boise is like an island? I'm not putting words in your mouth, I promise. But when you're talking about losing cell service and just shortly outside Boise being confronted again with the sparse populations, lots of wilderness and mountains as well . . .

HE: It does, and I think it creates interesting dynamics. This isn't totally unique to Idaho, but I think it is just maybe attenuated in Idaho. For example, in the legislature and many state-level discussions, there is this perception that the Boise area overshadows everything else because we have such a large percentage of the state's population concentrated here and in a couple of other nearby cities. The rural legislators feel a tension there between rural and urban.

SR: Heidi, you said something about being “back in the West” earlier. Did you grow up in the West?

HE: I did. I grew up in Oregon.

- SR: I don't confuse Oregon with Idaho, but you've returned to something very familiar.
- HE: In many ways. There are many ways in which Idaho is almost the polar opposite of Oregon, actually, particularly culturally and politically. But in other ways, that's the other part of your questions that I'm trying to think through. There is a real commitment in the West to having a full life, to doing things beyond or in addition to or that complement your profession, your job. I don't know if you experience this in Arizona, but perhaps you do. I remember that, even in graduate school in Nevada, people kayaked on the weekends or went hiking or skiing. I was such a book nerd at the time that I thought, "Why? How could you take the time to do that?" That happens here, too. While there's a real ethic of hard work for faculty as well here on campus, there is also an expectation that people engage in meaningful activities beyond their job.
- SR: I wonder to what extent that interest in the non-academic or extracurricular is due in part to the attractions of the extracurricular and the access to outdoors recreation in much of the West. It is a great part of the country to live in terms of access to recreation. Speaking of recreation, you told me that you and Susan Miller-Cochran, the CWPA Incoming President who is planning the conference this summer, very intentionally and strategically chose the conference theme of sustainability in writing program administration and that you're making a connection between recreation—or—re-creation—and sustainability. I want you to talk some about your thinking there, and what things about your program would you like all of us to be thinking about as we gather for the conference.
- HE: The beam in my own eye—to use a Biblical phrase—the beam that I have to look through every time I look at writing programs anywhere else across the country is labor, and that's only even more attenuated by your own experience at Arizona State as we're speaking right now. One question for us as WPAs is, how do we sustain something that is built on a really challenging and even unethical labor model at many, if not most, of our institutions? How do we do this in ways that seem more ethical? This has been the ongoing challenge for me as a first-year writing program administrator, and I think it is *the* challenge of our field. It's also the one that has not diminished in the last fifty plus years of scholarship. Labor is one huge challenge to the sustainability question for us as professionals. This particular challenge resonates really deeply for me. I want everybody to continue to put the best parts of themselves towards solving it because I see so many smart

people, like you and others in our field, wrestling with this in daily practice. Sustainability with labor in writing programs, I think, is the first facet of that theme that Susan and I talked through. But we also want to explore questions about how to sustain a life as a WPA, which is a challenging role that asks you to be really flexible and adaptive. How does one sustain that, especially now that the role of WPAs is shifting in that more and more of us choose WPA work as the kind of the identity we might want for the longer term?

SR: Yes, I see that happening.

HE: It's not that I'm just going to rotate in for three years and then rotate out. If that's so, then how do we create positions—WPA positions—that are sustainable? We also really wrestled with this idea of how to make the conference itself sustainable. Conferences are good things for local economies. Our downtown businesses are delighted that we're coming. But at the same time, of course, it will create waste. People fly all the way across the country. Should we be thinking about other technologies to bring people in? We really circled around that theme of sustainability in multiple ways, and we don't have it solved, but we want to think through it together with smart people, and that's what the conference can provide.

SR: I like everything that you're talking about for the conference. Obviously, the ongoing conversation about labor is so critical for everyone and your mention of how it seems that more people are choosing WPA work, preparing for it in an intentional way, and choosing WPA work as a career-identity focus. Jonikka Charlton and I have taken pains in our surveys to allow people to talk about being WPAs or WPA-identified without insisting that they have the official job. That's been really interesting for us because it's enabled us to hear from several kinds of people who have interest in WPA issues, who maybe move in and out of the official role but maintain a commitment to scholarship on those issues. We see in our research results what you're saying both about people seeing this as a career identity but also seeing it as a scholarship and research identity. It is very interesting. It brings with it questions like, "How do I keep doing this? If I can't look forward to when my turn is up, then what habits do I need to develop to cope with this if it is going to be ongoing?" I love what you're saying about this sort of physical strain of being sustainable in our conference practices. I think the group that comes will really be excited to think about being more conscious about that. All that sounds really good.

HE: Related to this question of how to build a sustainable, rich life as a WPA, one new feature of the conference in Boise will be a Recess Ses-

sion—most likely on Saturday morning. There won't be conference sessions going on, and we will have a lot of different activities that people can choose to sign up for. For example, it could be anything from walking to the Saturday Market, which will be right outside the conference door, to taking a yoga class, or going on a bike ride, or playing disc golf, and so on. We're going to come up with a whole range of activities, back to that idea of sustaining ourselves as whole people. We wanted to echo that in literally what we did during the conference. I'm pretty excited about that.

SR: That sounds really, really great.

HE: Who doesn't like recess?

SR: It sounds like a lot of fun and also a good way to make that point, making that part of the conference, not something extracurricular. My next question was also about the conference. When we're there in July, you've just mentioned some activities that are going to be part of Recess with going to the market and so on. What else, if I have a couple hours free time while I'm there, what should I see on the Boise State campus or near the Boise State campus that would help me understand the university there and the writing program there?

HE: If you were going to walk the campus, what it is defined by and what it has grown up against is the river. The campus stretches along the Boise River. The easternmost part of campus is anchored by the football stadium with its famous blue field and the athletic complex. Then, there are engineering and health sciences areas, each of which have programs with national reputations. Then, as you continue to walk up the river, you come through the heart of campus, with the student union and multiple classroom buildings, including the building where the first-year writing program and the English department are housed. We do not have cutting-edge facilities for our writing classes, but what we do have is a small class experience for our first-time students, which is critical for them. Then, you would keep walking, and you would see our Center for Teaching and Learning, which is amazing and is a beautiful new building. This is where the pre-conference CWPA Workshop will be held. We have an incredibly dynamic and active Center for Teaching and Learning that is, I think in some ways, emblematic of Boise State. You have athletics, you have rigorous research in all aspects of campus, and you have also a steady commitment to undergraduate teaching.

SR: I appreciate so much the way you laid out a path there as you were talking about the relationship to the river. I'm really struck when you talk about the small classes being important for those students who are

coming from rural Idaho, perhaps from high schools in which twenty-five was their entire graduating class, or maybe their entire graduating high school senior class was less than twenty or twenty-five, so coming from that experience and so needing the small class just as a place where somebody knows them. But then also the students who are coming from more urban, urbanized—not that all of California is urban, but a lot of it is—*that* California population needing the small class for other reasons, but still really as an orientation to college expectations. So that’s really an interesting point.

Can we talk about the work you and Dawn Shepherd have been doing with your counterparts and colleagues around the state on making the most of the opportunity to work on some statewide educational issues? The article you and Dawn co-authored with Lloyd Duncan and published in the fall 2014 issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* described a very successful joint effort, and I’m wondering what you learned about fostering sustainable collaborations.

HE: I think one issue related to sustainability and sustaining collaborations across very different kinds of institutions has been our growing willingness to accept that material conditions also matter. I can’t expect, for example, my community college colleagues to not rely on test scores when their teaching loads are so high, and they don’t have the flexibility that someone like me does to explore other options or to build new placement programs. That’s actually been a growing realization for me.

SR: That sometimes it is just not practicable. . . .

HE: Right, and so, I can’t make it the hill I’m going to die on. I can’t say that using tests for placement is horrible and none of us should be doing it because, of course, we know it’s not best practice. They know it isn’t either, but they’re also finding ways to make it work. They’re adding in advising, or they’re differently flexible in other ways.

SR: One of my last questions is this: give us a metaphor for your program. My metaphor for the program I direct at Arizona State is the ocotillo. I was very struck by the beauty of this plant when I came here to Arizona. I’m now in my sixth year here.

HE: Has it really been that long already?

SR: It has. One of my neighbors has an ocotillo, and when it is really dry and that plant is not getting any water, it still survives. It looks really kind of scary, but it survives. But when it does get water, it has millions, literally millions, of little leaves that come out so that its branches look green from these little leaves. Then, the flower itself is a gorgeous red flower. I think about how the writing program that I

lead is like that. We can survive without the resources we need, without the water we need. We'll live, but we'll be scary looking and dangerous. Whereas, when we get the water, the resources that we need, we're stunning and beautiful. Yes, that's my favorite metaphor for the program.

HE: I love your metaphor. I feel like it's emblematic of many writing programs. We can do so much with just a little bit more. In many ways, the Boise River is emblematic of our first-year writing program: constant and yet constantly changing. We're restless: Our instructors are consistently excellent, and they want to get better. We teach writing in ways that are rooted in our field—and we also work to unsettle our curriculum. Our FYWP influences nearly every undergraduate student—just as our river runs along our campus.

SR: A river is a great metaphor for a writing program for all those reasons. Think also about the way it sustains the life of the university—maybe flipping your ideas about sustainability and writing programs to consider also who, what, and how the writing program sustains as well as how it is sustained. A river is also a natural boundary or border, which helps me think about the ways your first-year writing program, as you talked about earlier, is the means by which your students make their transition to university life. When you and I first started corresponding about creating this travelogue, you described the Boise River as “imperative.” Would you explain what you meant?

HE: According to legend, a US Army officer crested a nearby hill and exclaimed, “Les Bois”—or “the wooded area.” We are located in a semi-arid region. From the air, it's clear how vital the river is: It provides water for much of the area, and trees grow readily along it but much more sparsely as you move away from it. The Boise River is also a source of civic pride, of recreation, of peace and relaxation—and it's what separates (although with lots of bridges in between) Boise State's campus from the rest of downtown.

SR: I do want to jump back to my question about your proximity to the capitol building because I'm remembering it so clearly from my visit to Boise. I think I've been to Boise three times now, and especially during my last visit, I realized you literally can walk to there. It's a pleasant walk from the campus to the state capital building. Could you talk about what difference it makes to have the state legislature physically that accessible?

HE: Yes, and for us, even more than access to our state legislature would be access to our State Board of Education next door to the capitol building. I can call up our chief academic officer, the main advocate

for higher education in Idaho, and can meet with him regularly. That we can have regular access to him is pretty amazing. It is certainly not something . . . I don't know if this is about me growing up as a WPA or about this state . . . I don't know that I would have thought to do that in other places I've lived where the infrastructure and the layers of administration are just so much more complex. Being able to be here and to meet regularly in person has been critical for fostering what we were talking about [in our *WPA: Writing Program Administration* article]: trust and a sense that we really are all on the same page, or we're close to the same page rather than having an antagonistic relationship. That is critical, and it's critical to Boise State as a whole.

SR: Was this work part of what you were recognized for when you recently won the Boise State University College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Service Award? Congratulations, by the way.

HE: Thank you. This was much of the work that led to that award, yes. But the work only happened because I have such amazing colleagues across Idaho at each public institution. I have colleagues here at Boise State who are willing to dive into trying new things. This work was highly collaborative—and that's what makes it so enjoyable.

SR: I'm glad the conference is coming to Boise this summer so we can see some of this first hand. Thank you so much, Heidi.

WORK CITED

Estrem, Heidi, Dawn Shepherd, and Lloyd Duman. "Relentless Engagement with State Educational Policy Reform: Collaborating to Change the Writing Placement Conversation." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 38.1 (2014): 88–127. Print.

