

Some Reflections

WNPA

a newsletter for
writing program
administrators

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IT IS HARD to be profound in a vacuum. I choose this as a starting point for a set of musings because I think that most of us who run programs are cut off--myself included. I had thought at first that the problem was mine alone, but a line in the William Coles interview (see below) made me feel better. I don't mean the aphoristic start of his response to question six, but rather a line buried in the narrative of that response: "It's almost more than I can handle."

THE FACT OF THE MATTER is that for most of us, the job is indeed more than we can handle. We must predict student needs--and meet the ones which are unpredictable but there; we must be sympathetic with those who teach writing for us, in whatever context; we, too, must teach, else we lose credibility; we must do public relations, arbitrate questions of style and usage for the press and public; we must train new staff and we must be politic and calm as we negotiate (or battle) for funding--not for arcane additions or experiments, but usually for enough to maintain a barely workable student-teacher ratio. In most institutions of higher learning it is no great problem if Professor Bloogle has only three or four or five students take his course in Contrastive Aerobics, but all of us seem to be constantly engaged in a battle to keep to class sizes that make any kind of sense. Does anyone running a program in composition suffer from underenrollment?

THE IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES of this work-load are many. If we do get to a conference, we usually rush in exhausted, hear a few papers, or give one, then leave before there is time for reflection or informal exchange of any kind. The same pattern is present in everyday working conditions. A recent study shows that most administrators get to spend something like three and a half minutes on any problem before their attention is diverted to yet another; this really is an automatic frustration factor.

AS I WRITE THIS, in the pre-dawn of an autumnal day, some notions of betterment occur to me. First, we must all learn to delegate better, as uncomfortable as that

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notion may be at first. Second, if special work in developing new courses or materials, or preparing grand proposals comes up, it is entirely appropriate to ask for compensated released time to do it. Third, it seems a good idea to have short term, small scale meetings which are real conferences, places for exchange, rather than mass presentation of formal papers. It seems a good idea for fifteen or twenty people interested in a subject to spend two or three days together discussing their common problems in an open way, with a previously established agenda as base, rather than a series of formal papers.

A CONFERENCE with hundreds of people packed into inadequate hotels, and with perhaps as high a percentage as half those attending giving papers is bound to be somewhat formidable, and possibly less productive. I certainly don't want to give the impression of having a sure

IS ANYONE OUT THERE interested in hosting such conferences? College? Institute? Foundation? I use the plural because the whole point behind all of this is that the events be local, low-keyed, and modest. Perhaps some urban institution could do this, and simply provide housing. This kind of activity should be on a cost-sharing basis; so that home institutions could provide expenses for attendance. I realize that the idea is sketchy, but it can perhaps best be accounted as a kind of personal and professional retreat into thought about communication and teaching with persons of similar mind.

route to a higher wisdom, but unless we all keep firmly in mind both notions of distance from immediately pressing problems, and unless we find time for reflection, the possibility of introversion and burn out are very real.

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Notes and Queries Calendar

The WPA Newsletter would like to begin a column of newsy items for our readership. Possibilities would include:

- (1) announcements of future conferences
- (2) brief reviews of past conferences
- (3) descriptions of local organizations and societies, regional newsletters or periodicals of interest to writing program administrators
- (4) news about availability of visitors, consultants, resources, etc.
- (5) special courses, summer programs or institutes in the field of composition
- (6) grant opportunities
- (7) inquiries concerning new areas of research or information needed
- (8) and, finally, but certainly not least of all, job opportunities.

This kind of information is in the spirit of the Newsletter and can serve our readership in countless ways; so please take the time to send it along to us or to ask others to do so.

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