

A Case for Writing Program Evaluation

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Edward M. White explains the “rhetorical problem” of program evaluation by asking “what kind of evidence will be accepted as real, as convincing” to prove to an (often-skeptical) audience that a writing program is “producing results, fulfilling its goals, and meeting institutional needs” (132–33)? White points out the rhetorical position and power of a disinterested team of evaluators whose members draw upon their own experience and national reputations as well as their extensive knowledge of

- composition administration and instruction;
- current scholarship on writing, teaching, and administration;
- labor issues such as course loads, budget, staffing, and working conditions;
- institutional contexts;
- and varied models for addressing campus problems (White 146).

The WPA consultant-evaluators’ credibility is thus based not only on their knowledge and expertise but also on their training as evaluators, their status as objective outsiders, and their ability to offer a national perspective on writing program administration.

WHY INITIATE AN EXTERNAL WRITING PROGRAM EVALUATION?

White makes a persuasive case for the value of program evaluation and the validity that expert consultants contribute, but the central question remains: How can *your* specific, local context benefit from a national perspective? In some instances, a larger perspective may help a program demonstrate that its plans, policies, and practices are in step (or out of step) with the research and practices of comparable institutions. In other cases, the national perspective may inspire ideas for change or renewal. In yet other cases, the outside evaluators might help a new writing program establish institutional credibil-

ity—or might help an existing program strengthen credibility. The specific context, history, and goals of your program and your institution are all factors to weigh when deciding whether to initiate a program evaluation.

Deborah Holdstein, co-director of the WPA consultant-evaluator service, discusses contextual factors with people who are considering a site visit. She poses the following questions to help guide programs as they decide whether or not to initiate an external review:

1. *Who* would initiate a program evaluation and who would be the primary audience for the evaluation? (The writing faculty? The department chair? The dean or someone else in upper administration? Some combination?)
2. What would be the *purposes or goals* for such an evaluation? (To develop new programs? To validate existing programs? To identify problems? To consolidate or increase efficiency? To compare to other programs? To promote change? To measure change?)
3. What would be the short- and long-term *effects* of an external evaluation? (Increased credibility for the WPA or the program? Greater visibility or recognition? Strategic planning? Substantive revisions to curriculum, faculty development, working conditions, or leadership?)

The next few pages explore responses to each of these questions in more detail by using a case example. I direct the writing program at West Virginia University. I hope our experience with the WPA consultant-evaluator service will illustrate why a national perspective on a writing program's local context can be valuable and how the processes of self-study and evaluation can foster conversation, collaboration, and change.

WHO INITIATES A PROGRAM EVALUATION?

At your institution, who gets to decide whether to seek an external review of the writing program? I would argue that the members of the writing faculty, rather than a dean or provost, are ideally positioned to initiate a review. The writing faculty members are likely to have the most detailed knowledge of existing practices and needs, and a self-study of the type required by the WPA consultant-evaluators can provide an excellent chance for the faculty to look closely at how writing is perceived within their institution at large and to assess the credibility of their programs, their faculty, and their curriculum. There is also a positive power dynamic gained by having the study progress from the ground up: it actively involves all members of the writing program and gives each a chance to have a stake in the process.

At West Virginia University in 1999, the writing faculty, in conversation with the department chair and other members of the faculty, decided that an external review of our writing program could help make our needs more visible and our arguments more credible. The timing was ripe for some large programmatic changes. The university and the college had recently made commitments to undergraduate education that recognized the central role that writing played in critical inquiry and learning. The English department was in the midst of revising its undergraduate curriculum and had recently received a planning grant from the provost to “investigate how the Department of English might meet its responsibilities in new ways in future years” and to explore ways that the English faculty could “help the campus build a new set of values regarding the learning environment in the new millennium” (Lang).

In this context, one area that the department chose to promote was its writing programs. The writing faculty knew that we had many separate strengths in terms of our engagement with writing, but past financial exigencies, recent changes in faculty assignments, and the overall administrative structure of the department all meant we were unaccustomed to thinking programmatically and collaboratively. West Virginia University did not, for instance, have a clearly defined philosophy or mission statement in relation to writing, nor did we have a central writing program administrator. Each writing course was under the direction of a separate supervisor, which meant that the courses met their separate curricular aims well but that there was little or no sharing of goals among courses. We also lacked a writing tutorial center for the entire campus. Budget exigencies in the early 1980s had reduced our tutorial center to one or two tutors per semester—and it had proven difficult to restore. There was no general composition committee at the department, college, or university level. Organized writing-across-the-curriculum activities were almost nonexistent, although the university had, since about 1985, required a writing-intensive course of all students, in addition to the two required writing courses that the English department taught.

Although West Virginia University was unusual in its lack of a coordinated writing program and central writing program director, the faculty teaching writing and directing the various writing courses were knowledgeable and dedicated, there were extensive training opportunities for teachers, and the first-year composition and sophomore research and argument courses that served more than six thousand students a year had a solid reputation. Beyond the writing faculty members, the department as a whole was well respected within the college and the university for its faculty members’ strong overall records of research, teaching, and service.

Nonetheless, to put our needs in a national context, to argue for new faculty lines and programmatic restructuring, to foster collaboration, and to sustain morale as we did the hard work necessary to achieve these major changes, we knew we needed concrete suggestions and strategies to make our writing program better. To negotiate a new academic identity for writing at West Virginia University, we found ourselves agreeing with White's assertion that external assessment by experts such as the WPA's consultant-evaluators, would lend "consequential validity" (147) and would thus increase the writing faculty's credibility within and beyond the department. National perspective on our local context would, for instance, help locate writing (and writing program administration) within a professional scholarly context, establish the value of research on writing, and illustrate the potential of proposed new programs by documenting their established success at comparable institutions.

In January of 1999, our writing program contacted the WPA's consultant-evaluator service. (See Appendix A: Sample Timeline.) We were already aware of the "Guidelines for Self-Study to Precede a Writing Program Evaluation" (1993) and with the general description of the consultant-evaluator service on the WPA website that explained that the "primary goal is to determine a program's unique strengths and weaknesses, not to transform all writing programs into clones of their own." Nonetheless, we still had a few questions about where the balance was struck between critique and development. We needed to be certain that the WPA consultants could help us evaluate our potential to achieve some fairly ambitious goals.

We contacted Deborah Holdstein, one of the directors of the consultant-evaluator service, in May of 1999. In answering our initial questions, she emphasized that part of the purpose of the self-study is to have the program identify some of its own strengths, needs, and goals, and that she would work in consultation with us to assign a team that would have expertise in those areas. She also drew our attention to articles by Susan McLeod ("Requesting a Consultant-Evaluation Visit") and Peter G. Beidler ("The WPA Evaluation: A Recent Case History") to help us consider not only whether we should request a WPA evaluation, but how we might establish our goals for such an evaluation. Her initial questions, along with her willingness to discuss extensively the potential audience for and the purposes and effects of an evaluation, illustrated from the outset the WPA program's emphasis on consultation as well as evaluation.

WHAT ARE THE PURPOSES OR GOALS FOR AN EVALUATION?

Much like writers struggling with a new idea, we knew we needed help with invention—as well as help in developing greater visibility and credibility for our writing programs. But we still needed to focus our goals. Susan McLeod’s article, “Requesting a Consultant-Evaluation Visit,” outlines the reasons she negotiated for a Council of Writing Program Administrators’ consultant-evaluation visit when she was beginning a new position as the director of composition at Washington State:

1. To highlight the strengths of the existing program
2. To give external sanction to planned changes
3. To learn a new job as quickly as possible
4. To document how things worked—or didn’t
5. To start a faculty conversation that went beyond matters of procedure to matters of curriculum and articulation of courses (McLeod 74–75).

Our reasons were not identical, but they were similar enough to get us thinking about how to start shaping the first stage of the evaluation—the self-study—into a candid assessment that would help us articulate our own set of goals and questions. Again, we turned to Deborah Holdstein, co-director of the consultant evaluator service, for advice and guidance. Her willingness to answer questions and discuss goals was invaluable as we started thinking about how we could adapt the “Guidelines for Self-Study to Precede a Writing Program Evaluation” to provide our outside reviewers with a thick description of our specific, local, and somewhat quirky context. We knew we needed the external reviewers to provide a national perspective. Together, the local context and the national perspective would help us locate ourselves in relation to writing programs at other large universities, generate a detailed and practical map of our program’s distinctive features and trouble spots, and consider options.

Two members of the writing faculty, my colleague Margaret Racin and I, spent a month or more gathering information and writing the self-study. As we wrote our self-study, we followed Peter G. Beidler’s advice in “The WPA Evaluation: A Recent Case History” to consult broadly and enlist our administrators as allies (72–73). We circulated our initial draft to other colleagues, our chair, and our dean. (See Appendix A: Sample Timeline.) As my colleague and I assembled the final report, we were conscious that we could

easily overwhelm our outside readers with too much detail. To give as clear a sense of our local context as possible, we concentrated on broad categories and tried to keep in mind three key questions:

1. What are the most important points and purposes that we want to convey about our program?
2. What specific details will help readers understand our particular writing program?
3. How might headings and tables help us organize information and highlight key points?

While every writing program's report will reflect unique goals and contexts, the next section tries to give a snapshot of our process—an illustration of how the invention, writing, organization, revision, and reflection that went into the self-study helped us understand our own goals while also giving our consultant-evaluators a starting point for their review.

WHAT CAN YOU LEARN FROM AN EVALUATION SNAPSHOT?

Just as a photograph can record a moment in time, our report would serve as a record, as a later prompt to memory, as an aerial view, and as a close-up of key facets and details. We were assembling a series of snapshots. Just as a photographer makes choices about what to include or exclude and how to arrange a shot, we needed to frame our local views and tell a local story.

We chose to begin our report with an aerial view of our institution, to help locate the readers and provide a sense of the institutional landscape: a one-page fact sheet about the university's size, demographics, mission, enrollment and budget predictions, and pertinent recent legislation. We then sharpened the focus to record general information about writing requirements at West Virginia University, and from there we focused further to frame departmental information.

Snapshots of writing instruction in our report took the form of tables and charts designed to provide information at a glance. For instance, one table listed for each writing course the average number of sections per semester, the maximum enrollments per section, the percent of computer-aided instruction in each course, and the percent of full-time faculty, visiting faculty, part-time faculty and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who taught each course. Another table listed for each writing course the name of the supervisor, that person's rank, research emphasis, teaching load, and amount of course load reduction for administration. In another part of the report, a pie-chart demonstrated that over half the department's student credit hours were generated by composition courses. The text on the other pages,

while free of tables and charts, still provided metaphorical overviews of the department's budget, faculty, and administrative structure and close-ups of the courses, faculty development activities, and related programs. Appendix B provided a detailed table of contents to offer another snapshot of what our self-study yielded. We concluded our thirteen single-spaced pages (organized with headings, tables, and graphs) with a bulleted list of the specific goals that we hoped the consultant-evaluators would help us consider.

After assembling our self-study, we chose to add a final step that was not included in the guidelines for the self-study: a reflective cover letter. The purpose of this cover letter was three-fold:

1. To let us reflect on what we learned about our program in the process of the self-study,
2. To provide an executive summary in less than two pages and draw our readers' attention to our initial goals and questions, and
3. To introduce us to the consultant-evaluators by locating the self-study and the supporting documents within the unique context of our institution.

If the report was something like a photo album, the cover letter captioned the series of snapshots and set up a framing context for the viewer. In this brief letter, we explained that the university and the department had recently made new commitments to writing and had already voted to establish a Center for Writing Excellence (CWE) to foster and coordinate writing activities. We also sought the consultant-evaluators' help in assessing the new center's goals and developing realistic strategies to realize some or all of those goals. All of these points had in common the goal of expanding the role of composition within the department of English and within the university as a whole.

Table 1 includes our original list of goals and questions in the left column and the final consultant-evaluator recommendations in the right column. The consultant-evaluators clearly kept our goals in mind as they reviewed our self-study and supporting documents and as they spoke with administrators, faculty, and students during two days of campus interviews. (See Appendix C: Sample Itinerary for C-E Visit.) Their recommendation list echoes our own goals in many ways, but, as the order of the two lists reveals, the consultant-evaluator recommendations helped us set priorities.

Table 1
 Goals and Recommendations

WVU's Writing Program: Goals from Self-Study	Consultant-Evaluators: Recommendations after Visit
1. Develop and plan the Center for Writing Excellence initiative. (See recommendation 2)	1. Develop a fully articulated writing program with proper reporting structures and oversight.
2. Develop and plan a professional writing and editing emphasis at the undergraduate and graduate levels. (See recommendation 5)	2. Proceed with the development of a Center for Writing Excellence. By the end of the current semester, develop a three-year plan to phase in the Center for Writing Excellence.
3. Develop, plan, and assess technology-assisted instruction. (See recommendation 7)	3. Hire at least one new faculty position in rhetoric and composition to help develop and direct the required writing sequence and participate in the leadership of the Center for Writing Excellence. Hire one additional faculty member in technical and professional writing.
4. Develop alternatives for English 101 and 102. (See recommendation 6)	4. Proceed with the development of an MFA in creative writing.
5. Plan strategies for external funding.	5. Proceed with the development of an MA in technical and professional writing.
6. Plan hiring needs and strategies. (See recommendation 3)	6. Redesign English 101 and English 102 into a fully articulated writing program, and redesign the current teacher-training program to broaden its scope and possibility.
7. Extend GTA training and preparation. (What else can we do, what can we do differently?) (See recommendation 6)	7. Provide all those who are teaching writing using computers the kind of equipment necessary to complete the job in the most productive way.
8. Extend faculty development opportunities to adjuncts and new faculty.	8. Develop a Writing Tutorial Center as part of the Center for Writing Excellence to provide focus, support, and faculty development for the Writing across the Curriculum Program.
9. Explore ways to define, evaluate, and reward professional service and teaching innovation.	

The consultant-evaluator recommendations focus first on central coordination, new programs, and new hires. They did not ignore our goals about external funding, faculty incentives and recognitions, and distance learning, but they did help us see that we needed to think programmatically *first*. The processes involved in the self-study and the consultant-evaluator visit fostered conversation, collaboration, and consensus: we agreed that we had to establish a solid foundation of core faculty, well-articulated and coordinated curriculum, and ongoing research if we were to establish a visible and valuable center for writing at our university. To do this, we needed to think about organizing structures, networks for communicating change, and arguments for additional faculty hires. The consultant-evaluators helped us think strategically about short- and long-term plans. Notice that their second recommendation does more than endorse the idea of a Center for Writing Excellence; it also recommends developing an immediate three-year plan to phase in the Center for Writing Excellence. See the timeline in Appendix C for a sense of what phased planning and subsequent actions can accomplish.

WHAT ARE THE SHORT- AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF AN EVALUATION?

Since receiving the consultant-evaluators' report in 1999, we have acted on every recommendation in some way. We have achieved most of our initial goals, and we continue to develop other areas. (Please see Appendix D: CWE Implementation.) While we will advertise a new MA in Professional Writing and Editing for the first time in the fall of 2004, an undergraduate professional writing program is already in place; in 2003 we added an additional faculty line in professional writing and editing to support both the undergraduate and graduate programs. One goal remains unrealized: we are still a couple years away from developing a writing tutorial center. We are, however, beginning to lay the groundwork for a peer-tutoring program.

We've even made some progress in additional areas now that we have a well-articulated and collaboratively structured program to improve conversation among the current writing faculty and various stakeholders in the Center's projects. We have, for instance, secured some small grants, piloted distance versions of writing classes for adult learners, and piloted one linked course (English 101 with Introduction to Art History for Art Majors). While we certainly would have made some changes even without an external review, that the consultant-evaluators' recommendations endorsed so many of our own goals helped increase our credibility by adding a national perspective to our arguments for revised curricula and training, new hires, and new programs.

Collaboration and conversation mark the self-study process and the evaluative visit. Initial discussions with Deborah Holdstein in her role as coordinator of the consultant-evaluator service helped us consider how our specific, local context might benefit from a national perspective. Ongoing conversations and the self-study gave us the chance to learn locally from colleagues at the department, college, and university level. The consultant-evaluators gave us the chance to learn nationally from the best practices of other more-established programs as we initiated changes.¹ We are now trying to sustain those collaborations and conversations long-term.²

Appendix A: Sample Timeline

Timeline for C-E Visit, Initial Planning through Visit and Report

January	February	March	April	May
Gather C-E info:	Writing faculty meet with Chair	Ask more questions of C-E coordinator about how to prepare for visit	Gather program materials	Contact Deborah Holdstein with questions about C-E service
Read WPA website	Chair meets with dean		Re-read WPA Self-Study	
Contact C-E coordinator (Deborah Holdstein)			Re-read WPA articles on C-E visits (McLeod and Biedler)	Ongoing conversations with Deborah Holdstein to define goals
Read WPA Self-Study				Begin writing self-study
Read WPA articles on C-E visits (McLeod and Biedler)				Discuss goals, organization, and what to include/exclude; conversations include Holdstein from WPA and department colleagues.
June	July	August	September	October
Complete self-study	Submit self study and other materials	Schedule time with dean and provost	C-E Visit in early Sept. (2 days)	Meet with writing faculty and chair to discuss C-E report
Circulate draft		E-mail and phone other members of the university	Receive report on Sept. 30	Meet with Dean and Provost
Present budget request to Dean for approval		Establish schedule for C-E visit		Plan goals for six months, one year, two years, five years.
Apply for C-E Visit				

Appendix B: Sample Table of Contents for a Self-Study

Here is the table of contents from our self-study, which offers sense of what worked for us as a way to organize our information.

Table of Contents	Page
General Information about the university	1
General Information about Writing Courses at WVU	2
Course Administration at a Glance (Table 1)	
Course Information at a Glance (Table 2)	3
General Information about the Department of English	4
Annual Budget	
Budget Supplements from Writing Funds	
English Course Enrollments by Category (Figure 1) (Composition, Creative Writing, all other courses)	4
Faculty Overview	5
Faculty at a Glance: Number by Rank and Assignments (Table 3)	
Teaching Loads	
Part-Time, Visiting, and GTA Positions	
Salaries	
Staffing	
Credentials for Writing Faculty	6
Administrative Decisions about Writing	6
English 101 Details	7
English 102 Details	7
English 202 (Professional Writing) Details	8
English 305 (Scientific & Technical Writing) Details	8
Additional Courses	9
Faculty Development for Writing Instruction	10
Related Writing Programs and Instruction	11
Conclusion	12
List of Supporting Material (Handbooks, brochures, <i>c.v.</i> 's, course guides, syllabi, web pages)	14

Appendix C: Sample Schedule for Consultant-Evaluator Visit

This schedule is closely modeled on a template provided by Deborah Holdstein, co-director of the WPA consultant-evaluator service.

Sunday

- 4:00 p.m. Arrive at airport.
6:00 p.m. Dinner with department chair and writing faculty and administrators
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Monday

- 8:00 a.m. Meet with dean of College of Liberal Arts
8:30 a.m. Meet with provost
9:15 a.m. Meet with professional and technical writing coordinators
10:00 a.m. Meet with English department undergraduate advisors and associate chair
10:45 a.m. Meet with undergraduate writing coordinator
11:30 a.m. Meet with business writing faculty—a mix of full-time faculty, GTAs, and adjuncts. (Course coordinator will not be present)
12:30 p.m. Lunch with department chair
2:00 p.m. Meet with director of the Computing Center
2:30 p.m. Open forum for GTAs and adjuncts to discuss anything related to composition (e.g., courses; course content; teacher training; administration; professional/career prep, etc.) Not present: Composition administrators, chair, or associate chair.
4:00 p.m. Open forum for all faculty to discuss anything related to composition (e.g., courses; course content; teacher training; administration; etc.)
Not present: Composition administrators, chair, or associate chair.
5:00 p.m. Ph.D. supervisor
Evening free (as requested); dinner on your own.
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Tuesday

- 8:00 a.m. Meet with members of Academic Standards Commission, GTA Council, Assessment Council, Liberal Studies Program Committee, and the associate provost for academic programs
9:00 a.m. Meet with creative writing supervisor
9:30 a.m. Meet with sci/tech writing faculty—a mix of full-time faculty, GTAs, and adjuncts. (Course coordinator will not be present)
10:15 a.m. Final meeting with composition course supervisors
11:00 a.m. Prepare for exit interviews with chair, dean, and provost (344 Stansbury)
12:30 p.m. Lunch: Exit interview with chair and dean
2:00 p.m. Exit interview with provost
3:00 p.m. Leave for airport
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Appendix D: CWE Timeline for Implementing Changes

Six months after visit (Spring 2000)	One year after visit (Fall 2000)	Two years after visit (Fall 2001)	Three years after visit (Fall 2002)	Four years after visit (Fall 2003)
Begin changes:	Revised GTA summer orientation	Welcome two new tenure-track colleagues and one new visiting professor in composition	Renew visiting professor position; welcome a new tenure-track colleague in creative writing	Welcome a new tenure-track colleague in professional writing
Monthly meetings of writing faculty and chair	Involve GTAs in program administration as TA Mentors	Launch new M.F.A program	Begin search for an additional tenure-line hire in composition	Propose and gain approval for an MA in professional writing and editing
Write document to create new writing center; articulate mission for CWE	Begin drafting course goals for English 101 and 102	Introduce new 101 curriculum and training workshop	Introduce pilot of linked courses (Eng. 101 and Art 105)	Introduce new courses for the graduate program
Appoint CWE director	Introduce writing discussion series (three meetings per term)	Expand TA Mentor program	Work on revisions to 102 curriculum, course guide, and training workshop	Review directorship and set new short-, middle-, and long-term goals for the Center for Writing Excellence
Plan changes to summer GTA orientation	Searches for two new hires in composition in Fall; new colleagues hired in Spring.	Pilot distance versions of 101 and 102 for adult learners	Introduce changes to writing placement and tutoring.	Work on ways to expand professional development of GTAs and adjuncts
Plan changes to Engl 101 for Fall	Work with new colleague on further revisions of English 101 curriculum, the course guide, and the summer GTA workshop	Propose and gain approval for undergraduate concentration in professional writing and editing	Expand mentoring program to adjuncts and 102 faculty	Continue to look at ways to improve and expand tutoring.
Develop proposals for new hires	Apply for a distance-education grant and a one-year appointment	Introduce new courses for the professional writing program	Expand distance offerings for adult learners to include professional writing	Continue meetings with writing faculty and regular communication with provost, dean, department chair, and advisors
	Monthly meetings of writing faculty; communication with department chair, associate chair, and advisors	Design brochures for CWE and for creative writing program; host an open-house for Center in January	Propose and gain approval for a graduate pedagogy course required of all new GTAs	Begin planning for next consultant evaluator visit
	Semester meetings with dean	Continue meetings with writing faculty and regular communication with provost, dean, department chair, associate chair, and advisors.	Circulate proposal for an M.A. in professional writing	
	Yearly meetings with provost	Form research and writing group to encourage publication	Continue meetings with writing faculty and communication with provost, dean, department chair, associate chair, and advisors.	
	Plan changes to physical space for summer 2001			

NOTES

1 Deborah Holdstein deserves special recognition for the help she provided with the WPA's consultant-evaluator service. Between May and September of 1999, I received over a dozen e-mail notes from her as she patiently, promptly, and thoroughly responded to initial questions, to questions about planning and drafting, and to questions about scheduling the visit; she was equally generous with her time in phone calls where we discussed issues both large and small. These discussions over the phone and e-mail informed our own self-study, while Deborah's careful attention to our program's specific needs guided her selection of an extremely qualified team of evaluators: Doug Hesse and Lil Brannon. Our program is grateful to all three of these WPA professionals for their knowledge and expertise, their objectivity and professionalism, and their national perspectives.

2 My outstanding colleagues at WVU make long-term collaborations and conversations possible. In particular, I would like to thank Timothy Dow Adams, Patrick Conner, James Harms, Margaret Racin, and Timothy Sweet for their work before, during, and after the consultant-evaluator visit. I would also like to recognize new colleagues who have joined our faculty since 2001: Catherine Gouge, Kathleen Ryan, and Julie Vedder have enriched our writing program in important ways.

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