

Editorial

The following remarks were delivered to the plenary session of the MLA Teaching of Writing Division, Chicago, December 27, 1977. You will notice that they were addressed not to writing program administrators primarily, but to writing teachers. They were an effort to explain the purpose of WPA to our colleagues, some of whom have expressed doubt about the necessity and goals of such an organization.

You may find them useful, therefore, both in explaining the organization to others, and in thinking further about the implications of our work as writing program administrators.

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Last September a notice in the MLA Teaching of Writing Division Newsletter announced a new organization loosely associated with the division, called the Council of Writing Program Administrators. Many of you may have disregarded that notice because you are writing teachers, not writing administrators. To writing teachers, an organization devoted to the interests of writing program administrators could not seem to be of such importance.

In this case, however, I think appearances may be deceiving. This new organization of writing program administrators, along with such programs as the new institute for writing program administration being

planned at the University of Iowa*, is important not just to our colleagues who do jobs variously called Director of Freshman Comp, Chairman of Rhetoric, Supervisor of Freshman Comp, Chairman of the Comp Committee, and so on. In my judgment, efforts to improve writing program administration are important also to all of us who work as classroom teachers under the guidance and protection of writing program administrators. Today, especially, and increasingly in the future, successful writing program administration in our colleges and universities is essential to our own success as writing teachers. Or, to put it another way, it seems to me that a good deal of our recent lack of effectiveness as writing teachers could be traced to limitations built in structurally to the way most writing programs are set up and administered in this country.

Naturally, my purpose here is not to criticize the efforts of the many hardworking people over the years who have knocked themselves out trying to create and maintain sound, workable, progressive programs in writing. Rather, it is to describe and explore the implications for writing teachers of what seems to me to be a relatively new phenomenon in our profession.

Very recently a striking change has taken place in the organization and visibility of what we writing teachers do. I am not talking about the press we've gotten in the last few years. What I'm talking about is the fast-growing tendency in colleges and universities throughout the country to involve whole campuses in writing programs. In many institutions today, writing is no longer perceived as the exclusive province, responsibility, and tough luck of the English Department. Writing is being per-

*For a description of this program, see PMLA 92 (November, 1977), p. 1252.

ceived as the active concern of the whole college. As a result, the director of the writing program at many schools has been catapulted into a new, important, demanding, and highly visible position of leadership.

This situation is, of course, not new at some colleges, where good writing has been a focus of campus-wide attention for many years. But for most of us it is a great change from what we're used to. When I became a director of freshman English seven years ago, for example, the task was defined in the traditional manner. I answered to the English Department Chair, who appointed me, and I was expected to represent him in dealing with the teachers of freshman comp. They in turn dealt with me. And that was about it.

Contrast that with a recent experience I had as a CEA Campus Consultant at a medium-sized private college in the midwest. I spent a day there. For a few hours at the beginning and another hour at the end I talked intensively with the person most directly involved with their writing program, their Director of Freshman English. In between, however, in lounges, offices, over coffee, at lunch, I was plied with acute, well-informed questions (many of which, I hasten to say, I had difficulty answering) about organization, procedures, staffing, budget, faculty training, textbooks, location of drop-in writing center facilities, methods of evaluation, and writing pedagogy -- all these questions directed at me by faculty development administrators, faculty council representatives, a representative of the college president, as well as students, faculty members, and department chairs from departments of English, History, Biology, Education, Business, and others. The person who organized my meetings with these people, informed them, and is now primarily responsible for putting their recommendations into effect is the writing program administrator on that campus -- the so-called Director of Freshman English.

Despite these new demands now being made on writing program administrators in our profession they remain a beleaguered group. For one thing, as most of you realize, the profession is in the habit of considering them second-class citizens, in part because they have stepped through the looking glass, from the traditional academic point of view, into that never-never land where croquet mallets turn into flamingoes and croquet balls turn into hedgehogs: the land of administration; and mainly, of course, because they take the job of teaching writing seriously.

Writing program administrators are beleaguered also because when the campus rises out of its lethargy in arms about the deplorable state of student writing, the buck inevitably gets passed to the writing program administrator. As I suppose some of you may have noticed, the director of freshman comp is held personally responsible for the worst student writers on campus. That the director of freshman comp is not responsible in any way for the best writers on campus is also universally acknowledged.

But writing program administrators are beleaguered in two more important respects as well. And remember the people we are talking about represent the interest of writing teachers to the English Department and to the College as a whole. First, most writing program administrators are untenured, and, therefore, vulnerable. They often cannot act boldly, because their jobs may be at stake. Tenure decisions are not notoriously made by members of the faculty who revel in opportunities to teach writing. Most writing program administrators are also subject to the will of the English department chair, whose constituency often consists largely of traditionally minded academics who depreciate teaching writing and writing teachers. In fact, the department chair may himself or herself be just one of those traditionally

minded academics, deeply -- although these days probably covertly -- antagonistic to anything that smacks of teaching writing. In short, the position of most writing program administrators is untenable at base because most of their interests as writing program administrators whether they know it or not, are inherently opposed in many respects to many of the interest, whether they know it or not, of the people who in most cases appointed them.

Second, most writing program administrators are beleaguered because they take the job young and freshly p-h-deed by graduate programs which in most cases teach them little either about teaching writing or about administrating anything at all. As a result, most have at best a rudimentary idea of what is required in order to do that job successfully. They don't know -- because nobody ever tells them -- what they are being asked to do.

And here is just some of what they are being asked to do. They are asked to organize junior faculty and teaching assistants under their care -- people sometimes only slightly younger and slightly less experienced than the writing supervisors themselves -- and teach these junior faculty how to teach writing, in many cases from scratch. They are asked to cajole into a semblance of harmony with the prevailing ideas about teaching writing, older faculty who outrank them, who resent having to teach writing, and who would willingly slay the messenger of the bad news that they must teach writing. Again, writing program administrators are asked to reach out beyond the English department, to faculty in other departments, teaching them how to deal with poorly written papers, teaching them how to assign papers short enough and clearly defined enough that students can do a decent and meaningful job of writing them, and even, of course, teaching many of them -- the faculty at large -- what the educational value is of assigning

papers at all. And beyond the college faculty itself, writing program administrators are also asked to teach college administrators, the general public, and sometimes even legislators and other government officials what is involved in teaching writing.

In short, writing program administrators today are the emissaries of writing teachers to the world outside their classrooms. Writing program administrators are responsible for creating the context -- in the widest possible sense -- in which we all teach writing. And creating an enlightened, sympathetic context is essential today to our success as writing teachers, because unless they create that context, we all teach writing in a vacuum. Our students cannot learn how to write in a context in which the general public, legislators, college administrators, college faculty, most English department members, and, alas, even many writing teachers themselves fear writing, view writing as punishment, and have an understanding of the nature of language which is roughly at the level of a "grammar quiz" on the inner pages of Readers Digest.

Now, you will perhaps have noticed that in my list of what writing program administrators are expected to do I have not included what most of us think administrators do -- the managerial tasks of making up schedules, assigning classes, hiring and firing, that sort of thing. Of course some writing program administrators have those responsibilities too. But where writing program administrators differ -- or should differ -- from most other college administrators is that the most important part of their job is not managerial but directly educational. Writing program administrators in their administrative capacity are writing teachers. Writing program administrators in fact teach students how to write in almost exactly the same sense -- although not, of course, in the same ways -- that we classroom

teachers teach students how to write, because both of us are actively undertaking to create conditions in which learning can occur.

In fact, I would say that only when writing program administrators conceive of their job in this larger way, as teaching, do they have a prayer of doing the job as it must be done. And in order for these intelligent, energetic and mature, but as I have said mainly young and professionally vulnerable people to begin to conceive of their work in this sufficiently large way and undertake the task with a proper regard to its immensity, they have simply had to organize. They have, therefore, associated themselves as the Council of Writing Program Administrators in order to support each other in their work, teach each other how to do that work, and focus their own and the nation's attention on the problems of teaching writing from the broad and fully informed perspective that writing program administrators alone are in the best position to hold.

This as I see it is the purpose of the Council of Writing Program Administrators. Only when the people who are really on the spot can identify one another and together identify the problems that together they — and we all -- face in improving the quality of undergraduate writing in this country, will we who toil in the classrooms under their guidance and protection have a chance of success.

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