A cheap, efficient, challenging, sure-fire and obvious device for combatting the major scandal in higher education today

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I suppose it could be said that one test of a civilized society is whether it can recognize a scandal when it sees one. According to that test, we could say that the society of college teachers in 20th century America is not dangerously over-civilized, so comfortably do we live with the persisting scandal of intellectual, economic, and social abuse of part-time faculty. The scandal is not peculiar to English departments, of course, and it is not confined within those departments to writing programs. But writing programs are probably its worst victims. Some measure of the scandal can be seen in the statistics recently compiled by Morello and Gibaldi. They report that when they polled departments of English about programs for training and integrating part-time faculty only one-third replied, and, of those, only about one-half offered *any* training or in-service instruction. But quite aside from the statistics, we all know that there is something radically wrong with the selection, care, and feeding of those who do a fair share—and in some colleges the lion's share—of the composition teaching.

The abuses both of the teachers and of their students are so many that one hardly knows where to begin. There is first the issue of slave wages—of plain and shameful economic exploitation by administrators who inevitably make their savings where resistance is weakest. There is second the issue raised by the knowledge that a majority of part-time faculty are women, many of them caught in situations that make resistance equivalent to loss of their jobs. As one correspondent wrote to me recently, part-time faculty members do not need to be fired; they simply do not appear on next semester's schedule of courses. There is third the puzzling issue of the conflicting interests of part-timers themselves. Insofar as they have professional ambitions, they will naturally side with those who think the use of part-time faculty in itself an abuse, because it reduces the number of full-time jobs and increases the ranks of unemployed academics. But insofar as they need a job, any job, they will naturally see the hiring of a full-time person as a threat to two or three part-time teachers. Thus scarcity budgeting produces rivalries that threaten all of us. Fourth, there is the issue of university governance and the lack of full citizenship for part-time teachers. Should they organize to obtain full citizenship? What should full citizenship mean for part-time teachers? Fifth, there is the issue of credentials. And on one could go. There is scarcely a contemporary issue in higher education that does not bear on the plight of the part-time teacher.

From all of these overlapping issues, *WPA* is concentrating on one that may seem much less pressing than the political and economic plight of teachers, namely, their selection, training, and integration. But it takes no very deep thought to see that our topic will finally affect the others. Any college that takes seriously the task of selecting, training, and integrating its part-time faculty will immediately find itself facing all of the other problems. And any college that decides to oppose current shameful practices of *non*selection, *non*training, and *non*integration will find that the political and economic questions will be transformed—and even to some degree solved.

We don't have space to argue the matter here, so I'll simply assert that you can tell whether a college is serious about teaching its students at any level simply by looking closely at how many freshmen are taught by part-time faculty members who have had no training and who have no stake in the future of the institution and its programs, no sense of how their work relates to anything else the college is doing, no long-range prospect of full-time or permanent appointment, and thus little reason to think that what they do matters to anyone.

The college that places unlicked B.A.s into composition classrooms, with little or no attention to what they do or how they do it, is no proper college at all, but one guilty of a cheap and shoddy con act. By the same token, a college can prove that it is not a con act by the simple measure of choosing and implementing a serious program of continuing education for all beginning faculty members, and by taking part-time teachers as seriously as lucky tenured teachers.

Such a program cannot, of course, be faked. While it does not necessarily take a lot of money, it does require a lot of commitment from the established faculty and from the administration. No doubt there can be many different models of successful programs, and as I turn now to the one I know best, I am aware that its precise details may fit few institutions. But it does have one universally admired quality: it is cheap. And it has another supreme advantage: it is intellectually profitable to the full-time faculty on which its success depends.

The model was not devised in order to integrate and train part-time faculty, but rather to develop the best possible required courses, taught by large, heterogeneous staffs. After World War II, there was suddenly a flood of students into colleges that had lost their faculty members to the armed forces. Suddenly every college needed new teachers, fast. As a consequence, when I completed my M.A., in the spring of 1947, I had a surprise call from the director of composition at the University of Chicago College, asking if I would teach two courses the following autumn, as a part-time "assistant instructor." Poverty and vanity overrode the anxieties of ignorance, and I accepted. Needless to say, nobody in my graduate courses had mentioned teaching composition, just as nobody was to mention composition in my remaining three years of graduate study. What I knew about teaching composition was what most beginning part-time faculty members still know: what can be remembered from the freshman course taken many years ago. In my case, nine years had passed since I'd even seen a composition class, except for a four-month stint pretending to teach in a U.S. Army "University" in Shrivenham, England.

What saved me from total disaster, though I had plenty of bad moments, was a device that every college could employ, simply by deciding that such matters are important. The college at that time required every teacher of every required course to participate each week in a staff meeting about the teaching of that week's work. What this meant, of course, was an extra hour or hour and a half each week for all concerned. As you would imagine, many of the junior people, half-time and full-time, initially resented both the extra time and the necessity of listening to each other talk about how and what to teach. But most of the resistance quickly faded as we discovered that we were being offered what was, quite simply, a superior kind of liberal education: a sustained and intense conversation about the arts of reading and thinking and writing, and about how to teach those arts.

It was a conversation that included beginners as well as veterans with up to 40 years of teaching experience. There were specialists in rhetoric, but there were also poets and novelists and historians and sociologists and even a mathematician. As the term progressed, we not only discussed the difficult readings and possible writing topics, we also had sessions in which we graded sample papers and discussed our results, results that often conflicted widely. And we discussed, because of our heterogeneity, why we were teaching composition at all—and how such teaching contributes to a liberal education.

I don't think it is only the glow of memory that makes those meetings so important to me. I am convinced that in them, and in similar meetings in other staff-taught courses, I learned more than I did in any graduate course—not just more about teaching but more about how to read and think. If there were space I could report exhilarating battles with people like James Sledd over the question of how style relates to substance; with a future scholar of Edmund Burke over the nature of analogical proof; with Richard Weaver over the proper role of ethical concerns in the freshman teacher. There were debates about whether short readings or extensive readings worked best; about whether classical rhetorics should be on our reading list—a question that, of course, required some reading of the classical rhetorics. But the precise substance mattered less than the fact that I, a part-timer, was incorporated into those meetings and was thus made part of an institution that everyone visibly cared about.

The weekly meetings spilled over into the corridors and offices. "Were you scared," I remember asking Wilma Ebbitt, "when you first began teaching?" "Did you ever find yourself running out of material after the first 30 minutes?" I asked Robert Streeter. "What kind of notes do you make for the structure of the hour?" I asked Henry Sams. "How do you manage to get papers that are not as dull as my student's papers?" I asked the poet, Reuel Denney. "What do *you* make of this passage in Aristotle?" I asked my junior colleague, Richard Levin.

I cannot pretend that my students that first year got a very good education in how to write. But they got a lot better start than they would have had if I'd been on my own. And I was given a first-class beginning in rhetorical education.

You may say, "But all that depended on having a majority of experienced full-time faculty in the meetings. The part-timers were a small minority. But in *most* of our programs, the majority of the teachers will be beginners, quite unable to give each other the sort of thing that your staff gave you." Well, I admit that the proportions did help. Obviously the nature of weekly staff meetings must shift depending on who is attending, and I think it is quite true that if we do not involve a fair number of experienced faculty members, such discussions will not work as well. But surely we can now hope that with proper nudging, experienced faculty members *will* again take part in sufficient numbers to produce the serious weekly arguments that make such meetings count.

Colleges that are wondering how to retool older faculty members who for some reason have been required to return to composition teaching could find in this device a painless way to combine interests: part-timers and returnees educating themselves together. Other faculty members can perhaps be brought into such activity, at least long enough for them to discover that their commitment to the profession can, through such encounters, be born again.

Note that there is one grand assumption in my suggestion that such staff meetings can do the job that is needed, namely, that in the teaching of how to write, there can be as much intellectual challenge and excitement as in the most recondite subject we know. If we teach writing on certain popular models of mere correctness or immediate serviceability to some corrupt norm imposed by prophets of the back-to-the-basics movement, then of course we will find that no self-respecting senior teacher will choose to attend weekly discussions about how to do it better. But if we ask ourselves honestly what it means to say well something worth saying—if, that is, we revive the sorts of questions that were taken for granted in the great rhetorical inquiries of the past—we will find, as I found in 1947 through 1950, that nothing in the world is more interesting than the question of how to transform those confused and semi-literate freshman souls into alert, curious, and effective writers.

I assume that it must seem utopian for me to claim that the composition course could in fact become a center of intellectual vitality for a whole campus. I would think it utopian myself if I hadn't seen it happen—not at Chicago, because there we had other favorable factors that no doubt contributed a good deal, but at places as diverse as Earlham College and Diablo Valley Junior College in California. In short, any college that takes seriously the problem of how to teach writing will become intellectually alive, and any college that is intellectually alive will automatically train and integrate its part-time faculty, provided only that faculty members meet to debate the questions that such a mission automatically raises.

I confess that I do not feel terribly optimistic about many colleges adopting this one inexpensive and promising measure, and I feel even less optimistic about its working well if adopted. What is most likely to happen, if a college attempts to require weekly briefing sessions, is that everyone will look upon it as just another chore, an *hour* that should surely be paid for, counted like any other hour, an additional burden in an already overburdened life. If the part-time faculty members are graduate students, one might well pay them in academic credit. But what about the seniors? Will they insist on counting those hours as hours requiring extra pay?

Even if they do, I think administrators would do well to try to find some way to provide that pay, at least for a few experienced teachers. But I would hope that at many colleges people would find their compensation in a renewed pleasure in what they themselves learn. In 1947, you could not have paid me enough to get me to miss one of those sessions, so much more challenging than any class, so much more to the point of my own progress as a would-be literary scholar.

I need hardly point out that for any staff that holds such weekly planning sessions, the problem of evaluation becomes much simpler. When you have been briefed by a junior colleague, in an hour or so of discussion, and observed his or her response to your own briefings, you are no longer dependent entirely on chancy student evaluation forms when retention decisions are to be made. As we all know, student evaluations are especially untrustworthy in required writing courses. Staff meetings are one way to make us less dependent on them.

They are also one good way of ensuring that when retention and promotion decisions are made, juniors feel that they have been given a genuinely fair shake. They will, that is, if senior faculty members have become genuinely engaged in freshman teaching as the single most important task any of us faces. And as Helen Vendler told us in her presidential address, if that does not happen, if we do not once again recognize where the heart of our endeavor lies, we can expect far worse troubles than we have yet known.