

Notes of a freshman Freshman Comp director
or

Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch' entrate

Leon Coburn

In July, 1980, I began, with some trepidation, my new job as director of freshman composition at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. At the time I had been at the university for 10 years as a specialist in eighteenth-century British literature. Although I had often taught composition, I avoided it whenever possible because I found it to be a frustrating and generally disagreeable experience. Nevertheless, I accepted the position and decided to keep a journal during my first year as director. From that journal I have selected the following remarks, which I would like to share with other WPAs. I should say at the beginning that the overall picture is one of frustration, anger, and defeat. But no matter how bleak the summary sounds, the day-to-day reality was much worse.

To begin, then, at the beginning.

Prelude. In December 1979, my chairperson asked me to take over as director of freshman composition the following July. The program itself is quite traditional. It consists of English A, a noncredit remedial course; English 101, Rhetoric and Composition; and English 102, Introduction to Literature with instruction in writing a research paper. In taking on the job, I would move from a nine-month contract to a 12-month contract and receive a 20 percent increase in salary. My decision was not an easy one to make for several reasons. But after several weeks of hesitating I agreed to take the job. My main reasons for taking it were these:

1. I had been a severe critic of the composition program for several years and felt that it was time to either put up or shut up.
2. Rightly or wrongly, I thought I could do a better job than the other candidates for the position.
3. I thought there might be more opportunities for significant research in composition than in my academic specialty.

The first thing I did was apply to the Council of Writing Program Administrators for a grant to bring two consultant-evaluators to our campus to provide an outside view of how our program was working as an administrative unit. The council awarded us \$300, and the department chairperson and dean provided an additional \$700 for expenses plus honoraria. The consultant-evaluators were appointed, and I spent a month collecting the materials they asked to review before arriving on campus the following November. I'll have more to say about that visit later.

During the remainder of the spring, 1980, semester, I spent a lot of time seeing publishers' representatives and trying to pick a text, getting to know some of the teaching staff who would be under my supervision, and trying to catch the outgoing WPA, who had suddenly become an elusive shadow, for a few words of advice. I also convinced the department chairperson to pay half of the cost of my attendance at the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English, where I hoped to learn something about how to do my job.

On July 1, I took over officially. On July 5, I left for Laramie—perhaps the smartest thing I did all year. (One piece of advice: get away as often as you can.)

When I returned, I made the following list of projects and areas I felt I needed to develop expertise in to survive as director. Notice that the list does *not* include developing a theory of rhetoric on which to base the writing curriculum itself.

1. Learn the intricacies of placement and exemption tests and procedures.
2. Learn to staff composition courses effectively and fairly.
3. Develop a background in evaluating writing and the reliability of grading procedures.
4. Learn to use our Learning Resource Center—i.e., the writing lab.
5. Contact public school writing teachers.
6. Develop relationships with colleagues in other departments for a writing-across-the-curriculum program.
7. Develop relationships with other institutions in the state.
8. Improve the lot of the part-time instructors, who teach half of our composition sections.
9. Learn how to train and evaluate writing teachers effectively.
10. Learn grantsmanship.

First summer on the job. I had two days to contemplate this list in mid-July before reality reared its ugly head.

- A new teaching assistant told me she was getting married in October and would need three weeks off to take her honeymoon, and asked if that was all right.
- Forty-three students asked for individual appointments to discuss the results of their Advanced Placement and CLEP tests in English.
- One hundred and twenty-seven students who scored low enough on the ACT test to place in remedial English demanded the right to challenge their placement by writing an essay—most of which I graded.
- One student threatened to sue the university because she was placed in English 101 the preceding spring but attended English A the whole semester without being told she was in the wrong class. Now she still had to take 101.

Meanwhile, I had my first tangle with the university administration. I was designing a two-day writing workshop for teaching assistants and part-time in-

structors and asked the chairperson, dean, and university president to provide lunch money, since none of the participants would get paid for attending. This request was denied. In a pet, I sent a letter of indignation to the president, who complained to the dean, who complained to me. My relationship with the dean has been rather cool ever since.

My secretary said she was pregnant and would be quitting in January.

I began a mail survey of colleges and universities who staff their freshman composition classes with full-time instructors. I was interested in their recommendations should we decide to move in that direction.

The week of August 14 I spent preparing for the staff workshop and designing an English 101 syllabus. By the end of the week I felt overwhelmed by my ignorance. I vowed to design a program of self-education in theories of composition and rhetoric. I drafted a bibliography and went to the library only to discover that the collection included fewer than 25 percent of the books and articles I considered essential. As it turned out, it didn't matter. This proved to be the last opportunity I would have to pursue my vow.

The head of teacher training in the College of Education called and suggested we talk. I was delighted. We talked over many shared concerns about English teachers who were not trained to teach writing. This too proved to be a last opportunity. I was unable to pursue this contact the rest of the year, although I did go to several meetings of the local chapter of NCTE where I discovered that there was considerable animosity toward the English Department at the university. This was one of several areas that needed immediate attention—and didn't get it.

At the end of August, I held the two-day workshop. For most participants it boosted morale. I found this result gratifying because I thought they would resent the pressure I put on them to attend. In fact, they saw the workshop as a kind of acknowledgment of their contribution, and they began to feel a sense of community, which I subsequently attempted to develop.

The semester begins. The next week registration happened. That seems to be the only way to put it. The twin nightmares of placement and scheduling exhausted my reserve of patience. By the following Monday, I was quite willing to resign. Unfortunately, two colleagues came by separately to tell me they appreciated my willingness to take the job as director. I am easily seduced.

I spent the next couple of days trying to arrange for desks and office space for teaching staff and arguing with the university administration about getting a telephone for the teaching assistants. On the third day of classes a new teaching assistant, in a state of near panic, came in wide-eyed and breathless and wanted to know how to teach composition to a blind student who had showed up in his class.

Near the end of September, I met with the English Department's personnel committee. For the first time in five years the department had a vacancy because one faculty member was retiring. I argued that we should replace him with a composition specialist. We have two linguists in our department, and the rest are literary specialists. We have only 100 majors, but we teach 1,700 composition students each year. The committee wondered if I wasn't afraid a composition specialist might want my job eventually. When I could stop laughing, I told them I hoped, in fact I expected, him or her to take over within a year. The committee, in its decidedly finite wisdom, chose to hire a folklorist.

On September 23, two students came in to complain that their teacher wouldn't let them into class because they showed up three weeks late. One said he had been there every day but the door was always locked. The other said he had had illness in the family and had to carry 12 hours or lose his grant. This is a sample of the level of conflict and decision-making that was an almost daily occurrence for the rest of the year.

In another attempt to make headway with the university administration, I approached the academic vice-president about improving the lot of the part-time instructors. For teaching four sections of composition each semester, part-time instructors earned \$7,200. His position was that as long as they are willing to do it, we needn't worry too much. As it turned out, several improvements were approved during the next few months. During our discussion, the vice-president also mentioned that teaching assistants were not supposed to teach during their first semester as graduate students. I said I knew that. The subject was dropped and no further mention has been made of it. Teaching assistants still start their first semester of graduate school by teaching two classes of English 101 while they are taking their first graduate courses.

In October I began designing a writing-across-the-curriculum workshop for January. After polling the faculty to determine interest level, I convinced the academic vice-president to provide funds to bring in Richard Adler from the University of Montana to conduct the workshop.

On November 5, the consultant-evaluators from the Council of Writing Program Administrators arrived. They were William Smith of Utah State and Winifred Horner of the University of Missouri. I had scheduled meetings with a wide variety of individuals and groups, and for the next two days the visitors moved across the campus like a dust devil across a vacant lot. Many people were stirred up and talked about the experience for several days following their visit. It was an excellent morale booster for the composition staff and for me. The only people who were not affected were the majority of the English department faculty, only five of whom deigned to show up for the scheduled meeting. None of the members of the graduate committee were there—i.e., the people who ultimately must approve any substantive changes I might propose in staffing the composition courses.

In spite of this resounding show of indifference from my colleagues, I was reinvigorated by the evaluation and by the evaluators, who reminded me that I was not alone and who gave me a perspective that I tended to lose from time to time during the year. Their best advice to me was to find time for myself and to plan my escape. The first piece of advice I didn't always follow; the second I practiced daily.

I have already offered one piece of advice in this reminiscence. Here's another. I strongly recommend outside evaluation. Off-campus experts are the baseball bat that can get the attention, and perhaps even the compliance, of at least some of your colleagues.

The first semester ended with a flurry of grade appeals, complaints from teachers about other teachers who were too easy, and complaints from teaching assistants that I hadn't given them enough attention. They were right.

In January my secretary quit to have her baby. I hired and trained a new secretary.

During the spring semester, I appeared on TV; spoke on the radio; was inter-

viewed by a newspaper reporter, who wanted to know why students couldn't write; conducted a writing-across-the-curriculum workshop; taught two freshman composition classes; continued to apply pressure for better treatment of our part-time instructors; observed 27 teachers in class; conducted a student evaluation of teachers; had two encounters with the registrar and one with the admissions office; and lost a lot of sleep nights as I lay in bed and worked out the perfect freshman composition program. I also listened to anybody and everybody who had complaints.

In April my new secretary announced she was pregnant, and I began getting strange looks from my friends and colleagues.

On May 31, I left Las Vegas to attend a two-week seminar at Purdue University on Modern Rhetoric Theory. While there, I was reminded once again that I am not alone and that I don't know nearly enough to do the job I'm trying to do.

Some conclusions. On evaluating my first semester in office, I discovered what is perhaps the central problem facing any writing program administrator: routine maintenance work on the program is so time-consuming and emotionally draining that program development and innovation are almost impossible. It's like jogging around a track and discovering the wind is always against you. The second biggest problem is the *inertia* of English department faculties. A mind in motion, like a body in motion, tends to remain in motion in the same direction unless affected by some outside force. Professors fail to come to meetings or respond to requests or approve changes because their inertia keeps them doing "it" the way they've always done "it." Their motto seems to be that of Tennyson's Lotus Eaters: "Leave us alone."

I can see only two ways to deal with this inertia. One is to assume despotic power, to make decisions and implement them without seeking approval. Your colleagues' inertia will thus become an asset to you. There may be grumbling and threats, but these will probably subside. If they don't, then at least you have forced your colleagues to do more than just say "no" to each of your proposals.

The second way to deal with this inertia is less drastic and ultimately more effective, if you have the patience and equanimity required. You must ignore the daily slippage and resistance to change and continue a steady, unrelenting pressure that bit by bit will, like a glacier moving down a mountain, effect the change you want. But to maintain this effort takes a farsightedness, a refusal to despair, and an ability to separate the significant from the insignificant that few of us have. The typical error here, I suspect, is the one I keep making—attempting too much too fast. Singleness of purpose is essential.

After a full year in office I have drawn four more conclusions from my experience, and can offer four more suggestions.

My conclusions are:

1. No job on campus is as thankless or as demanding as directing the writing program.
2. No other job offers a better opportunity to have a significant impact on students' education.
3. There is a potential rapport among writing teachers that can be mutually supporting and very satisfying.
4. What we do really matters.

My suggestions are:

1. Focus on a few goals—don't try to do everything at once.
2. Maintain a high profile and steady pressure.
3. Move beyond the department for recognition—use the media, publish, attend conferences and seminars. Get a job offer if you can.
4. Don't take any of it too seriously. As Walt Kelly (remember Pogo?) used to say, "It ain't nohow permanent."

On the positive side. Originally, my paper ended at this point. But after I read the final draft to my wife, she very rightly suggested that I was too negative; I had received more support than I have acknowledged here. So let me add this coda of good things that happened.

1. Three colleagues attended the workshop I held in August. Their good-humored participation added legitimacy to my efforts and raised the morale of the teaching staff.
2. The dean and chairperson came up with \$700 for outside evaluators.
3. The chairperson let me hire two people on hourly wages for a couple of weeks to help me out—with no questions asked.
4. Several faculty members in English and in other departments praised my efforts.
5. The academic vice-president gave me \$700 to pay for the writing-across-the-curriculum workshop and \$1,200 to attend the Purdue seminar.
6. I received \$200 to attend the Wyoming Conference.
7. The public relations office on campus has been very helpful, and the directors of both the ESL program and the Learning Resource Center have been most cooperative.
8. The graduate committee now gives credit toward an M.A. for two courses in rhetoric and composition.
9. Part-time instructors did not get a salary increase, but they are now permitted to park in the faculty lot.
10. My latest secretary has just completed her first six months and still isn't pregnant.