

Directing freshman English: The role of administration in freshman English programs

William J. Gracie, Jr.

Articles defining the role of department chairpersons have become so numerous in the pages of the *ADE Bulletin* that they are referred to routinely, and accurately, as a "subgenre." While an occasional comment or two by a WPA on the role, or roles, a program director must necessarily play are not exactly hard to find in the pages of *WPA*, papers that focus exclusively on the subject are virtually nonexistent. But if neglect of the role of WPAs in *WPA* itself is serious enough, neglect in the annual meetings of the Conference of College Composition and Communication is perhaps more significant, if only because that organization brings together so many writing program directors.

In the 545 panels and workshops comprising the last three years' meetings of the CCCC in Minneapolis, Washington, and Dallas, not a single paper addressed the subject of the WPA's role in department administration. More importantly, these CCCC meetings were awash with new ideas on curriculum development and program innovation, yet not a single paper addressed the WPA's capacity to bring home those ideas effectively to the local campus.

Because the capacity to translate ideas into action is the key to a WPA's success, I will attempt here to define the institutional roles WPAs should properly play. I do so for two reasons. First, some public discussion of the subject is clearly overdue. Second, I believe that the profession's recent and astonishing growth in composition research will count for very little if WPAs cannot translate theory into practice.

A department chairperson at Miami University once compared his role to a street corner fire hydrant: the chairperson is to the department, he said, as the hydrant to the dog. Those of us who have directed writing programs must appreciate the analogy, but with this difference: the chairperson, like the hydrant, at least has a perceptible and clear function, while the WPA on too many campuses has a role that is only vaguely defined and vaguely perceived. The 1978 CEA National Survey of the Teaching of College Writing, reveals that the typical director of freshman English holds a doctorate and is in a tenure-track position. What the CEA study does not reveal—but can be fairly concluded from it—is that what the typical WPA does not have is a job description. I am no exception. As the current director of a writing program founded by a past chairperson of the CCCC, I should be embarrassed to report that I have no job description other than a clear understanding that the job allows a reduced teaching load. Yet save for that important detail, there is no other description of what I must do in overseeing a staff of 100 on three campuses in 270 sections offered each year. Still, this absence of specifics, this very lack of a clear definition, in fact helps define the job. To me it underlines an important point all WPAs must know and believe deeply: that we are not managers whose tasks can be somehow set apart,

outlined, and prescribed. We are faculty members like our colleagues, engaged in what we must see as a common enterprise. WPAs must therefore see themselves and the roles they necessarily play as, above all, substantive and only secondarily administrative. From this initial assumption, I will argue three broad themes as I attempt to define the role WPAs should play in the decade ahead. Working as a faculty member, the WPA should seek to implement *change*; should foster, as much as possible, *collegiality*; and should *build upon already existing strengths* as the faculty perceives these strengths in itself and in the identity of the institution as a whole.

WPAs as agents of change. First: WPAs should try to implement change. In emphasizing the role of change in course direction or content I do not mean to endorse change for the sake of change, nor do I mean that change is necessarily or inevitably good. Rather it seems to me that the WPA at a typical university finds himself or herself at the head of a sometimes moribund, often complacent, writing faculty largely unaware of the theoretical and pedagogical ferment regarding composition that has characterized the profession during the past decade. With the conspicuous exception of writing programs designed to accommodate a specialized student body—Carnegie-Mellon’s, for example—or dominated by a comprehensive composition philosophy—Van Nostrand’s program at Brown comes to mind—the large majority of the faculty of most writing programs does not attend the CCCC or other professional conferences devoted to composition; does not agree on a set of coherent course objectives; and does not yet believe that the composition teacher’s calling is as honorable as the literature teacher’s. In fact, one of our profession’s long-running ironies is that as articles on pedagogy and theory seem to increase exponentially, there are teachers across the country still assigning papers—due next Thursday at 10 a.m.—on such stimulating topics as “compare and contrast a small town with a big city” or “classify instruments of the orchestra or fraternity men and sorority women”; and are still dealing with those papers exclusively by marking errors in red and assigning a grade. Let me darken this portrait a bit more. As the number of composition sections has grown, the number of literature sections has declined, thereby largely contributing to the unhappy situation wherein literature specialists find themselves back in those freshman English sections they thought they had forever escaped. It should scarcely surprise us that resentment, hostility, or simply boredom may affect especially senior faculty, nor should it surprise us that the WPA, even more so than the department chairperson, should be called upon to make the best of this unsettled and unsettling academic environment.

If we can agree for the sake of discussion that the environment I describe is fairly typical, then it would seem to follow that the people most responsible for correcting it must be program directors. If they do not wish merely to preside over a program of regulated chaos, WPAs should move, I suggest, in two ways. First, they should not underestimate the existing strengths of the faculty—its personnel as well as its even dimly perceived pedagogy—and surely should not try to undertake change single-handedly. If programs are to change in fundamental ways, WPAs will need the assent of as many faculty members as possible, and such assent, I believe, cannot be gained if WPAs present a program fashioned of cloth cut solely by themselves. WPAs should seek the best minds in the composition faculty, perhaps especially those who attend professional conferences, and should

seek their collective wisdom when proposing changes of an essentially curricular or substantive—as opposed to personal or administrative—nature.

WPAs should be pedagogically agnostic. WPAs who identify themselves exclusively with a single theory of composition or a single pedagogy, and claim that that theory or pedagogy is demonstrably and finally superior to all others, court failure. The truth in any case, is that composition pedagogy is a no more black and white proposition than life itself, and WPAs who have minds receptive to new ideas and new teaching methods will find ways to incorporate effectively the best and most appropriate of these ideas into an existing program, even if that incorporation means discarding old methods or repudiating long-held assumptions. These WPAs will seek to implement change then, but will do so only with the combined efforts of as great a number of faculty as possible and only with the idea firmly in mind that today’s program for change may itself be replaced next year.

WPAs and collegiality. My second theme is the encouragement of collegiality, and I hope it is clear why that theme is important. It has been said more than once that all of us are smarter than any one of us, and—chestnut though it is—the advice should be felt continually in the WPA’s very pulse. The WPA who seeks to implement change must do so with the assent of the group, but widespread assent is not possible without some sense among the faculty of group identity, of collegiality. At a time when the rigors of research and writing—or on a less sublime level, the grading of freshman papers—all too often isolate us from our colleagues, it may not be possible to encourage collegiality in even the friendliest departments. But the WPA may help by showing a willingness to share authority and especially a willingness to engage faculty at various times and for various purposes in group work. By *sharing authority* I mean presiding over the composition policy committee, but choosing not to vote except in the case of a standoff. I mean appointing an assistant director, if the program is large enough, whose term is fixed and rotated among members of the department. I mean circulating position papers and syllabus proposals among several faculty members before accepting or rejecting those proposals. And all this is not mere diplomacy or politic stroking. WPAs who actually respond and follow through when their colleagues offer advice will be perceived as colleagues whose authority stems from their active example of collegiality.

There are several ways collegiality may be fostered still more by engaging faculty occasionally in group work, and I am definitely not thinking of the old ploy of setting up ad hoc committees. Obviously a WPA should not create committees whose sole function is to rubberstamp the WPA’s decisions or take over the WPA’s role as bureaucrat. Such committees tend to separate director from colleagues, precisely what I argued earlier can be a real danger, and they may provoke only well-deserved scorn. Although committees have an important function, I am not thinking primarily of committee work when I speak of group work. Among the possibilities open to the WPA are team teaching; cross grading, faculty grading each other’s papers in pairs; and team grading, in which faculty “norm” their values in practice sessions, ETS-style, and then grade papers anonymously in lots. These activities may be undertaken among the teachers of a few sections, or, if successfully received, across the entire department. The rewards to ourselves of such enterprises are obvious.

WPAs as sources of information. My final theme is at once the most challenging and, perhaps, the most difficult for the WPA. As already mentioned, many of the ideas and programs presented at professional meetings may never reach the local campus if WPAs cannot translate the ideas from learned paper to daily practice. But if both spirit and flesh are willing enough to try to make that translation, to succeed in the attempt it is terribly important that WPAs know the strengths of their own departments as well as the perceived identity of the institution as a whole.

Of course, we all feel a sense of the perceived identity of our own institution in relation to other educational institutions. This intuition is often the result of long and sensitive involvement in the institution's affairs at many levels—department, college, university, even town and region. What WPAs are in a position to do for their colleagues is to make this intuition explicit and concrete. WPAs are much more likely than their colleagues to talk with their counterparts at other colleges in the region, to high school and grammar school teachers, to WPAs and professionally active composition teachers throughout the nation. WPAs are more likely to have access to, and familiarity with, their institution's entrance requirements and the statistical breakdown of its registration. And WPAs are more likely to perceive the role of composition in the institution's curriculum as a whole.

It is by making this knowledge available and real to their colleagues as they attempt to explain the newest work in the field that WPAs are most likely to make an impact on their institutions. However pure and theoretical their own research and that of the authors they read and the speakers they hear at conferences, WPAs have to be engineers. They have to make their own thought, and the thought of others, practical, applicable, efficient, and effective at home, in conditions under which they and their colleagues live and work. If WPAs can maintain their familiarity with the best work being done in the profession and at the same time maintain their familiarity with the realities of the local world, they will have a good deal of success, I believe, in guiding their colleagues into exciting and as yet unexplored new territory.