A report on the workshop on the administration of writing programs, summer, 1982

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The Workshop on the Administration of Writing Programs, held August 7 to 15 at Martha's Vineyard, was sponsored by Northeastern University's Summer Seminars in association with WPA. Harvey Wiener (La Guardia Community College) and Tim Donovan (Northeastern University) shared responsibility for the conference program. Unlike most writing conferences, the workshop did not cover such familiar ground as the writing process or theories of language acquisition but focused on program design and evaluation, and administrative problems. Although most of the participants clearly work in the midst of these questions every day, it was fairly obvious from the conference that many of us have not found the time or the way to thematize our daily problems for critical scrutiny. The great value of the workshop was that it allowed participants to isolate key problems of writing program administration and to approach these problems as if they had real-if not simple-solutions.

I have no doubt that Wiener or Donovan, or for that matter, half the WPAs who attended, could easily have run an ace workshop on the writing process or on becoming sensitive to the emerging voices of new writers, but it was clear from the beginning that a workshop specifically for WPAs was a venture into uncharted territories. Although there was a program of activities, Wiener and Donovan had chosen what might be called the Menemsha approach, i.e. , fishing for issues. Much of the unhappiness expressed in the workshop evaluations was that the organizers had refused to specify a few set issues; yet the same evaluations grumbled that we administrators each faced very different sorts of problems. Instead of an agenda of issues, Wiener and Donovan decided on a loosely organized process of discovery.

Participants were asked to prepare a brief description of their schools before the conference. The descriptions provided such administrative information as material on staffing, budget, program structure and rationale, text-selection process, lines of authority, placement procedures, support services, and staff training. Each of the twenty-two of us brought copies to distribute to all the participants on the first day. On day one, then, each of us had sixty pages of close-packed information attempting (**in** our best administrator's prose) to describe the complex of arrangements we call our writing programs. We had learned much in preparing the document about our schools, but we could easily have used two weeks preceding the conference to absorb this material in any useful way. These documents did find one immediate use during the workshop: when we were puzzled or impressed by a participant's remarks, we could review the program description to situate the comments. As it turned out, this was necessary because we were coming from very different institutions with different kinds of programs. The conference attracted WPAs from large universities (Hofstra,

Kent State, Western Michigan), mid-size institutions (Eastern Illinois University, University of South Alabama, James Madison University), smaller colleges (Rhode Island College, Indiana State University-Evansville, Stockton State College), very small colleges (Vermont Technical, Bradford), community colleges (Manhattan, De Anza) and one college in an unusual setting (College of the Virgin Islands). Although some bickering and misunderstanding did result from this diversity, discovering the common ground was fascinating.

This sense of common ground began to emerge on the first day when we met in groups of four to list the three main components of a comprehensive writing program. None of us listed program philosophy (Wiener, directing the session, seemed puzzled, even appalled). W hat emerged instead was a list of concerns that reflect the daily intricacies by which WPAs tend to be ensnared. Foremost on this list was "asserting the place of writing on the campus." This, in most cases, turned out to mean "battling the English departments for support and recognition" and, only in a secondary meaning, to represent a concern for reaching out towards a writing-across-the-curriculum arrangement. The battle with English departments for tenurelpromotionlawardslsupport and for status recognition was not universal but very common. Where it did exist, it was the issue that elicited the most vehement responses, enough to allow one to conclude that, except for those few schools which had a nontraditional departmental structure (Stockton State, for example), this overcharged issue absorbed an immense amount of energy.

One variation of this general concern was expressed as, what I call, the Rumpelstiitskin Effect, i.e., the feeling among many WPAs that we are asked to spin gold out of straw. Specifically, this is the observation that the composition courses, which are the courses that require the most highly developed pedagogy and the fullest awareness of the overall curriculum, are most often taught by the least experienced teachers and those who often have little awareness of the full curriculum and of the institution generally. This concern arose again in a brief debate about adjuncts. Should the position of adjuncts be upgraded-better pay, promise of continued employment, campus benefits and amenities-or should we argue to abolish part-time employment. which in some cases threatens to disband faculties almost entirely in a time of economic exigency?

While there was a deep division on this question, as on the general problem of relations with traditional English department structures, a line of thinking towards solving these and a host of other problems did develop in the workshop. Indeed here as elsewhere-in such problems as integrating writing programs, sequencing the development of writing and reading skills, reinforcing those skills in later years. training faculty to teach, winning respect and support for basic skill programs, developing a comprehensive program and rationale-the solution was always the same: writing across the curriculum.

In some ways, talking about writing across the curriculum as the solution for all our problems is a bit like belonging to a persecuted Protestant sect in seventeenth-century Europe and repeating the word "America." This prayer answers all problems, but the specific plan necessary to set the idea in motion has to be considered in close detail, and in details specific to each campus. Most helpful were the anecdotal accounts of the moves being made towards a writing-across-the-curriculum agreement on different campuses. The University of South Alabama, for example, has been moving ¡n slow stages towards a full sharing of responsibilities for writing instruction. This

process allowed sufficient time to enlist administrative support, secure grants, and arrange for external evaluation. It included a series of faculty training sessions, visits by experts, internal negotiations, data collection, and curriculum revisions. It was important for us WPAs to be reminded that any significant program change requires a marathoner's endurance and the wit and patience of an elder statesman in international affairs.

Other areas of concern were covered with much less success. Pursuing the wide-open style of the conference, Wiener asked selected teams of participants to address topics that he reasonably supposed were within our competence. The topics were placement testing, support services, grants, writing across the curriculum, and program evaluation. However, because these presentations were off-the-cuff, and on topics of very different scope, this part of the conference was weak. When scope and competence were in balance-as with Dennis Gendron's presentation on grants-the result was first-rate. But when scope and competence were off-placement testing, support services-the presentations were tedious. In short, anyone planning future WPA conferences has to anticipate a fairly high level of sophistication among the participants and allow for careful preparation of presentations and materials in advance.

Along with this concern for better planning, I must mention the use of readings. Although a few of the participants entered each discussion by repeating the BAWP credo--"process not product"--most of us were beyond such simple pieties and ready for a harder and more critical look at program philosophy and the practical politics of program administration. Weiner and Donovan chose fourteen brief articles that did address these higher level concerns-most of them were WPA articles of the past three years. Workshop participants would, however, have been far better informed if they had the time to study the articles before arriving and had discussions been more focused **on** them. Most participants agreed that it was impossible to absorb the readings in the midst of the conference and that the workshop leaders did very little to incorporate them. Here, too, the higher level of sophistication among the participants requires more advance work and a tighter agenda of issues.

By far the most frustrating moments in the workshop were the small-group, problem-solving sessions. Distributing case-situation problems to groups and asking for reports to the whole audience seemed sensible. The groups discovered, however, that individual participants were at different levels of experience and, more seriously, represented schools of such different size, level, and curricular pattern that precise problems became absolutely incoherent where we tried to tackle them. There is something to be learned from the differences in outlook and administrative strategy among such different schools. Nevertheless, if the agenda of issues takes no notice of those differences, a WPA conference risks significant failure.

Preparing to write this review I read through the evaluations of the workshop turned in by the twenty-two participants at the end of the conference. As a WPA myself, I have been to my share of workshops and directed some, too; but I have never seen such evaluations as these. Either this workshop was a flop, or WPAs are very different from other folks. Although there were weaknesses in the workshop, I think one of the things I learned in my ten days at Martha's Vineyard is that WPAs are a special breed, a mixture of restless intelligence, impatience, a will to command, and a readiness to think things could be better organized and more productive than by nature things ever are.

Without a doubt, the main value of the conference was the opportunity for twenty-

two isolated, harried, overworked and under-supported, thoughtful, serious, and ambitious WPAs to discover that our problems and notable frustrations were not the product of our particular institutions or our personalities. The tensions between writing programs and English departments, the movement to consolidate support from faculty in other disciplines and from central administration, the general lack of coherent outlook among writing program staff, the difficulty of achieving a comprehensive phi-losophy (both internally, and looking outwards towards the whole curriculum), the need for research and program-development grants, and many more concerns quite simply come with the territory. And, in the phrase that became the guide to wisdom in the conference, *nothing is easy!*

Along with gaining a securer identity as WPAs, participants came away with two other rewards: the beginnings of a network of contacts among the friends made in the week together and enhanced awareness of WPA as an organization that provides helpful information for all of us. If I need an external program evaluation, I now know where to go; if I need a speaker on a special topic, I have some idea whom to ask; if I need specific advice on an administrative tangle, I have some knowledgeable sources for the kinds of information that may never get to print. In summary, I have been to better-run workshops and felt the sweet rush of comraderie they inspire; but I have not been to a conference that was more useful to me than this one. I am hoping for Martha's Vineyard for the next one, but I'd be willing to go to Altoona.