

Freshman English 1984: Politics and Administrative Process

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Freshman English causes administrative grief that runs much deeper than that usually reported. Directors of freshman English spend hundreds of hours each year scheduling and staffing classes, monitoring enrollments, measuring students' progress, and keeping records, as well as developing curricula, training faculty, and evaluating programs. And they spend those hours moving towards changeless deadlines, working in understaffed offices. (See, for example, Leon Coburn's "Notes of a Freshman Comp Director or *Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate*.") But the problems of freshman English cannot be solved by meeting each demand, by responding to each emergency situation. Freshman English has caused composition's misfortune within the academy and disfavor within society. As a result, its problems can be solved only by understanding its history and by giving attention to basic processes of administration.

The size, if not the splendor, of the freshman program explains the early interest English departments showed in composition. Chronicling the growth of English departments, William Riley Parker found no compelling reason why in the late nineteenth century writing should have been annexed to English, except that the funding and faculty positions attached to large numbers of writing classes seemed attractive (347). So annexed it was. Over the years, English departments have never completely forsaken freshman English. Richard Lloyd-Jones has reminded us that even after departments lost their taste for writing courses, practical matters restored their interests: with declining enrollments, English discovered a literacy crisis "in order to get a few new sections" (29). As J. Paul Hunter observed in *Profession 80*, "Writing courses have, beyond debate, saved a lot of English departments from decimation in the past few years, and not a few faculty jobs are directly due to the renewed demand for basic courses in writing" (2).

These comments suggest how often pragmatic, rather than exclusively intellectual, concerns have governed the fate of writing courses. They also confirm that composition has been identified with freshman writing, even though it emerged from a broader, more important discipline: rhetoric. Indeed, we all know too well how writing courses have fared as adopted children of English. Martin Steinmann, Jr., offers this summary judgment: "...departments of English have been teaching

composition for almost a century, Tens of millions of teacher contact hours, tens of millions of student hours, and tens of millions of dollars have been invested in this enterprise. But all, or mostly, for nothing, it is generally agreed. The teaching of freshman composition has been, on the whole, a conspicuous failure. One reason is that we have despised it" (12).

Though it would be flattering to assume that today's writing courses will necessarily succeed where others have failed, the complexities of teaching and evaluating writing warn against such a claim. Steinmann's comment on attitude, however, hits the mark. The relationship between composition and English studies has been at best a delicate balance. English departments have usually shown distaste for composition, distaste which Paula Johnson explains as the result of its "appliedness." She points out that "nearly all research on student writing assumes that the writing must be altered in some way" and that this assumption and purpose "keep English and composition apart" (15). How ironic that English departments should show an extremely pragmatic interest in writing courses, then reject composition for its practical aims.

How ironic, too, that many writing programs today simply reverse that pattern: we deny that composition has exclusively practical aims, and then, as if to prove our point, we fail to take advantage of resources connected with freshman English. We dignify writing as something more than a skill, something intimately connected with cognition, something essential to all levels of a university education. Yet, lacking academic dignity ourselves, we seldom view large numbers of classes and faculty positions as gains. Even though these positions are often part-time or temporary and even though writing programs, like most departments, do not have full budgetary control, freshman English does offer us resources that we should use to advantage. To do so, we will have to develop new approaches to administration. Indeed, we will have to identify the administrative structures, processes, and organizations that can help give freshman English a new role in the academy and society.¹

For freshman English to be transformed and, in turn, to advance composition studies, it needs appropriate administrative shelter. Small wonder that it hasn't prospered under English departments' protection and guidance (often negative sums). Clearly, freshman English needs to be set within an administrative structure that will give it stability, direction, and purpose. It does not, however, have to be completely severed from English. We have the negative example of remedial writing programs that, with their own faculty and administration, have been shunted off from the mainstreams of their colleges and universities. We also have the positive example of interdisciplinary composition boards that exist outside of English departments but tend to draw their chairs and other key members from those departments.

The rhetorical tradition explains what composition has to do with literature and justifies their co-existence within one department, as James Murphy has persuasively argued. The plan he advances would place writing firmly and respectably within English departments once and for all (8-11). (See also the recommendations offered in *Composition and Literature*, edited by Winifred Horner.) In an ideal world, freshman writing could age gracefully, remaining forever freshman English. But for such a plan to work, English departments would themselves have to be dramatically transformed. As an interim or alternative measure, freshman writing might come of age within an administrative unit that has semi-autonomy yet holds some connection with English.

Michigan's English Composition Board (ECB) generally achieves this balance. Though the freshman program remains within the English department, the interdisciplinary ECB helps train freshman instructors and develops course materials. (See Barbra Morris' description of the board in the appendix to *Literary for Life*, edited by Richard Bailey and Robin Melanie Fosheim.) UCLA has designed an alternate model which combines a sub-department of English and an independent office in one administrative unit. That unit takes the name of the office, UCLA Writing Programs, and manages a campuswide writing program. In this arrangement, the freshman writing program has its own director, as well as coordinators of placement and testing, special preparatory programs, and teaching assistants, but it exists within a larger program. Here, freshman writing benefits from the quality and experience of its instructors, its firm administrative support, and its interlocking fit within a comprehensive program.

If the separation from English were to be complete, a writing program might become an autonomous unit or part of a communications program. Though these options would signal independence or new identity within the academic community, they seem largely impractical. First, they would finally separate composition from literary study. Though that union has been unhappy, the association should be modified and improved, not ended. Second, these arrangements could further endanger composition's shaky reputation. For the most part, composition seems a legitimate academic discipline only to those working within the field. Proclaiming independence too early--or joining with communications studies--might weaken rather than strengthen claims of legitimacy. Third, though these moves might be justified as efforts to restore rhetoric to its place of honor, such arguments would not be convincing on many campuses. However, some campuses do accept rhetoric or alliances of rhetoric, language, and literature as viable academic units. If some association with English departments--or literary studies more generally--remains possible, such departments or alliances may be effective.

Working within a structure that confers some independence and yet protects departmental affiliations, program administrators can give new attention to freshman English. In such a setting, the freshman program is elevated to the position of importance it deserves. For decades the academy and the public have identified composition with freshman English-and loathed it. But in a campuswide program, composition becomes larger than freshman English: associated with research, publications, and professional organizations, it becomes a specialization and a shared responsibility. In this context, freshman composition becomes something other than an administrative chore, valued only because it justifies large numbers of faculty positions.

To understand and usefully the resources of a freshman program, we need administrative processes that allow us to merge program review with faculty development. I see, in fact, a three-stage progression toward this goal. In the weekly staff meetings that Wayne Booth has recommended as "A Cheap, Efficient, Challenging, Sure-Fire and Obvious Device for Combatting the Major Scandal in Higher Education Today," faculty development occurs naturally through discussions of a set curriculum. In the coordinating group meetings that Michael Holzman has devised, instructors first gain latitude in determining their own teaching techniques and goals, then create their own peer evaluation system to improve teaching (291-92). In the review process that I advocate, faculty members examine and help reconstruct the entire freshman program in a way that gives them responsibility for its success and that places it at the core of a comprehensive writing program.

A review that was tailored to UCLA shows how a single administrative process can govern both curricular reform and faculty development. On a campus of 33,000 students, the UCLA Writing Programs faculty of 45 lecturers and 40 teaching assistants offers some 360 classes annually. After opening our office, we surveyed campus needs, developed adjunct and graduate courses, began work on computer programs and videotapes, and then, very early in our program's life, turned to freshman English. An 18-month review, involving more than 50 faculty and staff members from our program, the English department, and tutorial programs, led to major changes in the curriculum and administration of the freshman program. These principles governed the review:

1. Freshman writing should become the foundation for a pyramid of writing instruction. A broad, solid base of freshman courses should introduce students to the varieties of academic discourse, upper-division courses should teach them to write for their majors, graduate courses should offer professional training. With our faculty teaching at all levels, the freshman review could influence the entire writing program.

2. No single theory or practice should dominate the program. A survey of composition publications shows a variety of approaches and ideas, but no agreement on a single writing curriculum. Our curriculum should be pedagogically and theoretically sophisticated, its coherence resulting from informed decisions on its structure and purpose, its durability ensured by its capacity for change.
3. Our faculty should shape the curriculum. We had hired a large staff of well-trained and highly motivated professionals, and we had reduced their teaching loads from seven to six courses a year so they could participate in program development. Through this review, they could help design the new freshman program and prepare to teach in it. Those who would make the program a reality-teaching, conferring with students, assigning and reading essays-would thus determine its proper form.

The review was coordinated by a small planning committee representing our faculty and staff, as well as the English department.² After holding open forums for instructors and conducting student surveys, this committee named a dozen sub-committees to review the entire freshman curriculum, to evaluate our testing program and tutorial services, to analyze our upper-division courses in relation to the freshman program, and to propose training and research projects. These subcommittees surveyed instructors, contacted other institutions, and reviewed the relevant literature, then offered their recommendations for change. In a final report, the planning committee outlined the new freshman curriculum and its central administration. Valuing both coherence and creativity, the new director of the freshman program articulated its goals and principles and offered curricular models that our instructors could adapt, balancing or combining theories and pedagogical methods. In this way, we returned to our faculty the results of our joint deliberations so that they could bring the new program into being (Hartzog et al; Rose).

Participatory change, a reorganization from within, lends a program strength and flexibility. In this review, we tried to work not around, but through, the problems of managing large numbers of sections and hiring large numbers of faculty members. We turned not less, but more, of our attention to freshman English and its place within the university. Our lecturers, with experience in program review and curriculum design, have now begun incorporating the best of current composition theory and practice into all their classes. As Donald McQuade has pointed out, temporary faculty deserve clear information on their responsibilities; they need encouragement to study composition theory, research, and

pedagogy; and they need occasion to enter the community of intellectual inquiry (33). Geoffrey Weinman has suggested that the problems of providing qualified part-time instructors and making them feel part of the institution they serve "can be ameliorated, if not solved, by involving them in making decisions important to their professional work and welfare" (24). Such involvement not only serves these faculty members, but also enriches the programs in which they teach.

Housed within a comprehensive writing program and scrupulously reviewed, freshman English can gain new stature, substance and vitality. A carefully designed freshman writing program with an energetic and informed faculty can hold an essential place within a larger writing program and within the full university or college curriculum. Yet the structures and processes I've described will not alone change the fortunes of freshman English. The program director who designs and manages a solid, effective program must also represent it to the rest of the academy and to the public. To do so, the director must enter the intersecting realms of academic politics and public opinion. Work in these areas requires acumen like that displayed in creating a program, but it also calls for broader vision and a different kind of initiative.

If the freshman program is part of a campuswide effort to improve writing, its faculty and administrators regularly cross departmental lines. Establishing a writing program and integrating writing into the curriculum, they gain experience--sometimes painful experience--in academic politics. Yet any tensions that show in faculty discussions of writing will almost inevitably become exaggerated when the subject is freshman writing. The prejudice displayed against composition as an academic discipline, the notion that writing is a simple skill that should have been acquired in high school, uneasiness with students who lack full command of written and spoken English--all revert to freshman English. Because freshman English has caused composition's misfortune and disfavor, anyone advancing the cause of freshman English can expect repercussions.

Let me again work from an example. After we had ambitiously redesigned our freshman program, local academic senate committees, acting on systemwide legislation, turned their attention to the problems of remediation. Because the history of freshman English is always characterized by irony, we shouldn't have been surprised when a faculty committee declared English 1 remedial and removed credit from it. This freshman course, the second in a series of three, had carried two units of baccalaureate credit for five years. Though we had just upgraded the entire freshman sequence and though the revised English 1 might in fact have deserved four units of baccalaureate credit, the course fell into a vortex of excellence and educational reform. To set and maintain standards, to send a message to the high schools, the University of California's

faculty senate had ruled that no remedial course should carry baccalaureate credit. And local and statewide committees acted aggressively on this mandate, even though no one had agreed on a substantive definition of remediation in writing.

The decision to remove credit from English 1, even the legislation behind it, seemed anachronistic, given the reforms in our freshman program and in those on other University of California campuses. Recently, writing program faculty and administrators had been working to develop coherent, closely interrelated sequences of instruction that challenge all students to deal with university-level materials and assignments. At the same time, the academic senate had been preparing to separate remediation from the university curriculum and to reduce remedial offerings. Two problems seem obvious: (1) the lack of agreement on a substantive definition of remediation in writing, much less on an appropriate pedagogy or philosophy to guide the university's actions, and (2) the lack of communication on issues extremely important to both writing programs and the academic senate. As much as those of us directing writing programs felt that we held an informed, reasonable position, based on research and experience, we could not influence senate decisions.

During the past year's debates on these issues, writing program directors within the university have offered one another information and support. At an initial conference on remediation in writing, we invited university administrators and senate leaders to discuss the nature, purpose, and context of current legislation. Then, after tracing the history of the university's remedial programs, we made plans for a system-wide composition network. To meet the challenges posed not just by our students, but by our faculty senate and administration, we have now created a Council of Writing Programs. This council, with 75 charter members, will become a vehicle of communication between campuses and a representative body to work with the senate and administration. As chair of the council, I have already begun meeting with local, systemwide, and intersegmental committees considering such issues as diagnostic testing and university standards in writing.

I see distinct parallels between the formation of this council and the review of UCLA's freshman writing program. To give that program strength and resilience, we accepted its size and ordinary diffuseness, as well as the temporary status of its faculty, and we worked through these features toward change. Now, we're joining together a set of writing programs often staffed and directed by non-senate members, often dismissed from academic deliberations, and we are creating new means of representation. We gave our lecturers academic responsibility; we want now to give our writing programs a voice. In both cases, we're changing our basic stance and involvement in the academy.

Next, we need to reach beyond the academy, for the public is a source of unrest and also the target of our instruction. In the University of California, writing programs feel pressure from the administration and the faculty senate, who are concerned about standards and student preparation; the senate and administration feel pressure from the state legislature, which is worried about paying twice for education in basic skills; the legislature feels pressure from the voting public, which is distressed by the declining quality of education in America today. To reach the public, we need to reverse this line of influence, working with academic senate committees and administrators and with the State Department of Education, the California Postsecondary Education Commission, and individual legislators. We need also to continue collaborating with the schools, the community colleges, and the state universities and colleges. And we need to continue teaching our classes well. To develop influence, we will have to create a presence and demonstrate the success of our programs.

Program administrators have already begun showing initiative like that I've described. Writing programs are working through alliances such as the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors and the Consortium of Ivy League Writing Programs. And the Council of Writing Program Administrators, through its summer workshops, program reviews, conference presentations, and this journal, supports those who design and manage writing programs across the country. Overall, though, writing program administrators have not yet become good politicians; we have not yet argued well. Given the traditions of composition and its place in the academy, Richard Lloyd-Jones mused several years ago, "Clearly we are on the defensive. No wonder... but perhaps defensive measures will just further erode our tight little island. Perhaps we have too much given in to fashion and too little asserted our own view of the world" (29). Only by asserting that view, by coming to influence such things as budget allocations, commission reports, and legislation, can we finally improve the state of freshman English and the status of composition.

Notes

¹A new, dynamic model of program administration will show the influence of Kenneth Burke. The paradox of substance, described in *A Grammar of Motives* (1945; rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), explains how composition can share its substance with "legitimate" English studies, even as it grows toward independence. Further, administration itself is necessarily Burkean, demanding intellectual agility and multiple perspectives. I will develop these ideas more fully in another essay.

²For the success and the spirit of the review, my thanks to those who served with me on the planning committee: Cheryl Bolin, Susan Brienza, Michael Moore, Mike Rose, Patricia Taylor, and Jennifer Wilson. For the quality of the

new program, special thanks to Mike Rose, who, after co-chairing the committee in its last full year, became Director of the Freshman Writing Program.

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