

Editor's Note: The following article is the first in a series of articles by Edward White and Linda Polin which will appear in the *WPA*. Future articles will address numerous issues relevant to writing program administrators: problems and practices of faculty development, patterns of college writing instruction, student perspectives on composition instruction, and the effectiveness of specific features of college composition programs.

## Research on Composition Programs: Faculty Attitudes and Beliefs About the Teaching of Writing<sup>1</sup>

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Our research team has been examining the curious love-hate relationship between college and university English departments and the composition programs they normally contain. Our primary interest is to discover characteristics of effective programs of composition instruction, and, as our first step, we gathered a substantial amount of descriptive information about those who teach in composition programs. This article analyzes a few elements of those descriptive data, focusing particularly on what we have discovered about tenured instructors: what they believe about the students they teach, and the importance of composition research, and the effects of composition instruction itself.

We focus this article on the composition teaching of tenured faculty, since these faculty play an important role in many writing programs—despite the fact that the composition practices of the tenured are usually hidden from view. Interviews conducted in an earlier phase of our research indicate that writing program administrators usually know quite well what is going on in the classes taught by part-time faculty and teaching assistants. But what happens in the classrooms and curricula of the tenured faculty who more or less willingly teach composition is not only unknown but the subject of many dark suspicions. Our research allows us to organize and reflect on what they say they do and what they report their attitudes to be.

The information summarized here originated in individual responses to a questionnaire sent, in early spring 1982, to all those who regularly

teach lower division composition in The California State University.<sup>2</sup> The CSU, with its nineteen campuses, exhibits a diversity in campus size and student population roughly representative of most public and private institutions of higher education in the United States. We therefore believe the data from our sample of faculty will be useful, as well as interesting, to most writing program administrators.

### Who Teaches Composition?

The unusually high return rate for the questionnaire (56%) includes representative portions of tenured, tenure-track, and part-time faculty. These individuals (N = 407) show a reasonable diversity of age groups, despite the general shortage of jobs over the last decade. The largest grouping (33.7% or 137 respondents) is 40-49 years old; 29% are in their thirties, while 21.4% are in their fifties. Fewer than 10% are in their sixties; 6% or so are in their twenties. Since almost 70% of the respondents are 49 or younger, the frequently asserted aging of the collegiate faculty has not occurred (if our sample is typical) in the field of composition.

About 60% of our sample report completion of the Ph.D., and only 8.3% have less than an M.A. Most of the respondents (70%) report American or English literature as their major field of study. The remaining responses are distributed among linguistics, composition, education, and rhetoric (in descending order of popularity). A surprisingly high 14.7% report "other" categories, such as history, sociology, and counseling, a finding that suggests some influence from those urging writing across the disciplines and involvement of non-English faculty in the teaching of composition.

Over half of our instructor-respondents (58.5%) report themselves as tenured or tenure-track. Graduate student assistants (5.4%) and administrators (0.5%) complete the sample. As one might expect, rather more composition teaching is done by the younger staff than by the older staff. For "years teaching writing," faculty responses range from one to 40 years (with a mean of 13.3 years), but over two-thirds of the group report teaching writing sixteen or fewer years. The actual distribution of responses suggests a bimodal sample, with one group of respondents clustered around three or fewer years (generally non-tenure-track instructors) and a second group, the "tenured/tenure-track" faculty clustered around twelve to fifteen years of experience in the teaching of writing.

### A Few Words About This Data Analysis

We constructed the questionnaire in a way that allowed us to avoid relying on responses to any one or even two items to draw conclusions

about faculty attitudes and beliefs. Instead, we devised item sets, each covering a different dimension or facet of a subject area, and we allowed for a wide range of choices along each dimension. In addition, our survey is not a checklist; respondents did not simply give "yes-or-no" answers about whether or not they "do/have/use" something. In every item we required our respondents to answer by assessing "degree" (of use, importance, influence, for example). Thus, our data allow us to see gradations of difference, where they occur.

One of the main sources of information about these differences among faculty attitudes and beliefs is the set of 31 "Likert" items (items which ask for degree of agreement with a given statement) covering a range of topics such as attitudes towards composition instruction, department colleagues teaching composition, students in composition and remedial courses, program and department leadership, and campus policies affecting the writing program.

A second source of information about faculty perspectives is a set of 23 items requiring the faculty respondents to evaluate various influences on the composition program. For each of these influences, such as the department composition committee, the student population, and the available adjunct instructional services on campus, respondents assessed the kind (from positive to negative) and degree (from high to low) of impact these influences had on composition instruction.

Most of our information on instructional practices comes from six sets of questions asking instructors about what they do in class: the themes underlying the organization and sequence of instruction, the importance of various composition materials to the instruction, the frequency of certain composition activities in the classroom, the classroom arrangement, the frequency of particular kinds of writing assignments, and their usual responses to student writing.

We used answers to these and other items to develop two different factor analyses, a statistical procedure which examines patterns of responses to find a common set of items in those patterns. Where a common item grouping is found, the items are said to form a "factor," a hypothetical trait which underlies and "accounts for" the apparent clustering of those items. A factor (to which the researchers then affix a descriptive name) can then be used to generate a "score" which summarizes the particular pattern of answers given by any one respondent. This "score" describes the respondent in terms of the factor, for example, "high" on the "Bah Humbug" attitude factor.

Since we measured dimensions of the same subject area, such as attitudes toward composition course work or preferred instructional approach, we expected to find factors which grouped questionnaire items relating to those subject areas. We did, in fact, derive a substantial

number of instructional and attitudinal factors (13) from responses to our 12 page questionnaire. When we refer to a factor which describes "Level of Commitment," for example, we know we are discussing responses to items that many people see as related.

Although our 13 factors provide a wealth of information about our faculty, we will discuss in this article only some of that information so that we may expand our descriptions and consider implications rather than briefly list summary findings.

### Attitudes and Beliefs

*Bah Humbug.* Table 1 displays the questionnaire items which comprise this factor. These seven Likert items have a strong "anti-composition" bent to them, and for this reason (perhaps too whimsically) we call this the "Bah Humbug" factor. Faculty in our sample demonstrate a consistent pattern of responses to these items whether positive or negative. That is, those people who feel that tenured and tenure-track faculty do not need review or coordination of their instruction are also those who avoid faculty development and undergraduate writing courses; they also oppose remedial writing at the college level, see "writing as process" as one more passing fad, and (as one might expect) do not feel that their students improve very much as a result of a single writing course. The validity of this grouping of items also holds for those faculty respondents who reject these attitudes; they too demonstrate a pattern of answers to items in this factor, though, of course their pattern goes in the opposite direction.

TABLE 1. Items comprising the Bah Humbug factor.

Likert Items: (1 = strongly agree; 4 = strongly disagree; 9 = unsure)

Generally speaking, in this department tenured and tenure-track instructors do not need review or coordination of their writing instruction.

I am not likely to attend meetings designed to improve my writing instruction, e.g., faculty development or "retraining" sessions.

Had I the choice, I would never teach undergraduate writing courses.

Students who are not prepared to do college-level writing should not be admitted to this campus.

College resources should not support remedial programs in writing.

Much of what I've heard about "writing as process" strikes me as yet another fad in the field of composition instruction.

In every composition course I've taught here, I've finally had to admit to myself that most students do not improve their writing very much by the end of a single school term.

We have generated "factor scores" for each factor for each person responding to our questionnaire. Using these factor scores we looked for characteristics that differentiate between people with "higher" and "lower" scores on the Bah Humbug factor. Using the statistical tool of analysis of variance, we tested for and found these differences depending on whether faculty report themselves as part- and full-time lecturers or tenured and tenure-track faculty ( $p = .01$ ). (Table 2 also contains tabled ANOVA statistics for this factor.) When we look at the average scores of each status grouping, it is clear that the lecturers generally demonstrate the more positive attitude, i.e., reject the Likert statements that make up the factor, thus yielding a "negative" average ( $\bar{X} = -.11$ ); while the regular faculty generally tended to be the ones who agreed with the "anti-composition" sentiments expressed in those same statements, thus yielding a positive mean score ( $\bar{X} = +.07$ ).<sup>3</sup>

A future article in this journal will return to the "Bah Humbug" factor in relation to student performance, when that information becomes available. While we expect that students will show greater improvement in their writing if they have teachers with low Bah Humbug scores, we may turn out to be mistaken; perhaps the students of our composition cynics will perform as well as the informed enthusiasts.

TABLE 2. Analysis of variance on Bah Humbug factor scores.

Source variable	df	Sum of squares	F value
Main Effects			
Faculty rank	1	3.63	6.60*
Course referent	2	2.19	1.99
Campus	18	8.73	.88
Two-way Interaction Effects			
Rank x Referent	2	.63	.57
Rank x Campus	18	5.40	.55
Referent x Campus	31	13.35	.78
Three-way Interaction Effects			
Rank x Referent x Campus	15	3.60	.44

\* $p = .01$ ; (N = 418)

If our outcome measures (which include both a student writing sample and a student attitude survey) show that these differences in instructor attitudes do not affect either holistic or primary trait scores of students' essay performance, we may nonetheless find impact elsewhere, for example, in student attitudes towards writing or in overall faculty morale. If student performance does correlate with the Bah Humbug scores, and education research suggests it should, writing program

administrators will have powerful reasons to attempt to foster changes in their programs and their faculty to lower scores.

### Level of Commitment

Our factor analysis procedure uncovered a second factor seemingly related to the Bah Humbug factor. We refer to this second factor as "Level of Commitment" because so many of the Likert items that it subsumes describe the level of instructor effort and interest in planning for and teaching composition courses. The actual questionnaire items are listed on Table 3.

In addition to the Likert attitudinal items, two items from the instructional goals section of the questionnaire are part of the pattern of responses described by this factor. Those two instructional goals are "teaching editing skills" and "teaching invention skills." The grouping of these two goals seems counterintuitive; editing skills (as opposed to "revising skills," which was also a goal choice) seems focused upon the finished product of writing, whereas "invention skills" seems focused

TABLE 3. Items comprising level of Commitment factor.

Likert Items: (1 = strongly agree; 4 = strongly disagree; 9 = unsure)

My responsibilities in composition instruction require more preparation and "home-work" on my part than do my other teaching responsibilities.

I have tried out some of the new ideas about teaching composition suggested to me by my colleagues.

Student evaluations of my instruction in composition should be a part of my record for promotion or retention.

Concern about students' feelings about writing is a legitimate component of my instructional responsibilities in teaching composition.

I have a fairly good sense of what is going on in other composition classes in the English Department.

Themes underlying the organization and sequence of your writing class instruction: (1 = very important; 4 = not important at all; 9 = not applicable)

teaching editing skills

teaching invention skills, such as planning, prewriting, clustering, heuristics.

upon the process of writing, as articulated in newer composition research and theory. As it turns out, these goals are not endorsed by the same set of people. The factor describes two different groups of respondents.

Though both groups tend to answer the Likerts in the same manner, one group is made up largely of composition instructors who value "teaching invention skills;" and the other group basically consists of remedial writing instructors who value "teaching editing skills." This difference in responses between remedial and composition course instructors arises only for the instructional goal statements. Response patterns for the five Likert items which comprise the main thrust of the factor do not differ in this way.

As with the Bah Humbug factor, we generated individual scores on this Level of Commitment factor. We used those scores in carrying out analysis of variance to determine if particular kinds of group characteristics distinguished between higher and lower scores on the factor. We found that, unlike the Bah Humbug factor, instructor status does not account for statistically significant differences in scores; nor does it matter whether the respondents were referencing their regular or remedial teaching assignments. The one grouping characteristic that does result in significant differences in factor scores is "campus." This probably reflects an important underlying difference between the two factors. Level of Commitment is primarily composed of Likert items which describe composition instruction as a workload issue related to collegiality; Bah Humbug presents composition as a scholarly field of study with important effects upon students, eliciting much more personal reactions. Thus, the Level of Commitment factor seems to relate to faculty morale, which, in turn, seems to vary widely from campus to campus. And, despite such similarities across CSU campuses as teaching load and salary structure, the differences by campus turn to be very substantial.

The overall average score on this factor, across all nineteen campuses, is .06, and the range of scores runs from a low of -.26 to a high of +.60. The .60 score is an extreme one; the next closest positive campus score is .27. We of course can not disclose which campuses have the higher or lower scores on Level of Commitment. But we do expect to be able to summarize the campus program characteristics which are associated with high and low scores, and we do expect that numbers of these characteristics will be susceptible to change. Should high scores on this factor be associated with positive outcome measures, this factor will provide some suggestions for program change and some evidence for writing program administrators seeking resources or other support in implementing such change.

The excitement of the research so far has been the statistical identification of coherent sets of attitudes such as those we have described in this article and the prospect of knowledge beyond anecdote or merely personal experience as to their origins and locations. We have also identified six general approaches to composition instruction now in use by our

**TABLE 4.** Analysis of variance on Level of Commitment factor scores.

Source variable	df	Sum of squares	F value
<b>Main Effects</b>			
Faculty rank	1	.09	.22
Course referent	2	1.18	1.49
Campus	18	11.89	1.67*
<b>Two-way Interaction Effects</b>			
Rank × Referent	2	.12	.15
Rank × Campus	18	6.70	.94
Referent × Campus	31	9.00	.75
<b>Three-way Interaction Effects</b>			
Rank × Referent × Campus	15	6.36	1.07

\*p = .05; (N = 418)

sample of faculty, each approach expressing a different underlying theory of instruction and a different sense of purpose for college writing. Our intention is to develop patterns of composition program features and to associate these patterns with differences in faculty and student outcomes. Thus, the most interesting part of our study still lies ahead: discovering the program features which are most effective for different kinds of students and faculty in different settings. We will be reporting on these matters in subsequent articles.

Our intention is to make our findings available and accessible to writing program administrators, who are in an unusually good position to bring about change. Our interviews have shown that most writing programs have evolved in a more or less accidental manner and that there is a pervasive interest in discovering different and more successful ways of organizing writing instruction. As this article has shown, there are sharp and definable differences in faculty attitudes and beliefs about the teaching of writing, differences we expect to correlate with student performance. These differences are likely to occur among those teaching writing at most colleges and universities and to relate to program decisions made some time ago, perhaps at some distance from the composition program. Writing program administrators will, we hope, use our findings to understand the attitudes and beliefs of their composition staff and pursue ways of bringing about positive changes.

## Notes

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necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the NIE. A two-volume report on the first phase of the research (including the questionnaire and much of the data used here) has been entered in ERIC and should be available by the time this article appears.

Other members of the research team are Ron Basich, The California State University Chancellor's Office, Office of Analytical Studies, and four English department faculty from four different campuses of The California State University: Kim Flachmann (Bakersfield), Charles Moore (Sacramento), David Rankin (Dominguez Hills), William Stryker (Northridge).

<sup>2</sup>A separate version of the questionnaire was prepared for those involved with writing instruction in learning centers, specially-funded programs, or non-English department programs. The data from that form were analyzed separately and are not discussed here.

<sup>3</sup>These means were derived from standardized, not raw, factor scores.

