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Speaking Frankly: Writing Program Administrators Look at Instructional Goals and Faculty Retraining[1]

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This is the third in a series of articles reporting results of a four-and-a-half year study of college composition programs, funded by the National Institute of Education. The two earlier articles presented findings from our detailed questionnaire, sent to all writing instruction faculty on the nineteen campuses of the California State University (CSU). That questionnaire was developed in part from analysis of 57 face-to-face interviews conducted with a variety of administrators on ten of the nineteen campuses. (Copies of the six interview protocols we developed may be found in the appendix to our Phase I report, available from ERIC as document number ED 239-293.)

In this article we will concentrate upon the interview responses we received from English department chairs, composition program coordinators, and remedial instruction coordinators. We focus on what these writing program administrators have to say about two key issues: program goals and faculty retraining. The two issues are linked in many ways, but we feature them here because they were the most prominent issues in our interviews and because our findings turned out to be both surprising and interesting.

Our research is studying every aspect of composition programs, with particular attention to the issues which writing program administrators can affect directly. Thus, we are interested in the nature of decision-making with regard to curriculum, instructional methods, and teacher assignment and evaluation. Our findings in relation to curriculum cohesion and faculty development, some of which we present here, ought to be generally useful to administrators concerned about ways of supporting effective activities in both of the areas.

The Sample

In the winter of 1981 we interviewed 57 people on ten of the nineteen campuses of the CSU. We selected campuses to include different enrollment sizes, geographic settings, and student populations (high and low minority enrollments, higher and lower proportions of students admitted under such special status as that given for weak academic preparation). The interview campuses, which include two polytechnic

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institutions, not only represent the massive CSU system, but are roughly representative of American higher education.

Two of the ten interviewed campuses have fully developed writing programs operating outside the English department. In both instances, the non-English department program directors coordinate courses and instructors much the way their English department counterparts do. We believe it is important to include these programs in our analyses and to maintain their distinction from the English department program.

A Few Words About Turning Interviews into Data Analysis

All interviews were taped (though interviewees were free to request the tape be turned off for "off the record" comments). Transcripts of the tapes were the basis of the analysis. Passages of the transcripts were numbered using an arbitrary but constant size rule based upon turn-taking in the interview conversation. We then coded each numbered passage to indicate the main topic (or topics) discussed in that passage. Two readers coded each interview transcript to control the reliability of coder interpretations, and no one coded an interview that he or she had conducted.

Based upon a frequency count of topic code numbers, we were able to determine for which topics we had the most, and most diverse (different campuses or levels of administration) information. In this way, we identified five topics for first priority analysis. Our next step was to read through the coded sections of interview on each topic to get a feel for the range or variety in responses. Readers took notes from the interviews to support their perceptions of the categories for each topic. In group meetings, we first agreed upon a descriptor for each topic area, and then, aided by notes and excerpts from the transcripts, the group worked out categories distinguishing among programs within that descriptor. This sometimes resulted in redefinition of categories. Sometimes we found topics with only two mutually exclusive subcategories; sometimes topics generated four or more subcategories. Following agreement on the topical analysis of the interviews, we wrote drafts explicating these analyses and offering quotations in support of analysis conclusions. These "vignettes" were circulated among the group.

For this report to be meaningful, we need to report the location of campus writing programs in the identified subcategories of each topic. However, since it is the typicality of the campuses and the responses that we want to stress, rather than the particular identity of each, we have disguised campus identities with letter codes: A to J. We want to be careful not to imply that these analyses are based upon and yield facts about these campus programs. They do not. They are the perceptions and personal beliefs of the interviewees, and our analyses yield impressions of how the world works on each campus. Our analysis in this article

identifies perceived patterns of composition program features; it does not compare or rank individual campuses. Non-English department composition programs are identified by the extension letter "B" parenthetically affixed to the campus letter code, for example, program J(B).

Scope and Focus of Program Goals

We specifically asked composition program coordinators to describe the program goals and philosophy underlying freshman and remedial composition courses. We had two reasons for asking this question. First, we wondered to what extent newer composition theory had become "institutionalized," that is, formally adopted by English departments. Second, we wondered whether we would find much variety among English department composition programs, and we expected our goals and philosophy questions might reveal grounds for different program choices.

What we found instead was very little formal description of any sort. With a few exceptions (usually in relation to remedial programs), those coordinators who were able to articulate some programmatic goals tended to describe instructional activities or course content rather than intended growth or change in students or faculty. That is, when asked about program goals and philosophy, they chose to speak about carrying out a curriculum rather than about aiming at particular outcomes from that curriculum. There are, of course, many reasons why writing program administrators find it difficult to speak of program goals (for example, goals may be seen in terms of individual students with widely varying abilities rather than in terms of programs), but it is nonetheless worthy of notice that most such administrators do not tend to think of the desired outcomes of their regular programs.

As a result of this tendency, we found it most appropriate to analyze interview data from this question in terms of the scope of the planned curriculum, that is, the degree to which program planning affects both remedial and regular composition teaching. We identified three categories describing differences in the breadth and focus of curriculum statements. Our shorthand labels for these categories are "laissez-faire," "remedial only," and "regular and remedial." The first category, "laissez-faire," describes programs with no formal guidelines for curriculum and little evidence of administrative influence over the coursework of individual instructors. The second and third categories describe programs that differ in terms of the extent of their "programmatic" influence.

Laissez-faire

While all twelve composition coordinators interviewed report the existence of guidelines or course descriptions, some admit they have not seen or distributed a copy in years, while others produce hundred-page

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documents and describe instructor training. At the one extreme, we labeled as "laissez-faire" those campus programs in which course guidelines are "available" if someone asks, but where there is no active attempt to ensure widespread adoption of or adherence to these guidelines. In short, these programs have a very limited "programmatic" nature and leave a good deal of their domain uncharted.

Three programs are identified as laissez-faire: F, H, and I. Programs F and H are large, urban campuses, known to make extensive use of part-time instructors (50% or more of the department staff). Program I is a mid-sized polytechnical school. To demonstrate our laissez-faire definition, we offer the following exchanges between the interviewer (INT) and the composition coordinators for programs F and H (COMP-F, COMP-H).

> **COMP-F**...the diversity of the 100 sections, it's hard to... There is [a goals/philosophy statement] in our statement about the course, that it's a course in expository writing, if that's a philosophy. I guess it can be answered in two different ways: Among the 100 plus sections, no; in theory, yes. There is our statement which says clearly it's a course in expository writing not in literary analysis. That students will write. But it can't be taken for granted that in every section they write...[that] the papers will be responded to and students will have an opportunity to respond to the response, to write to show that they have learned. What we're trying to impress on everybody, that this is a writing process... . Certainly the most coherent theory probably exists among the TAs because they've all been through my class...that's true for maybe a third of [the sections]. The faculty, I don't know really what happens in faculty sections. I never see their evaluations. I've been in one faculty member's writing class on his request. I hear rumors from some others, but I don't really know what happens.

> **COMP-H:** The history of the composition program here is that we used to be a department of literature that taught some composition and I think now it would be more accurate to say we are a department of composition that teaches some literature. Certainly that's true in terms of our FTE.... The only guidelines that have existed have been rather general and perfunctory descriptions of the courses that appear in the university catalogue. But I suspect that most faculty members have not even looked at those.

The remarks of the nine other composition coordinators indicate they have more actively and successfully established a cohesive program of instruction. The main distinction between these more organized programs is a characteristic that might best be called "scope" or "breadth" of the formal curriculum: the degree of planned articulation between remedial and regular composition, and the focus on student gains. Six of these coordinators refer in their comments to both levels of composition coursework; three others refer only to their remedial composition program.

Remedial Only

For three composition programs, the focus of their formal curriculum is restricted to their remedial composition program (J, E, and C). One of these programs is located on a polytechnic college campus, one on a large suburban campus, and one on a large urban campus. The common feature among these programs is the absence of a cohesive freshman composition program despite the presence of an organized and structured remedial writing program. As one might expect under such circumstances, two of the three programs have separate "remedial coordinators" whose job it is to organize the remedial coursework and instructional staff (J and C).

When asked about the regular composition program, the freshman composition coordinators sound very much like their laissez-faire colleagues. Though they do talk about the desireability of organizing the freshman composition program, they also report their "authority" extends almost exclusively to the part-time lecturers and graduate teaching assistants.

Methods of Program Cohesion. Program E's composition coordinator reports a uniform midterm in all remedial classes, a single common textbook, a required training course for instructors, a planned sequential curriculum, and specific performance expectations for students. Program J's remedial coordinator also mentions common exams, texts, course guidelines, and agreement upon instructional methods. With the exception of common exams, program C's remedial coordinator reports the same devices for ensuring a cohesive program. The interview comments of Program E's composition coordinator are typical:

> **COMP-E:** There is a very specific set of goals for [the remedial course]. At the end of the first half of the semester we want the students to be able to proof-read their own writing accurately. The theory behind that is these very, very inexperienced writers literally do not see what they have written. They see only what they meant to write. And so we...(monologue continues for 1½ single-spaced pages of transcription.)

> **INT:** These are taught by part-timers?

> **COMP-E:** Yes, exclusively.

It is important to note here, that in addition to articulating a remedial curriculum, these coordinators describe student outcomes. In fact, we discovered from our transcript analyses that specific prescriptions for student growth in writing skill exist for remedial coursework only, that when coordinators talk about regular freshman composition many of them are vague about student gains and others do not describe student gains at all. The coordinators of these three programs make it clear that their success with establishing a cohesive remedial program is due in

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large part to the fact that most remedial courses are taught by part- and full-time lecturers or graduate assistants. Each coordinator remarks upon his or her lack of specific knowledge of or power over the regular faculty. However, this in and of itself cannot explain the lack of a programmatic structure in the composition coursework.

We have speculated that goals for student achievement or growth from remedial instruction may simply be more easily described and measured than are those for freshman composition. Further, the need to describe and measure "exit" requirements for remedial instruction is greater than the need to do so for freshman composition.

Regular and Remedial Composition

Coordinators of the six remaining writing programs describe programmatic features that provide for some measure of cohesion among instructors in both remedial and regular composition. The six programs are D, G, J(B), Q, Q(B), and S. Perhaps it is no coincidence that four of these six programs are found on smaller, suburban campuses, and that the fifth, although located on a large campus, actually represents two small programs housed outside of the English department (one in the Chicano Studies department, one in the Pan-African Studies department). It is apparently more difficult to structure and enforce a particular program with a large faculty than with a small one. Only one of these six programs is located in the English department of a large, urban campus.

This exception to our size hypothesis (program D) divides control of its writing program between the English department composition coordinator and the Writing Lab director, who doubles as the remedial coordinator. The two coordinators articulate clear goals for their students and specific philosophies of instruction which are translated into instructional strategies.

The two ethnic studies department programs are small, run by one person, and staffed primarily by part-timers or non-tenure track full-time lecturers. This seems to support our observation, above, that the coordinator's ability to establish and maintain a cohesive program may be largely dependent upon the status of the faculty teaching courses in the program.

Methods of Program Cohesion. Again, common exams, textbook lists, and sample syllabuses offer some measures of cohesion among remedial and regular freshman composition. However, we also find mention of faculty "retraining" efforts in the comments from these composition coordinators. These coordinators seem more willing to deal with the issue of influence over tenured and tenure-track faculty teaching in the freshman composition program.

It thus seems as if the question of goals for freshman composition courses is a very complicated matter, connected directly to the basic sense of "program" at the institution. One of the first studies of collegiate composition programs, Albert Kitzhaber's *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College* (1963), centered on the dispute over such goals, in a narrow sense. What he then called "therapy" is now widely accepted, and rather readily defined, in remedial composition programs. What he wisely called "theories" remains a welter of conflicting procedures and aims, embodied in hundreds of textbooks and generally uncoordinated classes of regular freshman composition. The smaller the size of the staff and the lower their status, the more readily they can be affected by composition program decisions, such as a definition of goals. As composition staffs increase in size, and as more and more tenured or tenure-track faculty participate, the role of the writing program administrator changes. Under these conditions, goals statements seem to link directly with considerations of faculty development and the very concept of goals expands beyond student performance into faculty performance and even to campus climate.

Faculty Retraining

We have noted the distinction made by most of the writing program administrators we interviewed between knowledge of (and influence upon) what is done in class by the tenured as opposed to the part-time faculty. In earlier articles we reported the reluctance and even adamant refusal of some tenured and tenure-track faculty to participate in lower-division writing class instruction. As everyone knows, the teaching of writing, particularly at the lower-division or remedial level, remains a low-status activity in most English departments, generally delegated to the least experienced and lowest paid members of the staff. Nonetheless, for various reasons (such as declining enrollments in literature courses), more and more of the senior and tenured staff at many institutions have become involved in the teaching of writing during the last decade. Ironically, because of the recent burgeoning interest in writing instruction as a legitimate field of study, many part-time instructors who are new graduates may be better informed about writing theory than their more prestigious colleagues, and may even have been trained in teaching writing.

For these reasons, we were very interested in the ways writing program administrators attempted to extend their influence over the full-time, tenured and tenure-track faculty teaching writing. Our composition coordinators use the phrase "faculty retraining" or "faculty development" to refer to an entire range of activities whose goal it is to help ease the transition for the literature-trained faculty who must now function as writing course instructors. From our interviews we find that

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these activities can be as marginal as circulating a research article or as vigorous as requiring a completion of a graduate course in composition theory.

Further our analyses indicate that faculty retraining is one element of the writing program administrator's job that our interviewees consciously decided either to accept or ignore. Most of those we interviewed chose to take on the challenge as an important, if frustrating, aspect of their work, an obligation with implications for many other parts of the job. Among the comments of those coordinators who report attempts at retraining activities, we find persistent statements of frustration and limited success, but also one rather surprisingly hopeful note.

Six of the twelve coordinators interviewed take a very active role in retraining faculty: E, J, J(B), I, Q(B), and S. Coordinators for programs E and Q(B) require faculty to complete a graduate course on writing before they may teach in the composition program. The Program E coordinator teaches this course as part of a Masters degree program in composition offered by the English department. The Q(B) program relies on a course for non-English department faculty teaching in the interdisciplinary department where the Q(B) writing program is housed. While these "requirements" may ensure greater compliance or success in reaching those full-time faculty who will be teaching in the composition program, no doubt they also serve to discourage faculty from volunteering to teach writing.

The other four program coordinators are considerably less formal in their approach. These program coordinators run loosely organized social gatherings in which composition is the formal topic for discussion. However, these coordinators describe their difficulties in drawing tenured and tenure-track faculty into these activities. Success appears to be largely affected by the level of energy and commitment on the part of the coordinator. Those who are more successful in drawing their faculty tend to have consistent, systematic offerings. They also clearly put substantial time, effort, and, sometimes, personal cash into the organization of the activity.

> **ENGL-I:** We have an informal luncheon meeting called "comp. meetings" held perhaps once every six weeks, in which we, as a faculty, are to read an article and discuss it. Or have an individual faculty member come and discuss an article on which he may be working, on composition, or which he has read and wishes to use as focal point for an hour, an hour and a half discussion.
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> **INT:** Are those well attended?
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> **ENGL:** I'd say we have perhaps eight to ten faculty. Often the people who attend the meeting and are the most interested are also those who know the most about it, and those who need it the most are nowhere to be seen. They were better attended at first and it really depends on the person who's got the energy to do the paper work and recruiting.

> **COMP-J(B):** It is usually a Saturday workhsop or something in someone's home. And it is casual and we have pie and coffee. But sometimes some very good suggestions come out of that. Everyone brings his or her favorite essay or project or whatever. We exchange a lot of ideas. ...quite often they are at my house and I provide a little dinner party or some hors d'oeuvres or something. How are you going to get people there otherwise? You can't pay them. You have to have some sort of a carrot.
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> **INT:** And do they respond to this carrot?
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> **COMP:** Most of them show up.

> **COMP-S:** And the [full-time faculty], they take the time to say I'd really like to come to that [meeting] but I can't. And I think part of it is that conflict in their souls between composition and literature. They say, 'Look, I'm going to give just so much time a week to composition. I believe in it—teaching [it] is an important thing, but I'm not going to that discussion session. It's too much of my time.' So it's a really interesting paradox, and yet the interest is there. Oh, they'd love to know in two seconds what happened at that discussion session. But they don't want to take that hour and a half.

For the most part, the more successful formal faculty development efforts use one of two approaches: 1) mandatory, enforced prerequisite coursework in composition before assignment to teach composition, and 2) socially contexted "meetings" which are not overtly designated as "faculty development" meetings, but for which composition topics and materials are prepared in advance. It is important to note that the two programs with prerequisite coursework are on campuses with graduate Masters programs in composition, and that the required course is one of the core seminar courses in the Masters degree program. Relatively few campuses have such degree programs to draw upon. Further, in our interview sample, the "socially contexted" approach to retraining arises in the smaller composition programs. In such settings most faculty members know each other well and may feel that the socially positive aspects of the session compensate for the labor of the learning that goes on. Personal closeness may overcome the traditional professional distance. In addition, on a smaller campus it may be harder to escape meetings unnoticed.

It does seem clear that direct efforts to solve the problem of faculty retraining in composition are largely unsuccessful in drawing the tenured and tenure-track professors. It is not hard to figure out a key source of this resistance: until recently, composition instruction was a "service" performed by the English department for the benefit of the campus and the English department's own graduate students who were employed to teach the course. In short, it has traditionally been a task without academic recognition or reward. As every writing program administrator knows, influential faculty in most English departments continue to deny that composition is a field of study, or, in any event, that it is a field about which they have anything to learn.

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Though it sounds like a losing battle, faculty development for regular faculty need not be; we have discovered a very simple event that succeeds in drawing all writing instructors and getting them to interact on the subject of composition instruction. An important additional benefit accrues to this event: establishing some comparability in instructional goals across classes taught by these different faculty members. This successful process is simply group scoring of student essays written to a common topic. These occasions arise on several levels: system-wide for the scoring of placement test writing samples, campus-wide for the scoring of essay exams certifying students' writing competence for graduation, and of course, in the department for common exams across sections of a course.

Those coordinators heading programs in which common essay assignments are given talk about the positive "side effects" of a process which entails gathering faculty members together to select and word the essay topic, develop the scoring guide, and read and score papers. Among the benefits they describe are the opportunity for interaction between tenured and tenure-track faculty and adjunct or part-time lecturers, discussion of composition theory, and sharing of instructional methods. They also describe reports of change in class instruction, such as an increase in assignment of in-class writing.

Consider the long excerpt below from our interview with the composition coordinator for the program on campus D. The first set of remarks describe his largely unsuccessful efforts to draw full-time faculty to retraining sessions on composition. The second set of remarks address a question about his knowledge of what goes on in the classrooms of his composition instructors. Earlier in the interview this same coordinator reports repeated frustration from his failures in faculty development.

> **COMP-D:** When I first started [here], we did that constantly....where we would beg people to come, browbeat them, invite them, plead with them, bribe them with wine and cheese, and do everything we could to get them to come and listen to some of our best people talk about everything from grading techniques to massive theories of composition....
>
> **COMP-D:** The [common] final exam allows a great deal of [influence on full-time faculty] to occur. The common final exam, not just for being able to go back over and work with the statistics and the calculator, but the committee work that comes prior to that, working with people and setting up the topics, talking about the theory of composition. They bring in topics, possible topics. You learn something about it; you make comments and make an effect on people and vice versa: 'You can't make students write on that.' Also, the [exam] reading sessions, where you spend a whole day with all your composition staff, at every level [lecturer to tenured]. They're talking about composition; that's the focus. And prior to that, everybody went his own separate way and you never really knew what was going on.... There's an example of how you can affect your individuals, including brand new part-time people, on the basis of something like a [common] final exam. We have a prewriting segment built in to the final exam where students may not write in their blue books for half an hour. People who may never have heard of prewriting before, it's hard to believe nowadays, we inform them in the beginning of the semester what the exam is all about.

Summary and Conclusions

This article describes data on two of several issues uncovered by our interview analyses. These two issues, composition program goals and faculty retraining, are among our most intriguing because findings were not what we expected.

We did not find many instances of composition program goals or theoretical perspectives on writing instruction describing expected student gains in writing skills, knowledge about the writing process, or attitude toward writing. On some campuses, we find descriptions, goals, and activities for remedial coursework, most often defined in terms of the students' ability to profit from regular composition course instruction (a sort of "readiness" goal). But we did not find any statements of goals for the students in regular composition courses.

The practice of college-level composition programs seems to argue against the statement of fully articulated goals for students in freshman and remedial writing courses. Perhaps we ought to have looked for such goals as successful "consciousness raising," for English department faculty as well as for faculty in other departments. When we re-examine our own data in this light, we find that this approach reveals curious, even useful findings. In the CSU, that "consciousness raising" is being spurred by a strong incentive, an upper-division writing competency requirement for graduation. We have found evidence that the way in which a campus (and English department) deals with that requirement reflects both the programmatic nature of its lower-division writing courses and the relative interest and knowledge on the part of English and non-English faculty. We even have some evidence that student writing performance at the freshman level has a relation to the way the campus as a whole deals with this kind of graduation writing requirement.

The second issue we discussed in this article focuses upon the writing faculty themselves and efforts to "retrain" literature professors for their secondary role as writing instructors. Throughout our data analyses (in this and our previous two articles in this series), we found distinctions between part-time, contract instructors or lecturers and regular tenured or tenure-track faculty. In comments by our interviewees and in questionnaire responses from the instructors themselves we find this distinction holds up. But the meaning of this distinction is far more complex and difficult to understand than we expected.

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We also detect a strong, if as yet undemonstrated, assumption that tenured faculty know less about the teaching of writing than do newer faculty because they tend to know less about new writing theory. And, we find corollary assumptions, such as that tenured faculty are less competent writing instructors, that they need "re-training," that they need to be monitored or evaluated. At the same time, we find inequities in the opportunities for part-timers to participate in program decision-making. We find real limits to the extent of writing program administrators' authority and power of persuasion over regular faculty. We find few assurances and little use of mechanisms for assuring a common core of curriculum and instructional methods for composition courses. It appears that the staffing of composition courses greatly affects the likelihood of establishing and maintaining that elusive "program" of instruction we have been seeking.

Our data indicate that formal attempts to unify part-time and tenured instructors do not succeed. However, we have found that common essay exams offer several such opportunities to involve all writing course instructors in discussion through preparing the essay topic, setting criteria, and scoring papers.

Notes

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