

Affiliate News

"Writing and Undergraduate Education": A Report on the First Annual NEWPA Fall Meeting

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New England Writing Program Administrators (NEWPA) held its first annual fall meeting "Writing and Undergraduate Education" on October 4 and 5, 1985, at Harvard University hosted by the Expository Writing Program. Eighty participants, veteran WPAs to graduate students, came from private and state universities; liberal arts, state, and community colleges; and high schools in New England and upstate New York to talk about the theory and design of campus-wide writing programs.

NEWPA is an outgrowth of the Mass Bay Association of WPAs, an organization founded a decade ago by Harry Crosby (Boston University) and Timothy R. Donovan (Northeastern University). Last spring, representatives of the Mass Bay Association of WPAs and WPAs from New England and upstate New York met at Harvard's Expository Writing Program office to discuss the need for a regional organization and to shape the format for the first fall meeting.

The conference opened with a wine and cheese reception co-sponsored by the national Council of Writing Program Administrators. Later, at dinner in the Harvard Faculty Club, NEWPA honored Harry Crosby for his years of service to our profession, a timely occasion that marked his retirement as Chair of the Rhetoric Division at the College of Basic Studies at Boston University and his reactivation as Director of the Writing Center at Harvard. Program Chair John Trimbur (Boston University) read greetings from Winifred Bryan Horner, President of the Council of WPAs, and at the final plenary session on Saturday, NEWPA members voted to affiliate with the national WPA.

Conference organizers—John Trimbur, Toby Fulwiler (University of Vermont), Tori Haring-Smith (Brown University), and NEWPA President Ben W. McClelland (Rhode Island College)—planned a series of events that involved participants actively in small group discussions and workshops. There were no major speakers, no call for papers, no formal presentations which would cast conference participants in the role of spectators. The meeting was participatory and self-reflexive, about ourselves and what WPAs talk about when we talk about writing and undergraduate education.

To keep conversation focused on this common theme, the small group discussions centered on a fictional case-study of "Platonic College." The groups met Friday and twice on Saturday, in the role of a college-wide ad hoc Task Force, to formulate a philosophy, outline a curriculum, recommend staffing and training, and forecast a schedule to implement a campus-wide writing program. The eight workshops which took place on Saturday raised issues that formed the topics of the small group discussions: the role of freshman composition, led by Richard Marius (Harvard); writing and general education, led by Bruce Herzberg (Bentley); writing and the English Department, led by Lil Brannon (NYU) and C. H. Knoblauch (SUNY-Albany); models of faculty development, led by Toby Fulwiler; maintaining writing across the curriculum programs, led by William Mullin (UMass-Amherst); peer tutoring in writing, led by Tori Haring-Smith; computing and writing, led by Sam Boothby (Harvard School of Education); and college writing programs and the high schools, led by Ben W. McClelland.

Participants were enthusiastic about what became known as the meeting's "no stars" approach to staging a day and half of professional talk. The conversations revealed the conceptual diversity of writing programs in the region and the wide range of institutional circumstances and pressures WPAs face. One of the prevailing undercurrents that surfaced periodically at the conference, sometimes quite sharply, was the tension between theory and practice, between the desire to articulate a theoretical underpinning for what we do and the daily practical need to put a program in place and make it work. As one participant noted, the conversation veered between critical probes of our working assumptions and the search for a quick fix—a tension that reflects no doubt our hybrid identity as WPAs, as faculty and program administrators.

It was not surprising that few of the issues confronting WPAs were resolved. What did emerge, however, was a strong sense of the direction and achievements of writing programs and the new questions WPAs are asking themselves and each other. The successful proliferation of writing across the curriculum programs, for example, has opened new issues for theoretical exploration and programmatic development. Many WPAs in the region are beyond the point of initiating writing across the curriculum programs and are interested now in refining our understanding of what writing across the curriculum implies for writing programs and undergraduate education. One current of thought suggested we need to know more about the relationship between rhetoric and the other disciplines, to understand how the epistemological assumptions and methodologies of the various disciplines predispose faculty toward writing and determine their responsiveness and orientation to campus-wide writing programs. A number of WPAs suggested that writing across the curriculum has been important not just in developing student writing abilities but also in reforming and improving undergraduate teaching. We need to

tap the experience of colleagues who have successfully incorporated writing into their courses and to find forums for them to present their findings.

Many participants noted that writing across the curriculum has also had a marked effect on the way we define the rationale and goals of our writing courses. The time-worn professional commitment to required freshman composition especially was subjected to critical scrutiny. The questions that arose asked, among other things, why and by what authority freshman composition is a "service" course or a "content" course with its own distinctive subject matter; who is qualified to teach writing and according to what criteria. These questions invariably raised the problematical relationship among writing programs, English departments, and undergraduate education. This problem, many WPAs felt, is a strategic one that poses a series of related issues about the nature and identity of our writing programs, the disciplinary status of composition studies, and the professional standing of WPAs.

These issues will be debated over and over again. Our ability to talk together, to locate points of common agreement, and to explore our differences in a collegial manner is an indication of the professional maturity of WPAs in the region. We plan to meet again in Fall 1986. Look for details about time, place, and theme to be announced shortly.

