

Coming of Age: The WPA Summer Workshop and Conference

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Writing program administrators love to organize. It's in their blood, along with DNA and an abundance of red corpuscles. They can't help themselves. So if an organization doesn't exist, they invent one to fill the vacuum.¹ In the first stage of development, members hold meetings to discuss matters of common interest, to provide moral support, even to lobby for the organization's newly-vested interests.² The second stage of growth and development requires a journal to reach those who can't get to the meetings.³ In the third stage of organizational maturity the members proselytize, recruit, and train new members to learn the folkways of their forbears, the tricks of the trade, the state of the art; they can do this with particular efficiency—and gusto—during a summer workshop and conference.⁴

That is the current developmental stage of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, which held its fifth Summer Workshop in the summer of 1986 at Miami University of Ohio, in conjunction with the first WPA Summer Conference. We report on both here.

Like any five-year-old, the Summer Workshop is still in its formative stages. During these five years, WPA has been experimenting with the Workshop's size, format, and content. After the fourth Workshop (which shrank the earlier ten-day format into five), the WPA officers decided to try instead an even shorter, more intensive Workshop of two-and-a-half days, followed by a Conference of equal length. So the experimentation continues, as it probably will for the foreseeable future.⁵ The following discussion identifies the general principles and ways in which they are currently being applied.

Why. The Summer Workshop and Conference should enhance writing program administrators' professional development and promote cooperation among writing programs in two- and four-year colleges throughout the country. There are differences between the two—in size, schedule, and leadership—but the unifying aim of both is to bring writing program administrators together to exchange ideas in an intimate context, relaxed but purposeful.

Who. The Workshop should be small, not more than twenty-five participants, preferably from a diversity of colleges and universities throughout the country. The Conference can accommodate a larger number, but it should be small enough (under 200) to be friendly and cohesive. New directors of writing programs (up and down and across the curriculum) and writing centers should attend. Indeed, a dozen have attended each Workshop, and eighty participated in the first Conference—ranging from new M.A.s or Ph.D.s to more seasoned scholars, some with new full-time jobs but many years of part-time teaching. In addition, experienced administrators also came—deans, division and department chairs, longer term WPAs—some with vintage doctorates in literature, others with recent doctorates in rhetoric or writing research.

This eclectic mixture might seem at the outset too diverse to be mutually beneficial; what are the advantages for people who already know how to do their jobs? A typical answer comes from a veteran composition teacher, for nine years a department chair before becoming writing director at another university: "I very much appreciated the opportunity to spend a week with like-minded souls discussing what we do with our lives. Like the rest of those who attended, I am somewhat professionally isolated, and it helped me immensely to hear what others are doing and to be able to submit my own program to the judgment of others. I returned home with renewed confidence that I am on the right track and that there is a place for me in this particular professional world."

Who else. The success of the Summer Workshop and Conference also depends on the efforts of the Conference Chair (the overall coordinator of the week's activities), the Workshop Leader, Conference speakers and discussants, and the Local Arrangements Committee, unobtrusive but indispensable.

The Workshop leader should be a mover, a shaper, a survivor, and an enabler. Past leaders have included Harvey Wiener (La Guardia Community College), Tim Donovan (Northeastern University), Maxine Hairston (University of Texas), Linda Peterson (Yale University), Lynn Bloom (Virginia Commonwealth University). Leaders not only have to know (and be known in) the field, and be experienced survivors of life in the trenches and on the hot seat, they must be able to integrate the group quickly, and willing to provide considerable professional information and support not only during the Workshop, but in the years that follow. A paradigmatic paradox: The leaders must plan the Workshop very thoroughly in advance, but be flexible enough to accommodate topics and interests that develop during the Workshop sessions. Most importantly, Workshop leaders must incorporate the expertise of the

participants and draw on that at all times. No single person (perhaps fortunately) has experienced everything a Writing Program Administrator needs to know, but the participants as a group possess enough knowledge and strategic sense to engage the hearts and minds of everyone present.

The Conference Chair needs to understand the big picture of writing program administration in order to fit the key pieces into the conference frame—focusing the conference on issues of general interest and concern, planning a lively and varied program that includes participants of diverse types and amounts of experience, from experts to relative newcomers. The chair is also responsible for the organizational matrix into which these key pieces fit—handling publicity (WPA tries to reach every writing program administrator or department chair in the country), registration, scheduling the program and lodging facilities, answering inquiries, working with the local arrangements committee to ensure appropriate food, fun and facilities—the list is endless.

Featured speakers not only share their research at the Conference itself, they provide focal points for the advance publicity designed to attract paper proposals during the following winter and spring. The 1986 Conference, for instance, featured major addresses by Winifred Horner (Texas Christian University) on "Literacy and the English Department," Edward P.J. Corbett (Ohio State University) on "A History of Writing Program Administration," and Maxine Hairston (University of Texas) on "The Future(s) of Writing Program Administration." Just as important are the individual or team presentations by conference participants (see next section, below).

What. The Workshop should provide a substantive overview of the current issues in writing program administration, as well as some practical sense of how particular writing programs can accommodate these. Recent workshops have focused on some or all of the following topics: the many roles of the writing program administrator; freshman writing programs, models and sequences; grading and scoring; assessment and placement; writing centers; support services; faculty development (recruiting, training, and supervising new TAs and part-time faculty; re-training and re-inspiring experienced faculty); computers and writing programs; time management; program evaluation; budgeting and grantsmanship; and—always of compelling interest—professional survival and predictions about the future of the profession. Additional topics arise from the participants' needs and interests, the ever changing field, and the particular expertise of faculty from the host institution. Participants and leaders share with everyone descriptions of the writing programs in their own institutions, syllabi, writing assignments and test topics, and bibliographies.

Recent workshops have been praised for "sticking to an organized agenda and presenting information based on research and experience, rather than falling back on anecdote and group 'rapping' to support a loosely planned program.⁶ The quality and quantity of substantive material was therefore very high. I also found the perspectives of different composition programs valuable and illuminating, and have already referred to the shared materials and bibliographies numerous times."

The Conference extends and supplements the Workshop; in fact, their programs cover similar topics, but often from different perspectives. The Conference's intimate size enables each featured speaker to appear in a solo session that encourages considerable discussion after the formal talk. During the rest of the time no more than two sessions meet concurrently; in these, individual speakers or teams (again, with substantial audience interaction) address such issues as: "The Role of the Writing Lab within the Writing Program," "Budgets and Finances," "Evaluating Writing: Department-Wide Holistic Approaches," "Building a Writing Across the Disciplines Program," "Administrative Challenges of the Computerized Writing Program," "The Job of the Associate Writing Director," and "Building a High-Yield, Low Budget ESL Program."

When. The Workshop and Conference must be offered in the summer at a time when WPAs have a bit of breathing space. The only feasible time is late July or early August, when summer session programs are ending and before the ides of August have arrived. This time has two further advantages: It does not conflict with the other summer conferences that have been mushrooming in June and July. It also enables these events to become the life raft launched for people who have had writing program administratorships thrust upon them at the last minute; there are more people trying to stay afloat in uncharted seas than meet the eye.

Where. The Workshop and Conference should be offered in a pleasant location, where they can be affiliated with a local university that will provide meals, lodging, library and recreational facilities, xeroxing, student assistants, and where faculty and graduate students can be involved in the sessions. It should be possible for participants to bring their families for vacations in the vicinity. In the interests of making the proceedings accessible to participants throughout the nation, WPA shifts the location among sites in the East, Midwest, and West, ranging from Martha's Vineyard to the University of California at San Diego, from the University of New Hampshire to Miami University at Ohio, to the forthcoming 1987 Workshop at Utah State University in Logan.

How Long. The Workshop should be long enough to cover the essentials expeditiously, and to provide time for informal interchange among the participants. The optimum length isn't clear, although the 2½ day version supplemented by the Conference may do the job, particularly if all Workshop participants attend the Conference. At the Conference they will find, as one person observed, "not only reinforcement of what was said in the Workshop, but also an opportunity to see how some of the ideas discussed in the Workshop have been put into practice in various programs around the country." The new format remains to be tested and refined. We are still in the process of coming of age.

Notes

¹Wiener's First Law of Writing Program Administration.

²Wiener's Second Law of Writing Program Administration.

³Wiener's Third Law of Writing Program Administration.

⁴Wiener's Fourth Law of Writing Program Administration.

⁵The Writing Program Administrators' Creed. WPAs, incessant tinkerers, are never satisfied with the status quo.

⁶Thereby overcoming earlier problems. See Stephen Zelnick, "A report on the workshop on the administration of writing programs, summer, 1982," WPA, 6 (Spring 1983), 11-14.

