

When Administration Becomes Scholarship: The Future of Writing Program Administration

Richard H. Bullock

At most universities scholarship, the pursuit and application of knowledge, is divorced from administration, the day-to-day running of the school. While faculty regularly perform administrative functions ranging from committee work to chairmanships and the administration of various special programs, their "service" to the university is perceived as an activity subordinate to their primary function, the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. I wish to argue in this essay that the administration of writing programs should confound such traditional categories and should instead be performed as and considered a form of scholarship.

In terms of past practice and, I suppose, much current program administration, this is a ridiculous suggestion. Professor X would be asked (or told) to be in charge of freshman English, meaning that he had to take time out from his Shakespeare or Whitman to monitor the graduate students as they were thrown, untrained and unprepared, into their assigned sections. Or a willing faculty wife would be hired to run the freshman program so that the tenured faculty could pursue their scholarship unhindered by the demands of staffing, scheduling, and textbook selection.

Recent scholarship demonstrates that this dismal picture has changed, though perhaps not as much as it should. Linda Peterson's survey of WPA members reveals that "the typical WPA . . . specializes in a traditional field of English or American literature" (12), implying that not much has changed (though the recent growth in graduate programs in composition studies may change that, along with the growth in courses in composition taught by WPAs), while Carol P. Hartzog reveals in her survey of 44 writing program directors that nearly all run programs that have a statement of principles to guide them and extensive training programs for TAs and other teachers in the program (35, 49).

At many schools, however, even this picture is changing as writing programs proliferate and diversify. At Northeastern University, for example, the English Department includes in addition to its literature offerings and traditional freshman writing courses basic writing, ESL,

and a writing center; an advanced-level, interdepartmental writing program; a graduate program and a certificate program in technical writing; and an off-campus summer graduate program in the teaching of writing. Recognizing that these programs require constant monitoring and nurturing, the department has hired four tenure-track professors to design, implement, and oversee them. These four people, two of whom are tenured, have developed their expertise not in literature but in writing, and design and alter the programs in light of their expertise. This is obviously not an isolated example, as Hartzog's survey, accompanied by case studies of three schools with extensive writing programs, shows.

This fact, that scholars of writing (at least, WPAs who, "while they hold Ph.D.s in English, . . . have specialized in both a literary field and composition studies" [Peterson 17]) control writing programs, signals a profound change in the structure of English departments because administration at these schools is no longer a shared burden rotated, as are many chairmanships, among all faculty. Increasingly, faculty members are hired to use their expertise to design and run writing programs; the administration of those programs is an integral part of their jobs. Faculty in these positions are not caretakers of a slice of bureaucracy; they are experts and scholars testing and refining their knowledge in the practical arena of application. The administration of writing programs under these circumstances advances our knowledge of the teaching of writing. No less than an architect's erection of a building or a playwright's successful directing of his or her own play, it is scholarship.

The design and implementation of assessment procedures at Northeastern may prove a helpful example. When I began administering the freshman writing program there, I inherited a placement procedure consisting of a one-hour timed essay given students during fall orientation week. While this sort of test is common in colleges and universities, it conflicts both with what we know about valid writing assessment—that various samples of writing must be evaluated to determine students' abilities in various writing situations—and with the writing program itself, which acknowledges the difficulty of assessing writing by delaying the giving of grades, evaluating groups of papers, and requiring faculty collaboration in the evaluation of student essays. In short, the instrument used to determine students' placement into writing courses conflicted conceptually and operationally with the courses themselves.

After defining this as a problem, I decided that a potential solution lay in turning the freshman writing course itself into an evaluative instrument, under the assumption that students' performance over eleven weeks would better indicate who needed additional help. Students who did need more help would then be required to take an additional course before continuing in the regular freshman sequence. There were practical problems, of course. Although the crudity of the single writing sample

guaranteed that each class's students would show a broad range of ability, under the new system that range would broaden further, so that instructors would need help with the weakest students, who would need help themselves when placed in a potentially too-demanding course. In administering the basic writing program I had observed that instructors got to know their students' abilities after about three weeks of class. To give the needed help I instituted a third-week assessment of students' overall abilities, based on various samples of their writing: students identified then would be required to attend a weekly small-group session in addition to their regular coursework.

At the core of this administrative action lay a conceptual base: the belief that writing programs should be pedagogically sound and consistent throughout, and more specifically that placement and evaluation procedures must conform to our knowledge of students' growth and development as writers and of accurate, valid, and humane tools for the assessment of writing. While no empirically verifiable data can be gathered from such situation-specific manipulation and innovation, the knowledge that results—it can be done, it works—is surely as valuable as that derived from classroom research and case study analysis, which has supplanted the scientific model in recognition of writing's individual and situationally-based nature.

The analogy between this sort of scholarship in action and the assessment of an architect's work, or a dancer's, is revealing. Architects must spend much time and energy attending to practical matters of plumbing, wiring, load distribution, traffic patterns, and other aspects of a building in daily use. A dancer preparing a performance must obtain a theater, convince backers, audition dancers, arrange lighting, hire musicians, and choreograph not only the dancers on the stage but the entire *gestalt* of the performance. In both cases the achievement depends on hours of mundane activities; but what elevates their efforts above mere administration are their roots in concepts based on artistry and expertise. (The artist Christo provides a telling if extreme example; he considers the efforts involved in obtaining financing and permission to wrap islands, buildings, and bridges with sheets of plastic or nylon integral aspects of the work of art and meticulously documents the process leading up to the product, explicitly recognizing the role of implementation in the production of significant art.)

So it is with the writing specialist in charge of a writing program. If the administrator bases the program on sound principles and coherent, consistent concepts of writing and its teaching, all administrative activities—from articulating the program's guiding principles, suggesting syllabi, and recommending textbooks to interviewing prospective faculty and arbitrating students' grievances—aim toward the construction and

implementation of a program that embodies the key elements of the administrator's knowledge and expertise. And since such administration cannot rest solely on received knowledge, its dynamic nature constantly producing challenges to be faced and problems to be solved, it demands that the administrator innovate, based on expertise, developing novel solutions to the difficulties involved in implementing general principles in specific situations. Like the literary scholar applying theoretical critical principles to a specific text, the writing specialist's arena is the writing classroom and program.

Where all this comes home, of course, is in the evaluation of the WPA's performance as a WPA. And that evaluation, as Hartzog and Peterson both point out, is sadly inadequate to the tasks a WPA faces and their importance. Hartzog observes that "formal reviews are often directly associated with, or perhaps subsumed by, academic reviews." In then affirming that program administrators nonetheless are evaluated, she quotes "one person who said that he is not reviewed except 'on broader performance as a scholar and classroom teacher' [and] added that 'of course, steps would be taken' if he did not handle his job well" (25; emphasis added). Peterson echoes this assessment, quoting a WPA who noted that administrative work would only have mattered at tenure time "if any had been bad" (14). Informal review, much less the threat of negative response as the only response, is hardly sufficient for the time- and energy-consuming task of directing writing programs.

A further complication arises as both Hartzog and Peterson observe that because composition studies themselves, let alone program administration, are often tainted in the eyes of literary scholars, WPAs must "have commitments in both academia and administration" (Hartzog 25) and, further, must publish in both composition and literature to assure their place in English departments. Peterson in particular argues forcefully in favor of such dual-field scholarship "to fulfill an oft-neglected ideal of the profession: to integrate teaching with scholarship and research" (15). Unfortunately, unlike literary scholars who teach, research, and write about literature, WPAs must by this reasoning divide their energies (already strained, in Hartzog's reckoning, by the demands of their duties) between two distinct fields, primarily to placate intolerant English faculty members. Such attitudes may be necessary for WPAs' survival in many schools, but I have to wonder whether it serves the interest of WPAs to accept their unpleasant implications. Rather, I believe WPAs should concentrate their scholarly work in their primary area of interest: composition studies.

Unlike traditional scholarship, though, administrative scholarship does not always result in publications, the traditional measure of a scholar's work. Like an exhibition, reading, or recital, program administration is bound to a certain time and place. Like a building, it cannot be

moved. Like a performance or an improvisation, it is dynamic; it changes, develops, evolves. And like a grant, it is based on expertise but involves the testing and working out of ideas grounded in that expertise. Just as grant evaluators must evaluate a recipient's work on its merits, the evaluators of writing programs and their administrators must recognize that same dynamic, situation-specific nature of writing programs and adapt to it. Mechanisms already exist for writing program evaluation which involve sending teams of recognized experts on writing to evaluate programs, and this method of on-site refereeing is ideal, though it must be clearly focused. Referees must distinguish among the various aspects of administration, focusing their attention primarily on the scholarly achievement embodied in the program and its relationship to clearly articulated, discipline-wide standards or goals. A program's success depends on many things, including administrators' personalities, the nature of the teaching staff, the context within which the program operates, and available financial and moral support; but at the heart of the refereed evaluation must lie the assessment of the success with which the administrator has applied cogent, articulated principles based on scholarship, the same grounds on which a journal referee must judge a manuscript. That principle, not a program's cost-effectiveness or its smoothness of operation, must be paramount.

Writing program evaluation must also recognize its evolutionary nature. In designing and implementing programs, scholar-administrators must consider the program over several years. Unlike a scholarly publication, which at some stage of its writing must be considered "finished" and published, a writing program continually evolves. Like a student's writing ability, it cannot be evaluated fairly on the basis of a single sampling, a single visit, but must be looked at in a larger context of accumulated, incremental changes and revisions as well as conceptual and organizational leaps.

The administration of writing programs as scholarship then involves a reconceptualization not only of administration but of scholarship as well. This was brought home by an objection I received from a reader of this manuscript. This reader wrote, "WPAs are paid very good money for possessing this 'expertise.' To exact it as 'scholarship' is about as logical as paying scholars administrators' salaries because they publish articles and books." This reviewer is missing the point. If 'expertise' consists of administrative ability only—ability to evaluate transfer credit, to keep the machinery running, to smooth feathers as they ruffle, and perhaps to give TAs pointers on classroom behavior—then the objection is valid; such an administrator is not performing scholarship. But if, as I am arguing, the WPA's role is to innovate, to erect and maintain a program that embodies and tests theoretical principles and monitors the results over several years, that activity is scholarly and should be recognized as

such, and the traditional disciplinary view restricting scholarship to written publication must broaden to include performance in the artistic or theatrical sense. Such a shift in evaluative concepts will engender further change in the nature of writing programs as they move from burdens borne by unwilling or unqualified caretakers to dynamic laboratories in which composition theory and composition pedagogy grow together. Such unity of research and application can then serve as a model for other fields, bringing the elusive ideal of the scholar-teacher—for whom teaching and scholarship are not separate and compartmentalized, but integrated and mutually informing—closer to reality.

Works Cited

Hartzog, Carol P. *Composition and the Academy: A Study of Writing Program Administration*. New York: MLA, 1986.

Peterson, Linda H. "The WPA's Progress: A Survey, Story, and Commentary on the Career Plans of Writing Program Administrators." *WPA*, 10 (1987), 11-18.

