
Responses to “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of WPAs: A Draft”

The previous issue of *WPA* invited responses to “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of WPAs: A Draft” (*WPA* 20.1/2 (fall/winter 1996): 92-103). This statement, currently under final consideration by the WPA Executive Board, seeks to provide “a framework by which writing program administration can be seen as scholarly work” that is “worthy of tenure and promotion when it produces and enacts disciplinary knowledge within the field of Rhetoric and Composition” (92). Following are three responses to the draft. Additional responses should be sent to Charles Schuster, Department of English, U. Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI 53201. Email: cis@csd.uwm.edu. —*Doug Hesse*

Traditional Criteria: Solution or Stumbling Block?

Diane Boehm

“You think like an administrator.”

The first time those words were addressed to me, I was taken aback. I still thought of myself as a teacher. And though I still am a teacher of students, I am also a teacher of teachers—as well as a budget manager, a personnel supervisor, a program developer, a technology consultant, with many other roles as well.

As I read the draft of the WPA document, I found myself agreeing with much of what it said. But I do not think it will solve our problem.

One reason is that the WPA has no uniform defined role. Each operates differently, depending on his or her individual context. (Fulwiler and Young describe 13 different models for writing programs in *Programs That Work* [Boynton Cook, 1990]; Connolly and Vilardi discuss 28 in *New Methods in College Writing Programs* [New York: MLA, 1986].) Some of us do not reside in an English department—or in any department. Many of us have responsibilities that go far beyond a composition program. Thus for some of us a description of our work within a traditional English department will have little or no value.

The draft makes numerous references to the cross-disciplinary functions of most WPAs, and herein lies a second issue. WPAs *must* work from an interdisciplinary framework if they are to build the kinds of programs students need. Thus Writing Program Administrators are continually bumping up against many of the turf tensions that characterize higher education. Yet the networking that results from what Dolence and Norris (in *Transforming Higher Education* [Ann Arbor: Society for College and University Planning, 1995]) call the “hybridiza-

tion of disciplines" provides impetus for the very changes we are seeking to cultivate. Writing programs in their many manifestations *are* hybridization, seeking always to create an improved strain to enhance "yield." Trying to define this work according to the criteria of a single department is, I believe, at cross-purposes with our goals.

Those who seek reform in higher education are convinced that our disciplinary insularity must change, if higher ed is to survive. But traditional-minded faculty may prefer to preserve familiar patterns rather than explore new shapes for higher ed. Any faculty member whose work takes place within an interdisciplinary framework faces the same issues. In the case of the WPA, such opposition to change may translate into opposition to the WPA who seeks to effect change.

Furthermore, interdisciplinary work such as faculty development is often invisible. When I help a colleague develop new writing-intensive assignments, he or she will take credit for the innovations. This is as it should be, for our most far-reaching work is often done behind the scenes. I do not know a graceful way to bring such work into our evaluation process.

A third problem I perceive is that faculty may not be equipped to evaluate administrative work, unless they themselves have engaged in it. The document suggests five categories by which to evaluate WPA work: program creation, curricular design, faculty development, textual production, program assessment and evaluation. Most faculty will have had some experience in most of these areas—but few of them will have had to negotiate all of these tasks *at the same time*. Thus, they are not likely to understand the kind of pressures under which WPAs work.

If faculty and administrators live in tension, as they do on many campuses, this resistance to administrators can likewise spill over into the evaluation process of a WPA, creating an adversarial atmosphere. This does not change the fact that the WPA must be an effective administrator. Administration is *not* teaching nor research nor service; it is work of a different kind, and thus, I believe, requires a different kind of evaluation.

Is it a bad thing to be an "administrator"? As the case studies demonstrate, success as a WPA requires *more* than disciplinary knowledge; the WPA must have outstanding interpersonal skills, a clear understanding of the institution's history and present context, an ability to develop a program vision and the strategies to attain it. The WPA must know how to capitalize on his or her own strengths, and how to motivate and integrate the abilities of others. The WPA must create alliances, or at least working relationships, with a much greater range of people than the traditional faculty member is required to have. The WPA is a "middle manager"—working between the faculty and the top administrators; he or she must be able to work with both to be successful. How can those traits be measured by traditional disciplinary standards?

The draft, I believe, tries to use traditional structures to make the case for recognizing a non-traditional and widely varied role; it attempts to define

administrative work by criteria for other roles. But the role of the WPA is different from a traditional faculty role—there are different stakeholders, different kinds of decisions, different parties with whom to negotiate. I question whether this document can solve the problems it is intended to address.

Whose Work?

Suellynn Duffey

My story falls outside the realm of “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Program Administrators,” and yet I am a WPA and have been for a dozen years (and more). Can the document be revised to include me? For it influences me, implicitly. It argues that curricular and program development are scholarly work, but who owns the work? Even if my story is unique (which I doubt), I hope you will agree that it merits consideration. For ten years I administered writing programs at a Carnegie Research I university with a first-class graduate program in composition and rhetoric. Now at another large public university, I focus on writing across the curriculum.

At my previous institution, I adapted a basic writing and reading program from the University of Pittsburgh. A stimulating teaching and scholarly culture emerged so that graduate students began to gravitate to the program, stay there as teachers, and conduct career-building research under my guidance and that of others. We created internal curricular documents, often received requests for these documents from other institutions, and were visited by WPAs wanting to investigate innovative programs. We began studies of literacy in basic writing classes, in graduate classes, and elsewhere.

We paired honors and basic writing classes to investigate alternatives to English placement systems. Springing from a desire to deliver excellent writing instruction to all students equally, this project investigated the known effects of tracking students. It worked within the local institutional structure to open boundaries that segregated groups of students; it used teams of teachers and ethnographic researchers to document results; and it formed the basis for scholarly presentations and articles (mine and others’). Under my leadership and a collaborative management style, this basic writing program received national recognition. All these, plus my efforts since, have resulted in written evidence of my curricular, pedagogical, and scholarly work (publications, internal documents, grant proposals, program descriptions and training materials with philosophical and pedagogical grounding).

Partly as a result of the success of the program, I was asked to take on a bigger operation. Charged to reform the core curriculum, to enhance graduate student preparation, and to bring coherence to an array of first-year writing