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# Redefining Composition, Managing Change, and the Role of the WPA

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WPAs have the unenviable task of serving many constituents, all of whom have different perceptions and, often contradictory, expectations about the aims and goals of composition. Meeting the expectations and demands of faculty and instructors within the writing program, colleagues in the department, colleagues from other departments, department chairs, other university administrators, students, and parents, and serving as a mediator between these many stakeholders is both critical and stressful. More so perhaps than any other program "a writing program is itself part of its institutional context, constantly shaping other features of the institution and constantly being shaped by those features" (Witte and Faigley 45).

Because of the unusual, even unique, niche which composition holds within the larger system, it is not surprising that composition has often sought to redefine itself in relationship to the university, or that the university has often sought to redefine composition. What is different about recent calls for reform or for the abolition of the composition requirement all together, as Connors notes (24), is that these calls are now coming from inside the field. WPAs have become proactive voices in this debate and are in the position to redefine their own roles as well as help alter the terrain of higher education. No longer content to tolerate programs which have grown organically, and which exploit part-timers, adjuncts, and graduate students, or to oversee writing programs that are "not so much planned or organized as inherited and casually coordinated" (White 136), some WPAs have begun to call for the end to the composition requirement while others seek dramatic reforms.

The question of whether to abolish the freshman composition requirement, or whether to pursue reform within composition programs, is a question about systems and the complicated interrelationships that define both composition and the academy at large. Thus, as WPAs, we need to think on both theoretical and practical levels about this relationship. Currently, composition courses still represent a major site of writing instruction in the academy (Bazerman 258), and it is unlikely, and perhaps undesirable, that the requirement for composition will be dropped quickly at institutions that are unable to provide alternative comprehensive sites for writing instruction. If, however, we perceive that the relationship between composition and the larger institution is problematic, we must look closely at ways in which this relationship may be redefined. We must find and create other sites for writing instruction in the academy—something WAC programs across the country already do—and we must be open to fundamental changes in composition programs themselves at the same time we address the pressing and legitimate issues raised by the New Abolitionists. It is

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unrealistic to assume that the relationship between composition and the academy can change if composition does not change. Moreover, it is also unrealistic to assume that the academy will remain static and that pressures to change coming from outside and inside composition will cease.

My goal in this article will not be to argue for or against the first year composition requirement. The answer to that question, as I hope to show, is, "it depends." The question that seems most cogent to me is, "How do we know how far and in what directions we should move to address the problematic position of composition in the academy?" Composition programs are complex, dynamic systems; when we tinker with one facet of a program, that tinkering will impact the entire program. Consequently, whether we engage in reform efforts or move to abolish the composition requirement, we need to take a comprehensive, holistic approach that acknowledges how the various levels of any composition program are interconnected, and the way those levels interact with the larger institution. What I propose is a model for examining the complex relationships that determine the day-to-day practices in our composition programs and in other sites for writing throughout our colleges and universities. Specifically, we need to think about the *local conditions* at our institutions, evaluate the *internal coherence* of our programs, and consider the degree to which our programs are *externally relevant*. By examining local conditions, focusing on internal coherence, and asking ourselves about external relevance, we can assess the effectiveness of our composition programs in relation to a host of complex factors which speak to the comprehensive nature of higher education. Finally, I will move to describe how considering the interplay of these features at our institution led us to make dramatic, and in some cases controversial, changes in our composition program. Thus, finally, I propose to place composition, not just writing, in a "broader view," and in that way "remain responsible to a larger social need" (Bazerman 258).

## Local Conditions

Local conditions are those features of our colleges and universities that make our institutions distinct from each other. Budgets, teaching loads, requirements, building design, pay scales, computer availability, and the students themselves all point to differences among our campuses. These, in turn, shape attitude and morale, which also translate into powerful differences. At times, it may seem that because there are general statements we can make about higher education, all our campuses are essentially the same. This is, obviously, not the case and we would be wise as we pursue changes in our programs to focus on these differences and on how local conditions shape the programs and opportunities at our schools.

Perhaps the most overt feature of local conditions is the budget. Generally, we are in a time of fiscal constraints when budgets are not likely to increase dramatically. Thus, we are often in the position of finding "creative solutions" to bridge the gap between resources and needs. Unfortunately, higher education has in recent years, particularly in state-funded institutions, turned to stopgap

solutions. Raised caps, part-time and adjunct instructors, and technological short cuts all stand as prime examples of these stopgap measures. The problem is that these solutions become permanent and, thus, over time, change the nature of higher education through ad hoc means. Stopgap methods sometimes take on the aura of "temporary" army barracks built during WWII: decades later they are still standing, and they have changed the landscape.

Fortunately, most local conditions, though determining features of our programs, are themselves dynamic and open to change. It is imperative that we consider dynamic conditions as we entertain openings for change within them. One way to begin this process is to examine the coherence of our programs in relation to these conditions.

## Internal Coherence

A good deal has been written about the importance of coherent programs (see, for example, White, Witte and Faigley, and Hilgers and Marsella) and so there is no need to go over this ground in detail. Nevertheless, it is important to note that a composition program must be constructed so that individual sections work together to provide a coherent educational experience at the same time that the program remains conscious of its place in the larger institution. Internal coherence rests on a programmatic footing comprised of four components: (1) common goals specific and detailed enough to be meaningful and useful, (2) common assignments, (3) standard methods for evaluation and assessment across multiple sections, and (4) a commitment to examining and discussing these shared features openly. In one way, planning for internal coherence is the easiest part of what we do. It is the area over which we have the most control, and it is the facet of administration most directly linked to the training we receive as graduate students and junior faculty.

When internal coherence is sacrificed, or abandoned, to the wishes, beliefs, and predilections of individual instructors (faculty, graduate assistants, or part-time instructors) who may have no training in teaching composition, or who may be completely unaware of the developments in this field in the last thirty years, or who may argue that they have academic freedom and thus the right to teach whatever they want, it becomes impossible to talk about a program at all and thus impossible to talk about what the relationship should be between what we do in our programs and the larger institution. Moreover, when a program lacks internal coherence, the opportunity for collaboration and cooperation among instructors is limited. Everyone is on their own. It becomes nearly impossible to talk about the overall effectiveness of the program and, finally, it becomes nearly impossible to talk about composition as it relates to the larger educational experiences of students within the program. Internal coherence, then, is essential.

## External Relevance

We need also to examine the extent to which the internal coherence of our writing programs contributes to the larger educational experience of our students. That is, we must also gauge our effectiveness on the basis of the extent

to which our programs are externally relevant. We must ask ourselves how the writing that students do in our programs contributes to the overall mission of the college or university, how it contributes to what they do in the major, and how it contributes to their liberal or general education.

I am not suggesting, however, that we need only to make our programs conform to the needs and expectations of others in the university. Clearly the training, background, and experience that we have as writing instructors and as WPAs enables and compels us to help the university community think about the links between composition programs and the rest of the university. We must become spokespersons for writing who are able both to listen carefully to external expectations and to articulate clearly how these expectations might better line up with internal program goals. On this two-way street WPAs need to be adept outside their programs as well as within, able to discuss how their program contributes directly to the experience of students within it.

Before discussing how a consideration of local conditions, internal coherence and external relevance prompted us to make significant changes at my institution, let me make one other critical point. Because we are dealing with dynamic systems, and because the components of those systems—local conditions, internal coherence, and external relevance—differ, our composition and writing programs must necessarily differ also. Consequently, it is essential that we recognize that composition programs will differ widely too. In some writing intensive programs, for example, students may never take courses in composition. Instead, the writing they do may be integrated into course work. At other institutions, students might be required to take twelve hours of composition, or six, or four, but we should understand that, as Carol Hartzog notes, “no single model, no single prescription will work in all cases” (Hartzog 12). Thus, I present the following illustration as one example, *not* as the model, of how composition programs may be defined.

## Local Conditions, Internal Coherence, External Relevance: Our Situation

For several years in the 1980s and on into the 1990s, enrollment demand and static budgets levied a heavy toll on the composition program at Northern Arizona University. Thus, like many comp programs, the one at our university became in part something of an unfunded mandate. To meet demand, more part-time instructors were pressed into service, and the teaching load for GA's remained consistently high: two sections a semester with 24 students in each section while they were also enrolled in nine hours of graduate course work. Whereas at one time GA's might have received a slightly reduced load, at least in terms of preparation time, by working in the Writing Center, they were by the early 1990s committed every semester to cover additional sections, and the number of graduate assistants actually staffing the writing center dwindled to three or four per term. In addition, most of the graduate assistants in this program were working toward master's degrees and thus represented a popula-

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tion with a high rate of turnover. Finally, as a result of these conditions and constraints, the perception throughout the university community was that English composition GA's were overworked, that the writing center was not providing enough support, and that the level of instruction being offered by part-time instructors was very mixed at best. At the same time, the program was perceived by administrators as expensive and, as a result, was not likely to receive additional resources.

Thus, by the early 1990s many recognized that, in the words of external reviewers, although there were strengths, there were also significant weaknesses. And, the primary suggestion made by external reviewers was to increase budgets. When it became clear, however, that the administration could not follow these recommendations—additional resources were not going to be pumped into the program to alleviate pressures caused by increasing enrollment—we realized that we had two options. The first was to continue with business as usual and to tweak the program where possible to try to alleviate some of the pressures it faced. The second option was to overhaul the program completely. We decided to pursue this second option.

As I suggested in the opening section of this article, reforming or reformulating a composition program is a complex, systematic process in which different elements must be considered in relation to each other. Thus, although I will write about this process as though it happened in a linear fashion, it really did not; it was recursive and layered.

The most obvious changes we proposed were to shift from a two semester, six-hour composition requirement for all students to a one semester, four-hour requirement, and to impose a twelve-hour prerequisite for that four-hour course. These changes were both highly controversial and initially seen as a cutting back on our commitment to teach undergraduate writing. But these changes also provided us with several advantages.

As Table 1 shows, the change from a six-hour to a four-hour program requirement was a strategic move to help reduce graduate assistant workloads. Because at our institution (local conditions), it is impossible for graduate students to teach more than six hours a semester, we knew that by shifting to a four-hour course we were creating a program in which a GA's teaching load could not easily be doubled should enrollment increase. Second, by imposing a twelve-hour prerequisite we were reducing the number of incoming students we would need to accommodate in composition classes. Because we have about a 25% attrition rate at the end of fall semester for entering students, and a total rate of 33% by the end of the spring semester (these attrition rates did not change when we implemented our new program), a twelve-hour prerequisite would significantly reduce our student enrollment pressure. These changes enabled us to move away from using part-time instructors altogether and to lower class size. Thus, we moved to a program with no part-time instructors and one where GAs could teach smaller numbers of students in four-credit-hour classes, with other assigned duties for two other credit hours.

**Table 1**  
GA Responsibilities Under Old and New Programs

	<b>Semester 1</b>	<b>Semester II</b>
Old Program Structure	Enroll in 9 graduate hrs. <i>and</i> 2 sections of ENG 101 (24 students/section, total 48)	Enroll in 9 graduate hrs. <i>and</i> 2 sections of ENG 102 (24 students/section, total 48)
New Program Structure	<b>Semesters I and II</b>	
	Enroll in 9 graduate hrs. <i>and</i> 1 section of ENG 105 (24 students/section), <i>and</i> 1 section of ENG 205 (2 credit elective open to all students having met composition requirement, 16 students/section), <i>or</i> Tutor for 6 hrs./week in Writing Lab, <i>or</i> Mentor beginning GA's, <i>or</i> Work with faculty teaching writing intensive courses across campus.	

These changes allowed us to use GA's in more varied ways. In addition to teaching a required four-hour course, they could undertake such other responsibilities as working in the writing center, working with faculty and students across campus to help writing efforts in courses outside of English, mentoring new graduate assistants coming into the program, or finally, teaching a two-credit elective writing class for students who had completed the required writing class. Thus, with these shifts we were able to address issues of external relevance (the writing center and using GAs to work with other departments), and internal coherence (providing mentors for all new GA's). At the same time we reduced GAs' overall workload.

As I have already suggested, however, internal coherence is a key component of any program, and the mentoring we provided using experienced GA's was only one way to build that coherence. To move further toward greater coherence within the program, we made several other key changes. First, we rewrote the curriculum and asked GA's to teach from standard syllabi. Second, we implemented an assessment program that worked vertically through the program. Let me elaborate on each of these changes in turn.

Because most of the instructors teaching in our composition program were students working toward their master's degrees, most of them had no experience as teachers and no substantive awareness of how to teach writing effectively. We realized that if we were going to use these inexperienced students as the primary instructors in a required course, we had an obligation to provide as much guidance and support as we could. The standard syllabi helped do so by

giving these graduate students a scaffolding. The standard syllabi also provided a common experience for instructors and students in the program. That is, the composition program became a core experience that students could share outside the classroom. Further, it provided a common experience for GA's so that they could work together as a community to address the challenges of teaching a required composition course to a diverse range of students. The standard syllabi thus went a long way toward creating possibilities for focus and coherence.

At the same time, the standard syllabi were written with the university mission, and thus external relevance, in mind. First, the course was designed to help students become more effective readers and writers by providing them with a range of texts (poetry, fiction, essay, letters, autobiography, encyclopedia entries, academic journal articles, etc.). Learning to analyze these texts rhetorically, students could develop broad-based strategies for reading that would help them work more effectively in any other courses that they might take in liberal studies or in their major. More specifically, we sought to design a curriculum which would help students "evaluate new discourses as they became visible and relevant;" at the same time we provided them with "the tools of rhetorical analysis that [would] allow them to explicitly recognize, analyze, and respond to the particularities of the discourse systems and situations that they may move into" (Bazerman 257-58). Second, the course was thematically focused on issues of environmental sustainability. Our university sees as part of its overall mission the need to help students address environmental issues as well as the more specific problems facing the Colorado Plateau on which we are located. The course, then, was designed to dovetail with the larger curriculum both in terms of the skills it helped students achieve and its larger philosophical and pedagogical orientation.

Another key component of the program which helped us move toward internal coherence revolved around issues of assessment. On one hand, we wanted to do a good job of assessing the work that students in the program did; we wanted measures that were valid and reliable. Thus, once again, in part because we would be working with so many inexperienced teachers, we wanted to provide a strong framework for assessment that would work not just in individual sections but across the program. Accordingly, we implemented a portfolio assessment program that would work program-wide. All students would submit portfolios at the middle and the end of every semester, and their portfolio would be read and evaluated by at least two or three other instructors. The instructors would, in addition, take part in norming sessions at least three times a during a semester: at the very beginning, just before the midterm portfolios were to be evaluated, and just before the final evaluation process at the end of the semester. As a result of what was for us a new approach to assessment, we could spend more time training instructors in assessment and, once again, provide opportunities for them to discuss a common practice.

Finally, in terms of assessment, we rewrote the course evaluation forms instructors give to their students. The new forms reflect more specifically the common goals of the course and provide opportunities for students to assess

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their own progress and commitment. We abandoned the generic evaluation instrument that was used across our college in favor of one which asked questions such as, "How often did your instructor make connections between what you were reading and your writing?" and "How well did your instructor describe the portfolio approach to evaluation to you?"

I suggested that budgetary realities and constraints must be a part of our thinking as we contemplate the ways in which we might reform composition programs. One key is to consider the relationship between what we can do with what we have, what we would need in order to make our program stronger, and what are reasonable financial requests. In our case, for example, to stay with the old program, to put people back into our writing center, to stop using part-time instructors, and to lower class size would have required that we increase our budget by about 30%. While we might argue that such an increase is desirable, we also recognized that it was not likely given current budget constraints. At the same time, as I have already suggested, to continue with the program as it had evolved would have meant continuing with a program that was problematic. We were, in essence, promising to deliver more than our budget limits allowed us to offer.

As it turns out, our new program costs about the same as the old program; we haven't saved a lot of money. What we have been able to do is use our resources in different ways. The result is a series of trade-offs, the biggest two of which involve dropping the number of required hours from six to four, and the imposing of a twelve-hour prerequisite. On the other side of the scale, however, we now have GA's who teach in an effective and coherent program, who are gaining a range of teaching experiences, and who, because they are not pushed so hard, are more effective. We have returned to a fully staffed writing center, and we are able to provide more support for writing-intensive courses across campus.

In all, we have achieved a balance which is workable here. The university community supports the new program which has been running full tilt for four years, and students in our courses are positive about the instruction they receive. Most importantly, students and faculty across campus agree that the program is making a difference in the way that students write. And, finally, faculty across campus are grateful for the support and direction they now receive from the composition program.

Still, I would want to reiterate the key point—because local conditions differ, composition and writing programs will differ. It is unrealistic and unwise to assume that what works effectively on one campus is well suited to another campus without local adaptation. If local configurations and their relationship to each other remain in the foreground as WPAs undertake composition reform, we are more likely to develop effective writing programs anywhere.

Composition programs need to change and develop over time. Ours certainly does as we continue to find ways to integrate what we do more effectively with the larger institution. Thus, I fully expect that in coming years,

our program will develop in new directions, respond to new demands and, thus, will not be the same program it is today. This is as it should be. What will remain constant, I hope, is that these changes will continue to reflect judgments that are locally responsive, internally coherent, and externally relevant. In this way, effective programs will be able to address complex, dynamic forces and all the facets inevitable in a university setting.

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