

Writing Beyond the Headline: Building a Writing Program at Princeton

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In December 2000, Princeton's faculty did something very surprising: they voted to support a proposal to restructure the teaching of writing at Princeton, a decision that led the university to build a new writing program from the ground up. Within nine months, Princeton instituted a new way to fulfill the writing requirement, committed funds to an independent program, developed a new pedagogy for first-year writing seminars, and hired a staff of lecturers to teach these courses. The change at Princeton appears so dramatic that the program was even featured in a front-page article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Why Johnny Can't Write, Even Though He Went to Princeton." Although the article surveyed the decisions to make changes at Princeton, Duke, Columbia, Brown, Penn, and Bowdoin, briefly sketching where these programs stand in their stages of revision, it was hard to see past the dismal headline and the opening hook. The piece began with a story about a student badly served under the previous structure of the writing requirement at Princeton, whose writing instructor "kill[ed] time and his students' enthusiasm," and whose father, a Princeton professor, was so outraged by her experience that he now teaches in the new program.

As a consequence of the slanted lead, the headline that evoked a critical moment in the history of literacy and composition, and the incomplete information about the featured programs, the article elicited predictably indignant responses. Letters to the editor chided the creation of topic-based seminars—"boutique courses to cajole reluctant students into writing-intensive classes"—and predicted, on the basis of no evidence, that "These solutions are doomed to the same failure as their predecessors because two crucial ingredients are missing: instructor enthusiasm and student understanding of writing's importance" (Gedeon; Sull). Another letter, from Theodora J. Kalikow, President of the University of Maine, proudly dis-

missed all the efforts at reform with the statement: “We could teach the big fancy places a thing or two. They should ask us.” A few members of the WPA listserv joined the fray, with a lively exchange under the subject heading “A writing program crisis?” Fortunately, some of the postings to the list acknowledged that the article offered scant information on which to base judgments and also raised some provocative questions about whether or not program changes at high profile institutions are significant for higher education and the field of composition. Does it matter, for instance, that these programs tend to hire non-tenured faculty and administrators, most from disciplines other than composition and rhetoric? Is it meaningful that even institutions like Princeton now acknowledge that they need a writing program to assure that first-year writing is taught consistently and well? Or do such programs diminish the field by hiring “amateur” writing teachers into second-tier positions outside academic departments?

Those questions are certainly worth considering, but before I do, I would like to consider what these changes mean at Princeton, a story the *Chronicle* article simply did not tell. I begin by reading past the headline and the obvious appearances of change to consider the roles that a writing program can serve at a university as a product and also an agent of institutional change.

To clarify my terms, the writing program I refer to at Princeton is an independent administrative unit—not an academic department—that exists primarily to offer first-year writing seminars and to sponsor a writing center. While its mission is service, not research, and although few of its faculty identify themselves primarily as composition scholars, the program is home to a lively and continuous conversation about pedagogy and writing.

The term “institutional change” is a bit more challenging to pin down. In my most hopeful moments, I recognize a common goal with James E. Porter and his coauthors, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles, whose Braddock Award-winning essay, “Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change,” claims institutional critique as an “activity of rhetoric and composition” that “aim[s] to change the practices of institutional representatives and to improve the conditions of those affected by and served by institutions” (611). Here, Porter et al. identify the study and reform of institutions as core practices in composition. The work of Richard E. Miller has also argued for the centrality of institutional understanding and reform to writing program administration. Miller’s work is particularly astute in pointing out, however, how closely frustration sits next to possibility when one attempts institutional change: “To pursue educational reform is thus to work in an impure space, where intractable material conditions always threaten to expose rhetorics of change as delusional or deliberately deceptive; it is also to insist that bureaucracies don’t simply

impede change: they are the social instruments that make change possible” (9). Following Porter et al. and Miller, when I write of institutional change, I do not mean toppling the venerable institution I work for. Rather, I would define agency as learning how to work *creatively* within constraints to alter structures and practices so that the institution becomes more responsive and humane to those within it.

When I think, therefore, of what would mark institutional change at Princeton, I look beyond the account ledgers and the profile of the undergraduate curriculum. In addition, I look beyond the question of whether students are developing college-level writing skills in our seminars—which they are—to whether the writing program has become a voice in the ongoing conversation about undergraduate education. I also look to see if students’ experience of the institution as a whole has been enriched by the presence and work of the writing program—that is, to see if department faculty are more confidently assigning ambitious essays of inquiry and argument. Eventually, I’d like to hear that more professors are assigning drafts and spending some time in class talking about writing assignments and defining expectations. I’d like to know that juniors and seniors are being consistently well guided and advised in their research projects. These are the changes in practices—changes in teaching and in the place and value of writing—that need to occur in order for the institution to have changed and to be doing a better job of meeting the needs of student writers.

We’re not there yet.

I’m in a unique position to be able to consider the nature and degree of change at Princeton because in the mid-1990s, as I finished my PhD in the English Department there, I worked for two years in the previous incarnation of the writing program as the coordinator of the writing center and as a lecturer. Six years and several jobs later, including a few years as an assistant director in the Rutgers writing program, I returned to Princeton as an associate director and to an entirely new and different program. The question of how the program has evolved is one that I’ve pondered since my return.

For one who worked in the dark ages of the writing program at Princeton, change appears dramatic. Let’s start by talking real estate. In 1996, I shared an office with the associate director of the program and this office was, in fact, a closet. In addition to housing Ellen and me, this closet/office contained the program’s office supplies as well as its printer and, for a while, its photocopier. The writing center that I ran was a small room with two tables, some rickety room dividers, and two aged computers. These rooms, I should add, were in a building on one edge of the campus, not far from the library and other academic buildings, but not where the program and the

writing center got regular foot traffic. The main entrance to the writing center was from the building's dark interior alley whose distinguishing feature was a looming fire escape. Since material conditions can be a powerful sign of institutional importance, this portrait suggests—correctly—that the writing program had little institutional influence. Although arguments can and should be made about the potential power of marginal locations, at Princeton at this moment in time, writing instruction was tainted as remedial and therefore something to hide.

This interpretation of the symbolic value of the writing program at Princeton was clear to me when I first walked in the door as a tutor. Now, however, I can bring a bit more to my analysis. I am intrigued by Porter et al.'s use of spatial analysis as one of many frameworks that can be used to understand institutions (620). They use spatial analysis to study institutions and reform because they argue that “institutions are situated physically, that theories of change must account for such situatedness, and that attention to spatiality helps one fashion institutional change” (620). Their spatial analysis is informed by an understanding of institutions as multi-dimensional systems that extend from the local to the abstract, from the micro- to the macro-level. When we theorize institutions, we tend only to do so on the macro-level—for example, at the level of the discipline—but, in doing so, we inevitably limit our agency, at least as individuals. If we instead take a micro-level view of institutions, we can map the particular actions, policies, or spaces of an institution. Combining both macro- and micro-level institutional perspectives, we can see how different institutional formations relate to one another, to local practices, and to macro-level systems. It then becomes possible to understand how to move some of these pieces around, to re-imagine relationships, and to alter the organization and constitution of the map as it is presently conceived (Porter et al. 620-21). Porter et al.'s approach, in particular its attention to the multiple dimensions of institutional structures, helps to clarify not only the difficulties of the previous program at Princeton, but also how shifting conditions made possible the creation of a new program, and how further change might be imagined and implemented.

For hundreds of years, Princeton was content to have no formal writing requirement; students were expected to enter with strong skills and to develop those skills through regular course work. Through the mid-1980s, in fact, most students would have thought of Princeton's main writing requirement as their independent research projects in their majors—two junior papers and one senior thesis. Then, in 1990, Princeton created a small writing program and revised its writing requirement so that all students had to take a writing-intensive course. The program itself sponsored a small set of

topic-based courses. The program director defined goals and a structure for these courses and trained and supervised the advanced graduate students who taught them. The director was also nominally in charge of the array of courses throughout the university that fulfilled the writing requirement. These w-courses were typically large introductory classes across the disciplines that mixed lectures with small discussion sections taught mostly by graduate students. In order for a course to fulfill the writing requirement, students were supposed to produce a specified number of pages, compose drafts, receive feedback, and revise. At that time, however, the writing program director had no mandate to train instructors in the academic departments, nor did she have the institutional power to enforce compliance with the guidelines for writing-intensive courses. How, or even whether, instructors were trained and supported in the teaching of writing was left to the course leaders.

It will surprise no writing program administrator that this system didn't work. As the *Chronicle* article revealed in its lead, many of the students were unhappy, and I can assure you that those of us toiling away in the closet weren't having a great time, either. Joseph Harris spoke about such an untenable situation at the 2003 CCCC, when he criticized how writing programs are too often given responsibility without authority. In such conditions, productive change cannot occur or be sustained, and this is precisely what had happened at Princeton. The *Chronicle* could be interpreted as implying that the w-course system failed through negligence, as if no one knew or cared that there was a problem. In fact, the two directors who served in the previous incarnation of the program, Marvina White and David Thurn, wanted writing instruction to happen more consistently and well. They knew too well that they had a responsibility to solve the problem, but they also had no authority to do so. They fought to organize formal reviews, both internal and external, to examine the writing requirement and the place of writing in the university. They fought for the institutional influence and funding necessary to put together a stronger program.

One key macro-level change laid the foundation for profound change: the endowment's growth during the economic boom of the 1990s. This source of funding appeared in the context of several other changes in higher education and in elite universities that further prepared the university to commit to creating a more substantive writing program: increased investment in the "first-year experience"; the new status and attention to writing programs at institutions such as Cornell and Duke; and the decline of enrollments in the humanities along with the subsequent reexamination of the importance of pedagogy as a way of keeping students. Finally, I'd like to

add to this list of macro-level contextual changes that played a part in the decision to build a new writing program at Princeton the increased cultural currency of the field of composition.

As I've been thinking about how the current writing program came into being, I've also interviewed various players in its pre-history history. Collectively, they have given me insight into the importance of key micro-level agents and the local politics of the university that were, to those I interviewed, as important as the program reviews, and more important than the macro-level changes happening in higher education and the stock market. A few details should suffice to help me demonstrate my sense that the kind of changes that enabled the creation of the present Princeton writing program could occur only when, at last, macro-, micro- and mid-level stars aligned. After the mid-1980s, changes in personnel and the university's educational culture made the dean's office more receptive to the importance of teaching revision in courses that fulfilled the writing requirement. In addition, a powerful professor retired, one who had held a central place as a leader of one of the more popular w-courses that served hundreds of freshmen every year and thus brought potential majors to a small department. When those key changes occurred in the local landscape, arguments that the writing program directors had been making for years had a chance to be heard. In addition, the directors' repeated calls for the university formally to review the writing requirement led at last, in 1999, to an internal review of the program. This review, heavy with survey data regarding the inconsistency of writing instruction and student dissatisfaction, made a powerful case for the administration renewing its commitment to the teaching of writing. The external review done the following year recognized in stark terms the fundamental contradiction between the importance of advanced writing at Princeton and the place and status of writing instruction. This review sharply noted the contradiction that, although the senior thesis constitutes the academic pinnacle of a Princeton education, the courses in place to prepare students for these ambitious independent writing projects were peripheral and uneven.¹

The review also argued that Princeton needed a program that could generate a vibrant and ongoing conversation about writing and teaching among faculty and graduate students from across the university, that it needed to define standards and assess outcomes, and that it needed to better and more consistently train and supervise graduate student teachers. It needed, in other words, a writing program that could more deeply effect substantial institutional change at the level of *teaching*.

As a consequence of this review, and as could happen only at a resource-rich institution, Princeton quickly built a new program. In 2001, the outgoing president of the university added a hefty line to the operating budget

to fund an independent writing program. The university then hired Kerry Walk from Harvard's Expository Writing Program, who deserves full credit for building the program in a few short months in the summer of 2001. She and the associate dean of the college hired a faculty that mixes full-time lecturers, advanced graduate students, and a few departmental faculty and university administrators. She then defined a pedagogy, a course structure and goals, grading standards, and a faculty training program. Now all first-year students take a topic-based, writing-centered seminar in which they learn to pose genuine questions about compelling problems, and in those courses they repeatedly practice developing academic arguments through engagement with sources. Because part of the program's mission is to help prepare students for the independent research writing they will do their junior and senior years, the students compose a research paper, and begin to learn how to find a variety of sources and to use them in multiple and complex ways in sustained arguments.

All I've reported seems to shout that institutional change has occurred. There's certainly been positive change. But I still wonder about the extent to which the creation of a freestanding writing program constitutes fundamental institutional change. Perhaps my hesitation will be clearer if I pose the question this way: Has the "problem" of student writing been solved by putting a strong first-year course into place?

Once I've revised my question, it's obvious that for the university to see a writing program as a single-course, add-on, quick-fix solution is to misunderstand the complexity of the problem the program was created to solve. Faculty at Princeton, like faculty everywhere, speak wistfully of a mythic time, long ago, but supposedly within their professional memory, when students wrote better. This is a particularly dangerous myth for a new writing program to face because it is accompanied by the expectation that a first-year composition course will easily solve that problem, clean the students up, and pass them on, so that the rest of the institution can go on functioning as it was meant to function, as it functioned back in the days when students knew how to write flawless essays without having to be taught to do so. One of the many logical fallacies here is the idea that a writing program can succeed without being accompanied by or causing institutional change—that is, without the institution shifting to value the *teaching* of college-level writing skills. If a university creates a writing program without a broad commitment to the teaching of writing, then to what extent has the institution changed?

One way to think about the question of institutional change and the new Princeton writing program is to return for a moment to spatial analysis and literal real estate as an indicator of the figurative place of the program within the institution. Now and for the next few years, we are in a large house on

the main social corridor—the Street—as the students call Prospect Avenue. The discussions about where we will go next, however, are revealing. The original plan was to move us about a quarter mile further down the street to a former private student club—a club that failed, significantly, because it was on a periphery of campus, on the opposite side of campus from the student residence halls. This plan did not bode well for the program. It threatened to make our classes, our faculty offices, and our writing center inaccessible, while also reinforcing the marginal place of writing instruction at the university. It threatened, in short, to undermine our mission.

Now, however, there is a new plan. Instead of being pushed to the margins, the writing program will be housed, by fall 2007, in a new residence college to be built among the existing residence colleges. One way of reading our move is this: we will be an intellectual presence integrated into student life; our classes and faculty will be more accessible than ever; the writing center will certainly thrive in a location that assures that students, in the grip of an assignment, can wander over for tutoring in their slippers. This reading of our move has real appeal because we are eager to take advantage of the opportunity we've been given to embed academic writing into students' lives.

And yet, I also recognize that this move may indicate something less positive about our place in the institution and the limits of the institutional change that has taken place. While our new home signals recognition of the centrality of writing to student life, it also separates the writing program, in type and location, from any other academic program or department, and runs the risk of isolating us further from the intellectual center of the university. While the gap between the students and the program will be productively narrowed by our move—all to the benefit of first-year writing—we will have to work hard to make sure that the gap between the program and the academic life of the university does not widen still more. The new location may make it even more challenging to fulfill the call of the external review to promote a cross-disciplinary discussion among faculty and graduate students about writing and the teaching of writing.

The truth is, of course, that this essential conversation will be difficult to start and sustain, no matter where we're housed. In order for it to take place, a deeper change must occur in the university—a change that did not, by fiat, occur with a reallocation of funds, the creation of a new first-year writing requirement, and the hiring of writing program administrators and a staff of lecturers. The daily improvisation and problem-solving that define our work always remind us that part of the very difficult job of a new writing program is to create the sort of institutional change that will enable that conversation to take place. The goal of that conversation is the fundamental goal of

writing in the disciplines and writing across the curriculum programs—to recognize the central place of writing and writing instruction in a liberal arts education, and also to recognize that the responsibility for helping students write with increasing complexity and maturity cannot entirely be borne by writing program faculty. Through hours of conversation and work, we have come to see our program as being *instrumental* to making good writing happen at the university; but we also recognize that we alone cannot be wholly *responsible* for making that happen.² Students' senior theses will improve not only because they have taken a first-year writing seminar, but because their experience as writers has been enriched throughout their undergraduate careers. And that is one change that we can only influence slowly—one professor, one graduate student, one tutor at a time.

This is the story that got left out of “Why Johnny Can’t Write. . .”—a story about financial, cultural, and extra-institutional changes, about local politics and the power of data, and about changes that have laid the foundation for what we hope will be a deeper change in how teaching writing is understood and valued. It’s another version of the oft-told story of writing program administrators as agents of institutional change and local reform. Arguments about this aspect of our administrative role have been made by James Porter et al. and Richard Miller, whose work I discussed earlier; many others have made valuable contributions to this thread of writing program administration scholarship, among them Lynn Z. Bloom, Toby Fulwiler, Anne Ruggles Gere, Daniel Mahala, Susan McLeod, Libby Miles, and Louise Wetherbee Phelps.³ This truism of writing program administration, however, needs regularly to be rediscovered in our particular locations, in our daily work, especially in new programs, and emphatically at institutions as traditional as Princeton. Another truth is clear, as well: the institutional change our Program has caused and the change we hope to cause are probably not going to announce themselves in flashy headlines or catchy stories. I expect that if or when we realize our ambitions regarding institutional change at Princeton, the change we inspire will feel to many at the university like no change at all. Instead, this change is likely to be naturalized, becoming part of what makes the institution effective and habitable for both students and their teachers.

In writing the unwritten story of the Princeton writing program, I have yet to address the questions raised by the *Chronicle* article and the responses to it about whether the changes in the writing program at Princeton and several of its peer institutions have significance for the field of composition as a whole—that is, whether the new programs at elite institutions signal a professional crisis, professional possibility, both, or neither. The concerns typi-

cally raised are that these programs diminish the field because they are not academic departments; they employ faculty from across the disciplines to teach in untenured, temporary positions, thereby perpetuating composition's reliance on contingent labor; in contrast to Cornell, Duke, and Stanford, many of these programs have non-tenured leaders; and these programs are typically defined by the ethic of service that seems to some to have limited the field in the past.⁴

I'd like to be able to offer the definitive response to these questions and concerns, but to supply answers that will be acceptable to all critics doesn't seem possible, especially since my strongest justifications are simply pragmatic. At Princeton, local conditions have shaped the current program in ways that make the status of writing and writing instruction at the university ambiguous. Nevertheless, here on Prospect Avenue, the present structure appears to be a workable first step. Because we offer topic-based courses, we are able to introduce students to the conventions of inquiry-based writing that are so vital to their success here. Because we fulfill our service mission, the departmental faculty largely support us. They also appear to see value in our program's organization and purpose, despite our lack of departmental status, because we train post-docs and graduate students and enhance what these scholars can offer in the academic marketplace. In other words, as problematic as the program's structure is for the symbolic value of composition at the university, this structure enables us to get our job done here and now.

I acknowledge that such a pragmatic, locally grounded response may seem inadequate. Understandably and appropriately, many of our professional conversations seek common ground, and this answer offers none. But, inevitably, as soon as we start talking about the institutional structures and cultures that define so much of our work as administrators, our differences complicate communication and can feed misunderstanding and conflict. Especially in an era when state colleges and universities have recently faced unprecedented budget cuts, financial inequities between programs—which are admittedly gut wrenching, and even obscene—certainly contribute to the tension in the room.

So how can we talk productively about our institutional differences?

Recent WPA scholarship offers frameworks for conceiving new and broadened conversations. Jeffrey T. Grabill and Lynée Lewis Gaillet's work on "Writing Program Design in the Metropolitan University" seeks to expand our construction of writing programs as institutional structures by using the model of the metropolitan university—a university that is a system that coordinates work both within the university and in partnership with the community for research and problem solving. When Grabill and Gaillet

define writing programs as “a new type of institutional system with multiple purposes, functions, and activities tied to research” (61), they revise our understanding of their institutional nature so that their own writing program at Georgia State University can take a central place in professional conversations about administrative structures. This is a tempting new theory of an active, engaged, and productive system. Unfortunately, it leaves my writing program—which is funded to provide a service, not research, and which is not integrated into the community—still on the periphery and makes me hesitant to generalize about programs in ways that flatten the particulars of institutional difference.

Thomas Amorose’s “WPA Work at the Small College or University: Re-Imagining Power and Making the Small School Visible,” is more helpful in supporting my sense that that institutional structure makes a profound difference in the nature of our particular jobs as WPAs. Amorose observes that “the work of Writing Program Administrators at small colleges and universities goes under-reported and generally unaddressed” (85). In addition, he writes that the collective erasure of small-school WPA work has meant not only that small-school WPAs have been “under-served” by the discipline’s discourse, but also that the large-university WPAs have missed out on the contributions and perspectives of a subset of the field (85-86). To begin to build an understanding of how a small-school WPA must operate, Amorose redefines the ways in which power, influence, and authority function in different institutional structures, and demonstrates how an appreciation of these differences is essential in enabling WPAs to become locally effective agents of change.

Like Amorose, I believe we must become more articulate about our institutional differences in our professional discussions of writing program administration. Such conversations have the potential to make us aware of unexamined assumptions about our own institutions and others, in addition to informing a broader and deeper understanding of how we can better function as agents of institutional change. Amorose’s article, however, enables us to acknowledge only the small school/large university difference; our differences extend beyond this distinction and are complicated by institutional structure, history, geography, economics, and culture in all its manifestations. While I appreciate that Amorose has drawn our attention to one difference that hasn’t been sufficiently acknowledged in the scholarship, and while I do think broadened conversation about institutional systems is profoundly useful, I remain, at this point, uncertain about whether it is possible to define a framework for a conversation across so very many divides.

In the end, however, even without a general framework, I maintain that the rise of new writing programs at high-profile institutions offers an occasion for productive cross-institutional conversations that directly address the

extent to which our jobs are defined by local structures, constraints, personnel, and personalities. We have long acknowledged that our students learn in different cultural, economic, and personal circumstances, and it is worth pondering, as well, how different settings, structures, and budgets require and enable different solutions to the problem of how best to teach our students to become college writers. It will take patience and skill to talk across institutions and to respect the local realities that disrupt our sense of what we have in common. But this talk about institutions and difference promises, if nothing else, to deepen our sense of how institutions function and thus to help us imagine otherwise unimaginable possibilities for reform.

NOTES

¹ The external and internal reviews are private documents. Although I've been given permission to paraphrase the texts, I cannot quote from them or cite the authors.

² Gretchen B. Rossman first pointed out the useful distinction between instrumentality and responsibility to the administrators of the Princeton writing program in a conversation in January, 2003. Since then, it has helped frame our thinking about program assessment and our writing in the disciplines initiative.

³ See: Lynn Z. Bloom, "Making Differences: Writing Program Administration as a Creative Process"; Toby Fulwiler, "The Quiet and Insistent Revolution: Writing Across the Curriculum"; Anne Ruggles Gere, "The Long Revolution in Composition"; Daniel Mahala, "Writing Utopias: Writing across the Curriculum and the Promise of Reform"; Susan H. McLeod, "The Foreigner: WAC Directors as Agents of Change"; Libby Miles, "Constructing Composition: Reproduction and WPA Agency in Textbook Publishing"; Louise Wetherbee Phelps, "The Institutional Logic of Writing Programs: Catalyst, Laboratory, and Pattern for Change."

⁴ For an example of many of these criticisms, see Thomas Miller's comments, quoted in Peggy O'Neill and Ellen Schendel's "Locating Writing Programs in Research Universities," 206.

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CORRECTION TO WPA 27.1/2

The editors regret misspelling Mary Juzwik's name in our last issue. The correct and full citation of her article is as follows:

Juzwik, Mary. "Handling Curricular Resources: An Examination of Two Teachers' Tactical Appropriation of First-Year Composition Curricula."
WPA: Writing Program Administration 27.1/2 (Fall/Winter 2003): 40-58